Contextualizing English language instruction through descriptive writing tasks

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Abstract

Language is basically a medium of communication to be used within an immediate available social environment. No language is separate or cannot be separated from the world around the people who use that language. The purpose of any language instruction is never to equip the learners with language abilities which they may not even use in real-life communication. As far as the second and foreign language instruction is concerned, learners, in some cases, do not get enough opportunities to use the language for day-to-day communication as they already have a common language (L1) for the purpose. It becomes the responsibility of the teacher to create enough authentic situations in which learners could use the target language. The present paper attempts at enabling learners’ written production of English in authentic contexts. The attempt is made to enable the learners to create the descriptions of places, people, and situations readily available to them.

Keywords: contextualization, content-based instruction, authentic content, authentic instruction, descriptive writing.

Introduction

Language is a basic need in society. It is a major medium of our day-to-day communication in different places like the market, home, shopping mall, classroom etc. We cannot exist in society without a language. Everyone on this planet knows at least one language. When any language is used for communication, it is always used in a situation and with some purpose. We cannot go on making empty expressions without any communicative value assigned to them. Language is always used to do things in our day-to-day lives and to perform various functions such as complaining, enquiring, questioning, and expressing opinions, describing people, places and things around and so on. Similarly, when it comes to learning and teaching language, we cannot learn or teach it in the laboratory conditions completely detached from the real life situations. The language learned through such controlled situations is not likely to be used for a real life communication. Most of the learners of English in India, even after 10-12 years of formal instruction in the English
language, fail to use the language for real-life communication. The root of this failure lies in our ways of teaching English in our schools and colleges. Contextualization, or making the language instruction authentic or real life-like, becomes a necessary condition if that language instruction has to reach the stage of actual real life communication (Richards, 2014). Contextualization of the instruction also means the use of authentic materials and classroom tasks in the language classrooms. The use of authentic classroom tasks is directly connected to the interest and motivation level and even learners’ overall productivity in the classroom. If the learners do not find the classroom tasks relevant and useful and if they cannot make a connection between the classroom and the world outside, then, however, rich or effective the instruction may be, it would not yield the fruitful outcomes for both the learners and the teacher as well.

The present paper is a report on one of such classroom studies where the focus of the classroom teaching was to make English language instruction as authentic and as contextualized as possible. The attempt is made to authenticate/contextualize the English classroom instruction through the use of descriptive writing tasks. The study discusses the following research questions.

**Research Questions**

1. How effectively do the descriptive writing tasks help in making English language instruction authentic?

2. What is the effect of using descriptive writing tasks on learners’ interest and motivation level?

**The Study**

The present study is an attempt to explore the usefulness of descriptive writing tasks to contextualize and authenticate the English language instruction. In particular, the study examines closely the effect of writing descriptions by the learners of the world around them (places, people, things, and situations). The study is a qualitative study and the researchers used *microgenesis*\(^1\) as the method for analyzing the qualitative data. This data was collected by using the teacher’s classroom observation, teacher’s reflective notes and students’ writing responses to the given tasks.

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\(^1\)Microgenesis is a research method that is often used by the researchers in the area of sociocultural theory. It is a way to track the development in a phenomenon over a short period of time. The present study does not use this method in the true sense of the term as the growth shown or analyzed in the study is based on the observation of only one classroom session (Lantolf, 2006).
The study was carried out by two researchers and it uses data from their classroom teaching experiences when they did a one-month summer camp as the guest teachers with the target learners. It was a one month English language communication and leadership skills development program with the learners from 6th to 10th grade. It was a heterogeneous class. The classes were arranged as part of one-month summer camp for the students who are supposedly educationally deprived and who belong to the backward strata of the society. This stratification was done based on the government records. Most of the students had Telugu as their mother tongue. There were students from 6th to 10th class in each section and each section had forty students in it. It was a smart classroom with a digital system which was new for the students. Some of the students had fairly good command over English but they were not confident to use the language for the day-to-day communication. However, most of the students from all the sections and classes were unable to use English for numerous reasons. But they were quite interested in attending the English classes and highly motivated and enthusiastic to learn English. There were two types of descriptive writing tasks given to the learners:

i) Task-1: Describing the given pictures

ii) Task-2: Describing the premises where the camp was conducted

Task 1:

