Exploring English Language Problems of Undergraduate Students at University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan

Abdullah Laghari[1], Faraz Ahmed Bughio[2], Inayatullah Kakepoto[1*], Rafique Ahmed Memon[2]
[1]Quaid-e-Awam University of Engineering, Science and Technology, Nawabshah; [2] Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro
[*]Email: kinayat@quest.edu.pk

Abstract

This study aimed at exploring English Language problems of undergraduate students at Institute of English Language and literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan. English as Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) learners face many language problems; thus it was the biggest motivation for the researchers to explore the problems systematically to prepare them better learners. Action research method was employed. It consisted of two phases: reconnaissance and intervention. Data were collected through multiple resources such as semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, classroom observations and note-taking. One hundred twenty students (120) were randomly chosen as respondents. Data were analyzed through 'Interpretive Approach'. Results revealed promising learning outcomes by adopting action research technique. By doing so, the existing gap between teaching and learning was bridged that led to effective learning outcomes of students and professional development of the taught.

Keywords: Action Research, Reconnaissance, Intervention, Lesson Planning, Implementation, Reflexivity.

Introduction

This research study was conducted to explore English language problems of undergraduate students at Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan. The researchers endeavored to gain an in depth understanding of the English language problems faced by undergraduate students while learning English as a second language at University level. English language plays a paramount role in this modern age of globalization and industrialization. This is because it opens the doors of sound opportunities for acquiring lucrative jobs in public and private sector of organizations. Additionally, English language plays an indispensable role in all job sectors such as business, marketing, management, engineering, medical, commerce, teaching provincial and civil service of Pakistan. Singh et. al (2020) opines that English plays an indispensable role in the field of education, economics and social interaction as well. Singh et al. (2020: 4008) further noted that "Students have the perception of English as a difficult language to master and avoid communicating in the language". Thus, they put their efforts to obtain English language proficiency to be successful in professional life. If we look at the real scenario based on our decade old experience of teaching, it has been observed that majority of students face difficulties in learning English language and it is a major concern for them. In fact, students' poor English language proficiency results in poor outcomes and failure in a professional context. Since this research study was conducted to explore students' English language problems, it has become a major barrier for them to excel in their academics. Attaining this objective, researchers observed the classes and tried to know

the problems faced by students that affect their learning outcomes at large. The researchers adopted Action Research as research methodology, because it is one of the most effective techniques in modern research arena to redress language problems of second language learners.

Rationale of the Study

This research project can be useful for English Language Teachers teaching at higher educational institutions in terms of bridging the widening gap between teaching and learning. The study can be instrumental since it aims at gaining an in-depth understanding of English language learning problems and bringing about effective learning outcomes on the part of learners through Action Research in reconnaissance and intervention phases of this research study respectively. The research study has a broader scope for teachers of English who can change the teaching and learning scenario existing in their contexts effectively. Besides, this research significantly leads to professional development and effective learning outcomes for teachers and students respectively that can make their teaching innovative and goal-oriented and learning more effective one.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the present study are to explore English Language issues faced by Second Language learners at Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro and to enhance the Language learning outcomes of Second Language learners at Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro.

Literature Review

This part of the paper deals with the problems of undergraduate students at Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan. It deals with researchers' perspectives regarding Action Research.

What is Action Research?

Action Research has emerged as a novel method in research arena around the globe. Action Research is a rich contributor in the field of education (Burns 2010). Koshy (2005: 9-10) summarizes features of Action Research as it involves researching your own practice – it is not about people out there; is emergent; is participatory; constructs theory from practice; is situation-based; can be useful in real problem-solving; deals with individuals or groups with a common purpose of improving practice; is about improvement; involves analysis, reflection and evaluation; facilitates changes through enquiry. Hyun et al. (2020) view that credibility of classroom Action Research is discovered by its ability to solve problems or improve the quality of learning strategies. In view of this, Communicative Approach has been useful to ensure effective learning outcomes but barrier to achieving the desired learning objective is lack of teacher training. Concerning this, Martínez-Gómez (2020:160) raising the concern of teaching English in an effective manner in which the researcher acknowledges that though the materials and course books have been updated and a communicative way of teaching has been provided by the Ministry of Education in the context, yet lack of teacher training is the barrier to implement communicative approach. It serves as a barrier towards the achievement of the targets. In order to meet students' learning needs and necessities, teachers need to manage classes efficiently as Ningtyas (2020:5) emphasizes on classroom management which is an important aspect of teacher's competence. By doing so, a teacher can be capable of planning and delivering the lesson effectively and shaping students' behaviors positively.

