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DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE READING SKILLS IN ESL THROUGH BLENDED MODE AT TERTIARY LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

Education is human right. Yet due to various negative factors such as poverty, poor educational background at home, lack of trained English teachers, not attending ESL classes regularly, no motivation, war situation and other socio, political, and cultural aspects the learners fail to obtain the reading skill proficiency. The success of mastering all four language skills and grammar in the second language is very challenging. Reading skill was considered as a passive skill. It has been taught and learnt through traditional face to face mode. Even though various teaching methods and approaches were postulated from time to time, less emphasis has been given to developing reading skills. This research is to explore whether (traditional and computer assisted blended language learning) Blended Learning mode could be utilized to develop reading skills at the tertiary level. Fifty first year students from the Faculty of Arts were taken as sample for the study. Their performances in reading skills were tested before and after teaching reading skills through the Blended Learning mode. It was found that the participants' performance in reading skills improved. The research findings disclose the fact that the Blended Learning mode has a positive impact on the development in the participants' proficiency in the reading skills. The study has an implication of recommending Blended Learning mode of teaching and learning to improve effective reading skills at the tertiary level.

Key words: Education, reading skills, English as a second language, blended learning mode, tertiary level.

Introduction

The literacy in reading has a great influence in his or her education. The educational goals cannot be set without the reading knowledge. Today it is obvious that libraries are deserted. There are only a few books in book racks in homes. The digital age has promoted easy access to computers and mobile phones to learn. Yet children and adults are now addicted to various aspects and facilities available in the new technology. This has

now drastically decreased the number of readers at home and in libraries. Many of them do not read to develop their reading skills as in earlier times. Majority of them use net based reading to fulfil some immediate browsing goals. In the researcher's context ESL reading skills classes are conducted through the traditional/ face to face mode. Reading skill is interdependent on all the other three skills: speaking, writing and listening. Learners need to be trained to comprehend, skim, scan, infer and do various activities to complete reading goals. The

teachers' instructions and the written instructions in the text should be clear enough to complete the tasks in the given texts. The participants of the study indicate poor reading skills and exhibit reading skill proficiency below the expected tertiary level which is a threat to their academic achievements. The performance in reading skills at the tertiary level indicates that the participants have not obtained proficiency in reading skills by learning through the traditional mode. Efforts have been used widely in second language learning to facilitate the learners with computer assisted language learning (CALL). The curricula in the researcher's context is based on traditional mode of teaching and learning and from 1974 to date it has not shown any remarkable improvement in the development in the proficiency in reading skills. It is therefore attempted in this experimental research to explore whether utilizing a blended mode of (traditional+ CALL) teaching and learning could develop effective reading skills in ESL through blended mode at the tertiary level. "Blended learning is the mixture of media and tools engaged in an e-learning environment, the mixture of a number of pedagogical approaches, regardless of learning technology use" (White lock & Jelfs, 2003 or different training "media" combination (technologies, activities, and types of events) (Bershin, 2004).

Problem Statement

The participants' reading skills has been catered through face to face mode from primary to tertiary levels. In Sri Lanka from primary to tertiary levels the curricula is designed aiming mostly for traditional mode of teaching and learning. In this study the participants who are in the tertiary level are found to be poor in their ESL reading skills .Efforts were not taken to develop the proficiency in reading skills by finding alternative modes of study rather than being purely dependent on the traditional teaching mode.

Objective

The ultimate aim of this research is to find out the effectiveness in the teaching and learning process through a blended mode in general and developing the proficiency in reading skills in particular. To achieve firm results with authentic supportive evidence, the researcher has conducted

an experimental research on the first year first semester students at the tertiary level through applying the (BL) blended learning mode in teaching one of the English language classes comprising fifty students. The researcher expects through the experiment to obtain positive results concerning the influence of the BL on the effective development on students' proficiency in reading skills, which could support integrating CALL with traditional mode in teaching and learning ESL reading skills

Research Questions

The following question will be addressed in this study: 1.What is the influence of introducing the BL mode of ESL reading on the ESL learners' development in effective reading skills?

