



English Connects Action Research: Learnings from the African Classroom

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Introduction

Paula Rebolledo, Teresa Okoth, Irene Simiyu

The e-book contains 22 stories of classroom research conducted by teachers based in six countries in sub-Saharan Africa (see map below). Their reports illustrate their journey as teacher-researchers as part of the English Connects Action Research programme organised and funded by the British Council.

The programme began in March 2020, when 20 selected teacher educators from the ten participating English Connects countries in 2020 attended a one-week training event on 'Updating methodology and implementing classroom research', and 20 teachers attended a one-week training event on 'Ideas for teaching and managing large classes', with the aim of inspiring participants to carry out classroom research projects in their countries. They were then mentored remotely to undertake action research projects following on from the training event. While some participants carried out their research by themselves, others did so with a colleague, thus engaging in collaboration and dialogue during the development of their research. After project completion, all participants were supported to present their findings at an online event, and for those interested in publication, further mentoring was offered to assist them in writing up their research projects.

The second cohort of the programme began in February 2022. This time, 20 selected teachers and teacher educators from four countries were invited to participate in the programme dedicated exclusively to the learning and development of classroom research.

The programme started with a three-day online training session focusing on exploratory action research. This approach invites participants to explore a classroom situation before addressing it. Thus, during the training, participants identified a situation to explore and planned ways to gather data to answer their research questions. Teacher-researchers were then mentored remotely by two mentors from the region, who supported them in the design of data collection tools. A second two-day online training session focused on the analysis of the data collected and the design of action plans, followed by three further months of mentoring to assist them in the last stage of their research. Finally, teachers shared their research in an online event, using posters to illustrate their research process and main findings. This event was followed by a one-day training session, where they were supported to write their projects for this publication.



Countries where author teacher-researchers are based

The Stories

The 22 stories included in this publication were written by teacher-researchers themselves and only edited by the editors to ensure greater clarity. In the stories, author-researchers tell of the process carried out, the results obtained and the learnings obtained from such an experience. A full list of the research projects presented here can be found below

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Gouede**

Teaching grammar in context

Sudan

**Ahmed
Shareef**

Effectiveness of using the flipped classroom strategy at Sudanese tertiary level

The purpose of this publication is to provide a generous collection of classroom research reports that can be used either to encourage and support other teachers to carry out research in their classroom or to understand the situations explored by these author-researchers, what they found and how they addressed them.

A summary of the stories in this publication is provided below to assist readers to get a general idea of the different projects carried out, before examining each story in greater detail.

Mayyada Assadig Hamdan

Mohammed noticed that her students' participation in speaking activities was very low, and when they participated, they made a lot of mistakes in pronunciation and grammar. She decided to explore students' perspectives towards speaking activities, her teaching style and the instructional resources. The study helped her know the needs of her learners, which she says was something she had never done before.

Bethel Uzochukwu Udeh conducted her research on improving the speaking skills of her students after she had established that most of them spoke their native language or Pidgin English at home and with friends, affecting their fluency in the English language. She established that her students did not seem to be bothered about their poor performance in speaking activities. In this story, she tells how she turned around her students' experience through reading comprehension.

Tarig Ahmed Adam Elamin chose to explore his students' speaking skills and the use of grammar because he noticed that they were reluctant to participate in class activities. To understand the situation and implement interventions, he collected data using a questionnaire and lesson observation and by keeping a reflective journal. He then introduced practical tasks, collaborative sessions, listening sessions and conversation games.

Dagnachew Adefris conducted his research with first-year pedagogical science students taking communicative English language skills courses. He noticed that this group of students had no eagerness to speak in English. He established that the use of a think-pair-share strategy enabled learners to feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts. He realised that designing appropriate activities is important if we want students to speak in English in class'.

Helen Ogudugu observed that her students were not participating willingly in speaking activities in class and were always shy and reluctant to speak, and when they did, they made lots of mistakes in pronunciation and in grammar. Through this research, she has understood why students are shy, afraid to make mistakes and anxious to speak in class.

Chinenye Bernard-Nnabuike is a special education teacher for the deaf in Nigeria. She noticed that her deaf students had challenges with naming letters in reading comprehension lessons, especially when the lessons were held in the afternoon. She decided to explore the situation and implement an action plan that included shifting the comprehension lessons to morning hours, peer-group reading, facing students when using hand cues and small-group activities.

Oluwatimilehin Amos Akinade noticed that his learners were making a lot of mistakes in their essay writing, which he attributed to a lack of skills in essay writing and poor reading habits. Through his exploration, he established that the poor performance of many learners in essay-type writing involved the identification and application of strategies that are helpful in bringing out the desired changes in the learners' essay performance.

Ibtisam Sabahelzain Ibrahim Gibreel carried out her research to respond to students' difficulty in reading. Using think-pair-share, among other strategies, students were able to build up word recognition skills, respond to prompts and give full answers during reading comprehension, implying a better understanding of learned vocabulary. Ibtisam deemed exploration results to design an intervention as important for any classroom teacher wishing to improve their instruction.

Patrice Kané and **Moussa Tangara** are mentors whose role is to support teachers in their classroom practice. Their research was intended to support teachers to teach writing skills in their classrooms. This was on an experimental basis, since WhatsApp had not been used before for mentoring in the Malian context. The use of the process and product approach enabled teachers to enjoy teaching writing, leading to more learner motivation.

Anita Nchat Kevin teaches literacy at a dyslexia centre. Aside from the fact that her learners experience dyslexia, she believed that other factors were responsible for students' inability to achieve reading comprehension. Using focus group interviews and a reflective journal, she noticed that the strategies used to develop reading for comprehension work differently for different learners and that more learner-centred methods work well.

Mohamed Abdalla Ibrahim observed that most pupils had problems with reading comprehension, especially when reading a text containing new vocabulary. His study established that the use of pre-reading questions increased learners' curiosity and eagerness, thus improving their comprehension. He realised that teaching reading strategies provides students with the tools to become aware of their thinking and give them confidence.

Sufian Mabarook observed that his students had challenges when undertaking writing tasks. He remembered noticing that in his class all students had smartphones, which they brought to school but did not use in their lessons. He also observed that all students got excited when they were required to use their smartphones. Therefore, he explored the use of smartphones to teach writing skills and achieve greater participation in writing activities as a result.

Sarah Balogun is a teacher trainer who realised that her students lacked motivation and interest in reading recommended literary texts, thus failing their courses. To collect initial data, she used focus group discussions, a questionnaire and a reflective journal to capture her thoughts. Reflecting on the study, Sarah contends, 'The actions carried out really helped me in motivating my class to develop an interest in reading recommended literary texts.'

Geremew Wozie observed that his intermediate-level students struggled to understand the reading texts he used to develop their reading skills. Through this research, he learned that culturally and level-appropriate texts with the right vocabulary level make reading practice easy, and that teachers need to reflect on their challenges and success in classroom teaching activities if they are to improve their pedagogical skills.

Abdisalan Muhumed noticed that his classes at university had continued to swell over the years. His concern became how to make teaching and learning more effective in a large class. Using focus groups, interviews and peer observations, he explored this issue, finally putting in place intervention measures that allowed him to discover the value of 'productive noise' and to enable effective teaching and learning in his classroom.

Doussou Keita's research was concerned with discipline management amid rising numbers in class. This is a work in progress, but initial findings showed that students listened carefully when activities were interesting to them. The reorganisation of the class ensured that students stopped being noisy. To keep and sustain students' attention, this research revealed that teachers must choose interesting topics and deliver them in an interesting way.

Yassin Mohamed Omar and **Ali Farah Warsama's** key concern was with lifting students' motivation in their English language learning. Questionnaires and interviews were used to seek students' views on their motivation or lack thereof to learn English. It was established that the environment being predominantly French-speaking bore a strong influence on discouraging students to speak in English, as well as inadequate resources.

Isaac Akinseye noticed that his Year 9 students had difficulties doing spelling tasks. He decided to address this problem, with the support of the school administration who had challenged him to come up with a solution. In his reflections about the study, Isaac said, 'I learned that the best way to a lasting solution to learners' problems is to first engage in exploration in order to understand the problem and not to assume the cause of the problem.'

Tewodros Gebremichael is a secondary school teacher in a private school. His learners have a good background in English, but he noticed the presence of grammar mistakes, such as verb patterns, sentence structures, subject-verb agreement and connecting words or sentences, in exam papers. After collecting exploratory data, he intervened using grammar lessons that focused on connecting devices and fundamental sentence structures.

Aime Gouede is a teacher trainer. In carrying out this task, he realised that one of the challenges teachers face is teaching grammar. In his study, Aime realised that 'despite the teachers saying that they know what contextualisation is, which is partly true, we still think it needs to be explained to them. There are ways of contextualising grammar that they are not currently aware of, which they can make use of; made-up situations are not the only ones.'

Aliyi Hassen observed that most of his undergraduate students had problems acquiring computer-programming skills, as many of the students were experiencing computer usage for the first time at the university. The research enabled him to get insights into the activities he used to teach programming. His students gained an ability to solve different problems and became inquisitive when he got the methods 'right'.

Ahmed Shareef's research was informed by a heated debate around the efficacy of online teaching at the Sudanese tertiary level, especially after the last wave of Covid-19. He explored the use of the flipped classroom strategy and established that it was effective in aiding the understanding of lectures and enabled him to cover the outlined objectives. The exploration enabled him to diagnose challenges and effectively devise a plan to address them.

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Finally, we would like to thank the school administrators who allowed and encouraged their teachers to engage in classroom research and the students who kindly agreed to participate.



Note on permissions

All photographs included here have been provided by teachers. Following British Council protocols, in cases where permission could not be gained, photographs have not been included and/or learners' faces have not been shown.



