

Teaching Report Writing Skills through Communicative Activities

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Abstract

Designing communicative activities for teaching any specific skills has been used for the last few decades effectively worldwide. In teaching Report Writing Skills its use is somewhat new as the subject itself has not been taught separately before as a complete course in many universities of Pakistan and internationally as well. It happened only with the passage of time that it has been introduced as a separate course due to the need of learning of specific skills and time required in writing, developing and presenting reports by business students or in some cases students of other professional disciplines such as engineering. This workshop will suggest methodologies and techniques that cater the needs and interests of the teachers teaching a technical subject like Report Writing Skills. It will also emphasize the kind of problems students face while learning report writing a form of technical writing. They are affected by the basic handicaps/mistakes developed since childhood in learning of English language. It is obvious and natural to cause them to make similar mistakes even at higher level of education when they are studying technical subjects like report writing skills. The grammatical errors, the style of writing is erroneous due to no exposure and experience of writing reports or technical documents previously. Moreover, the focus of this workshop will be to teach Report Writing Skills using non expensive Communicative Activities to enhance writing skills of the students in writing professional reports.

1-Introduction

English is the language for higher and advanced studies in a country like Pakistan where it's teaching at primary and secondary levels lacks the creative touch of activities practiced in a modern language classroom. A country like Pakistan is in dire need to adopt modern techniques, approaches and methodologies for bringing change and improvement in its already existing stale education system especially for teaching of English language for Specific Purposes at Bachelors Level. The current system is only promoting students to cram from books even for technical skills like report writing at Bachelors Level for students of Business and Engineering. The practice of backwash and lockstep is very much common which omits the essence of report writing skills. The students due to this practice only prepare for passing in the examination. Moreover, lockstep is a hindrance in promoting creativity in teaching. It makes it difficult for students to understand the practical implementation of report writing skills in their professional setup.

At the present scenario in Pakistan, the needs and interests of the teachers are ignored in the English Language Teaching. The kind of methodologies for teaching specific skills such as Report Writing rarely include real life situations for student's practice, understanding and application of the skills learned. The teachers do teach but the emphasis is mostly on using correct English language instead of the correct usage of English language. Moreover, importance is only on writing correct English instead of writing according to the specific task or skill which students are learning. The students lack exposure to technical English Language making it even more challenging for the teachers to teach them writing efficiently, independently and effectively. Most of the students have only been practicing essay writing or story writing which is more of the fiction style. However, Report Writing skills demand factual, realistic and to-the point writing style. In Report Writing Skills the "cut-copy-paste" culture is very common due to the influence of writing styles students have been working with at their earlier stages of language use and learning.

2-Literature Review

Students learning report writing skills find it difficult to absorb the dry syllabus from books taught in lockstep which has little or no chance of activity; given a chance to learn through interaction and communicative activities which involves them in making the learning process more real.

Anson Yang and Chan-Piu Cheung (Hong Kong) also discuss the use of Communicative teaching (CLT) and Cooperative Learning (CL), which share common characteristics. Students also find it easier to work on projects of assembling parts of reports even out of the classroom scenario. The students learning report writing skills can learn more effectively if topics from current affairs or other social or research oriented humanitarian topics which need critical thinking are given to them for writing reports after discussions on those topics in class. This not only develops their involvement and interest in the subject rather becomes a source for improving language skills and increasing knowledge. It is mentioned by Evrim Ustunluoglu (Turkey) that language teaching can be done through critical thinking. The thinking skills when developed in the learners grant them ability to produce knowledge utilizing a number of thinking skills such as analytical, lateral, problem solving, critical, creative, and reflective thinking (Rose and Nichol 1997). Critical thinking most of all should be developed in the language learners to develop their understanding of the language. It gives them a chance to penetrate through surface meaning of things and to determine the deeper meaning instead of merely using basic literacy skills (Van Duzer and Florez 1999)