Furthermore, Action Research aims at enhancing students' learning therefore it is considered as reliable and credible tool for exploring language problems of students. According to Ferrance (2000) Action Research is not problem-solving; but rather a quest for knowledge about how to improve. AR leads people to improve their skills, techniques and strategies so as to bring about reforms in their own context (p.2-3). Burns (2009:289-290) defines Action Research:

Action research is the combination and interaction of two modes of activity-action and research. The action is located within the ongoing social processes of particular societal contexts, whether they be classrooms, schools, or whole organizations, and typically involves developments and interventions into those processes to bring about improvement and change.

As regards the concept of Action Research McNiff (2017) believes, "There is general agreement among the action research community that action research is more considered for:

Action: taking action to improve practices, this is rooted in improving understanding; and Research: finding things out and coming to new understandings, that is, creating new knowledge. In action research the knowledge is about how and why you should act in the world and to evaluate the effects of your action (p.13).

These definitions determine positive change where the practice of Action Research is exercised. Action Research has been given a wide significance in the field of education. By adopting the principles of Action Research in education, positive learning outcomes can be expected which, in turn, result in the desired learning outcomes. Action Research "is a deliberate process through which people aim to transform their practices through a spiral of cycles of critical and self-critical action and reflection" (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005: 82). "Action Research has been found to be a valuable tool in conflict situations; though in the psychology literature its utility appears to be somewhat under-reported" (Akhurst et al. 2020:152). The applicability of Action Research can never be denied to resolve unpleasant situtations in various disciplines.

Theoretical Framework

For this research study, Kemmis and McTaggart's (2005) model of Action Research was chosen which emphasizes on how to improve teachers' practice. They are of the view that Action Research is such a practice changing research which may lead teachers to self-understanding of their own teaching practices and judging themselves. This model contains Action Research Cycles (ARCs) such as act, plan, observe and reflect. These cycles assist in gaining an in-depth understanding of ESL problems prevailing in the context, planning lessons effectively, intervening in the ongoing learning, reflecting back on our teaching and modifying the lessons after every cycle. This model was most useful for our research. Burns and Westmacott (2018, p. 16) view that Action Research, with its iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting as cited in Burns (2010) and McTaggart (1988) offers an empirical process whereby teachers not only operate in the classroom, but also observe systematically the practical effects of their actions and behaviors. Burns' (2010) further says cyclic processes of Action Research, the model given by Kemmis and McTaggart given below shows the procedure of conducting Action which undergoes its cycles.
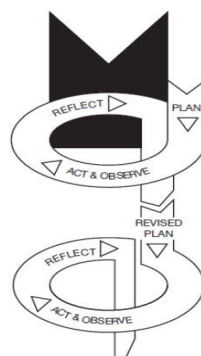
Figure 1. Kemmis and McTaggart's (2005) model of Action Research adopted for this study

Methodology

This study is purely qualitative in nature and Action Research approach has been adopted as a method. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) model has been chosen which contains cyclic processes like, act, plan, observe and reflect.

Data Collection

The data were collected in two phases. First phase consists of "reconnaissance" and second phase consists of "intervention".

Reconnaissance

In this particular phase, data were collected regarding the prevailing trends of teaching English at undergraduate level at Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan. Further, language problems were explored during various research tools (see 3.3). Reconnaissance helped in gaining an in depth understanding of the problems that learners faced. Throughout the reconnaissance phase, various English Language Learning problems were explored. The observations were recorded to know and understand the phenomenon in depth. The schedule of classroom observations and interviews with teachers and students was planned for a period of nearly three months with note-taking and video-recording has been assigned towards classroom observations and tape-recording has been carried out for interview sessions.

Intervention

Conducting intervention with rigorous planning was quite a tough job for us throughout this research. "Preparing intervention was the most critical part of my research and study" (Bughio, 2013: 89). After gaining detailed insights regarding the problems that learners were facing at Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan the action plan was prepared for implementation in second phase of data collection which was relatively a hard task. Therefore, lessons were carefully planned keeping in view the previous scenario of language teaching at Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh. Besides, we kept flexibility in action plan for any modification in the lessons in case of the observer's and the learners' feedback on the respective lessons.

Tools and Instruments

The tools and instruments used for data collection in this study were observation, video-recording, tape-recording, focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews and note-taking.

Participants and research assistants

Participants for this study were 120 undergraduate students of first year. Purpose sampling was used for data collection purpose.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the 'Interpretive Approach' method as this study adopted qualitative research.

Research Questions

R.Q. 1 What are the English language problems of Second Language learners at Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro?

R.Q. 2 How far language learning outcomes of Second Language learners can be enhanced at Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro?

