



PERCEPTION OF STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES TOWARDS ENGLISH COMPOSITION WRITING THROUGH ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

Politzers (1972) says that English composition writing products must consist of spoken discourse. The author of this paper holds that speaking is likely to be in the union of reading in its contribution to better English composition writing. Investigation of the perceptions of students with LD reveals their strong wish to improve English composition writing and classroom atmosphere 113 students with LD were involved in a series of classroom activities forming the preparing stage for English composition writing. The variety of activities offers a large platform for the participants to share opinions and exchange information. The investigations of the perceptions of students with LD carried out during the program towards each activity show their preferences concerning elective subjects.

Keywords: Students with LD needs, English composition writing, classroom activities, attitudes

I. Introduction

Syllabus of English composition writing at Graduation level in Pakistan is usually a very complex syllabus. This syllabus contains a detailed list of contents and objectives as well as procedures are also available with main contents. The whole course is taught in accordance with the schedule. At the end of academic year the students are to sit for final annual exam. They are required to write an essay of at least 400 words to 500 words within a limited time. This exam is based on detailed requirements of each faced with the pressure of the test students feel worried. In Pakistan composition writing is usually considered important at the very beginning. Since this is the facilitating anxiety (Wang, 1997, p.109) which will promote the students with LD to meet the challenge of a learning task. However teachers are often faced with the frustrating situation affects these students' motivation that also gradually weakens as the syllabus progresses. The atmosphere in a language classroom is not always satisfying either the teacher or the students. Both teachers and students are eager to own a happy and lively classroom atmosphere.

Krashens says that we learn through exposure to meaningful material. This notion was opposed by the evidence reported from evaluations of immersion (Skehan 1998 15 16). I assume that English composition writing does not come for free either it requires more dynamic and initiative cooperation from the students. They are supposed to be immersed in the activities. Output is important as a signaling device to negotiate better. Input would still be the major explanatory construct but output would be necessary to generate it most effectively (Skehan 1998 16-17).

Writing is a fairly recent development in the history of mankind even now there are languages which have not been committed to English composition writing. Many structuralist linguists working within a tradition which focused mainly on spoken language were involved in describing American Indian languages for which no spelling system had been developed as yet. Els et.al.,(1984) and Politzer (1972) asserted that language contents must be presented in spoken form before they are introduced in written form. Of course referring to the initial phase of language instruction in which the audio logical skills must be dominant over reading and writing. And our case is a bit different in that the subjects had been learning English as a foreign language for at



least 14 years and so they were not likely in the initial state of learning yet Politzers idea casts some light here that speaking is always put in juxtaposition of reading in its contribution to better English composition writing if before it hence gives us opportunities to do a lot of discussions in a classroom of English composition writing.

Taking all above into consideration we hold a strong belief that college English students with LD need oral discussions as well as written practice. They have strong motivation to acquire better communicative competence through various means including oral and written classroom activities.

Attitudes and Needs of Students with LD

The idea of English composition writing through activities came from my regular conversations with my students concerning what they prefer in language course like English composition writing. The suggestions of my colleagues and complaints from students formed and strengthened my belief that a successful course should be both enjoyable and rewarding.

According to Krashens affective filter hypothesis (Richards Rodgers, 2000 p.133) there are three kinds of effective or attitudinal variables related to second language acquisition. They are motivation, collection as well as analyses. Thus questionnaires adopted in the investigation of their attitude towards each activity were mainly as follows 1) Do you like or dislike this activity, Why not. 2) Do you think your improvement in English composition writing relevant or irrelevant to these activities? I used excels for the purpose of data collection and analysis.

Objectives

The main concern of this study was to investigate the perception of students with LD towards each activity with regard to their differences in majors. In other words the goal of the study was to find answers to the following questions.

- 1 What is the perception of the students with LD towards activities?
- 2 what are the differences between perception and their elective subjects?
- 3 what is relationship between their improvements in English composition writing and the activities they used?

Selection of Participants:

A check list was used to identify the students with LD.

Procedures

The activity items were obtained from my interviews with the students after class and discussion inside the classrooms during the beginning two weeks. It is negotiation period during which I decided what to cover in this course and the activities we would like to have in our classrooms. This program was open to changes that were based on the current wishes of the students. The investigations of subjects perception held at the end of each semester were mainly about the activities already covered. The data was collected twice whereas the analysis was done after the



whole program was accomplished. The whole study lasted for about one academic year from Sep 2012 when a new academic session begun to May 2013 when the annual exams were held.