Difficulties of speaking English in primary school

Mayyada Assadig Hamdan Mohammed

Country : Sudan





Mayyada Assadig Hamdan Mohammed

is an English teacher who holds a first-class Bachelor's of Art and Education (Honours) in English language. Besides this, she holds a master's in teaching English as a foreign language. Mayyada has five years of experience in primary schools and universities, working in different systems (private and public) in Sudan

Sudan

My teaching context

I work in Al Amal primary school located in Sudan, western Kordofan state. There, I teach Grade 6 students who are about 12 years old. They take six hours of English weekly. The school is a private one with limited resources and, because it is in a rural area, electricity is only available for four hours a day, so the technology available to help with the teaching process is limited and the materials used are mostly provided by the teachers. Teaching English in particular is quite a challenge in my region for a number of reasons. First of all, the students started learning English just three years ago, when they were in Grade 3, following a reform in the education system in my country.

Therefore, they are still struggling with the basics. In this context, students learn English as a foreign language, with very limited exposure to the language outside the English lesson and school. Hence, they feel unmotivated to learn a new language. Additionally, with limited modern and technological resources, English teachers find themselves bearing the brunt of adapting to the limited environment and creating solutions to overcome these challenges.

My research topic

I chose to explore the difficulties and challenges of speaking English faced by my students. This is because I noticed that my students' participation in speaking activities is very low, and when they do participate, they make a lot of mistakes in pronunciation and grammar or they speak their mother language, Arabic. I decided to explore this issue by finding out my students' perspectives on speaking activities, my own teaching style and the materials that I use. I applied exploratory action research methodology and designed my research project.

This topic is important to me because, as a language teacher, oral communication between the teacher and students or among the students is very important and plays a vital role in any educational process. Therefore, the lack of speaking definitely affects teaching negatively. Moreover, it has a negative effect on my students' perception of the language and also on their performance during the lessons and exams. Since they are in a transitional stage, as next year they will move from primary school to middle school, they are in great need of speaking skills in order to face the next level.

In order to understand this situation, I developed four questions:

1. **What kinds of speaking difficulties do I observe in my students?**
2. **What do my students think of pair-work speaking activities?**
3. **How often do my students interact orally in the lesson?**
4. **How do I teach speaking in the classroom?**

To answer these questions, I carried out focus group discussions and lesson observations and had my students keep a reflective journal. For the focus group, I chose eight students randomly. The discussion was carried out in Arabic to make the students feel encouraged to participate. Six questions were designed to address the exploratory questions about the students' perception of speaking activities.

As for lesson observation, three lessons were observed by my colleague. I designed eight questions to be answered in order to address Question 4, which sought to understand how I teach speaking in the classroom. In their journals, students wrote about the challenges they face when they speak, what they think of the speaking activities, their preferred activities, as well as their perception of collaborative work.

The answers to my exploratory questions

In terms of students' speaking difficulties and preferred activities (Questions 1 and 2), the results were that students think positively of pair-work speaking activities. They claimed that their peers help and support them, so they were not afraid of making mistakes. One of my students said, 'I feel unconfident and frustrated when I speak to the whole class'. The student explained that she felt like this because they had challenges in grammar, lacked vocabulary and also had difficulties in pronunciation.

When I asked them in what way I could help them to speak more in the class, they proposed that they be given pre-speaking activities and some related vocabulary in order to be well prepared for the lessons and they also indicated that they needed more speaking activities. In addition to that, they expressed their need for more visual aids to help them with vocabulary. One student said,



We want to be divided into groups, and in each group there should be strong and weak students. In this way, we can help each other. And the activity should be dialogues. We love dialogues because we feel as if we are in a real situation and we speak with confidence.

This would solve the issue I had noted in the past that the students' oral interaction in the class was very low, whether they were nominated to participate or were given the freedom to participate voluntarily.

In terms of how I teach speaking (Question 4), my fellow teacher who observed me reflected,



Although you support your students during the lesson by giving them clear instructions and helping them with some related vocabulary, some students still didn't participate. You need to give them more support by giving them more time to prepare their answers and perhaps giving them extra activities.

My observer also commented on the way I correct my students' mistakes when they are speaking. He indicated that it was too much and that I needed to reduce the correction because it interrupted them and affected their speech negatively.

It can be concluded that my students like pair activities. They also like to be given pre-speaking activities and more activities to practise. Moreover, my students expressed their need for visual aids and more speaking activities. The results also revealed that my students had difficulties in grammar and pronunciation and they lacked vocabulary. Therefore, I had to teach those areas more precisely. Furthermore, I needed to reduce the correction of mistakes during speaking and give extra support to weaker students.

My action plan

Based on the findings above, I created an action plan to address the issues identified. The action plan included strategies to develop more effective speaking skills, and this was carried out for almost a month and in eight lessons.

I provided students with leaflets of the related vocabulary task before each lesson and also taught grammar implicitly. This is where I taught grammar in a communicative manner by providing my students with authentic contexts and communication-based activities, such as role play and oral group pattern games, which facilitate learners' oral production. I also conducted pre-speaking activities such as information gaps, reading something relevant to the topic, jotting down ideas and reviewing vocabulary necessary for the topic. Likewise, I used visual stimuli such as pictures, drawings and cartoons to pre-teach vocabulary and pronunciation. I also conducted pair- and group-work activities.

To evaluate the effects of the strategies included in the action plan, I used a questionnaire, another lesson observation and a reflective journal. Three classroom observations were carried out, using an observation instrument and an observer,

one at the beginning of implementation, another during and the last classroom observation taking place at the end of the intervention. The observer was instructed to focus his attention on the activities I implemented to teach speaking and whether I provided students with enough grammatical explanation, vocabulary and pronunciation. Additionally, he observed how I supported my students before, during and after speaking lessons, how I promoted collaborative work and also the way I provided feedback to my students. The questionnaire was designed containing 12 questions aimed at gathering students' opinions regarding the actions that were implemented. The reflective journal was designed with eight questions to guide my reflections on my own teaching and to obtain more information about the impact of the action plan.

The impact of my action plan

After analysing the results from the different tools applied, I was able to conclude that the effects of my action plan were positive. Learners were more involved in the speaking tasks, particularly when the speaking activity was part of their grammar lesson. This could be due to the fact that the lesson provided the content for speaking. Learners were able to use the new vocabulary in practice tasks, where visual aids and pre-teaching vocabulary were of great help. In addition, they appeared at ease and capable of using correct grammatical language in speaking activities. Furthermore, pronunciation improved, but only slightly. It seems improving this may need more time and a more focused approach. However, pronunciation lessons and activities gave my students a lot of confidence to carry out speaking tasks. The consistent practice carried out in the class was useful in improving their confidence. Learners are now more confident to speak in pairs, groups and to the whole class. In terms of my teaching, I became more flexible and patient with weaker students and provided them with more support.

My reflections

In conclusion, the actions I implemented improved my students' speaking and had a positive impact on my students' performance. Furthermore, this exploratory action research helped me to develop positive interactions with my students through all the stages of my research, whether by exploring their points of view about their learning and my teaching or by talking to them to find out the problems they faced. This gave me the opportunity to know their learning needs, which is something I had never done before. In addition, this action research made me aware of the importance of collaboration with my colleagues. Through peer observation, we exchanged ideas and we had long discussions on the topic of my research. This helped me a lot and enlightened my insights. With follow-up, guidance and advice from my mentors, I was able to find answers to the problem that I had identified for my study. I am grateful for this opportunity.



Students' poor performance in speaking English

Bethel Uzochukwu Udeh

Country : Nigeria





Bethel Uzochukwu Udeh

has a BEd in English language from the University of Nigeria. She has experience in preschool, primary and secondary education. She has been teaching for more than six years, both in private and public schools. She currently teaches English language and literature in English in a federal college.

Nigeria

Teaching context

I teach English language at the Federal Government Girls' College, Bwari, Abuja in Nigeria. I teach teenagers who are 13–15 years old. The students take English language classes three periods weekly (a total of 3 hours 20 minutes). The school is a public one sponsored by the federal government, so it encompasses children from the high, middle and low classes of the country. Most of the students speak their native language or Pidgin English at home and with friends. Hence, this affects them in speaking English fluently. More so, the students make mistakes when speaking English and are not bothered by it because they do not believe that they need to speak fluently to be successful in life.

A very popular opinion in the country is *Who English epp?* (Who does speaking good English help?). As a result, they perform poorly in the English language, both in speaking and writing and even in their exams. Parents also contribute to this because they would rather pay for their children's extra classes in other subjects but English. They pay more attention to other foreign languages, such as Chinese, French and Spanish, than to the English language.

Focus of exploration

I chose to explore the speaking skills of my students because they performed poorly during speaking activities and they seemed not to be bothered about it. I have noted that they have problems with their pronunciation, vocabulary and use of tenses and, as a result, they even code-mix. When I started working with them, they usually described me as that teacher that speaks *fone* (a term Nigerians use in describing someone who speaks fluent English) and they liked it. This made me think that I may have a positive impact on them, and they can learn to speak well as a result.

This gave rise to my research. I wanted to know the reason for their poor speaking skills and what they think of the strategies I use in teaching them and the general classroom activities.

The questions that guided me during my exploration are:

1. What mistakes do my students make when speaking English?
2. What do I want to see happening regarding my students when speaking English?
3. What do my students feel about their poor performances in speaking English?
4. What do my students think of the strategies I use in teaching speaking?

Methods of data collection

To answer my exploratory research questions, I used the following data-collection methods: focus group, peer observation and a reflective journal. The focus group was made up of eight students. I selected them based on their performance in the last examinations they had (these covered the high, middle and low grades). The focus discussions were guided by five questions that were designed to help me know what students feel about learning to speak English fluently and the methods I use in teaching them. Two colleagues observed the four lessons during the course of the research. I also wrote reflections as I thought about what I wanted to see happening when my students spoke in English.

Findings

From my reflection of students' spoken and written work, I have noted that my students make mistakes/errors when speaking English. They say things such as 'When did you came to school?', 'Abeg give me your pen na?' They pronounce words differently, for example plumber as 'plomba', thereby sounding the 'b' which ought to be silent. My colleague who did the classroom observation also observed that the mistakes made by students included wrong use of tenses, poor pronunciation of words and low vocabulary levels. While there was laughter in the class after a student made an error, no correction or support was provided to improve the performance.

During my reflection, I noted that I wish to see my students perform excellently in the English language, be it spoken or written, and also in their exams. I want to see my students develop a passion for speaking well. I want to see them take the English language as a subject more seriously than they do other subjects.

