

Use of literature-based online ESL materials in enhancing the English speaking skills of undergraduate learners

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Abstract

This study attempted to investigate the impact of literature-based ESL lessons conducted online in enhancing English-speaking skills and analyze the perceptions of the BSc undergraduates towards these lessons. Thus, a literature-based language programme was developed and conducted online for over 15 weeks for the third-year students who had registered for the English language programme of the Faculty of Science, University of Ruhuna. A questionnaire survey with open-ended questions was administered to a group of 50 third-year students selected using convenient sampling. Moreover, focus group discussions were carried out with 6 English teachers and classrooms were meticulously observed to get a better insight into the impact created by these lessons. The data accumulated was qualitatively analyzed. The responses of the participants revealed that English lessons based on literature were able to create a conducive teaching and learning atmosphere, which eventually enhanced active participation, intrinsic motivation, creative thinking, and attendance of the students while reducing their anxiety to a considerable level. Hence, it was evident that this would be an effective method to inspire language learners in improving their speaking skills. Nevertheless, language teachers should also be smart in exploiting the ideal literary texts to reap the best out of the approach.

Keywords: Speaking skills, Literature-based Language Lessons, Undergraduates

1. Introduction

Currently, nobody can renounce the fact that English language teaching and learning plays a vital role in the lives of individuals. Thus, a significant number of students are required to learn English during their secondary and tertiary education through compulsory language programs (Trang, 2007). Dealing with the Sri Lankan context, although most of the consecutive governments stressed the value of English and the importance of producing English-speaking citizens, most of the secondary educational institutions and universities are still struggling hard to achieve the expected language learning outcomes (Sanmuganathan, 2017). As Wattegama (2018) pointed out the majority of the students are unable to pass the written paper at the GCE (Ordinary Level and Advanced Level) examinations even though they have been learning English for 10-12 years consecutively. As per Wijesinghe (2015) when those students are enrolled into universities the tragedy remains untouched for language teachers, respective departments, and units as they face the challenge to inspire the university students towards a successful language learning process. Hence, 'who should be blamed?' Nevertheless, the greatest share of the blame directly goes to the language teachers and the departments (Editorial, Daily News, 2010), because in any atmosphere of language fostering, the language teachers and the respective language teaching departments attain the prime attention.

This issue remains rather drastic when the industry complains that most of the graduates lack the necessary speech competency although their writing ability is fairly acceptable. As indicated by Aliakabari and Jamalvendi (2010) it is by the speaking skill that learners are judged, which can be applied to the Sri Lankan graduates as well. That is, the English Language competence of Sri Lankan graduates is generally determined based on their ability to speak in English (Wijewardene et al. 2014). Nevertheless, English language communication is one of the most shared issues faced by a considerable number of undergraduates. The majority of the undergraduates of the University of Ruhuna, Faculty of Science also belong to the similar category as in many circumstances they satisfy themselves by achieving the

basic language requirement which is a simple pass for the General English examinations prescribed for them in their students' handbooks, without which their degree is withheld. Consequently, their proficiency in English speaking is not tested, whereas only their ability to read and write based on a written paper is tested at the examinations, which may have resulted in poor attention to English speech.

However, the challenge of enhancing the communicative competency of the undergraduates was further challenged as physical classrooms and traditional learning strategies were rapidly replaced with the online mode of teaching and learning due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic. It was a challenge for both the learners and the language teachers (Oraif and Elyas, 2021). This distinctive e-learning directly influenced the learner behaviour that most of the students continued to be passive listeners on digital platforms. Moreover, the limited number of available linguistics and communicative resources allocated to enhance the speaking skills of the undergraduates were ineffective. Therefore, a deeply fondled requirement has emerged at the Faculty of Science, the University of Ruhuna to create an approach that would address the communicative barriers of the undergraduates more precisely during the time that COVID-19 had revolutionized the entire system of teaching and learning. That is teaching the English Language through Literature to enhance the communicative competence of the undergraduates.

1.1. Research problem (Background / Literature Survey)

Focusing on speaking, the ability to speak is considered the most indispensable skill as it is the basis for communication (Aungwatanakun, 1994 as cited in Oradee, 2012). Since speaking necessitates a comprehensive vocabulary, elements of grammar and socio-cultural awareness speaking skill is not easy to attain (as cited in Al-Roud, 2016). Further, speaking is considered as one of the forgotten skills for it is not tested for examinations and more attention is paid to grammar (1987, in Leong & Ahmadi, 2016). The fact that speaking is not usually tested for examinations, and it necessitates more time for practice leads the teachers into ignoring its usefulness in the classroom atmosphere (Bashir, Azeem & Dogar, 2011). As stated by Clifford (1987), regardless

of the value of speaking, it has been discarded in several language learning environments giving more attention to grammar (as cited in Leong & Ahmadi, 2016). Thus, it is evident that poor English language communication many obstruct the students from achieving the best outcomes of the years of dedication in language learning.

