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Devising Speaking Activities Based on Core Text (Syllabus textbook) for Improving Reading Comprehension: A Case Study Conducted at Intermediate Level in Bahawalpur

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to observe the usefulness of devising speaking activities based on core text of English for developing language proficiency in English specially in reading comprehension skills. The research has been conducted at Federal Government College Bahawalpur and the participants were students of Intermediate level and teachers from private and Government colleges. Quantitative experimental research design was employed. A total 62 students were selected and divided into control group and experimental group. During the first stage six speaking activities were conducted with both the groups. The findings show that group discussion was the most successful speaking activity. In the second stage lesson plans involving speaking activities based on reading comprehension texts were devised and conducted in the experimental group classroom. The findings reveal that there is a marked increase in the post test scores of experimental group which indicates that English speaking activities based on core text result in an improvement of students' reading comprehension.

Keywords: Speaking Activities; Core-text; Reading Comprehension; Integrated Skills; Language Proficiency.

1. Introduction

Consideration a classroom situation, most of the task is to speak and listen and these two skills hold key importance. Students listen and speak in order to understand concepts and express thoughts. Speaking and listening skills are of noteworthy importance in any language of the world as they are receptive skills and come prior to reading and writing. Yet, unfortunately in most of the Pakistani schools these two very essential skills are considered as less important. In Pakistani system of education and more specifically if we look into the core text of intermediate classes we see that reading passages and authentic text is being used. There's a lot of reading practiced in the classroom.

Listening skills and speaking skills have no scope and value in this kind of English language teaching system and thus these two entities are overlooked.

To improve the spoken expression of our students, a major change in our syllabi is needed. Pakistani students who study in private schools and some public schools are in fact taught how to speak and communicate fluently in English, but the majority of Pakistani students, in different schools and colleges do not get this opportunity. In most of the government schools and colleges listening and speaking skills are not worked upon and the objective of the English language teacher is the completion of the course.

The best solution to this problem of course can be to exploit the already present material included in the syllabi of English in such a way that it fulfills the task in question that is; it paves a way towards the improvement of speaking skills of the pupils which in turn improves their reading comprehension.

The present research will explore how devising of speaking skills activities related to core text can help students enhance their reading comprehension skills. Some theories support this notion such as Schema Theory which suggests, that knowledge is organized into meaningful units called schemata. These units or components of memory help in remembering and learning (Bartlett, 1995). Hence speaking on core text may be easier as the relevant content schemata will already be present in the minds of speakers. Learning language skills in connection with each other is also supported by the integrated skills approach which suggests, that all four skills of language must be taught in a combined form. In this way, the language learner is exposed to language in the most genuine and realistic manner as in daily life an individual encounters all four skills of language together, interlinked with each other (Oxford, 2001).

1.1. Objective

To study the effect of speaking activities based on core text on reading comprehension of students and to see which speaking activities are students most comfortable with.

1.2. Research Question

1. Which speaking activities are successful for intermediate students?
2. Do speaking activities based on core text have positive effect on reading comprehension of students?

1.3. Significance

The outcome of this research will guide the teachers of English of Government colleges who want to employ speaking activities in their classrooms. The English language teachers can use the prescribed text books as resource material. They can use in their situation the activities employed by the researcher during the experiment. In this way their students not only become good speakers but also they are better able to understand the text that they read from their text books.

2. Literature Review

When learning a new language, learners find speaking skill more difficult to master than listening, reading and writing, because speaking has to be done on the spot, with no choice of editing and reviewing. Hence it requires a lot of practice (Bailey in (Nunan, 2003), p.48). Speaking skill is one of the oral skills, along with various other oral skills such as listening, comprehending, lexis, knowledge of sound system etc. In a classroom situation, a student's command over a language is usually seen in form of reading and writing. In Pakistan, the oral skills are ignored even more, and most students are neither taught nor tested on these skills at all. As syllabi are lengthy and students need to work only on reading and writing for the exam, there is no time left to cover the oral skills. Hence the present research will explore how the core text, which the students are already studying, can be taught with speaking activities. These activities will help in improving not only their reading comprehension but side by side, students can practice their speaking as well.

This study gives useful insights for the present research, as it investigates speaking activities like role plays and group discussions. Moreover, it also tells us how these activities are integrated with a given curriculum. However it does not explain how these speaking activities can improve reading comprehension and the focus of present research is on intermediate rather than secondary school students.