Literature review

Reading is a process of constructing meaning from written texts. It is a complex skill requiring the coordination of interrelated sources of information"(Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985) .The term blended learning was first introduced in American literature using a wide variety of pedagogical methods and different forms for blending of traditional and technology based teaching .(Gynther 2005).Hiltz and Murray found the face to face courses blended skill fully with online courses. Kekang He (2004) thinks that the blended learning is a combination of the advantages of traditional way of learning and E-learning, which makes the instructors play the role of instruction, enlightenment and monitoring and fully embody students' initiatives, enthusiasm and creativity as the main stream of the learning process. The findings of Purcell, Boxall, and Wright's study (2009) about the contributions of blended-learning components show that the learning components with the most contribution in blended-learning are assignments, textbooks, face-to-face presentation, and face-to-face lecture with instructors. Online learning video has also had contribution towards learning while online textbook gives average contribution towards learning. Even though they have a relatively low contribution toward learning, the learners argue they use video and online textbooks for learning occasionally. Purcell, J., Boxall, P., & Wright, P (2009). The oxford handbook

of human resource management, pp. 364-38. Oxford University Press

Population and Sample

Fifty students following English as a Second Language in the Faculty of Arts were randomly selected. The participants were divided into two groups. Group A followed the traditional way of learning and group B followed traditional and face to face blended mode of learning English as a second language. A pre reading and a post reading tests were conducted for the participants in the two groups. Their performance in the tests were utilized to gauge their proficiency in reading skills at the beginning, and their development in reading skills after introducing the blended mode of learning reading skills. The experimental group was taught via the blended learning mode (BL) for two months. The experimental group represented the source of data about applying the BL in teaching the reading skills to develop proficiency at the tertiary level.

Method

Fifty students from the first year from the Faculty of Arts were randomly selected and they were grouped as A and B, each group consisting of twenty five students. All fifty students were given a pre reading test and their marks were compared to gauge their proficiency in reading skills at the beginning. The A group followed the traditional mode of teaching for two months. The B group followed ESL reading skill lessons through the blended learning mode (BL) at the language laboratory for two months. Post reading tests was conducted for all the participants and their marks were examined. A questionnaire was circulated to the experimental group to obtain their experience and views on, before and after learning through the Blended mode. The teachers' observation in teaching through the traditional and BL modes were utilized.

Findings

Data collected from the pre and post reading tests, questionnaire survey and interview with the teachers were utilized to gauge the reading skill development and proficiency after the introduction of blended learning mode teaching to the participants.

Pre reading test

Fifty students were randomly selected. They were grouped as A and B. A pre reading test was conducted for the fifty participants. Their performances reveal the fact that almost all the participants were of the same level in the proficiency in reading skills.

Post reading skill test

The A group was taught through the traditional mode and the experimental group -B- was taught through the Blended Learning mode. After following traditional and BL mode of learning for two months, a post test was conducted for the two groups. Even though the test was a common one there was striking difference in their performances. Group B scored good grades and showed better performance in the test. The marks obtained by the experimental group B which learned through the BL mode indicate the development in reading proficiency by obtaining higher grades when compared to the group A which learned through the traditional mode.

Teachers' Observation

The teachers' stated their observation of participants' learning behaviour in reading skill in the traditional mode of learning as follows. They stated that at the tertiary level they issue hand outs only. The students were found to be bored. They did not understand new vocabulary in reading texts. They feel it is not necessary to develop proficiency in reading. They revealed the fact that the students do not take efforts to read loudly. The teachers found that the participants feel it is not necessary to put much effort to learn L₂. The teachers found that the participants' aim is to pass the exam only. They find reading skills as problematic as they do not understand new words, their spelling and pronunciation. The teachers disclosed the following reasons for neglecting reading skills: home, school and educational background. They further stated that the participants neglected the development of reading skills as they thought they can manage to answer by guessing from the text. The participants were not exposed to L₂ speaking environment and this has affected the lack of vocabulary and increased pronunciation problems. Their target is to pass the examination in ESL. They scarcely take

efforts to read. They cannot understand English texts. They lack vocabulary skills. The main reason is the home, school and social background and the medium of instruction in mother tongue and learning in mother tongue. At the tertiary level reading skills has to be developed to keep up with lectures and assignments.