Hence, teaching English through literature to enhance the speaking ability of the undergraduates will be undeniably significant. Thus, literature would be truly important in developing a taste or a drive among L2 learners to learn the language. It would break up the fabricated belief that literature should not be limited to the privileged few, but for all the second language learners to appreciate the autonomy of learning English. Therefore, literature would be an emotional boost and a mechanism for an attitudinal transformation for both the language teachers and the students.

Against this backdrop, several scholars have stated different definitions for the umbrella term 'Literature' and considered it an opulent source for language development. Literature is the use of language successfully under inapposite circumstances (Baird 1968; Shazu, 2014). According to Brumfit and Carter (1986), literature is a supporter of language (as cited in Babae and Yahya, 2014). As Llach (2007) identified "Literature is constituted by language and it represents one of the most recurrent uses of language." As per Willmott (1979), the connection between literature and language is synergetic; which means both are not only entwined but also meticulously interrelated. Literature is engrained in language and language acquires life through Literature (as cited in Ihejirika, 2014). Hence, literature is considered to be a great potential resource in teaching language and communication skills, especially speaking skills for language learners. It further enhances their intercultural competence as it opens a window to the culture of the target language. "... a powerful motivator for the learners to communicate and improve their language skills in an integrated way..." (Gjuzeleva, 2015, p. 20). Thus, literature has become the most treasured tool that can be used in a communicative classroom and outside, merely because of the motive it offers the learners to become more vigilant and reason

analytically using language in a more innovative and a personalized mode (Collie & Slater, 1987; Duff & Maley, 1990; Gjuzeva, 2015). It accomplishes linguistic, methodological, and motivational benchmarks (Duff & Maley, 1990; Gjuzeva, 2015). According to Chan (1990), the literature that is used in improving linguistic skills is not the canon of distinct texts or the literature which is symbolized by 'L' reasonably, it comprises songs, television drama, jokes, and graffiti, and it is emerged from the language point of interpretation and is considered for linguistic development which is correct of the current study as well. If it is a poem, novel, or short story it can drive in line with the student's personal experience in actual life scenarios thus providing novel areas for discussions in a language classroom to improve their speaking ability. Literature is assumed to address individuals' feelings, dreams, imaginations, and experiences that other texts are impotent to do. Moreover, "It expands language awareness, encourages interaction and discussions, and educates the whole learner's personality." (Clandfield & Foord, 2006 cited in Vural, 2013, p. 16). However, more decisively it is the language teacher who should select which texts to encompass, for what purposes, and what tasks will be done to explore the texts and encourage language growth (Shazu, 2014, Gjuzeva, 2015). Essentially, "if the teacher radiates boredom, it is unlikely that students will be enthused ... be more energetic, and your enthusiasm for the text will communicate itself to students." (Bibby & McIlroy, 2013, p. 20). Thus, here the researchers believe that teaching the English Language through Literature would improve the speaking skills of the undergraduates since literature is authentic and considered as a universal language (Beresova, 2014). Therefore, action research was conducted, and a literature-based study programme was designed, implemented online, and assessed accordingly.

2. Research Questions

- What is the impact of literature-based lessons conducted online on English speaking competency of the BSc undergraduates?
- What is the perception of the BSc undergraduates on literature-based lessons in enhancing their communicative competence?

3. Objectives

The research objectives of the current study were identified as:

- To investigate the impact of Language through Literature lessons conducted online on English speaking competency of the BSc Undergraduates.
- To analyze the perceptions of the BSc Undergraduates towards Language through Literature lessons in enhancing their communicative competency.

4. Methodology

The qualitative research approach, as demanded by the nature of the study was employed in order to derive distinct implications. Thus, a literature-based language programme was launched online over 15 weeks limiting each lesson to two hours per week. Based on the convenient sampling method 50 third-year undergraduates, who had registered for the course ENG 3b10, and 6 English lecturers of the Faculty of Science, University of Ruhuna were selected for the study. Different genres such as poetry, short stories, extracts from science fiction, and short movies were utilized in designing the lesson materials. Further, in developing lessons the students' preferences, cultural concerns, subjective requirements, and language capacity were also concerned which headed towards several task-based and student-centered activities such as debates, discussions, dialogues and role-plays to enhance their communicative competence. The data collection and analysis were predominantly qualitative. Hence, the major instruments that were used to gather data were a questionnaire survey with open-ended questions, observations of their performances online, and focus group discussions. Additionally, secondary sources were referred to for a critical evaluation of the research findings.

