Is Students' Mini-Lecture An Effective Strategy to Learn English?

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ABSTRACT

In most general and special English courses of the Iranian universities, reading comprehension is the main component of the syllabus. Nonetheless, in an attempt to improve listening and speaking skills, some general English courses were accompanied by oral presentations, according to which each student had to give a lecture lasting for nearly 10 minutes. The main objective was to investigate the effect of a 10-minute oral presentation on students' linguistic skills, in a comprehension-oriented syllabus. As such, two linguistically homogeneous general English classes were selected. Students in both classes were taught by the same English teacher, using the same textbook and syllabus, which, as usual, focused on reading comprehension. In one class (group 1) a 10-minute lecture, using a Power-point slide presentation software, was included in the syllabus whereas in the other class (group 2) the usual no-lecture syllabus was followed. At the beginning of the semester, both groups took a pretest composed of a set of reading comprehension, listening comprehension, vocabulary and grammar items, and at the semester end they sat for a posttest, which was similar to the pretest. The results of the two tests were then compared using the student t-test. Comparison of the mean scores on reading comprehension, listening comprehension, vocabulary and grammar, for the pre-test and post-test, showed no significant differences between the two groups although score gains on listening comprehension for the first group was noticeable. The conclusion may be that mini-lectures in a reading comprehension-oriented syllabus can improve students' listening comprehension although the level of improvement may not be so significant.

Key words: English language; short lectures; university students

INTRODUCTION

Teaching reading comprehension (RC) is the main focus of the syllabus in General English and special English (ESP) courses of the Iranian universities [1]; accordingly, the listening and speaking skills are either given little attention or overlooked altogether. In an attempt to improve students' listening and speaking abilities, this study included a 10 minute oral presentation in the syllabus of some general English classes at pre-intermediate levels. In terms of content, the lectures mainly dealt with topics related to students' field of study.

There have been numerous studies on specific effects of lectures on listeners' information retention and recall [2-8]. Many students these days take lectures through videos at their convenience, enabling them to spend their classroom time sorting out their problems or focusing on other class-specific activities [2-3]. In a survey by Chavez and Hughes [5], students who listened to downloadable audio lectures before coming to class were better prepared for class work. In addition, students reported that they would rather listen to an audio presentation before class instead of reading material in the textbook. The interesting point was that downloadable lectures represented a new method for presenting information to students while potentially allowing more time in the classroom spent on other activities. Students and teachers can have free access to rich stocks of short and long downloadable lectures on the internet these days. The resources are provided by teachers or writers who enthusiastically teach and write about conversational exchanges, movies or other pieces of work free on-line [9-12]. This could help EFL learners and listeners overcome shortages that they may encounter in developing their conversational skills. This way EFL learners

worldwide can have lecture recordings online [13]. Free access to such resources can provide further incentive for instructors to include mini-lectures in the EFL language courses. It worth mentioning that, despite easy access to such resources, many students still prefer traditional lectures over the latest technological facilities in the classroom although they are highly skilled at using technology [3], indicating the need for further encouragement of EFL learners toward greater use of online resources. [3].

As for the length of lectures, research is in favor of short lectures because they are in line with attention span of the listeners which nowadays have become shorter, or more challenged by numerous distractions, making it difficult for students to listen to 50- to 90-minute lectures. So breaking the lecture session down into 10 to 15 minutes, followed by three- to five-minute period of settling down, will help listeners achieve optimal focus. This help the audience have better focus no matter how compelling the subject matter might be [4,14].   Student attention decreases steadily during a lecture, and that the rate of decrease depends on issues like subject difficulty [15]. In Burns' study on students' recall of chemistry materials [16], students achieved the best recall, in writing summaries of the lectures they listened to, for the first 5-minute portion of the presentations.   Their recall was relatively constant for the next two 5-minute portions, and dropped to the lowest level during the 15- to 20-minute interval, as the lecture continued. In addition to the benefits indicated above, short lectures, to authors, could have many other benefits for the presenters as follows:

a. They provided an opportunity for the students to read new materials to present; each student was recommended to read and comprehend about 10 to 20 pages of English texts on the subject of his /her lecture. This, in addition to the materials practiced in comprehension classes, could serve as an additional attempt to help students enhance their RC ability further.

