

Developing Literacy in Undergraduates of Level One English Proficiency- Application of 'Reading to Learn' Methodology

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Introduction

The problem of this research concerns a set of students, existent at any Sri Lankan university at any given point in time. They are the students of very weak English proficiency, or of Level 1 proficiency, according to the English levelling system followed by the universities. This research makes this particular group its focus in view of future English Medium Instruction (EMI) developments that may arise in the Sri Lankan university system. The problem of this study is the underdeveloped English literacy (reading and writing) evident in Level 1 students. The term 'English Literacy' here refers to the ability to read and write in the English Language. When a student opts for English Medium education that undergraduate will be required to complete a considerable amount of reading and writing tasks in order to achieve academic success. Thus the aim of this study is to examine one methodology to address the above mentioned problem with the objective of helping level 1 students develop reading- writing skills in English for academic success.

It is common knowledge that university education requires a high degree of reading and writing. As Chen and Donin (1997) pointed out 'Reading constitutes a major part of schooling, especially at the university level...' and they add that 'By reading the texts, students are expected to either develop or to review concepts on their own.' The development of concepts and the reviewing to a considerable extent is presented through the written work of the students. In his description on the standard of literacy in higher education Rose says a student at this level should be able to 'read complex academic texts with a high level of understanding' and 'use academic conventions and objective academic language to demonstrate their mastery of a topic or inform and influence their reader.' Thus if students are unable to meet the reading and writing demands of higher education, they will be at a clear disadvantage in meeting the demands of English medium tertiary education. In fact the primary goal of the methodology which this research followed is 'to provide access to tertiary study...' (Rose *et al.*, 2003). The past research that is the Systematic Functional Linguistics based 'Reading to Learn' methodology, on which this study is modelled was implemented mostly with students having a literacy disadvantage which hindered their being successful in their respective educational programs. All these studies claim to have successfully achieved or considerably neared their goals of enabling such students to read and write texts which would have been considered impossible tasks from the stand point of the students' level of language proficiency. The English literacy disadvantage in the Sri Lankan undergraduates who belong to the lowest rung in English proficiency and the encouraging results produced by the past studies on the implementation of the 'Reading to Learn' methodology based on Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to develop English literacy in its subjects prompted me to research on the effects of this methodology on the students studying in my level 1 English language class in the University of Colombo.

Methodology

First the concepts of Systematic Functional Linguistics/Grammar which is the language theory behind the 'Reading to Learn' methodology were analysed to see their congruence with the English literacy disadvantage in the level 1 students. Next, as 'Reading to Learn' is a text based literacy pedagogy, the importance of text based writing pedagogies at the university level was identified by examining past studies. Further, as scaffolding or supporting students to achieve the literacy tasks is a key feature of 'Reading to Learn', insights on the value of 'scaffolding' was established by analysing the educational concepts of 'Zone of Proximal Development' or ZPD (Vygotsky, 1962) and 'Scaffolding' introduced by Wood Bruner and Ross (Wood *et al.*, 1996). Theories on Action Research were investigated as it corresponded with the problem based and reflective nature of the implementation of the 'Reading to Learn' methodology.

In keeping with the action research methodology, the problems to be addressed which are the reading writing difficulties experienced by level 1 undergraduates were established by administering questionnaires to the sample level 1 students in my class. Next, the steps of 'Reading to Learn' were implemented. Measurable data gathered before and during the implementation, by means of the pre- test and other assessments, was analysed and compared to evaluate the extent to which it was successful in achieving development in the English literacy of the subjects of this study. Both qualitative and quantitative analysis was used to analyse the writings produced by the students based on their language characteristics.

Outcomes

The group displayed English reading and writing difficulties in the post implementation activities. They had problems in identifying vocabulary meaning, understanding the meaning components in sentences and understanding sentence organization, understanding paragraph meaning, understanding paragraph organization, understanding the organization in the passage and the meaning of the passage. There was clear evidence to show the students inability to read an English text with adequate comprehension and form novel sentences and a novel passage to express the knowledge gained from reading the given text (reading passage).

The application of one cycle of the 'Reading to Learn' methodology was able to see the students meet the literacy demands of accessing the overall meaning of a reading passage, identify the main idea/theme of each paragraph in the passage, identifying the meaning components as well as the meaning structure of sentences. In addition, students were able to organize the identified meaning components in a logical order to reconstruct the sentences found in a given text. As the students were now able to access the reading passage and identify the meaning components in sentences, when adequate support, in the form of class discussions, group work and language assistance from the teacher was provided, the students were able to make short notes of the key ideas in a paragraph. When the same support was available, the students were also able to achieve 'joint rewriting', that is the construction of a novel passage using the key ideas gathered from the original reading.

It was observed that the ability to access the English reading passage also helped the students to comprehend the information in the passage. Further, their ability to demarcate a sentence according to its meaning components as well as identify the accepted and

logical arrangement of these meanings made students aware of the meaning arrangement in English sentences.

At the pre-test the subjects of this study showed difficulty in comprehending a given English text (reading passage). They were mostly unsuccessful in producing/writing a novel text based on the given text. With language support provided by the teacher in completing the literacy activities in the 'Reading to Learn' methodology, the students were able to read a given text with comprehension, identify and order meaning components within sentences logically and arrange sentences meaningfully with a logical flow and reconstruct the original passage. With the added supports of class discussion, group work and language assistance from the teacher, the students were able to produce a novel passage using the key ideas in the text. These outcomes indicate a development in the students' English literacy abilities from the level of abilities displayed at the pre-test.

At the end of one cycle of implementation of the literacy training, the students successfully completed five out of the six stages in the implementation. Only the final stage of 'Independent Writing' was found to be comparatively more challenging for the students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the implementation of the Systematic Functional Linguistics/Grammar based literacy teaching has the potential to contribute towards helping students of Level 1 English proficiency to develop English literacy. More research is needed to see how Systematic Functional Linguistics/Grammar and literacy training based on this grammar can be exploited to take the category of students who were the subjects of this study towards achieving the skills necessary for independently meeting the literacy tasks involved in an academic course of study in the English medium.

References

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