5. Results and analysis.

5.1. Student-Centered Learning Atmosphere

The students were immensely pleased about the freedom that they have been provided in the process of language learning through literature. Of relevance is what a student said about it and it proves what a literature-based classroom could be like in terms of being student-centered.

“What is discussed in literature is closer to our life experiences. Once we have contributed to a lesson by saying something, say, even using a few words, we feel some sense of achievement. We usually feel that we are part of the experience. And there is always some room for us to talk about things related to real life scenarios. That is really important.”

Hence, it was apparent that teachers simply acted as facilitators rather than language instructors assisting students to involve with the given tasks such as presentations, debates, dramas, language games, and group discussions in a more vigorous manner. A similar circumstance was echoed by Horng et.al (2005) emphasizing the positive consequences of creative teaching as “throughout the class, teachers act as a learning partner, inspirer, navigator, and sharer, while students transform from passive listeners to observers, performers, and co-learners (p.356).” It was noticed that literature-based teaching enhanced teacher creativity too. Therefore, as stressed by the students and teachers, the outcome was a cooperative and conducive language learning atmosphere that permitted both parties to enjoy ample ventures for free-thinking, imagination, and creativity which made learning English a congenial experience.

5.2. High Attendance

It cannot be forgotten that there is a high rate of absenteeism and as reported by Canagarajah (2002) that could be explained as a ‘drastic fall’. Notably, teaching creatively by employing lessons based on literature has provided a solution for the low attendance of the students which was one of the serious issues that the faculty

was experiencing for an extended period. The active participation of the students in the lectures remained to be low during the online lectures and with the use of these specifically designed lessons, considerable growth in the attendance of the students was evident. As revealed by the students, though they encountered a bulk of problems as this is the end of their university life, they were enthusiastic to learn the language in this relaxed manner and felt that they were one family. As stressed by some of the students they were automatically compelled to participate in group activities and were not left out from their groups. Concerning their ideas, there were no right or wrong answers and they were equally appreciated. As pointed out by the teachers, the high attendance of the students was a result of the favorable environment created as a result of their literature-based teaching for the approach was non-threatening for the language learners. The same scenario was stressed by Pugliese (2016) addressing the diversity of a classroom environment as a key factor for a successful teaching experience.

“A classroom is a microcosm governed by diversity: different social and psychological characteristics, different cognitive strengths and weaknesses, etc. As a result, our pedagogical offers should be as varied as possible: if they aren't, we would run the risk of excluding many of our students.” (Pugliese, edit. Xerri & Vassallo, 2016, p. 20)

5.3. Active participation

Active participation can be only expected if the teacher can provide students interesting language learning activities. Thus, as revealed by the students they never missed a chance of expressing their ideas despite their level of capacity to handle the language. What they truly expected from each task was to come out with the best ideas, solutions, and creativity. As identified by the teachers, it was easy for them to implement their creative ideas through literature-based lessons and were enchanted by the expected language outcomes for the performance of the students was above their expectancy. Moreover, as Nunan (2004) affirms it is when users begin to use

language creatively that they are maximally engaged in language acquisition because they are required to draw on their emerging language skills and resources in an integrated way. Thus, it can be said that in language teaching generated out of literature could be productively to use convert passive learners into more active and energetic learners.

5.4. Less Anxiousness

The students highlighted the fact that they were not anxious from the beginning to the end of their intensive programme and it was one of the remarkable experiences that they have ever had. As pointed out by main researchers speaking anxiety is one of the common obstacles faced by second language learners. Michael (2016) has stated that students often fear making mistakes in front of their classmates and teachers. He further claims that when learning a new language, students develop varying levels of speaking anxiety due to the fear of making mistakes in the classroom. Hence, in a time at which, the language anxiety of the students has become an issue that needs meticulous attention in the domain of English Language Teaching, it was significant to note that teaching creatively using literature-based lessons has encouraged both competent and low competent learners to actively participate in discussions and enhance their English language knowledge. It was quite clear that their involvement was not because of the students not being seen physically. The use of authentic materials allowed students to match the given contexts with their everyday life thus converting language learning into learning life skills. Since as revealed by the students they were less anxious, and it was apparent that their involvement and commitment towards language learning were significantly high. The following statement given by the students clearly encapsulates this notion.