Report Writing Skills can be taught even more effectively if teachers while educating these classes exploit "Authentic Material" (Alejandro G. Martinet, 2002) through different activities. The students learn a great deal from activities derived from authentic materials, as they are real events going on in the world. They generate interest easily in students as taken from newspapers, magazines, Internet which is modern media resources. The students learning report writing skills can be taught also to use authentic material for arranging diverse activities. Steven Tait (M.Ed. TESOL) writes in his article "Ingredients for Successful Communicative Tasks" about communicative activities that they are great for learning. Also, Alejandro G. Martinez (M.A Mexico City) in his article "Authentic Materials: an overview" says that the ultimate and utmost positive outcome of authentic materials is "exposure" of the students to the language. Moreover, it is important to note that using material artificially is different from authentic material (shortall 2001). The ultimate goal of using authentic material in teaching report writing is giving maximum exposure to types of reports students may encounter in their professional life and must know how to write those various types.

3-Rationale

It is a dilemma that students are not taught English Language with the use of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Cooperative Learning (CL) at earlier stages which makes it an unfamiliar mode of learning. Most of the students have never been involved in communicative activities which motivate to learn from meaningful tasks, interact both inside and outside the class in real situations and share common experiences with teacher and peers. A third world country like Pakistan cannot afford the use of expensive resources like, audio-visual aids. However, the idea of language laboratory is very valuable as it helps to enhance listening and speaking skills. It also increases deep knowledge into sentence structure and grammar, and helps build confidence. On the other hand the teachers are either not knowledgeable or do not practice language teaching through non expensive strategies like critical thinking which can be incorporated in the language classroom or specific skills learning with the aid of diverse activities.

The lack of knowledge, skills and practice in "the language skills" makes the students handicapped. They are into pressure to learn language as set by the international standards soon after leaving schools. This makes them learn English on their own or from different language centers in a short period. This practice makes them able somehow to cope with the apparently faced problems or situations but they do not have any deep knowledge and interest in the language. Most of the students are far from the real use and understanding of language. Moreover, the language teacher teaches in the traditional style like lockstep etc. The students lack exposure to the "real language" or "real use of language". The English as used in "real-life situations" is far from the imagination and reach of these pupils. They have rarely been involved in communicative activities which are great for learning skills like Report Writing as they are based on realistic situations.

4-Purpose of the Research

This research paper would present the communicative teaching methodologies for the teaching of Report Writing Skills in Pakistan to Bachelors Level students of Business Administration and Engineering. The application of Communicative Approach to teaching of Report Writing Skills is mainly to provide workable solutions such as promotion and implementation of activity-based teaching in the existing teaching culture. The basic research was conducted at COMSATS University of Science and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.

The practices of the English language teachers in the native country on the same level of academics were studied to mark the differences and shortcomings of the present Pakistani teaching scenario of Report Writing Skills in Business Administration. Suitable and workable techniques (from activity-based classroom) were adopted to implement extensively in Pakistan for better teaching of report writing skills of Pakistani students in their native environment.

This research also studied the effectiveness of communicative approach on teaching of report writing skills. The basic aim was to make teaching of report writing skills creative and helpful. Its purpose was to make students understand practical implementation of communicative activities, think analytically, write independently both inside and outside the classroom especially in the natural scenarios.

This research highlighted the positive impact of activity-based teaching implemented in a given time period i.e. a semester/term on a selected group of students i.e. bachelors level of Business Administration for teaching Report Writing Skills. These students were highly benefitted in enhancing the report writing skills as it is one of the vital skills required to fulfill their academic and professional needs.

5-Methodology & Procedure

The research was Holistic in nature combining both Qualitative and Quantitative research work. The population i.e. BBA students were kept under observation and tested to obtain results of communicative teaching methodology applied.

This was an Experimental Research for which two groups were made from students of Business Administration. One group was Experimental group and the other was Control group.

The population selected was all the students of bachelors in COMSATS University of Science and Technology, Lahore Campus.

