

Enhancing the Vocabulary Level of Tribal Tertiary Students: A Case Study

Ms. G. Mary Pushpa, M A.,
Lecturer, Government College for Women, Visakhapatnam,
Andhra Pradesh, 530001, South India.

She has been teaching for seven years among tribal students. Her interests include language teaching and communicative abilities.

Abstract

This paper attempts to make an analysis of the exigency of enhancing the vocabulary level of tribal tertiary students of Visakhapatnam. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Approach is followed in the teaching and learning of English as the second language. The syllabus is learner-centered and coursework is task-oriented, the graduates are not able to secure employment. The reason is the lexical incompetence and this is addressed by an intervention programme to enhance the vocabulary level of learners. A select academic vocabulary was introduced in the intervention programme. A pre-test and a post-test had been administered. The sample of 80 students had been selected based on NELT proficiency test with a score of 40% and above. Pre-test helped to ascertain the vocabulary skills and proficiency level of students. Post-test served to find out learners' retention of aspects of word after intervention. The pre-test provided homogeneity to the sample. The population includes 80 students from Telugu, English, Mathematics and Commerce streams. The results show a significant improvement in their repertoire of vocabulary. The learners were able to do productive tasks using computer. The use of computer in language learning had overall impact on the students' learning strategy.

Keywords: communicative abilities, competence, productive skills, proficiency and vocabulary.

Introduction

The study of English as the Second Language (ESL) in Andhra Pradesh had gained more importance since the advent of globalization. The graduates are not able to secure employment even though opportunities are available in the employment market. Many e-source related jobs are available but graduates become unemployables. The foremost reason is attributed to the lack of communicative skills especially productive skills. The foremost difficulty faced by the students is the lack of requisite vocabulary. It is an exigency to increase the vocabulary level of the students.

The importance of vocabulary had been highlighted by many linguists as critical in learning languages (Atasheneh & Naemi, 2015; Behbahani, 2016; Nation, 2001). Wilkins stated that "without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (1972, p 111).

Insufficient vocabulary knowledge will adversely affect the development of students' skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking (Alhaysony, 2012; Hu & Nation, 2000; Liu, 2011). Therefore, it is necessary that students need to apply effective vocabulary learning strategies to improve vocabulary acquisition (Nation, 2001; Teng, 2015).

Vocabulary improvement of learners is a critically significant point in their language learning advancement (Linse, 2005). It is accepted by linguists and scholars that vocabulary plays a more important role than the grammar knowledge in communication. Schmitt (2000:55) lays emphasis on the vocabulary issue: "lexical

knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language". Sufficient vocabulary knowledge helps the learner to communicate freely and effectively.

Literature Review

A great deal of research had been carried out in the area of vocabulary learning and teaching (Ahmed, 1989; Fan, 2003; Gu, 2003; Gu and Johnson, 1996; Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown, 1999; Kudo, 1999; Lawson and Hogben, 1996; Sanaoui, 1995; Schmitt, 1997; Stoffer, 1995).

Vocabulary learning is defined by different scholars. Nation (2001:217) defines, "vocabulary learning strategies are a part of language learning strategies which in turn are a part of general learning strategies". Rubin (1987) is of the view that vocabulary learning is "the process by which information is obtained, stored, retrieved and used". As Allen (1983) emphasizes lexical problems frequently interfere with communication. So it is vital to learn and teach vocabulary.

Need for the Study

It is an assumption that the reason for the graduates not able to secure career opportunities is lack of communicative competence. Language competence involves four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing including grammar. Especially students lack productive skills, speaking and writing. The important reason is vocabulary incompetence. This problem has been identified from the discussion with the establishments as well as the students. It is necessary to find out a solution for the enhancement of vocabulary knowledge of the graduates.

English Language Teaching (ELT) in Andhra Pradesh

Andhra Pradesh is a multilingual state. In the educational system, students learn their mother tongue L1, English L2 and Hindi L3. In the social milieu, students are exposed to Telugu, Urdu, Hindi and English. Students have to devote studying three languages and they have to divide their time to them in increasing their knowledge in the respective languages.

In Andhra University, in the undergraduate courses, the textbooks are prepared by the University; and in the teaching and learning of English, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Approach is followed. The syllabus is learner-centered and the coursework is task-oriented. A cursory examination of the writing of the students was made and revelations helped to identify lack of language proficiency although the learners have an experience of learning English for a decade.

Writing skill requires a strong repertoire of vocabulary. In writing, not only ideas are necessary but also vocabulary to make embellishments of ideas in order to present them in myriad ways to the audience. It is assumed that the vocabulary level of the students is below the expected level of tertiary education. It was also ascertained through interactions with the students that students struggle for appropriate vocabulary while writing. Hence an attempt has been made to enhance the vocabulary of the students by an intervention programme using Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Computer is one of the digital devices that the students are familiar with during their course of study. Internet is being used by almost all the students in tertiary education.