“Literature-based lessons create a friendly platform for us to say something in English; no matter how the classes are conducted: virtually or physically. Such lessons reduce our fear because we don’t have a language-learning mentality when doing such lessons. Because of that, we have the chance to talk about our life and people with minimum fear in making mistakes.”

5.5. High Intrinsic Motivation

Gunawardane, Chandradasa and Senevirathna (2021) identify the lack of intrinsic motivation of undergraduates to learn English as a challenge to language teachers at university; they claim it to be less visible to many of us. As many of the undergraduates lack the expected language competency and were in a crisis their attitudes toward the English language and motivation on learning play a major part in this mishap Pushpananda (2016). Even as pointed out by Fernando (2005), students' attitudes toward their teacher, the rapport between students and teachers, the timing of the course, and the methodology of teaching have a great influence on students' attitudes and motivation on learning a second language. In this context, a majority of the students stressed that they were extremely motivated to learn the language than they were before. Besides, the need for students to be intrinsically motivated is indispensable for language learning and the findings of the study show that it can be easily achieved though literature-based language teaching as is evident from the following statement made by a student.

“Literature, unlike some science related stuff, is closer to life so that we feel like contributing to discussions in English though we know that our English is not perfect.”

Teaching through literature-based lessons has enhanced their motivation in an amicable atmosphere and evaded monotony. Hence, learning English was productive as the students willingly took risks without being afraid of their mistakes. They further emphasized the fact that they have become independent learners, maximized interest, and enhanced free thinking. Moreover, the teachers also pointed out that they too had one of the most productive teaching sessions with their dynamic group of students. Thus, it was an amazing experience to teach the available language components creatively through literature following their intuition as they wished. This was further addressed by Antonia Clare (2016) that creativity is a tremendously important aspect in their career not because it assists their students to learn the language effortlessly, but because it is one of the key secrets for them to develop

further and search novel and adventurous ways to add more shapes into language teaching (edit. Xerri & Vassallo, 2016). This was also proved by Horng et.al (2005) as they highlighted teacher motivation as a direct result of teaching creatively ‘because they perceive the activity of teaching as interesting, involving, satisfying, enjoyable, and a personal challenge.’ Thus, it is evident that literature creates a healthy platform for teacher creativity too.

5.6. Encouragement for Creative Thinking

As per the students’ comments, learning English through literature has enhanced their creative thinking and communicative competency. The students enjoyed the friendly and non-threatening atmosphere generated through literature. They were not limited to a certain framework and the atmosphere has promoted peer interactions to the fullest which eventually assisted students to share their ideas more constructively. The same fact was also devolved by Horng et.al (2005, p. 352) as “In comparison with traditional cramming education, creative instruction encourages students to think independently, participate actively and express themselves freely. Under creative instruction, students are more likely to become creative professionals.” Therefore, it was apparent that teaching creatively through the use of literature has broadened their perspectives to learn the language in a more comfortable manner. As per teachers, the approach has made them realize that teaching English is not just teaching grammar structures, reading comprehensions, or conducting repetitious exercises, rather it is inspiring the students with the maximum use of existing resources in a novel way of teaching.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it could be stated that teaching the English language through literature positively impacts the performance, attitudes, and motivation of the second language learners. This would also be an emotional boost and a mechanism for an attitudinal change for both the language teachers and the students. As teacher-centered approaches are so far outdated it is strongly believed that literature-based language instructions will lead the entire language teaching domain towards a student-centered,

friendlier approach as learner motivation, teacher motivation are direct results of literature-based language instructions. It would allow the learners to go a step beyond what they have already learned as Krashen (1985) pointed out in the Input Hypothesis. Thus this approach of amalgamating language with literature would provide useful insights for all the language teachers and policymakers to design long-term language learning goals to facilitate undergraduates to be productive individuals competent in English language skills. The study also shed light on the significance of the construction of a conducive classroom environment even where the slow learners can benefit in improving their oral competency, which is a deciding factor in the employability of the undergraduates. Further, it was apparent that this could indubitably be an effective remedial measure that could be employed to engage the students actively in online learning platforms, which could otherwise result in monotonous learning environments that hardly motivate the learners. It was also evident that the effectiveness of the lesson solely depends on the way the teacher executes it within the classroom context. Thus, the teacher should also possess the skill to conduct these lessons based on literature in an interesting manner, which would otherwise be futile. Thus, the findings of the study have significant implications for L2 pedagogy at the tertiary level across universities and disciplinary boundaries.

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