Results

Action research cycles were devised in intervention to tackle the problems. During their previous learning as observed in reconnaissance, students were not given due attention by the teachers. It was rare to find teachers worrying about back-benchers' learning through their participation in the

classroom activities. This was the reason that they were found to be engaging themselves in their own talks and fun. Owing to their engagement, they did not remain concerned about classroom learning. The reason was that they could not receive teacher's voice properly and clearly either due to non-availability of loud speakers or teacher's low tone. While dealing with this issue, we found back-benchers' slow response. Thus, we approached them and told them again what to do in the given activity. Furthermore, we encouraged them to engage themselves in the activity and to come up with their own views in front of the class. As one of the students commented:

"... when you are involving your students in such a manner that they are actively participating. That means atmosphere is all perfect in a way. So in my class being a student all participants were trying to participate as much as they can. This proves itself that atmosphere was really perfect as it should be" (S5 focus group interview three).

Besides, we told them not to worry even if they committed mistakes. This thing gave them confidence. After a while, we found that they got engaged in the task and played their role actively. In doing so, the response of back-benchers slowly improved.

Developing Material

Content of the lesson is of much importance for students' learning. In case of interesting material, learners take more interest; otherwise they do not take interest in the lesson. It becomes significant to discuss the issue of material development because rich material helps learners gain substantial information and arouses their interest for further learning. On the contrary, outdated material leads to boredom for the learners in the class. In reconnaissance phase of this research study, we observed a teacher blindly following the prescribed book. He did not go out of it. He was mainly relying on the contents and exercises given in the book; he did not bring anything at his own. In order to bring interesting and culturally familiar things, we developed material at our own keeping in view students' needs and recommendations taken in focus group interviews after successive lessons. In listening, we designed material on stories, conversations and pronunciations. Developing interesting material was useful for learners because they involved themselves in that particular task which eventually increased their learning.

The problem of learners' motivation

Students need not be discouraged nor be frequently interrogated. Our teaching experience suggests that students actively participate in the class when they are given space, freedom and encouragement to speak on their own. This approach on the part of teacher affected students' learning. On the contrary, they were encouraged to speak and share their views without any hesitation. Consequently, there were many shy students who showed their willingness to come and speak. As one of the students responding our question describes:

"...there is my friend who sits along with me. She is very week. She was saying that she is learning lot of things. For me, I am learning a lot from your activities (S1 Q1 see focus group interview one).

The activities we designed were based on learning. They aimed at motivating and building up confidence level of those students who were shy and hesitated to participate in classroom tasks.

Removing Gender Disparity

In previous classes, the groups were formed in which genders were separated. "As a part of our culture, some sort of segregation is there at every working place. So culturally, we have got this consideration that their seating arrangement is different" (Interview one in reconnaissance). In order to remove gender disparity, we held discussions between girls and boys both in pairs and groups. In doing so, we made both girls and boys sit together. Students' remarks about mixing of genders (see focus group interview six) are given below:

That was quite good. There are some girls who feel hesitation because they have personal issues and grudges from boys. So I... I... had issue with one boy. Today when I was sitting with him, he was not that much bad as I think of him. So that was good" (S1). "Err...sir the idea was fantastic. Err...this idea really increases cooperation among students because we are really some issues with some boys. So they are reduced with this idea (S2).

In this way, we dealt with the issue of gender disparity which was removed in intervention which resulted in better learning outcomes and developed understanding between both the genders.

Code Switching

Instructions in teaching English as a Second Language play a very important role in the sense that teaching can be made easy or difficult depending on the way instructions are delivered. In reconnaissance phase, one of the senior faculty members at Institute of English Language and Literature often used English while teaching. While dealing with this issue, we used code-switching during the class in order to facilitate the process of learning as they were the students of first year class. At certain circumstances, we felt that students did not understand the language; therefore, we switched the code from English to L1. After switching code, we felt through their responses that they were getting lecture. We adopted this way of teaching throughout intervention. Consequently, there was more positive response and better performance on students' part than before.

Using Aid and Tools

Aid and tools ensure better learning outcomes. They are immediate and effective source of transforming learning. Knowledge can be delivered well with the help of modern tools and instruments. In this perspective, the utilization of modern aid and tools makes teaching and learning more interesting. In previous classes, it was observed that there was no use of modern tools in the classroom. In interview one, Teacher A acknowledged that he did not use modern aid and tools; rather he depended on traditional tools. On the contrary, we employed modern equipment in the class such as projector and loud speakers to ensure better learning outcomes. In speaking classes, we arranged multimedia to provide them with visual focus.