2.1. Popular Activities to Develop Speaking Skills
2.1.1. Role-plays

The research question of the present study explores which speaking activities are more successful in the given context.

Another inquiry into role play by Mendoza (2019) suggests that role play is a beneficial method for making learning practical and can be successfully used for adult learning. Another research based on upper secondary EFL students in Malaysia recommends using role plays for teaching speaking skills, which is also a point of focus in the current research. Long and Richards (1987) say:

"Incorporating role-play into the classroom adds variety, a change of pace and opportunities for a lot of language production and also a lot of fun! It can be an integral part of the class and not a 'one-off' event. If the teacher believes that the activity will work and the necessary support is provided, it can be very successful."

According to Maier (2002), role- plays are educational tools that bring life into classroom. Much action, movement and liveliness is involved in the class room.

2.1.2. Group Discussions and Public Speaking

A research on group discussion suggests that it is a useful method for teaching speaking skills in an ESL classroom. Students feel more confident participating in oral activities in small groups, rather than speaking individually in front of the whole class. Moreover, these group activities improve their individual speaking skills as well (Hamzah *et al.*, 2010). Another research on grade 11 students shows that discussions, role play and problem speaking activities are successful in developing speaking skills (Oradee, 2013). A study by Fairley (2010), explores gender differences in public speaking activities in Egyptian EFL classroom. The findings show that females hesitate and are interrupted by male students in speaking activities, and there is a need to use varied techniques in order to equalize participation. Another study shows that having debates in classroom can improve speaking skills a lot.

Debates make students more active, and they develop a sense of competition, therefore they are more motivated (Rubiati, 2010). These researches give us insights for the present research while assessing group discussion and public speaking as activities for developing speaking; however they do not provide a comparison between the two, or with other speaking.

In a case study conducted at University Technologi Malaysia, Lu Ye Ting worked on a group of 33 students at Intermediate level and figured out that when judged individually, they performed very well and they showed marked improvement in reading comprehension skills. The research also proved that the element of fear of class room learning also vanished from the minds of the students.

2.1.3. Info- Gap Activities

Information gap activity is one which involves an exchange of some information between two or more people, for which they need to communicate (Nunan, 1989), p. 66). A study in Iranian EFL classroom revealed that integrating information gap activities in the lesson plans can markedly improve the speaking skills of students (Watami and Gholami, 2012). One interesting method of implementing information gap task in the classroom is through tango seating. In this method, students are seated in pairs, adjacent to each other, but facing different sides of the room. Then they are given an information gap task, and they can only communicate by listening and speaking, as they can't see what their partner is doing or writing (Bailey in (Nunan, 2003), pg. 57). These works provide useful ideas for the present study, while assessing the effectiveness of information gap tasks to develop speaking at intermediate level. However, these studies do not reveal whether these activities are workable in Pakistani classrooms.

2.1.4. Questioning

According to a research by Qashoa (2013), questioning by the teacher in an EFL classroom is an influential method, if conducted in the right way. Simple yes/no questions are also important, however questions requiring longer answers and exploring the views of students on a particular topic or in reference to the lesson helps them interact more, and gives them more speaking practice. The response of teacher towards the answers in also very crucial, and should be motivating in order to encourage the learners to speak more.

2.1.5. Poster Presentations

A study reveals that if oral presentations are appropriately conducted and proper guidance is given, they can help students gain confidence in speaking. Students should be trained in giving oral presentations, and they should be made aware of the aids they can use to make their presentations more effective. Moreover, evaluations of these presentations, as well as discussions about them are also necessary. According to a study by Yusbido (2011), oral description of pictures can be extremely helpful in enhancing speaking skills of students. There can be varied activities that involve oral description of pictures.

The above mentioned studies and researches regarding various activities used for developing speaking skills give useful insights while addressing the first research question of this study. They give us awareness about the various ways in which these activities can be conducted in a classroom, and what should be kept in mind while doing so. However, a comparison between these various activities when actually implemented on the sample under study and their effectiveness in Pakistani context is yet to be found.

