

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PROMINENT TEACHING METHODOLOGY IN FIRST YEAR UNDERGRADUATE ENGINEERING PROGRAMME: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Task-based instruction is a well-accepted, appreciated and practised method to make the teaching-learning process interesting and engaging. However, the language learning tasks, when broadly categorized fall under two categories i.e. skill based and content based. The impact of these two types of tasks in the pace of learning and interest created in the learners is the focus of this paper. One of the indispensable factors to teach language skills to optimize learning outcome is to have tasks specifically designed for that purpose. Designing tasks for students with varied backgrounds, language proficiency and comprehension levels is a challenge for the course designers at the micro level. A common solution adopted by course designers of ESP courses is to decide only the content that is to be given as input. This study analysed the results of the language learning output: a. when tasks are based on a specific language skill or element; b. when the tasks are designed based on the content where language skills are learnt either implicitly or contextualized. This study was carried out on First Year B. Tech students of NBA Accredited Computer Science and Engineering students of a NAAC accredited self-financing Engineering college in Guntur District of Andhra Pradesh. As part of the study, three lessons are taught to two groups of 30 students each. One group is given tasks designed based on the content while the other is put through tasks to hone the same skill but ignoring the content (text/lesson). The motivational levels of the students and their performance in the tests (on all language skills and elements) given later are recorded. Later a questionnaire is given to both the groups and a discussion is organized to record the findings. Interesting findings of the study are discussed in the last part of the paper.

Keywords: content-based task, motivated behaviours, verbal interaction

Literature Review

Content-Based Instruction is an approach to language teaching that focuses not on the language itself, but rather on what is being taught through the language; that is, the language becomes the medium through which something new is learned¹.

It has its origins in the idea of language across the curriculum that is proposed for native language speakers in Britain in the mid-1970s. It is "a practice through which the study and use of the language takes place throughout the curriculum"²

This approach is also proved itself beneficial for second language learners as well in their acquisition of language as it bases itself on the assumption which says that students learn the second language successfully when they use the language as a means of acquiring contextualized information.³In simple words "People do not learn languages and then use them, but learn languages *by using them*".⁴ In this way Students will be able to use more advanced thinking skills when learning new information and will focus less on the structure of the language. This approach is student-centred as it depends entirely on the students' ability to use the language. Hence this approach aims to develop the students' language and academic skills.⁵

First implemented in the U.S as a complementary method of teaching to content-based language instruction, Skill based language instruction moves students toward independence as they learn how to make meaning on their own. A good amount of instructional time is dedicated to practising, assessing, and reflecting skills. As students practice skills, they are read non-fiction texts, discuss ideas, and summarize essential information. In this way, they are essentially learning how to think critically, analyse ideas, speak and write with insight. The focus in these classrooms is on developing students' into independent readers and thinkers while equipping them with transferable literacy skills that aid them innately create meaning from new information. Thus here students learn Information through a process of application and critical thinking.

Introduction

One of the challenges for the teachers in class is to make students understand language aspects and grammar and use them in real life contexts. Acknowledging this challenge, one can look into various possibilities of achieving desired language outcomes.

This paper is an enquiry into the aspects of task designing that yields better language acquisition and retention levels while minimizing anxiety among the students. With this in mind comparative study is made between two groups of students (group A and group B) to find whether it is the content based tasks or skill-based tasks that enable students to improve their skills of acquiring language better and retain it for real-time usage. To derive results, both groups were prepared and assessed in two different ways. The first engaged with content

specific tasks while the second group is put through skill focused tasks over a period of 20 working hours.

The students are assessed twice to check for their improvement and the retention levels of their language skills. The preliminary and secondary assessments are done after the lesson is discussed and after completely teaching the first three lessons of the text respectively.

Participants

A total of 60 participants contributed to this research. The participants were two groups of first year B.Tech students of a reputed engineering college in Guntur who had English courses as a part of their curriculum. The sixty students pursuing their Bachelors in Computer Science and Engineering were divided into two groups of 30 each namely, Group A and Group B and were exposed to Content-based and Skill-based teaching methods respectively. The average age group of the target group was 19.

Procedure and analysis

Each class was observed nine times during the first semester of the educational year 2017-2018. The observations took place on every alternative day which covered almost three weeks of the semester. The observer played the role of a participant observer, that is, in each session, the researcher was amidst the students except for oral presentation session by the students when he acted as a silent observer. The duration of each session was for 55 minutes and the researcher made notes by pen paper method. This was followed by interpretation and analysis of the collected notes.