**Group Work: From a group of five members**

*Observe the two pictures carefully and find the differences between them. Write the differences on a sheet of paper.*

The focus of this task was to enable the learners to observe the two pictures (appendix) and find out the differences. Learners were asked to write the descriptions of the pictures in a group. This task was given before the task two (the descriptions of the camp) because the target group was heterogeneous and most of the learners in the class did not have a basic idea of how to observe and describe things, places, and people. They needed a task which guided them with more scaffolding. The picture description task was a controlled task as the learners did not have to describe anything beyond the two given pictures unlike the task two where they were supposed to observe the entire campus and make decisions of what to describe and how to describe. Though this task was controlled in comparison to the task two but it was not decontextualized. It required the limited
response from the learners and the cognitive load was relatively less. It was a good example of a pedagogic task.

Task 2:

Now, we are at the end of this summer camp. Recollect your experiences about the place and describe it in not more than 300-350 words.

Relatively, this was a cognitively challenging task than the task one. The task required rigorous planning, decision making, selecting, prioritizing and organizing skills in writing. This was a fully authentic and real life task where learners were asked to describe the camp site and include the details about the world around them as they observe and perceive them. The task had immediate context and it required them to describe the place from their perception which made the task more personal.

Learners were first given the task and there was a discussion between the teacher and the learners on the requirements of the task. After the instructions were clear, the teacher helped the learners in planning the stages of their writing whenever they required. The learners were also free to refer any source or reference materials or discuss with their peer and the teachers. This task became more authentic in the sense that it was administered in the fashion as it would happen in real life. The only thing that could have reduced the authenticity of the task a bit is that the learners did not have enough time to revise and edit their writing as it happens in real life writing.

The purpose of designing this task was to make the classroom situation more relevant to the learners, to make them understand and feel in their own world of experience, to create a real scenario in the classroom for the learners’ better understanding, to inspire the learners and to encourage them to use new words by using dictionaries. Also, the aims of this task were to develop learners’ writing skills, to see the way they organize their ideas and develop them into comprehensive descriptions, to make them imagine the real picture of their campus and to connect it with their real life. The teachers also aimed at finding out the cognitive development of the learners, their interest and the differences between the learners’ performances in the past, at present and also to predict their future potential as far as their writing abilities were concerned.
Before going to the main task there was a discussion in the classroom among the students guided by the teacher. The students discussed their campus, their new experience in the smart classroom with the digital system, the environment of their camp, the quality of the food, the teachers, etc. The discussion gave them an overall idea about how to develop the ideas and organize their writing. They got a clear picture of the content which enhanced their interest and motivation level.

While this entire classroom instruction scenario was happening, the teachers were playing the role of researchers and observers. There was always one teacher teaching in the class while other was busy in classroom observation. Both the teachers observed their classes from the teacher’s and researcher’s point of view as well. While observing the class the teacher maintained a diary in which she recorded both her observations and her retrospective reflections.

After the learners complete both the tasks the teacher collected the papers from them. It was a complete process of learning on both the part of the learners as well as the teacher-researchers. As compared to the learners’ previous performances the learners were quite interested in the present task because they were largely involved in it and this involvement was caused because of their high motivation and interest level. The discussion on their campus before going to the main task gave a clear picture to the learners of their campus which was a type of pre-task activity. So the learners were quite confident to write about their campus as well as in the picture description activity which was facilitated through the discussion with their group members. They were showing active interest while doing the activity, communicating with their group members and sharing their ideas, which the teacher-researcher found while continuously monitoring the class.

While monitoring the class the teacher found most of the students using dictionaries to find some new words which they did not know. Thus they were learning new vocabulary which shows that the students were quite enthusiastic about the task. After the task was completed by the students the teacher collected the papers. While going through the papers the teacher found a lot of changes in the writing of the students which were quite different from the way the students were writing previously. There were a lot of developments in the way the students organized their ideas, the vocabularies that they used, the link between the sentences, the way they extended their ideas etc. This development shows the students’ complete involvement in the tasks, their high interest and motivation level and the successful productivity, relevance and the usefulness of the tasks at the end.
References


Appendix

Group Work: Form a group of five members

Observe the pictures carefully and find the differences between them. Write the differences on a sheet of paper.
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