The focus group discussion revealed that the students are aware that they make mistakes/errors when speaking English. One student said, 'I know my English is not good because my classmates laugh when I speak and the teacher also corrects me.' Despite this situation, the students do not seem keen to change. They believe that once they are able to communicate their thoughts to their listeners, that is enough. They do not feel bad when they fail their English language exams because they believe it is the norm to fail. In my reflection, I remembered one student saying to me during a casual discussion, 'You no fit get A for English.' 'A' is a letter grade for distinction, and students have already concluded that no matter how much they study, they can never have a distinction in English because of how 'difficult' it is to have a pass in it.

In terms of the strategies I use to teach speaking, students did not declare a problem with my method of teaching. However, they wanted more extracurricular activities introduced to them. During the focus group discussion, the students said they would love the introduction of mobile apps, especially games to help them. Some feel that the provision of more literary texts will help them build their vocabulary when they read, while others asked for fun activities to be introduced.

Action plan

Based on the findings, I implemented the following actions in four classes.

- 1. Debates: I picked a controversial topic and the students would speak on it.**
- 2. Impromptu speaking: students read comprehension passages and gave oral answers.**
- 3. Retelling stories: students listened to stories and retold them using their own words.**

Methods of evaluation

To evaluate the effects of the action plan, I used peer observation, focus group and reflection. I asked a colleague to observe how my students respond to questions and focus on how they construct their sentences. I also held focus group discussions with students and kept a reflective journal.

Findings after intervention

The data showed that students enjoyed the activities we carried out during the action plan. In my reflections, I realised that the students were more active and the lessons were noisier as my students did the fun activities. In fact, one of the students said, 'I like it when we have debates like the topic A bicycle is better than a car because I can share my ideas which I believe in and also listen to my friends supporting their side of the debate.' This reveals that the students were attracted to interesting ways of using their acquired language, and debates on controversial issues helped them to do this, as they got passionate and involved in the discussion. When describing the experience, the students used phrases and words like 'it was all fun', 'interactive' and 'interesting'. One student observed this and said: 'This has helped me to work together with others as a team and it made it easier for me to research for information, build my vocabulary and practise pronunciation. So I get to do all three in one.'

In actual fact, almost half the students said that retelling stories helped them to express themselves. Additionally, 22 per cent considered impromptu speaking to be a good way of making them always be prepared to speak. My colleagues who carried out the classroom observation commented that the students were engaged in the fun activities and were willing to make presentations when called upon. One student supported this by saying, 'We are convinced that we need to speak fluently to succeed, but we also need tasks that are interesting to participate in not just on special days but often.' As a result, they requested more fun activities during their normal lessons.

The findings also reveal that students now ask questions in class with a keen consideration of grammar and the proper use of tenses. For instance, before now, a student could say 'Please borrow me your pencil', but now they have learned to say 'Please lend me your pencil.'

Pronouncing words in groups during oral English lessons motivated them to fully participate. All the students said they felt comfortable pronouncing words in groups rather than in isolation because it shifts attention from them. One student said: 'I feel confident pronouncing words during oral drills because I know that it is a group responsibility to present well. I can also practise on my own and speak confidently not only with my close friends but with anyone.'

My learning and future actions

From what I learned during this process, my method of teaching will change because I will include more of the activities we carried out during the action plan in their lessons. They will work more in groups since it eases their anxiety when speaking. This new method will help students relate easily to things they are familiar with, thereby prompting them to participate freely or, as the case may be, speak freely in class because the topics we will consider during such activities will deal with things, objects, feelings and people they are familiar with. They will be introduced to more audio recordings for lessons as well, since it will help them more in their pronunciation. This will mean more work on my part as the school does not provide support for all of these.

What I learned

What I have learned from this experience is that I must listen to my students to know what they want so as to teach them better, because I might think that I am giving them what they want, while they want something else. I have also learned that I need other teachers to succeed, and to achieve this, I need to connect with them. I have connected with other teachers of English and they have helped me during this research. I have also learned that as a teacher, I am also a learner, because I do not know everything. I need to learn new things to be a good teacher to my students. Sometimes, to be a successful teacher, we need to go the extra mile in our learning and teaching, such as working extra hours with the students. There are things needed for my teaching that the school will not be able to provide due to funds, but since they are important for my students to perform well, I can look for alternatives or another means to get those items.

I have also learned that the environment exerts a powerful influence on young people, and they bring these things to school. So they need to be helped to see the right part. In the case of my research, it is a wrong notion not to pay attention to their speaking because it is of no use to them. This is what their environment made them believe, but they now have the correct view.



Promoting speaking skills

Tarig Ahmed Adam Elamin
Country : Sudan





Tarig Ahmed Adam Elamin

is a teacher with a minor in English and holds a bachelor's degree in teaching English as a second language. Tarig has more than five years of experience teaching in secondary schools and working in different educational systems (both semi-private and public) in Sudan

Sudan

Teaching context

I work in an independent institution located in Dilling locality, South Kordofan state, Sudan, where I teach English classes. My students are of both genders, and most are over 18 years. I also teach beginners, mostly in the afternoon shift. The students have two hours of learning and practising English as a second language daily, except Friday and Saturday because these days are considered official weekends here. Most of my students have already graduated from universities and work in different fields, but are studying English because their basic schools and secondary schools did not provide them with enough knowledge. The institution I work for is a result of a youth initiative in an association that is legally registered by the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) since 2016.

The institution depends on students' fees as the main source for meeting teaching needs. The students who participated in this exploratory action research are in the beginners' class in the same institute, where we have a programme called Intensive Speaking Programme. Since they are all college graduates or employees, they seek English for communicative purposes. In this programme, we teach them English with more emphasis on speaking skills. The institution follows a course system; the students have five subjects to study, five days a week and for three months, with exams that usher them to a higher level.

Relevance of this topic to my teaching

I chose to explore speaking skills and the use of grammar when speaking. This is because I noticed that my students were reluctant to participate when they were asked to. When they did participate, they made a lot of mistakes in sentence structures in English and pronunciation and they tended to depend on their mother tongue, Arabic. I wanted to help them resolve this situation by finding out their weaknesses and difficulties in speaking English.

I decided that I wanted to tackle this situation by finding out their perspectives on English, the lessons, myself as a teacher and the materials.

First, I decided to develop the following exploratory questions, whose answers would be useful in understanding the issue faced by my students. The questions are:

- 1. What do my students feel about speaking English in class?**
- 2. How do students perform during speaking activities?**
- 3. What do students think about the activities I give them to aid their speaking skills?**
- 4. What are the common errors made by students when speaking?**

Methods of data collection

To answer these questions, I collected data using a questionnaire, lesson observation and a reflective journal. Twenty students who completed the questionnaire were selected randomly to ensure they represent the whole class. The questions were designed to focus on students' perceptions of how the English class was carried out and how they felt while participating in speaking activities. The two lesson observations were carried out and focused on how I teach speaking and students' performance in class. Additionally, I kept a reflective journal to capture my thoughts, guided by questions I had developed that focused on my teaching of speaking skills. My reflection was to answer Question 1 of the exploratory questions by describing what I noticed and observed specifically during speaking activities. In five speaking classes, I took notes and was keen with my observations in order to answer the journal questions.

My findings

In terms of students' perceptions (Question 1 – What do my students feel about speaking English in class?), the results of the exploration showed that the students felt uncomfortable and nervous speaking in class. Students felt nervous when they made pronunciation errors in their oral work. This made the students feel less motivated in speaking skills. Findings from the questionnaire indicated that slightly near half of the learners (35 per cent) felt hesitant when speaking in English and 30 per cent of them said they experienced some fear when speaking in English. On the other hand, 25 per cent felt confident while speaking in English, and a few of them (20 per cent) mentioned feeling comfortable.

The findings for Question 2 (How do students perform during speaking activities?) show that the students did not collaborate among themselves during tasks. They tended to rely on the teacher to guarantee that what they were producing orally was being done correctly, and although students generally agreed that activities were effective and attention-worthy, they expressed their need for more scaffolding, for instance more visual aids to check their understanding and pronunciation practice to help with their production. From my observations, I noticed students' oral participation in class was very low when a student was nominated and even lower when they were asked to participate voluntarily.

For Question 3 (What do students think about the activities I give them to aid their speaking skills?), findings showed that many of the students (30 per cent) said they have difficulties with group work, while another 30 per cent of them mentioned that dialogue is the most difficult activity, followed by pair work and oral presentations. However, despite this difficulty, 45 per cent of students indicated that the most useful activities in speaking class were debates and group work, followed by pair work. Only 5 per cent of them selected oral presentations as a good activity in speaking classes.

In terms of students' performance (Question 4 – What are the common errors made by students when speaking?), 45 per cent of them indicated that they make grammatical mistakes when speaking, while 40 per cent lack vocabulary and 15 per cent make mistakes in pronunciation when speaking in English. The same tendency is observed when asked about the difficulties they have with speaking. They struggle with grammar, followed by vocabulary and pronunciation.

Action plan

Based on the above findings, I decided to create an action plan to address the issues identified. The action plan included strategies to develop speaking skills more effectively, and it was carried out over a month.

1. Practical tasks: dialogues, short conversations, debates and short audio and videos for pronunciation, to introduce the topic and during speaking activities to help with vocabulary and to boost their pronunciation.

2. Collaboration: while setting up team debate activities I decided to get students to work in groups of three. This increased the chance of effective collaboration.

3. Listening session for pronunciation practice: together and individual pronunciation practice to help students with accurate speaking production.

4. Conversation games: I planned short conversation games at the end of the lessons for the students to demonstrate their progress and to reward them for their voluntary participation.



Students practising a dialogue

Evaluation

To evaluate the effects of the strategies implemented in the action plan, I used classroom observations and focus group interviews. Two classroom observations were carried out using an observation instrument for the observer. The observer was instructed to focus her attention on observable behaviours of the students, the impact of the dialogue on their participation, participation during choral repetition, reaction to games and willingness to participate. During the focus group, the students were asked whether the lessons they had were sufficient, whether they were helpful and useful, and how they felt about them. Eleven students participated in the focus group, and these were chosen using the same criteria as in the exploratory stage of the research.