b. After reading and then converting the text into a short lecture, in order to deliver it fluently, the students were recommended to individually practice the main parts of the lecture first and then present it before family members or friends. This practice would provide additional opportunity for the students to improve their spoken English.

c. The class participants (classmates) were encouraged to listen to the lectures carefully and ask the lecturers relevant questions, helping them to improve their listening comprehension (LC) skill.

d. According to the syllabus, that is supposed to be implemented in most English classes in Iranian universities, the instructors are required to spend most of the class time to teach RC, which may become a monotonous practice that could bore the students.

The inclusion of few mini-lectures in each session of the course can relieve the monotony and add variety to the teaching and learning process of the class [17].

e. Mini-lectures could serve as a way of promoting learners' independence [18-19] by providing an opportunity for them to present in front of class participants. It assigns them a package of performance activities for which they can use their own learning strategies, e.g. they can choose the topic of their lectures, the text they need, the method of summarizing their selected texts and then converting them to a short lecture, etc.

With these points in mind, this research was formulated to investigate the effects of students' mini-lectures on their linguistic skills in general, and their LC in particular.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Two EFL classes, each with 21 undergraduate students, were selected. The students in the first class were majoring in physiotherapy and those in the second class were studying audiology. Around 70% of the students in both classes were girls. Both classes were at the same level of English, as measured by a pre-test (table1), and had to pass a three-credit general English course, lasting for 17 weeks, with three hours of class attendance per week. Both classes had the same textbook [20] and were taught by the same instructor, a female faculty member with a master's degree in teaching English as a foreign language. At the beginning of the semester, both classes took a 66-item general English test (Pretest), consisting of 16 LC questions, 15 RC questions, 20 vocabulary items, and 15 grammar questions [21].

In the first class mini-lectures were included in their comprehension-oriented course work while in the second class just the reading

comprehension materials and the related techniques were instructed (as was indicated in the course syllabus) throughout the semester. So, unlike the first class, students in the second class did not give any lectures as lecture was not part of their syllabus.

Students in each class, according to the syllabus, had to cover nearly 60 pages of a text book, focusing on reading comprehension.

The book, assigned by the English Department (5), served as text materials for comprehension-oriented courses in other affiliated colleges of the university too.

Four months later, at the end of the semester, all the students in both classes were asked to sit for a post test, which was a parallel version of the Pre-test [22], with items similar to the Pre-test. The Post test was to measure scores gains of the students in group 1 with mini-lectures and those of group 2 without any such lectures. The main intention was to examine the effect of lectures on students' linguistic skills, particularly their listening comprehension ability. The pre and post test papers of the two groups were corrected. A few students from each class were excluded from the study, because they had not participated in one of the "pre" or "Post" test. Thirteen students of the first group and 14 of the second took the final test. The mean of post test scores of both groups on RC, LC, vocabulary and grammar tests were computed and then tabulated (table 2)., using student t-test, to find out whether there was any significant difference between the two groups due to the instructions lasting for a semester.

RESULTS

Comparison of post-test mean scores of the two groups showed no significant differences on RC, LC, vocabulary and grammar (table 2). There were, nonetheless, some interesting points in the post-test comparisons as follows:

1. In the RC, while the mean score of the second group on the post-test, compared with that of the pre-test, remained nearly the same, the mean score of the first group, for the same skill, indicated a decrease (tables1 and 2).

2. Although both groups manifested some increase on the post-test mean scores for the LC skill, the increase was noticeably higher for the first group.