Study

As a part of the study, three lessons were taught to both the groups. Each group was taught with a different orientation. Group A, involved in tasks based on content, were sub-grouped into five. Each sub-group of six students, at the very outset of every task, were made to discuss the lesson for about forty minutes. Then, they were given a test in vocabulary followed by a task on narrating what they have learnt. For example, They were given a vocabulary test on education and were asked to redefine the concept of education as the first lesson was adapted from E F Schumacher's essay on "Education as the greatest of all resources."

Group B was asked to read the same lesson for forty minutes and answer the textual questions provided at the end of the essay. The comprehension included questions on the elements of grammar and vocabulary which were meant to enhance their skills of reading, speaking and writing. After the completion of the task, a round of oral questions was posed to the students to test their language skills.

The second lesson was *A Dilemma-A Layman looks at the science* that speaks on how scientific advancements has content that is technical in nature and illustrates chronologically, how science made its pathways into the human life ultimately trying to dominate it.

A similar approach was followed for observing Group A, however with a minor change, where a student from each sub-group was assigned with the job to record the points discussed by their sub-groups. The sub-groups are then given a few minutes to recollect the words and concepts learnt in that day's session. This was followed by a test containing questions that are factual and interpretative in nature and the scores of the students were recorded.

Group B is asked to do a pre-reading task of going through a set of words and various grammar related topics to prepare them for reading comprehension. The while-reading task lacked attention from the students as it was observed that some students were found to be slow in reading and some others were distracted. Students are asked to participate in a jam session as the post-reading task.

The third lesson is *Cultural Shock: Adjustment to New Environments* that deals with acculturation and symptoms of cultural shock.

Following the same procedure adopted for Group A, the students were encouraged to identify the cultural codes that they see in their locality after discussing the content present in the textbook. The researcher, taking the role of a participant observer, moderated their deliberations and helped the students pick accurate words demanded by the context. Here too, one of the students was asked to record and present the opinions and subjective experiences of the individuals of the group. This activity of student presentations gave an opportunity for three students from each group to represent it as care was taken not permit the same student to represent the group twice.

Students of Group B were given individual tasks of skimming and scanning the text to find the meaning of new/ethnic words. This was followed by similar while reading and post-reading tasks previously given to this group.

After completing all the activities planned for these three lessons, a common post-test was administered for both the groups to all assess their LSRW skills. Later, A Just A Minute talk session was organized for both the groups where each student should talk on a topic of his/her choice related to any of the three lessons. Each student's ability to use a specific set of words learnt from the lesson and their easiness with the topic was considered to evaluate them on a scale of 5.