Results

In relation to the tasks carried out, the observation revealed that learners participated effectively in the new tasks and enjoyed them. In the focus group, two students commented, 'I notice it gives me courage, support and the right pronunciation and it's very helpful', 'I feel good and comfortable and it's very useful.'

My colleague also noticed that learners interacted well through dialogues, short conversations and debates used in the action plan. They used simple grammatical structures and applied them effortlessly in tasks. The main effect of teamwork activities was growth in students' confidence as they communicate in English with their peers. One of the students said:



I feel good and more confident when I have to present alongside my team in front of the class. I feel teamwork is useful because I can practise speaking in English and gain confidence that I can use English not only with my classmates but also with other people.

Teamwork also helped the students to work together in finding information, recalling pronunciation and doing peer feedback to achieve communicative goals effectively. A student mentioned: 'I liked working in a team because we found solutions together and someone could explain to us when we didn't understand something immediately.'

Learners also enjoyed pair work using dialogues since they learned simple grammatical sentence structures. In relation to the listening sessions, students were able to practise the pronunciation of words and sentences as they heard through the audios and videos of native speakers. One of the students said: 'The listening session really helped me a lot, especially when I closed my eyes and got into a relaxed mood.' It is evident that by being in a state of relaxation and without pressure,

the students were able to listen more keenly and grasp the proper pronunciations. The session was challenging because the audios were fast, but the students found a solution by playing the audios more than once. Overall, they learned that English can be fun, easy to learn, entertaining and useful. One of them said: 'I feel happy because I learned a lot, I was able to grasp the ideas and I am also having fun with my classmates.'



Reflections and learning

The process of implementing the action plan was a little difficult at the very beginning. Students needed a lot of instruction and guidance, but the implemented actions have helped them with grammatical sentence structures, vocabulary and pronunciation.

Before the action plan, students were given grammatical rules theoretically in their notebooks. However, speaking skills require practical tasks, such as dialogue, debates or even short conversations, short audios and videos, for improving pronunciation. This action research project helped me to understand this, and I look forward to implementing it in my future lessons.

In conclusion, the strategies implemented during the action phase of my research had a positive impact on the students' pronunciation and motivation. It was necessary for them to work in teams rather than individually, and this gave them a sense of purpose in their collaborative work. This can help students get ready for the production stage of the lesson and lower their anxiety when they are called upon to speak.

Also, I have learned that teachers can work together to improve their classroom practice. My colleagues supported me during data collection.

Two of them observed two of my lessons and engaged in discussions with me about what they observed.

To see the full impact of the action plan requires more time, and I will continue to implement it as I observe the effect on my students' learning. I would advise that whatever the problem or issue in the teaching context, applying exploratory action research can solve it.



Improving first-year pedagogical science students' speaking skills

Dagnachew Adefris

Country: Ethiopia





Dagnachew Adefris

received his PhD (2020) in English literature from Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, and is currently a senior lecturer at Woldia University, Ethiopia. He holds a master's degree in English literature (2011) from Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. He holds a higher diploma in teaching methodologies to university young learners. He has more than six years of experience in secondary and tertiary education, working in different education systems (public and private) in Ethiopia

Ethiopia

Teaching context

This exploratory action research was carried out at Woldia University. Woldia University is located in the North Wollo zone of the Amhara regional state, Ethiopia. The university was established in 2011 and admits students to both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Woldia University is close to Lalibela Hewn Churches, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, and Ethiopia's popular tourist destination. I teach communicative English language skills and English literature courses at the university.

This research was carried out with 32 first-year pedagogical science students at the university. These groups of students are aged between 19 and 24 years and come from different parts of the country after completing their secondary education at the end of 2021. Some of them are from very peripheral areas, some from nearby towns and others from rural villages. They are also from different cultural, socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds.

I focused my research on speaking skills because I noticed that students had no eagerness to speak English in class. This topic was selected because I noticed from my teaching observations in the class that this group of students had no eagerness to speak in English in my communicative English language skills classes. To understand more about the problem, I considered anecdotal evidence that indicates that speaking is one of the most missed skills among secondary and tertiary students in Ethiopia, although the curriculum supports this skill. Several reasons can be mentioned regarding this issue, but the most common reason is that unlike most countries of Africa, where English is used as the medium of instruction and also as a means of daily interaction in and out of school, speaking in English in Ethiopia is mostly limited to classroom settings. This means that it needs to be emphasised in classroom settings if it is to find its roots in daily interactions. In many instances, secondary school leavers join higher-learning institutions with poor English language speaking skills in Ethiopia. Consequently, most of these students show no interest in speaking in English in classes.

Speaking in English, however, not only helps learners foster the development of other associated skills but also opens opportunities to explore more about language skills. It is also an important aspect of skill, knowledge and attitudinal changes in education. Speaking is considered a basic skill for tertiary students in Ethiopia where English is used as a medium of instruction. Besides, speaking in English in classes helps develop the teaching-learning process. Understanding this situation is important, as it has pedagogical implications.

To help me understand the situation, I designed four exploratory research questions. These were:

- 1. What is the perception of my students towards speaking English in class?**
- 2. What speaking opportunities do my students have in class?**
- 3. What do my students think of the strategies I use to promote speaking English in class?**
- 4. What do my colleagues think about my students' speaking skills?**

These exploratory action research questions would help me put the problem into perspective to help establish what the real issues were.

To answer the above research questions, I collected data through questionnaires, classroom observation and interviews. The respondents for the questionnaire were 32 first-year pedagogical science students at Woldia University. A questionnaire was prepared to collect perceptions and is best studied if we use questionnaires. So to know my students' attitudes toward speaking in English in class, I designed this questionnaire and administered it to 32 students. Classroom observations were conducted four times in two weeks during communicative English language skills classes by a pedagogically trained instructor at the university. Interviews were also held with two English language teacher colleagues. These two senior colleagues were chosen because they have had experience doing research on students' speaking skills and how to handle it in English classes.

The findings from the exploration indicated the following: 40 per cent of learners responded that they feel ashamed of English speaking because they think that they make mistakes in front of other people and did not participate in an oral presentation to promote their speaking skills, but 81 per cent of the students have willingness and motivation to speak in English. Thirty-seven per cent of learners have problems with speaking loudly, articulating words clearly and maintaining eye contact. Thirty-seven per cent believe that speaking is not a difficult skill to master. Half of the learners said their teacher does not organise their class in group work as a speaking strategy.

Using the observation and interview, the following results were recorded.

Learners did not want to participate in classroom oral presentations. They chose a representative who did it on their behalf (observation). This was someone who was most likely an extrovert and was not afraid of speaking in English. Learners were also seen and responded that they wanted to speak but struggled with speaking (observation and interview). They were afraid to make mistakes in front of the whole class and kept silent during the classes (interview). Learners also had problems speaking loudly (so that the mistakes will not be more pronounced) and articulating words clearly (observation). The majority of learners kept silent and tended to avoid speaking in English in class (observation). The majority of learners wanted to speak but struggled to speak English and they were not confident (interview).

After considering the findings of the exploration, I designed a think-pair-share activity that allows learners to practise and promote speaking about any topic to each other in a safer way. They would make mistakes with their peers and be corrected without feeling judged. To help improve their confidence, I designed self-introduction activities. In addition, I prepared short daily speaking activities with information gaps. The students would work in pairs to fill in the gaps. As they participated in these activities, opportunities to speak increased and their confidence to speak would also increase.

To evaluate the effect of an action plan on a student's speaking skills, I used peer observation and focus group interviews. These actions were implemented and evaluated using peer observation over a two-week period (during and after the intervention, i.e. second and third week of May and the end period). A focus group interview was conducted at the end of the intervention period to have a perspective on the effect of the planned actions.

The results indicated that the think-pair-share strategy gave each learner an opportunity to speak to one another. As they had no choice but to speak to their peers, they were able to speak to their peers who they were comfortable with. From the group interview, student responses were as follows:



First I was nervous to speak in English during our communicative English language skills course lessons. I did not want to speak as I was afraid to speak in English in front of students whom I have not known them before. But after the teacher sits me in pair, I am able to speak and avoid daunting to speak in English. I become relaxed and speak well.

Another student in the group said:



I had no good habit of speaking in English in classes. I always chose to be kept silent in classes because I had no exposure how to speak English in classes but after the action is implemented I feel confidence and courage to speak in English. I now freely speak without daunting and my peers encourage me to speak English more.

According to the peer observations, the self-introductions took off slowly due to the anxiety, but as the students saw that they were not judged, it improved. It increased the opportunities for them to speak. The learners were more willing to make oral presentations compared to the time before the implementation of the action plan.

The students initially struggled with information-gap activities. In pairs, they conversed and attempted to respond to the activities. This seemed to improve with time as they became freer to converse and fill the information gaps (data from the observation). In a focus group interview, a student explains the advantages of learning in pair work:



Pair work activities give me a higher percentage of talking in my real speaking activities. As working in pair creates safe environment to speak which is like a one-on-one conversation, it is a two-way communication. And we were able to complete information-gap activities. This gives me chance both to ask and to answer a question which also helps me to develop skills of interaction with my peers and classmates. It helps me improve social skills.

Because the speaking happened in pairs, the mistakes they made did not feel as severe as if made in front of the whole class. In their opinion, this seemed to increase their confidence levels in speaking. My students were also able to use the newly learned vocabulary in the information-gap activities. They even seemed more interested in speaking, using vocabulary they use in the class. This also helped them feel less anxious and more confident when working with peers in group or pair activities than during whole-class discussions (data from the focus group interview).

In the implementation of short daily vocabularies with information gaps, students were provided with materials to meet certain vocabulary and grammatical targets. This activity required the students to work co-operatively in pairs where they had to speak and express information, feelings and ideas.

The anxiety to speak had earlier made the students afraid to speak and articulate words clearly. They were afraid others would hear them make mistakes. As they participated in pairs and through daily activities, the amount of speaking also improved. They were able to speak English better than before. Their vocabulary skill has also improved, as they were seen speaking during classes.