Improving Instructions

Classroom learning depends on the way instructions are delivered in the class. If the instructions are made vague, it can be very difficult for students to understand and follow them in the given activities. On the other hand, if they are very clear and understandable, they may be comfortable to understand them. Teacher A also emphasized on the clarity of instructions.

Instructions play a very important part there because instruction is also part of teaching and learning. Either you write instructions for some activities what to do or if it is not there in black and white, you verbally and orally have to tell them what to do there. Telling them, you have to see the capacity of your audience or students and then you have to put things in the simplest and the most clear-cut form there, so that they should be able to understand you. These instructions are not always clear to back –benchers. They always raise their hands and they always want me to repeat what I have said there. So sometimes, just being at the dais, I repeat them, sometimes I have to go near them and I have to repeat things there to make things clear there (Interview One).

Likewise, we adopted his method of delivering instructions which apparently helped students.

Planning Lessons Effectively

In reconnaissance phase, we observed teachers unplanned: they did not plan their lessons on the classroom activities from the start till the end. In this regard, some teachers do not remain worried about lesson planning which, in consequence, does not benefit the students in terms of their learning. Concerning effective lesson planning, Teacher C's opinions are given below:

Yes. I think about the objectives. The steps I like are the timing, the division, the space. I mostly think about 'What are the objectives?' 'What will students learn from this?' If you give them steps, such as read the topic and think about it individually and ask them to give you some points. Now give them ten minutes for discussion. Sometimes, I find them in written and sometimes I write them in book. If not, again they are in my mind.

In intervention phase, the success of this phase depended on lesson planning. Throughout intervention, the lessons were carefully planned. Furthermore, each lesson was well-planned in which every activity of a lesson was planned within certain time frame.

Facilitating Learning

Facilitating learning is like enhancing learning outcomes of learners. Conversely, students find themselves in difficulty when they do not find conducive learning environment. In one of the observations, we found that the teacher interrupted the students during an activity. Consequently, they felt scared whenever they found the teacher approaching towards them. In order to enhance learning outcomes, we created such a learning environment where students could freely express their views. However, it took time to bring them to this position. We provided them with free and friendly atmosphere for their utmost participation which led them to adequate learning.

Dealing with the Large Class

Managing the classroom is very challenging in the context of University of Sindh Jamshoro, Pakistan because classes remain overcrowded. In case of some departments, the number of students exceeded one hundred and fifty even. In our class, the number of the students exceeded seventy which in normal conditions creates problems for the teacher. While dealing with this challenging issue, we designed lessons rigorously in which we were careful about learners' engagement especially back-benchers. Besides, we were giving equal opportunity to everyone so that they may participate. There was no particular group of learners to be repeatedly asked for various classroom performances or engaged in various tasks. Moreover, by initiating practice-based activities, the whole class remained well engaged.

Addition of Listening Skills

The atmosphere for 'improving students' listening skills' is not supportive enough due to unavailability of listening aid and tools at Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh Jamshoro, Pakistan. As teacher A expressing his concerns in interview one describes:

Listening is not here, but for listening you need devices here, you need sound system here. If you are to exploit this, you need some authentic language material there, some native speakers' talk and some discussions and some handouts there students need to be given to give responses after listening to the native speakers there. The unavailability of sound system and devices is the most difficult thing for us.

In reconnaissance, students also revealed their concerns regarding listening skills. They were of the opinion that they had not been taught listening since they joined the university. Listening remains the most ignored skill in the context of Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh Jamshoro, Pakistan which needs to be the focus of teaching in ESL classes. We adopted lessons for implementation from "Transforming English Language Skills" (TELS) which is the prescribed book for first year class. There was rarely any material on listening in the book. Therefore, we designed the material on listening on our own keeping in view students' needs and necessities so that students may gain listening exposure.

Improving Voice Quality during Teaching

In a situation like a large class, the voice of the teacher tends to be louder and clearer enough for students' understanding. Improving learning in large classes is a question that teachers and re-

searchers need to pursue for educational development (Bughio; 2013: 1). Likewise, one of the elements that may problematize learning in large classes is the voice quality of the teacher. Regarding learning in large class, we observed that the teacher was conducting a class of more than eighty students. There was no use of loud speakers; therefore, his voice was audible for those students who were sitting in front rows. These students could easily listen to the teacher, but when it came to back-benchers, teacher's voice did not reach there because it was not loud enough. During the intervention phase, the students did not have such problems. My voice was reachable since I was walking around the class and repeating the instructions slowly and loudly. In doing so, the students felt comfortable while listening to the lecture.