Main Activities

The eight activities discussed here are only one portion of various activities taken in our classrooms at various stages during the one academic session. We consistently did course content discussion at the very beginning of the course while mini lectures were presented near the end of the first term show and the usually came when a literature reading had been accomplished by all participants and book report based on the reading material constitutes one part in the final test speeches are delivered in the early period of the second term and topic based debates discussions are frequently held during the teaching period of argumentative English composition writing and essay writing preparation five minute games run through the whole academic year and chain stories appear normally during the weeks when we are engaged in English composition writing.

1. Course Content Discussion

Course content discussion was essential in the beginning two weeks since students with LD were to negotiate what to cover and through what routes to achieve the goals. Perception of students with LD towards this course and their needs were also investigated in this period. All the students with LD were informed before hand of the fact that they were to make decisions relevant to this course and that their suggestions may be used. The goals in this period were achieved by various means including interviews class discussions questionnaires and English composition writing. The subjects were free to choose one or more methods to convey their opinions and ideas.

2. Show Tell

Show tell was the first stage of a long term program of literature reading that usually lasted for one semester with specific requirements varying from period to period. Literature reading underwent three main stages stage one of reading stage two of showing and telling stage three of opinion sharing and book report in form of composition writing.

The idea of show and tell was inspired by a routine used in many western elementary schools and kindergartens where one day is reserved each month or so each week or each term for children to bring their beloved toys or other belongings to show others and to tell about them. However my students were to show and tell about a beloved novel or a collection of literary works.

On the day of show and tell five minutes were given to group work in which the participants for a pre performance and got suggestions for further improvement before standing in front of the whole class.

The focus of that day was to explain why and how the book had been chosen what one knew about the author and telling the story briefly since each participant was given no more than 5 minutes. They needed to be fully prepared with regard to the time limit. We get a collection of books of various interests and related information or stories or anecdotes as well about the book the author and the participants themselves. Every participant was to write down at least five books which attracted him her in one way or another.



3. Book Reports

Book reports were originally suggested as only written work. When I sought agreement to include it as a part in the final test many suggested doing an oral presentation before they actually submitted the report. This time book reports were submitted in the middle of the term. Sometimes heated discussions arose among those who chose the same novel or the same author about themes and characters. Finally each participant submitted a book report of 1000 words.

4. Five minute Games

A game of five minutes each time sets a joyous atmosphere in the class in which all students become unconsciously relaxed as a result they were ready to take part in the following activities with less or no anxiety tension since low personal anxiety and low classroom anxiety are more conducive to second language acquisition (Richards Rodgers, 2000, p.133)

We tried a wide variety of games such as brainstorming around a word which can be done by the whole class as well as in pairs or groups. Some of the games were taken from reference books such as five Minute Activities a source of short activities (Ur Wright, 1993) but most of them had been created by my students. These included weather forecasting, latest news reporting, personal experience sharing, cross words, puzzles, competition of idioms, presentations, describing a classmate, translation of a short paragraph or a few sentences and so on. But one thing certain in this activity is that the participants were pressed for time. They had to be quick in response and alert to possible errors committed by themselves and group members. All the games were in the form of contests in which each participant or group competed for opportunities and did a rather satisfactory job within the shortest possible time.

5. Chain Story

I designed a chain of stories during the weeks when we were engaged in English story writing and it was proved one of the favorite activities of my students. It was also most helpful in English composition writing and so students with LD were over-joyed to find their stories shared by their normal class fellows. Both the lots and the endings were very often beyond any of our expectations as a result everyone tried their best to make that part of the story emotional and most readable. What's more chain stories are also a collective activity in which each adds something to the whole. Although everyone can write their part freely no one has the freedom to disconnect the whole story.

6. Mini lectures

Mini lectures fell into two categories one was prepared and the other improvisational. The former was especially directed towards punctuation use whereas the latter concerned various topics or ideas suggested by one group.

a. Prepared mini lectures

The participants had one week to decide what to talk about and whether they would like to do group work or an individual job. Most participants chose group or pair work for the presentation. This activity can be composed of more than one part in that one member can be the main speaker



and the rest are helpers. This was a great success for its different ways of acquiring rules in adopting punctuation marks and vivid styles in presenting examples. Some students admitted that a teacher talk class would never produce such an effect.

b. Improvisational lectures

The idea acquiring group wrote the topic or idea on the blackboard and read the instructions. The rest of the participants listened during the first minute and thought or talked about it in pairs. For another minutes when the time to do the improvised arrived mini lectures produced good atmosphere where people were busy reacting to various requirements instantly.

7. Speeches

Speech is a conventional form of public talk but it became a form of pop among the youngsters. In my class participants chose a topic for them two weeks earlier and had to write their own speeches although they may get references from various sources. They may bring with them pictures to show the class and handouts to distribute to help make the lecture more vivid and charming. The teacher was ready to read and offer suggestions if required by the students. I was over joyed to find out that my students could actually write beautiful speeches and deliver them with excellence.