Reflecting on this experience, I realise that I will continue to teach based on exploring classroom problems and situations that will help me better understand my learners' attitudes toward my lessons and their general willingness to learn. Thanks to the proposed change that has let me know what I did not before, I have come to know the problems of my students because of their voices. My teaching will then be based on letting my students be the source of all my teaching activities.



Exploratory action research on improving speaking skills in class

Helen Ogudugu

Country: Nigeria





Helen Ogudugu

Helen Ogudugu is a teacher of English with a BA (Honours) in English Language and Literature in English. She also holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Education. Helen has more than five years of experience in secondary and tertiary education, working in different education systems (Oregbeni Estate Secondary School, and Nosakhare College of Education, Edo State, Nigeria)

Nigeria

Teaching context

I work at Nosakhare College of Education. It is a private college of education located in Benin City, Edo state, in the southern part of Nigeria in the West African Region. There, I teach in the School of Languages, Arts and Social Sciences. I work with students who are aged 17 years and above and who are studying English as part of their professional degrees. The students take four hours of English weekly. Most of the students have a mid-high socio-economic status. The students I carried out the exploratory action research project with are students in their first year of the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE I).

I noticed that my students were not participating willingly in speaking activities in class. They were always shy and reluctant to speak, and when they did, they made lots of mistakes in pronunciation and in grammar. Sometimes they had pauses and stops at regular intervals. I tried to encourage them verbally and also give them group activities, but it was not yielding the expected results. Another reason that led to my decision to focus on the speaking skills of my students was that my school is located in a multilingual environment, and English is the most common means of communication and expression. There was a need for the students to participate more orally and in writing than just to have a knowledge of English grammar (in which they were not performing well either). They were also in their first year and first semester, and I thought I needed to give them a solid foundation to make them realise that learning English is very useful and easy, as it is virtually the only instrument of instruction in all academic settings and social gatherings.

I wanted to know what exactly the problem was. I wanted to find out if the teacher was not using the right strategies and materials and also to provide answers or solutions to the problems that would be identified. Thus, I used the exploratory action research methodology and, with the support of my mentor, designed my research project.

To carry out this exploration, I had to develop exploratory questions, so I came up with the following questions:

- 1. What do my students think about speaking English in class?**
- 2. What am I doing to improve my students' speaking skills?**
- 3. What do my students think of the strategies I use to develop speaking skills in class?**
- 4. What challenges do students experience in speaking English in class?**

To answer these questions, I chose three data collection tools, and these were questionnaires, focus group interviews and a reflective journal. In designing the questionnaires, about 16 questions were designed to find out how my learners felt about speaking English in class and any challenges they may have had. I also designed a reflective journal to find out why I thought my students' speaking skills should be improved, and what were my expectations of my learners in terms of speaking skills, among others.

In the focus group interviews with my learners, I conducted four interviews in groups of eight each. For these, I focused on their perceptions about speaking in English.

In my findings, the data reflected that the students appreciate speaking English in class. They think that speaking English in class helps to enhance their fluency in the use of the English language. Of the students, 31 (representing 97.1 per cent) said they would want the teacher to engage them more in speaking activities because they find it more interesting and more helpful; 30 (representing 94 per cent) think that a good student should be able to speak English; 19 students think that although speaking English in class is good, it should only be spoken with the teacher.

In the focus group interviews, students indicated that they value speaking, but feel scared or shy to speak in front of their peers. They enjoy speaking activities where they work in groups in a collaborative manner, but they have challenges with pronunciation mainly, followed by grammar and vocabulary. In my reflective journal, I could confirm this, since I noted that students were usually reluctant to speak in class and, when they eventually did, they stopped abruptly when they came in contact with new words. Sometimes they felt shy or scared in the presence of their peers, probably for the fear of being laughed at when they make mistakes. This also agrees with questionnaire responses which indicated that 18 students feel shy and nervous and do not want to speak. I verbally encourage them to speak and prompt them by asking them questions. I also call on individual students to speak, although this has not helped much. Most students (25 out of 34) indicated that the strategies are amazing, while 20 students think the strategies I use in class are quite OK. In relation to this, one student indicated during the focus group interview that 'the strategies make me engage in group activities'. Twenty-one felt that the strategies are encouraging and want activities that will involve them in reading activities rather than speaking activities. These results indicate that students take more delight in activities that create opportunities that give room for participation.

Additionally, the questionnaires revealed that virtually every learner has challenges in the usage of the English language in class. Data indicated that 18 had challenges in pronunciation, but a bigger number (21) had challenges in both pronunciation and grammar, while 17 had challenges in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. Sixteen students indicated that they resort to speaking the popular Pidgin English and their local languages, which, according to them, makes them feel more relaxed and comfortable when interacting. Generally, the data indicated that students have challenges caused by the fear of using English in class as they feel shy and afraid to make mistakes. In addition, they have problems with the pronunciation of English words, the appropriate use of grammar and the use of vocabulary.

With the findings that students value speaking in and learning English, but have difficulties with pronunciation and grammar and challenges in vocabulary, I decided to design an action plan to address the issues identified. The action plan included strategies to develop speaking more effectively. Hence, I introduced the think-pair-share (TPS) strategy. I chose this strategy because it encourages co-operative learning.

I organised two pre-speaking activities, using information gaps, and the topic I chose

was communication (the elements of communication). I designed material on elements of communication with information – that is, I created gaps between the sentences and asked the students to fill in the blank spaces before teaching the topic – and for carrying out the activity they worked in pairs. I also prepared pre-teaching vocabulary activities with pronunciation practice before every speaking activity within the set period and taught a bit of grammar as well in every lesson. In preparing the pre-teaching vocabulary activity, I picked out new words in the text that the learners are to study and taught them the meaning of the words and how to pronounce them. By doing so, the learners would become familiar with the words and would have less difficulty pronouncing them.

After implementing the action for about three weeks, to evaluate the effects of the strategy included in my action plan, two peer observations were carried out by one of my colleagues, who observed me during and at the end of the implementation of the action. I carried out a focus group interview with about 25 of my learners in three groups. I used questions like:

- **What do you think about the speaking activity done in class?**
- **In what way did your teacher assist you before the speaking activity?**
- **Was the assistance adequate to encourage you to speak?**

After analysing the data obtained, I found out that during the focus group interview, learners suggested that they were at ease and felt more comfortable. They also indicated that their pronunciation improved, as they heard words being pronounced by their peers as they worked in pairs. When I asked the learners how they feel about using the pre-speaking method, they responded that it had a positive impact on them. They admitted that they learned from one another as they freely spoke with each other and did not feel frightened. This was because they learned in groups. With this, it was noted during the observation that students were more at ease while speaking English in class and their level of participation increased.

Before the action, learners usually pause in the middle of an expression or stop briefly in between sentences, perhaps trying to figure out the right vocabulary, but after pre-teaching the vocabulary, the learners become familiar with the words and manage the vocabulary with ease. They also revealed that discussing in pairs helped them to develop great interest in group activities and encouraged them to sometimes practise pronunciation at their leisure, as well as try to use the new vocabulary discussed, and learned to construct sentences of their own. During the classroom observation, it was noted that this helped to reduce the fear of making mistakes, and the mistakes were minimal because the students discussed freely with themselves. They were seen as eager to speak and participate in the class activity. It was also observed that they spoke with ease after the pre-teaching of vocabulary. This also helped in improving the learners' vocabulary.

In conclusion, through this research, I have been able to understand the reason why students are shy and afraid to make mistakes. They are afraid to be laughed at by their peers. This is as a result of anxiety as well as complexity and lack of confidence in themselves. It has also helped me to understand that teachers need to talk less to their students and facilitate learning, by carrying out research on how to impart knowledge in the most simple ways and methods without making any learner feel hurt or slighted. The exploration enabled me to come up with ways to implement an action plan.

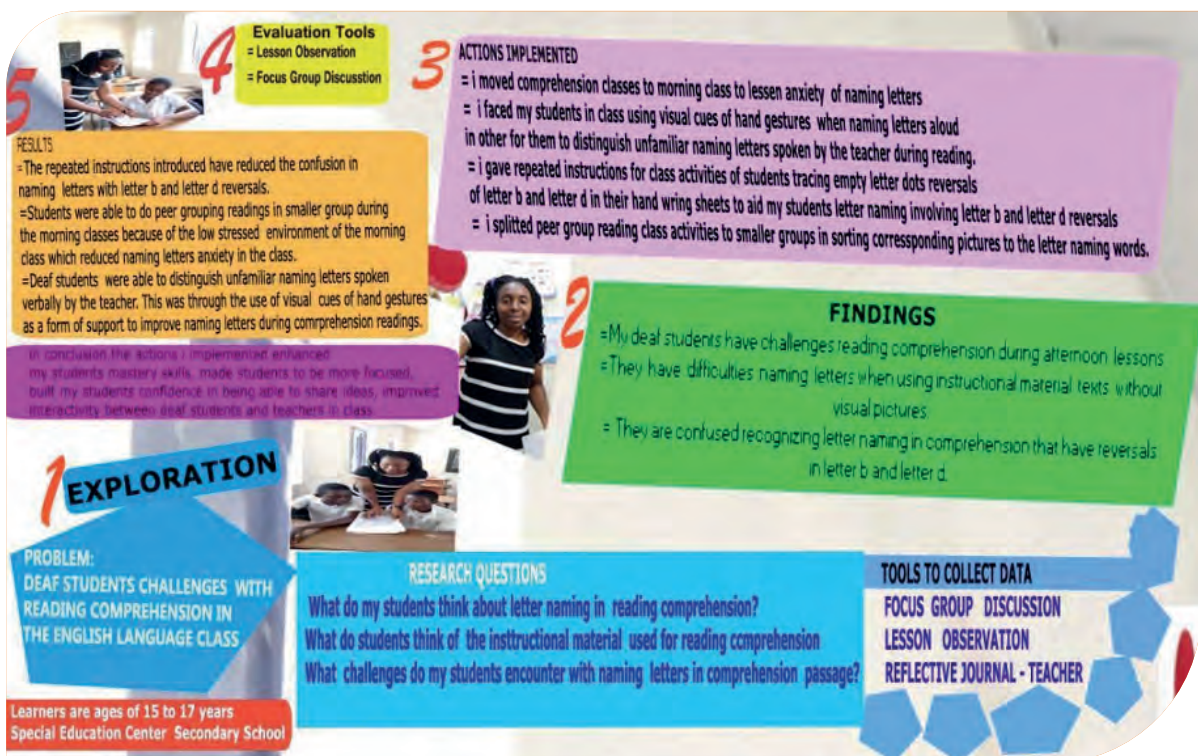
In the beginning, the learners had difficulties understanding the strategy. But after the second session of implementation, they showed more interest and did better with less assistance. By implementing these changes, I have been able to engage my learners in building oral communication skills, which involves grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. This had a more positive influence on the learners, making them aware that participating in class activities, most especially speaking activities, enhances learning.