3. Research Methodology

This study is quantitative in nature and employs experimental method. The research was conducted at F.G.Inter College Bahawalpur situated at Noor Mahal Road. The researcher chose this college as a case study as she herself was teaching there as a lecturer of English since the past 6 years. The researcher found that her students remained weak in reading comprehension of a text and wanted to devise new ways of teaching the text through which students' reading comprehension skills could improve.

3.1. Sample

Total number of students in Intermediate (HSSC-I) at F.G. College was 62. The researcher divided them into two groups of 31 students in each, through convenience sampling. One group was treated as experimental group while the other as control group.

3.2. Variables

The variable which was manipulated and implemented on experimental group comprised of 10 lesson plans involving speaking activities based on core text.

3.3. Nature of Data and Estimation Tools

The data is numerical in the form of pretest and post test scores. Observation sheets were also employed with a numerical scoring system.

3.4. Procedure
3.4.1. Stage I: Identification of Successful Speaking Activities

The first step of this research was to answer the research question that which speaking activities are successful with students of Intermediate. The procedure used by the researcher to collect data on this was that six different speaking activities were implemented on both the groups treating them as one large group.

The activities were conducted separately in both classes/ groups so that the number of students per activity does not succeed more than 31. As in an ideal ESL classroom the number of students should not exceed 30-35. To find out that which speaking activities were successful with the students of Intermediate, general reading passages were selected and speaking activities based on the following six categories were devised: role plays, info- gap activities, poster presentation, public speaking, group discussions and question answer session.

With the help of the technique of Observation and the tool of observation check list sheet, it was judged that which of the above categories of speaking activities were successful with the students of Intermediate.

For this the researcher set a criterion for judgment that was characterized as follows.

Observation Sheet
Table-1. Showing sample of observation sheet

Parameters	Give points (0) if you don't find the parameter and (1) if you find the parameter
Level of interest/ motivation	
Level of confidence	
Level of fluency/efficiency	
Use of correct structure/ grammar	
Connection of ideas	

Two activities were performed for each category namely role plays, info- gap activities, poster presentation, public speaking, group discussions and question answer session. For each activity each of the three observers filled in the observation sheet.

Two colleagues of the researcher Ms. Shumaila Naseem and Mr. Waqar Ahmad from Federal Government College Bahawalpur acted as observers and check- marked the above mentioned chart while observing the six speaking activities while the third one to mark the above mentioned table was the researcher herself, whose role was also to instruct about and conduct these six activities. The responses of observation of all three participants are given in the chapter of result analysis.

On the basis of these responses four activities were selected that were more successful namely role-plays, group discussions, info- gap activities and verbal question answer session (hot seat). However poster presentation and public speaking were considered as being less successful with students of intermediate of F.G College Bahawalpur.

3.4.2. Stage II: Conduction of Pre-test and Post-test on Experimental and Controlled Group

The second step of this research was to see that if speaking activities are devised on core text, does it help in improving reading comprehension of the students of Intermediate or not. For this purpose the researcher first of all devised a pre- test based on the story entitled, 'Overcoat' selected from their English text book for class 11. They had already read the story in class. Both the groups were treated as one large group and they appeared in a pretest conducted by the researcher. The results were tabulated. The next step was to devise 10 lesson plans based on short stories taken from the same core text book.

The lesson plans were implemented only on the experimental group while the control group was taught with the same traditional method i.e read the story and answer the questions given at the end of the story in 'exercise' section in written form.

The lesson plans were conducted in 30 working days. For each short story, on day one, the story was read in class. On day two, the speaking activities were implemented and on day three, a post test to check the level of their reading comprehension was taken on the same story. The results were then tabulated. Similarly with the control group the lesson plan was conducted in the same way. On day one, the story was read in class. On day two, they did written exercises (question answers) of the same story given at the end of the story in their books and on day three, the researcher took their posttest as well.