Traditional and BL modes of learning in the classrooms

The following table depicts the summary of the teachers' observations on the participants' learning of reading skills in L₂ in the traditional and BL modes of learning at the tertiary level.

Table1 : Impact of learning modes in Participants' development in Reading skills

Impact of learning modes in Participants' development in Reading skills		
Mode of learning	Traditional mode of learning	BL mode
Vocabulary	Limited	increased
Attendance	Not satisfactory	increased
Interest in the subject	To a certain extent	increased
Pronunciation	Remained the same	Improved remarkably
Speed	Improved little	Improved very much
Fluency	Remained the same	Striking improvement

The performance of group A

It was found that the participants' attendance remained the same. They showed limited knowledge in vocabulary. Their interest in learning the skill increased to a certain extent. Their ability to pronounce and fluency in reading remained the same. Their speed in reading improved a little.

The performance of the experimental group B

The teachers expressed that they could see striking difference in the performance of the experimental group. They stated that the Group B's performance indicated that the blended mode of learning is more effective. They disclosed the fact that the participants in group B were motivated to learn through the blended learning mode. The

teachers felt that the blended mode could be used in a flexible manner depending on the interest, and achievement levels of the teaching and learning goals. Initially in the pre test performance all the participants were found to be in the same level. After teaching through the blended mode the experimental group indicated the improvement in gaining more marks in reading test which was conducted for both group A and B. The teachers explained that they could observe how motivated the experimental group was. The experimental group took a week's time to get familiar to computer based learning. They further stated the blended learning induced extensive reading which was not found in Group A.

Table2 : Students' views and experiences in BL mode of learning

Students views and experiences in BL mode of learning	Agree	Do not agree	Agree to a certain extent	Strongly agree
Vocabulary knowledge developed	✓			
Able to understand the spelling rules	✓			
Improve in pronouncing				✓
Picked up good speed in reading				✓
Fluency increased				✓
Read texts other than prescribed texts				✓

The experimental group expressed their experience in learning reading skills through the BL mode. They expressed that they were very much motivated to learn through the BL mode. They expressed that their vocabulary knowledge, reading speed, and fluency in reading, increased. They could obviously experience the development in reading skills effectively after being taught through the BL. The participants and teachers found the use of online learning within the traditional structure of

lecture-type instruction. The reality is that they preferred altering traditional teaching modes and pedagogy. They felt that BL classroom looks more like a technology-rich workplace than a traditional lecture-type environment. The researcher found that the students could work together on meaningful tasks with the aid of powerful computer and learning tools. The BL enabled the students to tackle real-world problems. The results show blended learning created an innovative teaching-learning methodology that increased the effectiveness of the teaching-learning situation and offered new opportunities for the creation of an interactive learning environment.

Conclusion

The findings reveal the fact that by utilizing the BL mode, the participants could achieve effective development in reading skills at the tertiary level. Therefore, the curriculum designers can incorporate CALL with traditional mode that is a BL mode in the tertiary level ESL reading skill curriculum to enable the target group to develop effective reading skills proficiency at the tertiary level.

Recommendations

Blended learning combines online delivery of educational content with the best features of classroom interaction and live instruction to personalize learning. The institutes are committed to improve the physical environment meeting the diverse physical, emotional, social and aesthetic needs. Well structured, spacious and bright learning environment should be facilitated with adequate space to move and find comfort. A range of support to handle visual and auditory facilities should be available to assist students for BL based learning and modify curricula to suit the preset job market stakeholders and students' needs.

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