Deaf students' challenges with reading comprehension in the reading language class

Chinenye Bernard-Nnabuike

Country: Nigeria





Chinenye Bernard-Nnabuike

is a special education teacher who holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Education, majoring in special education, and a certificate in online English tutoring. Chinenye is a licensed professional qualified teacher certified by the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria. Chinenye has more than five years of experience with young learners' education in public primary and secondary schools in Nigeria

Nigeria

Where I work

I work in Special Education Center Secondary School, located in Cross River State, where we teach deaf students. The school is in the southern geographical region of Nigeria and depends solely on state government subventions, which have become limited in the recent past. I carried out the exploratory action research project with young learners ranging between the ages of 15 to 17 years, from low socio-economic status, and taking English language as part of their senior secondary school curriculum subjects.

What I chose to explore

I chose to explore challenges faced by deaf students when reading comprehension passages in English language classes. This was because I noticed my students having challenges naming letters during their comprehension reading in the afternoon English lessons. I decided to tackle this issue using exploratory action research by designing a classroom research project.

There were four reasons why I focused on naming letters during comprehension reading:

- I wanted to lessen the anxiety deaf students face in the class when they are not able to distinguish unfamiliar letter-naming words during their comprehension reading.
- My students were in their senior secondary classes, and I thought this was the right time for them to improve their word-recognition skills of naming letters during reading comprehension. These skills are important for their school life and after-school life.
- For school life, word-recognition skills of naming letters are really important for young learners in promoting their long-term memory of letter-naming words seen after several exposures from their comprehension reading, because they can remember quickly the named letter words seen from the comprehension and then link the words with their meanings. This adds to their vocabulary.
- Word recognition skills are handy for students' after-school life to enable them to read fluently and use words confidently that they have encountered in articles or write-ups.

I came up with three research questions that guided the exploratory action research. These questions were:

- 1. What do my students think about letter-naming in reading comprehension?**
- 2. What do students think of the instructional material used for reading comprehension?**
- 3. What challenges do my students encounter with naming letters in comprehension passages?**

The tools I used to explore

To answer these questions, six focus group discussions, using American Sign Language as a means of communication, were held after each reading session, and these focus group discussions were applied six times to collect data in the third term of the academic session.

Seven students (one girl and six boys) who participated in the focus group discussions were selected randomly from their sitting positions in class. The focus of these discussions was to know the challenges faced by my students when naming letters, specifically during their reading comprehension lesson sessions.

Lesson observation was another method I used in collecting data. I had two sessions of lesson observation, where a colleague assisted me because I wanted to oversee the peer group reading class activities. The focus of these lesson observations was to answer Question 3 of the exploratory questions that sought to find out the challenges faced by my students specifically during their reading comprehension.

What I found out

For Question 1, the findings showed that my deaf students have challenges with letter-naming during the afternoon lessons. My students expressed that they were fatigued and not able to focus their attention on naming letters during comprehension reading lessons in the afternoon.

The data collected from Question 2 revealed that the students feel that they memorise and remember letter-naming easily when they consistently use visual posters to correspond and match the letter-naming words from the comprehension passage. However, they explained that they had reading difficulties using texts with no visual pictures because they could not connect the concepts they read from the comprehension.

The data collected from Question 3 showed that my deaf students have challenges in participating in naming letters involving the letter reversals of letter 'b' and letter 'd' during comprehension reading. In addition, because my students rely on lip reading, they could not distinguish unfamiliar words spoken by the teacher when facing away from them. They also found difficulty in letter-naming using textbooks with no visuals.

In summary, my deaf students could not focus their attention on naming letters in the afternoon lessons. They had challenges naming letters that involved letter reversals of letter 'b' and letter 'd' and were unable to distinguish unfamiliar letter-naming words from the English textbooks that had no visual pictures.

What I decided to change

Based on the above findings, I decided to implement interventions on the action plan, which were carried out in six lessons with a duration of almost three weeks.

First, I moved comprehension reading lessons to the morning class, splitting class activities to smaller groups, which created an avenue for students to work in pairs in sorting corresponding visual pictures or flashcards. Thereafter, the students were expected to display the sticky papers around the classroom to enhance their word-recognition skills in letter-naming.

Furthermore, I allocated more time to peer group reading activities by introducing re-peated sessions for students to trace empty dots of letter 'b' and letter 'd' reversals in their handwriting sheets. I gave repeated instructions for the class activities, to aid the students in understanding letter-naming.

Last, I faced my deaf students in class, using visual hand gesture cues of 'thumbs up' and 'thumbs down' when naming letters aloud, in order for them to distinguish unfamiliar naming letters spoken verbally by the teacher during reading lessons

To evaluate the impact of the strategies implemented in the action plan, I used lesson observation and focus group discussions. Two lesson observations were carried out with the help of a colleague teacher. The observer was instructed to focus attention on the impact of instructional materials that enhance letter-naming skills and students' class activities during comprehension readings.

Six focus group discussions were held after each reading session in order to establish the students' thoughts about the implemented actions. The seven students (one girl and six boys) participated in the focus group discussion and were selected randomly from their sitting positions in the class. The six focus group discussions were held using American Sign Language in order to get information from the students' insights into the impact of the action plan intervention of exploratory action research carried out in the classroom.

The effects of the changes applied

Deaf students were able to do peer-assisted group readings of naming letters from the comprehension in the morning classes and considered morning classes as a low-stress time for reducing letter-naming anxiety. My colleague who did the classroom observation also noted that the students seemed very active and engaged when doing the tasks in smaller groups. Regarding this, one deaf student said:



I like it when I do letter-naming in the morning when I am not tired. In the afternoon, I am usually tired because of the other lessons. Working with my classmates on class activities has made me more confident in sharing ideas easily because I am comfortable being with my peer in the class.

Tracing empty dots of letter 'b' and letter 'd' in the handwriting sheet pads seemed to enhance the students' ability to identify letter 'b' and letter 'd' in the comprehension readings. One deaf student said, 'I find it easy to do letter-naming with letter 'b' and letter 'd' reversals after tracing the empty dots of letter 'b' and letter 'd' in the handwriting sheets.'

Furthermore, the students were able to distinguish unfamiliar naming letters spoken ver-bally by the teacher because the teacher consistently used visual cues of hand gestures in supporting students during the comprehension reading. My colleague said after the lesson observation: 'When you used hand gestures while facing the students, I noticed that they focused on you and concentrated on what you were sharing with them.'

One deaf student agreed with this observation and said:



We are happy with the lessons, which are now more interesting, especially when the teachers use 'thumbs up' and 'thumbs down' hand gesture cues. This makes the lessons more interactive since there is communication between the students and the teachers.

Giving my students repeated instructions in the activity of tracing empty dots of letter 'b' and letter 'd' reversals in the handwriting sheets improved their understanding and made their acquisition of the skill faster. A deaf student expressed:



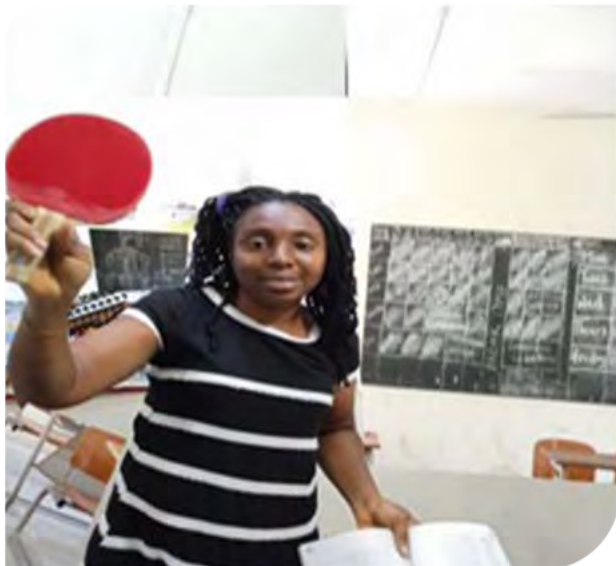
I like it when the teacher repeats instructions because this made me understand, and what I did not understand the first time, I would understand the second time. The teacher gave us more time for letter-naming during comprehension reading in the morning lesson.

What I learned and future actions

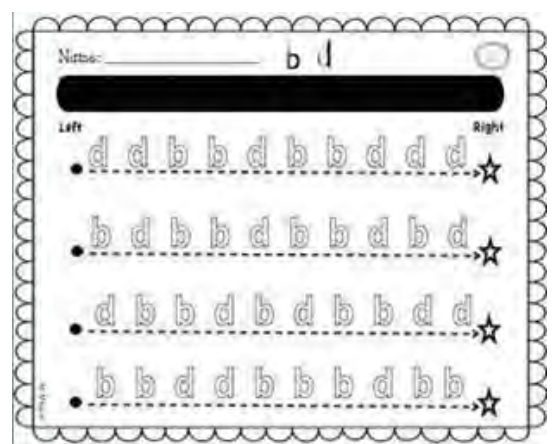
From the findings above, I feel that the interventions I applied in my exploratory action research project had a positive impact on my deaf students' mastery skills with letter-naming during their comprehension readings and also enhanced self-confidence among my students in sharing ideas with their peers in the lessons. The experience I have gathered during this exploratory action research will change my teaching as I learn from my teaching and my students. I hope to permanently move the letter-naming lessons to the morning time and also introduce more activities that involve peer tutoring.