4. Result Analysis
4.1. Results

The following table and graph gives us a clear view of the success of the six speaking activities devised by the researcher. It shows how far which activity was successful; which one was at the top and which one at the bottom giving low scores. The results are entirely based on the data taken from the observation sheets of the three observers.
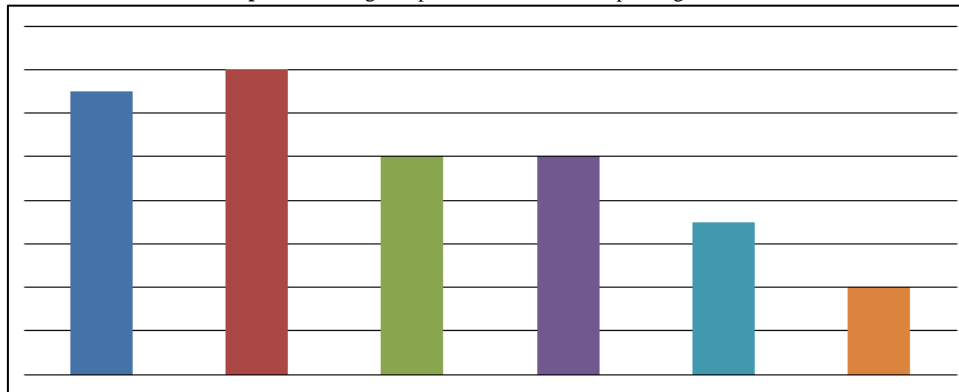
4.1.1. Scores of Observation Sheets

Table-2. Showing scores of observation sheets

Speaking Activity Type	Scores of Observation Sheets
Role plays	13
Group discussions	14
Info-Gap	10
Question Answer session	10
Poster presentation	7
Public Speaking	4

### 4.1.2. Successful Speaking Activities

Graph-1. Showing comparative of successful speaking activities

It can be observed from the above mentioned bar chart that the highest score has been given to 'Group Discussion activities'. It is very natural as the students mostly feel comfortable to work in groups. It can also be seen that the most unsuccessful speaking activities with students of intermediate of F. G. Inter College, Bahawalpur were public speaking and poster presentations giving only score values of '4' and '7' respectively. However the two speaking activities that are question answer session and info gap gave the same results.

4.1.3. Graphic Representation of Mean Scores – Control and Experimental   group

Graph-2. Showing mean scores of control and experimental groups
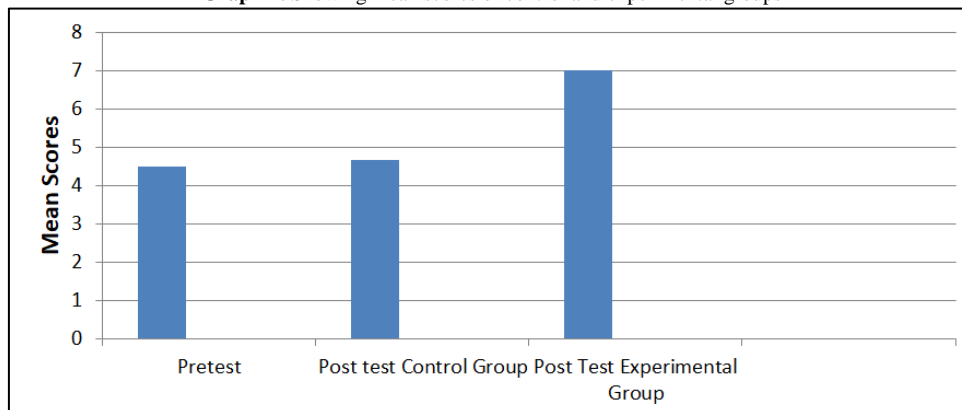
The above graph shows the mean scores of pretest for both control and experimental groups, in comparison with mean scores of post-test, of control and experimental group. The graph shows that mean score of control group's post-test demonstrate a minor raise from pre-test mean. Whereas experimental group's post-test mean is markedly high as compared to pre-test mean.

4.2. Discussion

The findings are in line with the integrated skills approach which suggests that the language skills enhance each other if taught in a combined form. The results show that group discussion is the most successful speaking activities which further validates the findinds of Hamzah and Ting (2010).Other successful activities are role plays, question answer sessions and information gap activities. The marked increase in the post test scores of experimental group indicates that speaking activities based on core text have a direct positive influence on the reading comprehension of students.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study show that students' reading comprehension skills enhance if speaking activities are devised on the lessons of their core text (syllabus). This is clearly indicated by the high scores of experimental group in the post test. The study also shows that popular speaking activities among students of Intermediate are Group discussion and Role plays. Least popular or successful are public speaking.

5.1. Policy Recommendations

We need a major change towards syllabus designing and improve our curriculum and paper pattern to run the race of modern era. Especially in government school, there is a dire need to add speaking activities in the core curriculum so that students can benefit from them and improve their reading comprehension.

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