Discussion

This study helped to understand English language learning problems faced by the students of Institute of Language and Literature University of Sindh Pakistan through Action Research. This study assisted in designing effective teaching strategies by the language teachers. Then implemented and designed teaching plan resolved students' language learning issues. Finally, the study resulted in pedagogical reforms and contribution to the knowledge in terms of facilitating the language learning process which ensured effective learning outcomes on the part of learners. Thus, the study can have vast implications in improving the quality of education in the context of Pakistan. The education system of Pakistan and current teaching and learning methodologies need a revision at large to make it more effective. Relating to the language learning process at university level, this research study can be helpful as numerous problems exist in these contexts concerning language teaching and learning. Two research studies have been conducted which somehow addressed the contextual issues such as resolving the issues in large classroom and improving English though cooperative principle of learning. The first study was conducted by Bughio (2013) which was centered on "Improving English language teaching in large classes at university level in Pakistan". He specified his study on large classes in which he concluded that it was not the large class that was creating problems for both the teachers and students; rather it was the teaching method that was the problematic area. This study led to the pedagogical reforms. Whereas, in the second study Panhwar (2016) conducted a study focused on "Using cooperative learning to enhance student engagement with language support classes in Pakistani higher education". In his study, he offered a fresh understanding of the implementation of cooperative learning through action research cycles which enabled learners to realize their own learning responsibilities.

Conclusion

This research study enhanced our understanding pertaining to English language teaching and learning problems of learners at Institute of Language and Literature University of Sindh Pakistan. The context of the study was not large, yet it filtered many misconceptions. It provided practical ways and directions, reviewed from the literature to effectively impart knowledge of English language teaching and learning process. In this perspective, rigorous planning of lessons, their execution, class control, evaluation of outcomes followed by learner reinforcement provided various dimensions and insights to support the study. Previously, neither rigorous lesson plans were made for my teaching nor we took serious consideration of everything happening during the class. Owing to this fact, the teaching did not meet learners' needs and demands. When we embarked on Action Research for this study, it completely changed our perceptions about English Language Teaching. Hence, it adequately contributed to our knowledge. Thus, we learned well about the significance of lesson planning and its impact on students' learning. Through this study, we were able to create in-

teresting learning situations where interaction with students increased their interest for learning new things in an interesting and novel way. However, having found the slow response of few students, we were able to motivate them as well providing them ample opportunities and giving them importance. Through this, they showcased their potential and represented themselves like other students. With this continuation, they performed as good as front benchers. Initially, they were ignored as revealed from focus group interviews. Through effective lesson planning and innovative tasks, we observed satisfactory responses from learners' part. As this research study is concerned with the practices of teaching and learning, it can enormously help improve teaching practices and students' learning at large.

Recommendations

This study can be replicated in the context of universities where the concern of effective teaching and learning remains unexplored. There is a huge gap between teaching and learning prevailing at universities in the country. Universities are the platforms where research is not carried out in true letter and spirit though Higher Education Commission of Pakistan spends hefty budget in research. Various universities need to be the central focus for such studies as widening gap between teaching and learning prevails. By doing so, teaching and learning scenario can be adequately improved therein. Furthermore, it is advisable for novice teachers to carry out studies in their contexts using Action Research methodology. It will help them gain an in-depth understanding of contextual issues. Through Action Research methodology, they can design effective lessons, implement them and ensure effective learning. Above all, Action Research can prove to be like a practical training for them in the field of teaching. Education is concerned with quality and that quality can tangibly be observed by following action research cycles. The number of lessons in each cycle needs to be increased. Action Research must be increased in its scope in educational institutions of the country. Thus, educational issues can be dealt with and resolved in a befitting manner. We firmly believe that it is high time English Language Teachers challenged traditional approaches towards teaching English which suppress students' critical thinking and fluency. Apart from this, sufficient listening input must be given to students in its practical aspects. For this purpose, equipment for listening needs to be available. Students need to be provided visual exposure which is interesting and a quick source of learning. It is advisable for ELT teachers not to blindly follow the prescribed book. Rather, they need to generate the material on their own as well since it is time-consuming for curriculum to change in Pakistan due to non-serious behavior of the government and educationists towards the continuing development in education. I would firmly say it is high time our teachers challenged traditional approaches towards teaching English which suppress students' critical thinking and fluency.

Limitations

This study was limited to first year of undergraduate level. Besides, there was only a single observer who gave critical feedback on our teaching in the intervention phase. Critical feedback was useful to assist us in upcoming lessons; therefore, the number of observers should have been more than one. It became hard since faculty members at Institute of English Language and Literacy, University of Sindh, Jamshoro had their scheduled classes. Most significantly, each research cycle contained eight lessons.

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