Furthermore, I have established that my students require more visual cues and materials, and therefore I will emphasise the use of visual cues alongside verbal information. I will allocate extra time to engage students in class activities alongside giving repeated instructions.

Finally, I have realised that teachers can support one another in their classroom practice through processes like lesson observation, which can help to show what one is doing well or what needs to be corrected. By participating in this exploratory action research, I benefited a lot from the support of colleagues. One of my colleagues proposed that I should keep the exploratory action research plan I used as a reference document in the bank of lessons in the staffroom, to help other teachers. I am eager to encourage and support other teachers to try out exploratory action research. I truly feel like a champion and a teacher hero in the classroom.



Teacher using visual hand gesture cues



Handwriting sheets with empty dots of letter 'b' and letter 'd' reversals

ERRORS ON ESSAY TYPE WRITING

Exploratory questions

What do I expect from my students' performance in essay type writing?

What do my colleagues think about errors in essay type writing?

What is my students' view about errors in essay writing?

What are the errors being committed by my students in essay writing?

Solutions

1. Develop an essay outline that will provide guidelines on principles of good essay writing.
2. Practice demonstration (teacher modelling), writing frames and templates that provide great source for scaffolding instruction and building students confidence in essay writing.
3. Encourage peer feedback among learners to facilitate friendly feedback among peers as they organize their ideas.
4. Expose learners to grade level readings such as story books, magazines, journals and newspapers.

Identified Problems

1. My learners were making a lot of errors in their essay writing due to lack of skills on essay writing and poor reading habits (the errors being committed by my learners were majorly out of context points, grammatical errors and improper punctuations)
2. Learners felt 'anxious when asked to write an essay because they did not have the idea of what to put down.
3. A few with ideas on what to write had problems organizing the ideas into a coherent essay as they lacked skills on how to structure and organize the essay.
4. The learners lacked confidence in their essay writing, writing the way they talk which disregarded grammatical rules.

ACTION

The essay guidelines and practices towards good essay writing Practice demonstration (teacher modeling), writing frames and templates Grade level readings such as storybook, magazines, journals and newspapers

RESULTS

Good structuring of ideas into three main parts: introduction, body and conclusion Making essays without committing out of context and grammatical errors with wrong punctuations Development of confidence and boldness in creating self essays in a well structured manner. Organizing of ideas into a coherent essay



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Nigeria

Background

I work with the Old Students Association of Ijebu Igbo Girls' Grammar School, a high school located in Ijebu North Local Government Area of Ogun State in Nigeria. There, I teach the Junior Secondary School (JSS1–3) Christian religious studies; however, as a graduate and teacher of English education, I voluntarily teach the English course to the JSS3 learners, who are within the age range of 12–14 years old, in the afternoon. These students take three hours of English weekly. Most of these learners have a low socio-economic status, so they do not have the opportunity to attend private schools. The only contact they have with formal English instruction has been in public education. The institution itself depends on the state resources, which are limited, so the technology available to help the teaching process is limited, and the materials used are mostly provided by the teachers.

I chose to explore the errors being made in the students' essay writing. This is because I noticed that my learners were making a lot of mistakes in their essay writing, which I attributed to a lack of skills in essay writing and poor reading habits. The main errors being made by my learners were mostly out-of-context points, grammatical errors and improper punctuation. I also noticed that students felt anxious when asked to write an essay. I assumed that they did not have any idea of what to put down, while the few with ideas on what to write had problems organising the ideas into a coherent essay as they lacked skills on how to structure and organise the essay. Finally, I felt that the learners lacked confidence in their essay writing. As such, they write in the same way they talk, which disregards grammatical rules. However, these were anecdotal, and I needed to depend on empirical evidence to ascertain the cause of the errors to enable me to come up with a remedy.

Exploratory research questions

This research topic is of utmost importance to post-primary school learners as they need to have a good structure in one of the basic language skills of the learners (writing skills). The topic is a viable means towards developing good and effective writing skills through which the learners could have flawless write-ups. I needed to put into perspective the issues identified.

To this end, I designed four exploratory questions. They were:

1. **What do I expect from my learners' performance in essay-type writing?**
2. **What do my colleagues think about errors in essay-type writing?**
3. **What do my learners think about errors in essay writing?**
4. **What are the errors being committed by my learners in essay writing?**

In a bid to provide answers to the four questions, after three classroom observations, I decided to carry out a focus group interview and also collect data through my own and learners' reflective writing. There were two sets of focus group interviews. One was carried out with five colleagues, and another with 18 randomly selected learners constituting three groups (six learners in each group).

Findings

After analysis of the findings, I was able to deduce the reasons why my learners were committing errors in their essay-type writing. First, my learners lacked skills in essay writing, and poor reading habits made learners make a lot of errors, starting from out-of-context points, grammatical errors and improper use of punctuation marks. I also found out that some learners did not have an idea of what to put down, while the few with ideas on what to write had problems in structuring and organising the ideas into a coherent essay. Lastly, I was able to understand that my learners lacked confidence in writing. The-refore, they write in the same way they talk, which negates the grammatical rules.

Learners' reflective writing indicated that 25 of the learners, constituting 62.5 per cent, were anxious whenever they had to work on essay-type writing because they did not know what and how to write. Because of their anxiety, they tend to put down whatever comes to their brain. Responses from my colleagues identified the same issues in writing: poor structure, wrong spellings and jumbled-up write-ups. A key issue that came out of the focus group interview with colleagues was the inability to mark all the time due to large classes. They said it was 'difficult to provide timely and constant feedback on stu-dents' writing'. They also identified key errors in students' writing as relating to grammar, punctuation, context and direct translation from the first language to English.

Intervention

In order to proffer solutions to the problems identified through the exploratory questions, an action plan of six lessons was adopted. The actions included:

- **the development of an essay outline that provided learners with guidelines on the principles of good essay writing**
- **practice demonstrations (teacher modelling), writing frames and templates that provide a great source for scaffolding instruction and building students' confidence in essay writing**
- **encouraging peer feedback among learners to facilitate friendly feedback among peers as they organise their ideas, which would reduce pressure on marking by the teacher**
- **exposing learners to grade-level readings, such as storybooks, magazines, journals and newspapers.**

These actions were then implemented over four weeks. Peer observation and focus group interviews were adopted in a bid to evaluate the effects of the strategies included in the action plan. Two peer observations were carried out using an observation instrument for the observer, a colleague, during and after the intervention. Again, the observer who has been following up on the class since the exploratory stage initially wanted to know the end result of the exploratory challenges identified. He was instructed to focus his attention on the observable behaviour of the learners during and after the action plan.

For the focus group interview, the learners were asked about their insights regarding the action plan strategies. Nine learners, constituting 50 per cent of learners selected for focus group interviews during the exploratory stage, participated in the focus group session of evaluation. To get their opinion of the actions carried out, five questions were designed for the interview, and the questions focused on each of the actions implemented.

Results of the intervention

After the actions were carried out, I established that the essay guidelines and practices towards good essay writing helped the learners in structuring their ideas into three main parts – introduction, body and conclusion – which made a difference from how they used to write without paying attention to the three major parts. The observations revealed that aside from being able to identify the main parts of an essay, the learners wrote essays without committing out-of-context errors because they had been introduced to how to develop and build up ideas in essay-type writing.

The observations and the focus groups suggested that with the practice demonstration (teacher modelling), writing frames and templates, learners were able to develop self-confidence in creating their own essays in a guided and controlled manner. Also, learners were able to explore the writing frames and templates to develop the courage to present the ideas of what would be written in an oral format before their colleagues. A learner said: 'The demonstration helped me understand what is expected of me during the writing exercise, making it easy for me to organise the ideas in my essay.'

Through grade-level readings such as storybooks, magazines, journals and newspapers, learners were able to build up their ideas in a well-organised manner. Although learners still have issues with their vocabulary, it is still much better when compared with the previous experiences before the actions were taken. As such, focus groups and observations made it clear that the few learners with ideas on what to write, but who faced problems with organising the ideas into a coherent essay, and those without ideas all presented their ideas in a simple but well-structured and organised manner after the action was taken. Meanwhile, grammatical errors and incorrect punctuation are reduced to a minimal level.

When the learners were asked about their perspective of the action plan carried out, they responded that reading newspapers, storybooks and writing essays with other class activities within a short period of time appeared to be challenging at first, but they eventually enjoyed the process because of how it made their learning of good essay writing so simple to understand.

The learners added that the initial problem of getting scared whenever they had to write an essay became a thing of the past, as they already have in them the principles needed in making a meaningful essay. Moreover, a few of the learners said they had already developed the urge to put each of their ideas into writing.

Final reflections

The plan carried out made me realise that the poor performance of many learners in essay-type writing is not what constant essay activities could solve. It involves the identification and application of strategies that are helpful in bringing out the desired changes in the learners' essay performance.

To buttress the above, many teachers (of which I was formerly one) are of the opinion that the more the learners are given constant essays, the more they write well, with their errors being reduced. However, through the actions carried out, constant essay activities without problem identification and proper guidelines would only make the learners keep repeating the same errors the teacher hopes to eradicate.

Hence, constant essays can only improve learners' errors and skills when problems or factors affecting their essay well-being are first identified and leveraged by the teachers towards providing the needed solutions in aiding the learners' performance.

Based on the experience gained in this research, I personally discovered that it is expedient for me to stay updated as a teacher, without limiting my teaching activities to passing across information to learners within the four walls of the classroom alone, as that makes teachers static and not dynamic, without having their knowledge broadened. This research has therefore helped me to see the need for personal development. It has equally opened my eyes to teaching by solving educational challenges, as a result of which I would teach as a teacher-researcher and use research as a tool to enhance effective teaching.