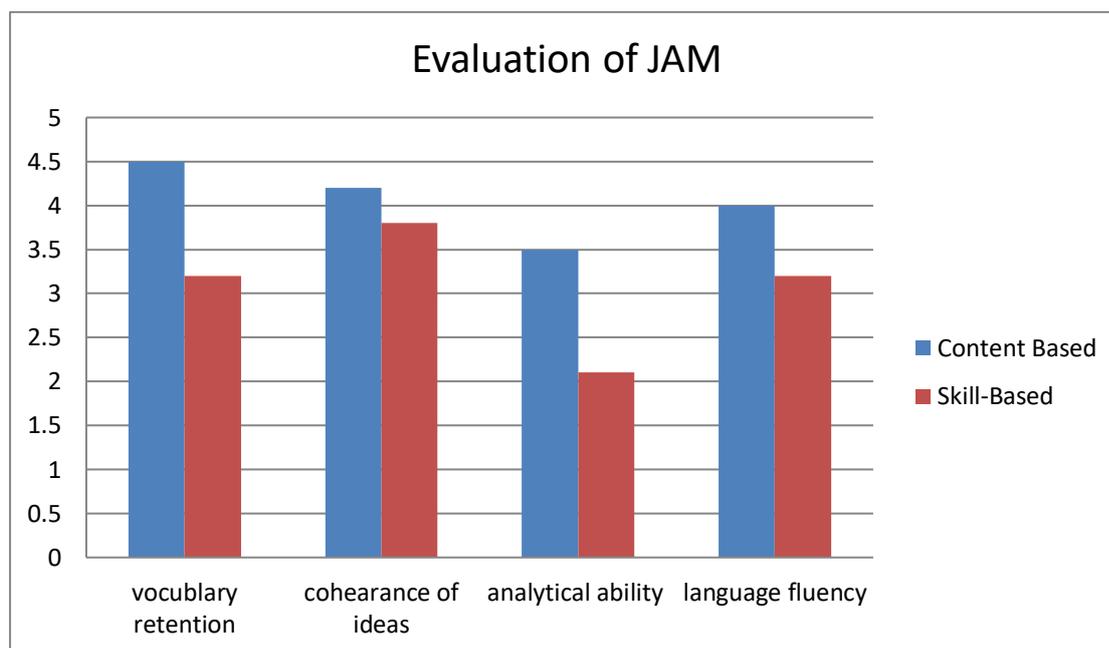


Figure 1

The students of Group A showcased their knowledge in a better way with deeper comprehension levels. The students also felt comfortable with the topic given and were able to deliver their speech coherently. Whereas, in group B, it is predominantly noted that student was found fumbling for the content specific words. Few of them managed to deliver the content with modesty while others were found showing visible signs of nervousness.

A questionnaire of 9 questions combining factual and analytical types, three from each lesson was given for the written test. In addition, they were asked frame few inferential questions from the passage on culture about the objects they find in their own cultural context.

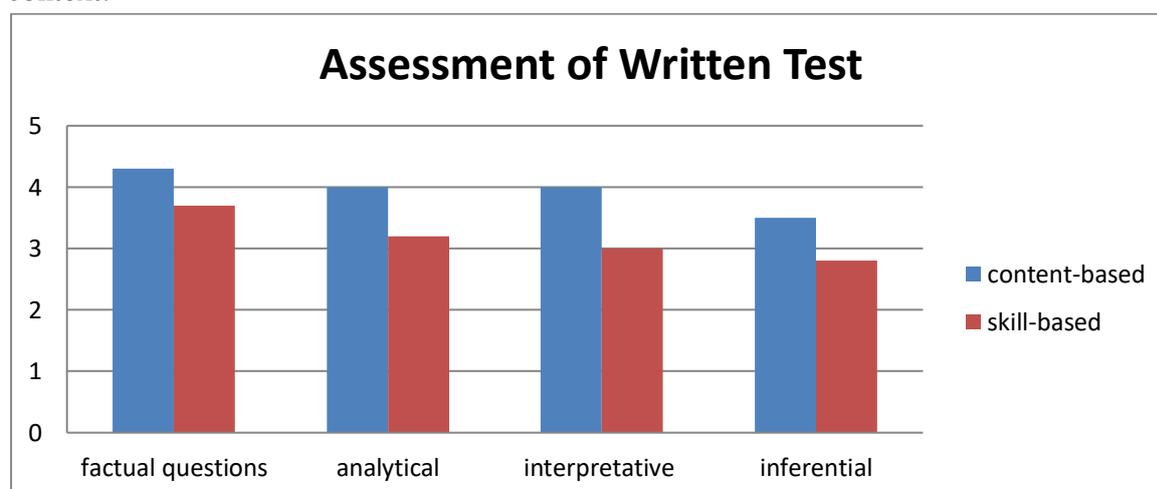


Figure 2

The performance of students with regard to the written test is remarkably different for both the groups in few areas like the choice of words or content related vocabulary, while it is more or less the same in other areas like grammar and style of writing. It is noted that all students scored similar marks answering the factual questions while the comprehension level group A is unusually higher while answering the analytical questions. Both the groups received comparatively lower results but it is group A that shows a slight dominance in the chart.

Conclusion

The paper expresses the idea that content-specific tasks yield better results when compared to skill-specific tasks. Improving any single linguistic skill without concentrating on a particular field of study or public affairs would prove to be futile as such skills would only make students consolidate the already acquired skill rather than improving it. It is noted that involving students to speak in a just a minute session giving them few general topics to improve their skill of public speaking only proved that the participants are just using the language they already know. Moreover, few students of the class start feeling as if they are left in the middle of the bay resulting in pressure mounting among students. Instead, if a student is made to involve himself in a content-specific activity which would equip him/her with necessary vocabulary and insights needed, he/she is noted to have performed far better in just a minute session as well as in answering the questioner than their predecessors. Hence with the evidence available at hand, we can say that content-specific skills are always beneficial for students to improve their language. Further research can be done into the catalytic role of "small group" during tasks in content focused task amidst primary and secondary level students.

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