What a Learner must know

Nation prescribes word limit for understanding various texts to the level of 98% of the text. It is 7000, 8000 and 9000 word families for spoken English, newspapers and novels respectively (Nation, 2013). For challenging academic texts in University textbooks 10000 words are required as claimed by Haxenberg and Hulstijn (1996). Nation and Waring (1997) claim that 15000-20000 words are needed to equal a native

speaker of English. As linguists point out that at the tertiary level for an ESL student 3000 word level would be advisable. But the fact remains as different to the claims of linguists.

Students often struggle to express themselves in speaking and writing. They use internet, watch TV and listen to songs, yet they are not able to express their thoughts coherently and effectively. The reason is lack of vocabulary proficiency as the students themselves point out in their interactions. Even though the course books are based on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Approach there is no provision for teaching vocabulary learning or vocabulary learning strategy teaching. The emphasis is on communication skills. The students are left to themselves to improve their vocabulary knowledge on their own. They try to undergo a course in communicative skills after graduation.

In Andhra Pradesh after globalization effects, in e-related services opportunities are more for employment but lack of communicative disability prevents graduates from securing good career prospects. The government of Andhra Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh State Council of Higher Education (APSCHE) launched an English communication skills project under the auspices of the British Council in 2016. The project aims to improve the English Language proficiency and employability skills of the college students. Several studies have investigated the relationship between vocabulary and comprehension abilities. There is a clear and established relation between vocabulary knowledge and comprehension with limited vocabularies being linked to limited comprehension of text (Carlo *et al.*, 2004).

Setting

The study had been carried out in Paderu Government College, Paderu Valley in Visakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh, South India. Paderu Valley is the conglomeration of many tribal hamlets speaking various languages and dialects. The students speak Adivasi Oriya, Kui Kond, Kondadora and Kupia, the tribal language Kodhu, Oriya Telugu, Bagatha and other minor tribal languages and Telugu (MacKenzie, 2006).

Participants

The sample of 80 students had been selected based on NELT proficiency test with a score of 40% and above. The population includes 20 students from each major subject, viz., Telugu, English, Mathematics and Commerce. The students have English learning experience for ten years. The students speak Adivasi Oriya, Kui Kond, Kondadora and Kupia, the tribal language Kodhu, Oriya Telugu, Bagatha and other minor tribal languages and Telugu (MacKenzie, 2006).

Methodology

Pre-test helped to ascertain the vocabulary skills and proficiency level of students. Post-test served to find out learners' retention of aspects of word after intervention. The pre-test provided homogeneity to the sample. An Intervention Programme was designed in order to enhance the vocabulary of the students.

Since computer is accessible to the students the method of computer assisted language learning is being attempted in the enhancement of academic vocabulary through tasks and activities. In the beginning, in order to ascertain the vocabulary skills and language proficiency, a pre-test had been administered. Nelson English Language Test (NELT) was administered to the students. Those who scored 40% and above were selected for the intervention programme of vocabulary learning. Further learners' familiarity with academic words was tested using a questionnaire. Then select academic vocabulary was introduced in the vocabulary intervention programme. The programme involves computer assisted tasks and activities. A post-test was held to examine the learners' retention of the aspects of the word after intervention. The tasks tested the recognition of vocabulary.

In the intervention programme a task contains a passage with the introduction of ten words from academic word list (AWL). The passage is followed by comprehension questions and the students answer the

questions. The questions are designed in such a way that the students are made to guess and search for the meaning using computer and dictionary. Twenty tasks were provided in the programme. The post-test is designed so as to test the recognition of the words introduced.

In the intervention programme instruction is based upon these concepts: (a) content broken down into small tasks (b) opportunities to respond (c) opportunities for feedback and (d) probes used to monitor progress.

Findings of the Study

The results of the study revealed that there is marked improvement in vocabulary. The productive tasks given made the students learn new vocabulary and consolidate what they have learned already. The assistance of computer in learning vocabulary had an overall impact on vocabulary learning. They were able to find and learn the meanings of different words. The overall perception with an additive benefit is that students found that computer is a rich source for vocabulary enhancement. But the students require some guidance in exploring possibilities of enhancement of vocabulary using computer for language learning. The use of computer is one of the methods to enhance the vocabulary of the students.

Discussions

Everyone is aware that a sound repertoire of vocabulary is the most important for the development of the language skills for better communication. But the enhancement of vocabulary does not find a place in the teaching and learning of the language. In the training of English teachers also, there is no method being prescribed for addressing lexical incompetence. Nor the teachers devote some time in enhancing the vocabulary of students exposing them to various vocabulary learning strategies. Although the students themselves explore some vocabulary learning strategies on their own, they need to have some guidance from the teachers for vitalizing the repertoire of vocabulary for the development of language skills.

Suggestions

Generally colleges have computer laboratory and students are familiar with using the computer for email, videos and watching games. In these circumstances, it is appropriate to use the computer for enhancing vocabulary of the students. If computer is made use of for language learning, the uninterested students will also evince keen interest in language learning. One suggestion is the inculcating the reading habit among the students in order to increase their repertoire of vocabulary.

Conclusion

The results show that the students were able to make significant improvement in their repertoire of vocabulary. The learners were able to do productive tasks using computer. The use of computer in language learning had overall impact on the students' learning strategy. The learners felt that computer is a rich source for vocabulary enhancement.

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