

The Missing Link in English Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this workshop is to provide participants with some teaching ideas on how the writing skill may be improved. This is done through error analysis, correction and vocabulary building. The first part of the workshop will explore different ways of identifying students' weak areas in writing and how these areas may be corrected. The second part will cover ways on how vocabulary building may be carried out, to help students improve their writing skill. The participants will have hands-on experience of preparing materials for vocabulary building during the workshop.

Thematic Concern

The thematic concern for this action research project is to improve students' writing skill. This is to be carried out through analysis, categorization and rectification of errors in students' written work and the second part is to explore ways to improve the use of vocabulary in writing skill.

Preparing Asian students for IELTS (International English Language Testing System) Examination has been challenging. Various methodologies have been carried out in the classroom and this has been the most effective. These students have previously undergone a mechanical process of learning. (Heavy /detailed marking by their teachers and students would copy the detailed marking as 'corrections' without understanding what their errors were.) I believe that a reflective process through feedback is essential. This action research project conducted was not only beneficial for the exams but also helped them to communicate well in an English speaking country. This project was planned based on the fact that

....education theory must always be oriented towards transforming the ways in which teachers see themselves and the situation so that the factors frustrating their educational goals and purpose can be recognized and eliminated.

Carr & Kemmis 1988

Action Group

This research was carried out in a private international tertiary education centre located in Central Auckland. It was carried out in the class which prepares international students for the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) Examination. The group comprised twelve students. These students were second language learners from China, Korea and Japan. They spent approximately five months in this class.

Description of Research Project

The three streams of institutionalism –language and discourse, activities and practice and social relationships do not take place independently but are interdependent.

Firstly, setting the conducive atmosphere for learning to take place. To encourage and bring about active participation of students .It is important to build a rapport with the students to encourage them to participate eagerly. Removing all the negative comments and putting forward only the positives. Consideration has to be given to their cultural background, proficiency level and their learning styles.

To analyse and categorise weaknesses in writing skill

Input

The students and the teacher had discussed a topic and ideas for the essay had been listed. The format for the essay was taught and the expectations were made known to the students to give them a direction to write.

Output

The students write out the assigned work with teacher /peer support. There should not be too much limitation on time. The work is submitted to the teacher for analysis and categorization of weak areas.

The following assessment record sheet was used to analyse and categorise.

| ASSESSMENT RECORD SHEET | |
|---|----------------------------|
| <i>NAME Of STUDENT :</i> | |
| Writing Skill Outcomes | Competency achieved |
| 1. Can understand instructions and task | |
| 2. Can organize ideas | |
| 3. Can write an opening statement –introduction | |
| 4. Can write a thesis statement –introduction | |
| 5. Can write topic sentence - contents | |
| 6. Can write references / examples -contents | |
| 7. Can explain the idea/ topic sentence -contents | |
| 8 .Can use cohesive devices -all paragraphs | |

| |
|--|
| 9. Can sum up main ideas and make a closing statement -Closing |
| |
| 10 .Can write a variety of sentence structures –all paragraphs |
| |
| 11. Can use a range of vocabulary - all paragraphs |

In the next stage I used Lewin’s Approach

Action research proceeds in a cycle of steps each of which is composed of planning, action, and the evaluation of the result of the action. The process begins with a general idea and some kind of improvement or change is desirable. Breaking the general plan down into achievable steps .It recognizes the need for action plans to be flexible and responsive.

Lewin, K.(1946)

To Rectify the Students’ Weak Areas

Cycle One

The student’s competency achieved is marked on the individual assessment record. One to one feedback is given to students to make them understand clearly what their weak areas are. Suggestions are given to rectify the errors . Sample written work may be provided to help students. If the weak area is a specific grammar topic, the student is given extra grammar work on that specific area.

Cycle 2

Written work is assigned. The students are reminded of their specific outcomes that they set to rectify. Some students preferred to work one area at a time while some of the more ambitious ones wanted to work on more than one area in each cycle. Students should be given the freedom to work at their own phase as long as some form learning is taking place at each cycle.

Action research allows us to give a reasoned justification of our work to others because we can show how the evidence we have gathered and the critical reflection we have done helped us to create a developed, tested and critically-examined rationale for what we are doing.

S.Kemmis & R.McTaggart (eds) 1987

Cycle 3

The process continues with constant monitoring .

The analyzing, categorizing, rectifying, and feedback is a continuous process. The students get to see what he or she has achieved through the assessment records.