8. Topic based Debates and Discussions

Debates and discussions often took place in five minute games although they were informal and brief. But topic based debates and discussions were frequently held during the training period of argumentative English composition writing where many topics poured into the classroom for discussions or arguments. The participants were divided into two group of for and against and each group tried its best to beat the other. Many topics were taken from English composition writing course at graduation level. For and against debates and discussions enriched each participant with convincing opinions and abundant facts. Students who had little to say in compositions found themselves armed with idea and facts during debates.

Findings

These initial investigations made it clear that students with LD have a strong wish to achieve a good competence in English composition writing and were also eager to have enjoyable classrooms. And these two goals became the main concern of this study. The questionnaire adopted in the investigation of perceptions of students with LD towards each activity contained two parts. Do you like or dislike this activity. Why not. The subjects chose between the two answers and at the same time explained why. This gave me a chance to show a relationship between their preferences and their majors and other factors such as prior experiences. As shows in table 1 a variety of preferences was measured. Table 2 unconverted a moderate picture of learner comments and feelings.

**Table 1 Investigation of Learners' Perceptions**

Participants	Perception	Like				Dislike			
		J 54	IR29	EL30	Total 113	J 54	IR29	EL 30	T 113
1	Content Discussion	32	18	16	66	22	11	14	47
2	Show Tel 1	38	21	15	74	16	8	15	39
3	Book report	28	15	22	65	26	14	8	48
4	Five minute game	39	23	20	82	15	6	10	31
5	Chain story	40	19	14	73	14	10	16	40
6	Mini lecture	34	20	18	72	20	9	12	41
7	Speeches	30	16	23	69	24	13	7	44
8	Topic based debates	44	20	20	80	14	9	10	33

Participants

J Journalism as elective subject

IR International Relations as elective subject

EL English Literature as elective subject

T total

Perceptions of Students with LD towards Each Activity

As shown in Table 1 the most popular activity was the five minute games with the topic based debates next show and tell chain stories and mini lectures were also welcomed in which over 60 enjoy participating in them. The final three activities seem least liked by the subjects but they were started favored by more than half of the participants.

Perceptions and Elective Subjects

Table 1 indicates that certain relationship existed between perception of students with LD and their electives subjects. These findings were supported by subjects statements of why they liked or disliked an activity. Most activities were improvisational which required quick responses and instant action and the subjects from International shipping showed the most enthusiasm. But those from International Accounting enjoyed activities like show tell and book report better than any other majors. However there are no obvious preferences among English major participants.

Comments and Feeling of Students with LD

When the subjects were asked to relate their improvement in English composition writing to the activities miscellaneous answers were collected. This time the subjects had the freedom of being undecided since relevance itself is quite a relative concept table 2 shows that almost half of the subjects admitted that their improvement related to the involvement of the activities while about 23 denied the relevance. It is not surprising that near 35 of the subjects were uncertain as to whether their progress is connected to the activities or not.



Table 2: Perceptions of Students with LD towards the Relationship between Classroom Activities and their English composition writing Competence

Perception s	Relevant		Undecided			Irrelevant	
Participants	51	45	39	34	4	23	20

The various answers collected give a more colorful picture of the participants comments and feeling. Many admitted that they had enjoyed those activities just because they made better classroom atmosphere.

CONCLUSION

Data collection and analyses helps show the true picture of perceptions of students with LD towards the course of English composition writing their suggestions of activity items and their perceptions to and comments on each activity. The findings of the study may be summarized as follows.

1. The majority of participants like classroom activities.
2. Perceptions towards activities are related to their electives subjects.
3. The improvement of English composition writing competence was related to classroom activities.

This one year study assures me in the belief that the success of an activity is largely based on the students with LD keen awareness of their responsibilities in a learning activity and an active involvement in it. Some of Pina Linders (2002) ideas concerning negotiation may shed some light on my points.

1. Personal investment of Students with LD in the learning process can enhance motivation and learning.
2. Negotiation can generate an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect which the typical teacher fronted and teacher directed arrangement does not necessarily succeed in achieving.
3. It can assist in attending to different learning styles levels and needs within a single classroom Breen Little John 2002 95

REFLECTION

However not all participants showed strong motivation in all the activities and the atmosphere was not as good as predicted. For the success of an activity sometimes depended on students previous experiences for students from different parts of the nation bring with the m different educational styles. For instance those from big cities have more flexible styles while those form small towns and remotes areas need time to adapt to activities and often needed time beforehand to get themselves ready.

In addition good English composition writing competence does not necessarily result from excellent performance in classroom activities. Writing is a complex cognitive process (Flower and Hayes, 1980). This often becomes complicated when language learning is involved and we can never assert that one strategy is more helpful than another But we can assert that certain types



of activities do help to turn a classroom into a more enjoyable place for both students and teachers.

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