The sample selected for this research was the students of Bachelors in Business Administration at COMSATS University of Science and Technology, Lahore. A number of total hundred students were selected as a sample, out of which fifty were in experimental group and fifty were in control group.

This research was carried out using simple random technique. The students were selected from two groups of BBA each comprising fifty students. One group out of these was Experimental and one was Control. The students selected out of these two groups through simple random technique were above average, average and below average on basis of their earlier academic record and performance.

The tool of data collection for this research was pretest, while test and post test conducted on chosen students via simple random technique.

6-Application of Communicative Approach

- This research was carried out by using pretest, posttest and while test. These tests were designed to analyze the required improvements and results of the application of communicative approach on the students learning Report Writing Skills.
- The teacher arranged group discussions, listening sessions to different documentaries, writing sessions for practice of writing various parts of the reports and reading sessions of different types of reports such as company reports, internship reports etc. for the students.
- In certain cases microteaching sessions were also arranged for which the appropriate equipment (Recording camera and projecting equipment like multimedia) were present. The students gave views individually about what they learned from reading various reports and listening to different documentaries.
- In case of listening certain sessions (other than listening to peers/teacher in class) were arranged of the recorded cassettes or CDS containing documentaries or reports from television/radio or discussion by experienced teachers.
- Authentic Material was also used for the students. This authentic material was company reports, internship reports or other professional reports gathered from various sources i.e. magazines, newspapers etc. and class visits to library were also made.

- The students were also taught to make a simple closed end questionnaire according to topic chosen by their group which was later on used as a source for analytical discussion in the report. The answers expected from these simple closed end questionnaires were in “yes/no”. They were also taught to make an open end questionnaire which was used as a tool for generating analytical discussion in the report for certain topics. The answers expected from this type of questionnaire were varied in nature. The students were instructed to discuss all the answers in detail by comparing them with other authentic material collected from newspapers, magazines, company reports, internet and television.
- The activities were done in different ways for instance; certain activities were done individually or in pairs. In listening, visit to laboratory where headphones, speakers, computers were present was made. The students listened to reports recorded from television or radio as well.
- Certain inexpensive creative or critical thinking activities with non-technical material were also conducted in the classroom. It mainly included discussion about material reviewed; guest speakers or senior students were also invited.
- The students also visited library from time to time to view reports of senior students which were later on discussed. They also had access to internet for searching relevant points for topics of reports. They also had to write on the spot emails for practice.
- They also had to arrange one mega activity under the supervision of the instructor. This activity was supposed to be a seminar, talk show or role playing session which they had to report also from organizing to conducting and presenting stage.
- They also had to write one long report which was assigned to them at the earlier stage of the semester and had to submit it at the end of the semester. They had to give a presentation or give an interview about the report once it was finished.
- This research was conducted via a 120-hour course with 3 credit hours a week covered in a span of about a semester of 6 months.

7-Results

The data analysis of this research was done once the pretest, while test and posttest of the sample population were taken. This took a period of six months total. The while test was taken after an interval of one and a half month from the pretest. Whereas the posttest was taken after duration of two and half months passed after the while test. Then by applying simple random technique three cases (above average, average, below average) were selected from each group i.e. control group and experimental group. These students were selected on the basis of their previous academic achievement record and performance in the tests given to them for conducting this research. The result of these six students in total i.e. three from each experimental and control group were compared and analyzed to see the effectiveness and usefulness of communicative activities for teaching report writing skills. It is worth mentioning here that all the students of the experimental group were continuously supported and involved by the communicative activities. These activities as discussed earlier were designed by the teacher and conducted on planned timings in pairs or small groups within the big experimental group.