Evidence and Achievement

- In this project the Asian students who were second language learners were able to achieve remarkable improvements in the writing skill ,within a short time.(about 5 months)
- The participants worked towards improvement of their work.
- It was collaborative
- It established self-critical communities.
- It established a systematic learning process
- The process resulted in the participants putting their practices, ideas and assumption to test by gathering compelling evidence.

- The participants were open-minded.

PART 2

This part will explore ways to build vocabulary primarily for writing skill. This has been a legitimate concern for teachers . This is also the root cause of the students being

- unable to understand what they are reading
- unable to speak confidently
- unable to understand what they are listening
- unable to express their ideas well in writing.

In the first stage resources are made for teaching vocabulary .A general vocabulary list is first made and a topical list is developed from the first list. The vocabulary list may be created weekly. In some cases the students may be able to handle more than one list a week.

First Cycle

Input

The students will be given a list of words /phrases .

The general vocabulary list is introduced to the students through various ways. The explanation is carried out bearing in mind the different types of learners in the class.

Output

The students use the learnt words and phrases in their speaking skill. A relevant topic had been set prior to that. This could be carried out as pair work or group work. The students practise the use of new vocabulary with their peers to build confidence before they speak one by one. When the students discuss their ideas, the other students are given a task to listen and make notes for random student feedback .This acts as a form of reinforcement

A relevant writing topic had been set prior to that. The students will write out the essay /sentences.

Feedback

The teacher gives feedback on the use of the words learnt. Corrected forms are emphasized for students to consider before the next cycle. Next action plan is discussed with the student.

Second Cycle

Input

The words/phrases are put up as posters in the class for constant visual reference and reinforcement.

Students are set another assignment for discussion and written work. The new assignment is relevant to the same vocabulary list.. General comments were given. And areas of concern emphasized.

Output

The students carry out the given assignment –discussion and written work.

Feedback /Input/Output/ Feedback

This is a continuous process.

Outcome of the continuous process

These cycles resulted in students :

- having a direct experience
- were able to express opinions
- were able to understand their errors and carry out appropriate action.
- having a non-threatening environment for learning
- having a better understanding of the teacher’s objectives.

This project provides an authentic hands-on experience where I learn by doing .It invites me to explore my educational values by investigating them in practice.

Henry & Rodostianos 1993,p.11

Tangible Evidence – Students’ Performance in the IELTS Exam 2006

| | WRITING | SPEAKING | LISTENING | READING |
|----------------------|----------------|-----------------|------------------|----------------|
| Student 1 | | | | |
| Korean Male | 6.0 | | 8.0 | 7.0 |
| Student 2 | | | | |
| Korean Female | 7.0 | | 7.0 | 8.0 |
| Student 3 | | | | |

| | | | |
|-----------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Japanese Male | 7.0 | 7.0 | 6.5 |
| Student 4 | | | |
| Korean Male | 6.0 | 6.0 | 7.0 |
| Student 5 | | | |
| Chinese Female | 6.0 | 5.0 | 5.5 |
| Student 6 | | | |
| Korean Female | 7.0 | 7.0 | 7.0 |
| Student 7 | | | |
| Korean Male | 6.0 | 6.0 | 6.0 |
| Student 8 | | | |
| Japanese Male | 5.0 | 6.0 | 6.0 |
| Student 9 | | | |
| Chinese Female | 7.0 | 6.0 | 6.0 |
| Student 10 | | | |
| Chinese Female | 5.0 | 6.0 | 6.0 |
| Student 11 | | | |
| Korean Female | 6.0 | 7.0 | 7.5 |
| Student 12 | | | |
| Korean Female | 5.0 | 7.0 | 6.5 |

CONCLUSION

This action research resulted in the successful learning of the language and also the students were able to use the language effectively. This was possible as they could clearly see and understand their weak areas and experienced the process of rectifying their mistakes. The vocabulary building through constant reinforcement cycle of (input, output, feedback) culminated in great results. This helped the participants to express their ideas confidently in speaking and writing skill. They were able to comprehend reading materials and what they were listening.

In a nutshell, improving writing skill is not just a matter of individual action but requires a unified approach of teacher/ student/peers. Other aspects to be given consideration when teaching English to speakers of other languages include their cultural background, level of proficiency, conducive atmosphere and learning styles which are linked inextricably to their way of learning. This may require making changes for successful learning to take place. These changes will have corresponding changes in others as they are interdependent.

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