3. As for the vocabulary section of the post-test, the second group manifested greater score gains than the first group.

4. Regarding the grammar section of the post-test, both groups revealed some score gains, as can be seen in the mean scores (table 2), but the differences were not statistically significant.

5. Regarding their total scores, both groups manifested an increase in their post-test mean scores, but their differences were not statistically meaningful.

Table 1. mean difference and p values of the pre-test for group 1 and group 2

type of tests	Group 1 mean	Group 2 Mean	Mean Difference	Group 1 SD	Group 2 SD	P value
RC.	72.27	61.51	+10.76	21.05	25.12	=0.24
LC.	58.97	49.95	+9.02	24.87	17.42	=0.29
Vocabulary	53.83	46.12	+7.71	12.31	18.09	=0.21
Grammar	61.92	52.69	+9.23	16.53	13.94	=0.13
total	61.74	52.56	+9.18	7.77	6.54	=0.12

Table2. mean difference and p values of the post-tests for group 1 and group 2

types of test	Group 1 mean	Group 2 mean	Difference of means	Group 1 SD	Group 2 SD	P Value
RC.	69.22	61.02	+8.2	15.29	18.82	=0.23
LC.	74.35	61.53	+12.82	20.82	24.89	=0.16
Vocabulary	54.86	56.91	-2.05	20.39	19.17	=0.79
Grammar	63.08	56.15	+6.93	18.20	16.22	=0.31
Total	65.37	58.90	+6.47	8.38	2.76	0.19

DISCUSSION

1. According to the results, the post-test mean score of the students in the first group on RC (69.22), compared to their pre-test mean score (72.27), had slightly decreased. This decrease may be justifiable, to some extent, because students in first group had devoted some of their class time to lectures and therefore spent less time to practice RC and the related techniques. However, what can be surprising is that the RC ability of students in the second group, despite regular attendance in a lecture-free RC oriented course work, remained unchanged, indicating lack of progress.

2. Unlike the RC test, there is a noticeable progress in post-test mean scores of the students of the first group on LC (table 2). While the difference between mean scores of the two groups in pre-test was +9.02, in the post test, it increased to +12.82 in favor of the first group. Although this difference is not statistically significant, (P=0.16), it is worth considering as it is in line with the researcher's prediction.

3. In vocabulary, the progress made by the second group was a little more than that made by the first group. The difference between the pre-test mean score of the first group and that of the second group was +7.71 in favor of group one. In the post-test, this difference decreased to +2.05 in favors of group 2 (tables 1 and 2). This insignificant decrease can be partly due to the fact that students in the second group were exempted from lectures and accordingly could spend more time to read texts and the related vocabulary.

4. In the grammar section, the post-test mean score of the students in the second group shows that the progress made by them was , though insignificant , a little more than that made by students in the first group.

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5. A noticeable progress could be seen in the total mean scores (all tests together) for both groups in the post-test, when compared with those in the pre-test, although the difference between these two mean scores was not statistically significant.

Limitations of the study

This study, like many similar pieces of work, had its own limitations. Mini-lectures were limited to 10 minutes per student which were apparently not lengthy enough to cause meaningful changes on the issues under investigation; longer lectures could have been more effective, but the syllabus, with RC as its prime focus, did not allow the participants to talk more than 10 minutes. The inclusion of more than one presentation per student could have also been more effective in investigating the impact of lectures accompanying comprehension but, due to limitations imposed by course objectives, each student could give only one presentation. As an alternative, the mini-lectures could have been extended to more than one semester; given that a language skill is acquired over time; unfortunately, however, the course extension was not practical either.

The participants were also limited in number as there were only 13 students in the classes taking part in the study. So to get more reliable results, future studies are recommended to involve more students in similar pieces of work. They may also need to increase the number of lectures to a minimum of two presentations per student.

CONCLUSION

The inclusion of mini-lectures in a reading comprehension-oriented syllabus can improve students' listening comprehension ability to some extent but, at the same time, it may slow down their progress on reading comprehension.

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