These were the results of the six students selected through simple random technique:

Groups	Control Group			Experimental Group		
	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6
Ratings overall	Above average	Average	Below average	Above average	Average	Below average
Scores	75/100	55/100	40/100	85/100	75/100	60/100
Performance in Assignments	Good	Fair	Poor	Excellent	Very Good	Good
Weak areas of the students	Some mistakes in syntax and spellings	Ideas relevant but expression and spellings weak	Ideas and expression both quite weak	A little bit mistake in spellings	A few mistakes in syntax and spellings	Ideas relevant but expression and spellings somewhat weak

8-Discussion & Conclusion

The research was conducted in such a way that the results of the two groups, control and experimental could be clearly compared for analysis. The control group had their classes in rooms without audio/video aid facilities and teaching style adopted with them was lockstep with a few tutorials. They had to submit one project as per the requirements of the course at the end of the semester. They were given three tests, pretest, while test and posttest with already decided intervals. The experimental group was taught with rooms fully equipped with audio/visual aids and other facilities. The teaching style adopted for them was communicative approach which gave them a chance to practice report writing skills via communicative activities. The students in experimental group were made to work in pairs/groups on regular basis. The tutorials and seminars were frequently arranged. The students visited the library with the teacher to explore books and other relevant material. They also had access to computer laboratory equipped for language learning. They had to submit three assignments and three quizzes in addition to the pretest, while test and posttest.

These short assignments and quizzes were given prior to each of the three main tests i.e. pretest, while test and posttest. These short assignments and quizzes were given for practice of skills and quick assessment of the students in the experimental group. The classroom activities were designed to build up the required report writing skills as well which were further enhanced and tested via assignments and quizzes. The three main tests were used as markers of performance. They calculated the learning in between the intervals of each test. The experimental group was also assigned a major project which they had to submit at the end of the semester. This major project was apparently the same as the control group i.e. submitting a long report. They had two choices either to present it in front of the whole class or give viva about it.

The results of the students in control and experimental group were different visibly. The students in the experimental group showed better results and performance. They had better understanding for the report writing skills as shown through their results. When given the same tests the students in the experimental group acquired better results as compared to the students in the control group. It is worth mentioning that COMSATS University of Science and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan where this research was conducted considers fifty percent marks as passing marks for the students. This shows that overall the students in experimental group had better results according to the criteria of the institute as well. The students in control group failed more in the subject and those who passed acquired lesser marks. Whereas the students in the experimental group took better marks in the subject overall and number of failed students was zero.

This research has proved that communicative activities are very helpful in teaching technical writing like report writing skills. This approach creates interest in the subject for the students. They become more creative in writing. The overall performance is better when students are taught with the help of communicative activities. The number of failure cases in the subject contracts to zero. The classroom activities in pairs/groups with the help of audio/visual aids and other facilities like language laboratory, library and internet makes students more independent and efficient in writing. The students have thorough knowledge of the report writing procedure and its various components. They are able to write both short and long reports individually. They can compose other documents related to report writing skills such as memorandum, letter, brochure, office notes and email quite efficiently too.

9-References

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10-Appendix

Exercises for workshop

- Writing an email about the session prior to the session. {Time required= 5 minutes }
- Writing a memo about the session prior to the session. {Time required= 5 minutes }
- A Critical thinking session about current affairs such as environmental pollution, financial instability, waste of natural resources like water. {Time required=10 minutes, 2-3minutes for preparation individually }
- Taking notes while the session is in process. { Time required during session=7 minutes }
- Developing a short report in letter or memorandum format about the session. {Time required=10 minutes }

Sample closed end questionnaire taught to students of BBA at COMSATS Lahore, Pakistan:

- 1-Do you use credit cards?
- 2-Do you think credit cards are difficult to use?
- 3-Do you think credit cards make buyers spend more than cash?
- 4-Do you think credit cards are a status symbol?
- 5-Do you think business class is truly benefitted by credit cards?

Sample open end questionnaire taught to students of BBA at COMSATS, Lahore, Pakistan:

- 1-What in your view is the biggest kind of pollution in Pakistan?
- 2-What in your view is the biggest cause of pollution in Pakistan?
- 3-Do you think the Pakistani Government is taking proper care of pollution issues?
- 4-Do you think media makes people aware about pollution?
- 5-Do you think recycling should be practiced more all over Pakistan to overcome pollution issues?