Exploratory action research on difficulties in reading

Ibtisam Sabahelzain Ibrahim Gibreel
Country: Sudan





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Sudan

My name is Ibtisam Sabahelzain Ibrahim Gibreel from Sudan. I am an English teacher at Babiker Osman Secondary School for Girls, which is in Jubal Aulia Locality in Khartoum state. I have worked for the Federal Ministry of Education in the department of education monitoring and planning for five years now. I have been a teacher for three years. I work in a public institution dependent on federal resources and community support. I teach Grade 9 learners aged about 14 to 15 years old. My research was carried out to respond to students' difficulty in reading. I noticed that the students make a lot of mistakes in reading and answering questions of comprehension. I needed to understand the reason for this; thus, my exploration was on students' difficulties in reading. First, I had to establish clearly what the problem was.

In order to do this, I proposed the following exploratory questions:

1. **How do I feel about my students' inability to read?**
2. **What do I want to see happening with students' reading?**
3. **What do the students feel about their reading ability?**
4. **What do students think of the strategies I use in class to teach reading?**

To answer these questions, I decided to use a questionnaire, interviews and a reflective journal to record my perceptions about my students' inability to read. About 30 students out of a class population of 60 were given questionnaires, to answer questions about the main difficulties students have when reading and what they think about their reading skills. I also wanted to get my students' thoughts about the strategies I use to teach reading.

The results from the exploration indicated the following:

My students have difficulties in reading and feel that they need more support. They feel that they cannot read because English is difficult due to problems with grammar and vocabulary. They also feel that they had a poor background in English from the primary school level. Over a third (35.4 per cent) of the learners stop reading when they meet a new word; 54.7 per cent of the learners do not stop reading when they meet a new word but struggle to read the word; 35.5 per cent of the learners indicated that they were unable to connect ideas in the passage; 38.7 per cent of them can connect the ideas in the text; 38.7 per cent of the students lack concentration when reading; while 48.3 per cent indicated that they do not lack concentration while reading.

In terms of reading strategies, 51 per cent of the learners indicated that they were unable to use reading strategies to understand the text, while only 16.5 per cent of the learners are able to use reading strategies to understand the text.

The findings also revealed that learners enjoy reading stories in simpler language. From the reflective notes, I noted that the strategies currently in use to support reading were

not helping the students to read appropriately. The questionnaire data above clearly indicates that students vary in the difficulties that they face while reading. Some had difficulties with grammar, some had difficulties with unknown words, while many had problems with vocabulary and a few with compound words. These results were further confirmed by my own observations in my reflective journal. Further, students reported during the interview that they have lip-reading challenges of not being able to distinguish unfamiliar letters, that they are confused when recognising letters in comprehension readings that have words with letter 'b' and letter 'd'. Results further show that students had comprehension difficulties with the meaning of words and sentences, as well as an inability to connect ideas in a passage (data from interviews). Besides, they lack concentration during reading as discerned from their answers to comprehension questions.

Based on the above findings, I decided to create an action plan to address the issues identified. The action plan would be carried out in one month in ten lessons and was based on the data from the exploration.

The following would constitute the action plan:

Before a reading activity, I decided to use sign language to illustrate examples of naming letters from the English textbook and visual posters to aid my students in letter-naming. In addition, I decided to explore peer class activities, where deaf students work in pairs to sort out visual posters to correspond with letter-naming words during comprehension readings in the class. To further aid the reading, I decided to display letters written on sticky papers around the classroom more than to build up word recognition skills in letter-naming. To ensure that comprehension was achieved, I supported these actions by providing reading texts in simple language.

During reading, I encouraged silent reading and then loud reading with the students. I read texts repeatedly to encourage fluency and also pre-taught new words. Finally, I made a decision to provide more support to my students during reading activities because the exploration indicated that some learners stop reading when they meet new words, while some learners could not connect ideas in the text. Lastly, students were unable to use reading strategies to help them read. Generally, learners felt that they cannot read because English is difficult due to problems at primary school level and that reading strategies must be taught again to help them improve their reading. It is for this reason that I explored peer class activities where deaf students work in pairs to sort out visual posters to correspond with letter-naming words during comprehension readings in the class grammar and vocabulary. Before the reading activity, I used sign language to illustrate examples of naming letters from the English textbook and visual posters to aid my students in letter-naming.

The action plan was evaluated using focus group interviews. Learners were divided into six groups of five each. Two peer observations were also conducted at the beginning and at the end of the intervention period.

The results indicated that my students had become better at letter-naming and finding the meaning of new vocabulary. During the focus group interview, the majority of them said that their reading abilities improved. Few were unable to read, and they mention a few causes like that they think English is difficult and English is 'hard' and that their basic English learning in primary school was insufficient and not connected to the reading required now.

In the observations, the number of students with difficulties was reduced and there seemed to be an improvement in students' reading. In the focus group discussion, some students mentioned that they would read better in their mother language. Most of the students said that they like to read about popular and inspiring people, and some like reading local stories.

The observations also showed that my students became better at letter-naming and finding the meaning of new words. As a result of the action plan, learners seemed more confident. More than 60 per cent participated in the reading activity. There was a general improvement observed in students' reading. They were able to respond to prompts and give full answers during reading comprehension. Observations also noted the use of some correct forms of grammar, implying a better understanding of learned vocabulary. In the focus group interview, learners reported that they enjoyed pair work, but they need more tasks and homework to continue to improve.

Finally, I would like to say that I cannot wait to help other teachers and share this experience. I learned how to explore and use the exploration results to design an action plan. This is important for any classroom teacher wishing to improve his/her instruction. I sincerely appreciate the opportunity given to me by the British Council. I truly feel great about this work.



Supporting teachers teach writing in challenging contexts

Patrice Kané and Moussa Tangara

Country: Mali



Patrice Kané

is an English teacher and pedagogical adviser. He works for the Malian Ministry of Education in teaching at the Academy of Dioïla. He has been in the EFL teaching field since 2011 and has worked in the Mopti region and Koulikoro region. As an IATEFL SIG member, he has written articles for the GISIG. He is keen on bringing environmental issues into his classes as well as global issues



Moussa Tangara

is an English teacher and pedagogical adviser. He is responsible for more than 30 English teachers who are working in secondary schools. He has been working for the Malian Ministry of Education in teaching at the Academy of Dioïla since 2009. He has been delivering cascade training sessions to teachers face-to-face and remotely since 2019.

We chose to explore the difficulty of supporting teachers during Covid-19, as well as many other teachers who need support in rural schools so far.

In our context, as pedagogical advisers, our main job is to observe teachers in their classroom practice and then give them feedback on their practice at secondary school. The number of teachers we need to observe is large, over one hundred English teachers. Also, we are involved in observing other subjects' teachers (primary school teachers and French teachers, among others). The workplaces of these teachers are far from each other. Some of these teachers work downtown and others work in rural areas. In rural areas, the schools are a minimum of 5km from each other. Riding from school to school is very expensive. Consequently, the state cannot afford the expenses and cannot offer a regular mentoring and observation programme to all the teachers. Therefore, many teachers do not profit from the mentoring and observation programme as much as they could.

In addition to the factors above, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic negatively impacted the mentoring and observation programme. The schools were closed for some time and restricted measures were put in place. As a result, face-to-face mentoring was practically impossible in some schools.

To address these challenges, we decided to carry out the project of WhatsApp mentoring to support teachers to teach writing skills in their classrooms. This project is an experimental one, as it has never been tried in the Malian education context. It was not quantitative research but qualitative.

The exploration and methodology

The teachers we observed taught at secondary school. They taught students aged from 14 to 17, who were learning English as a foreign language. They had just three hours a week of English classes.

When observing the teachers in their classes, we were surprised by what we observed. First, teachers' lessons focused mainly on teaching reading and grammar. When it came to writing, they just gave students an essay-writing topic. They gave some questions to guide and stimulate ideas, and the tasks were given as homework. That was a very challenging situation for students as well as for their teachers. Most of the time students reproduced similar essays, or asked for help from friends and parents, to get good marks.

Second, teachers gave writing tasks for marks because that is what they thought they should do. They were upset at the fact that most of their students cheated to get good marks. Their students' writing skills were very poor since they could not structure their writing in a paragraph to express a clear idea.

From the situation described above, we came up with the following questions to guide our research:

1. How do teachers teach writing?
2. How can we support our teachers remotely to teach writing skills?
3. What ICT tools do teachers have access to?
4. How do their students respond to a writing task?

To explore this issue in more detail, we conducted a focus group and applied a questionnaire. We asked ten teachers from two different regions of Mali – Koulikoro and Sikasso – and the district of Bamako to provide a video and photos of their classroom practice when teaching writing skills. The purpose of that was to understand the problem in different teaching contexts.



We used WhatsApp to gather our data as many teachers had a strong knowledge of it and they had easy access to the internet, despite connection issues in some areas. We used WhatsApp to send participants a questionnaire.

We also had a group chat with some of them, and through the app teachers sent us their answers and their videos over the course of one month.

Findings

The data we collected showed the following.

First, teachers were not interested and motivated to teach writing skills (writing essays, writing stories or writing articles). The reason for this was that their students could not work on their own to produce good writing. Students had poor marks and teachers were disappointed about that.

Second, teachers did not have a specific approach and activities to teach writing. To the question How do you teach writing (essay, article, ...)?, these were the two most frequent answers: 'I give the topic to do as homework with some explanation' and 'I give a topic with some questions to stimulate ideas and students answer as homework.'

These are the findings for the questions asked:

Questions	Answers
1. Which writing tasks do you give your students? (Essay, email/ SMS, letter, poem, problem page, description)	I give essay-writing tasks. (60%) I give letter-writing tasks. (40%)
2. Where do your students work on their writing tasks?	They do them as homework. (100%)
3. How often do you teach writing? (Once a week, once a month, other)	I teach writing once a month. (90%) I teach writing once a week. (10%)
4. How often do you mark your students' writing tasks? (Always, often, sometimes, never)	I always mark them. (90%) I often mark them. (10%)
5. How successful are your writing lessons? (Always, often, sometimes, never)	They are sometimes successful. (90%) They are often successful. (10%)
6. How do your students feel when it comes to writing? (Nervous, fearful, engaged, demotivated)	They feel demotivated. (60%) They feel fearful. (20%) They feel nervous. (10%) They feel engaged. (10%)
7. What difficulties do you have when teaching writing skills?	I have a problem to engage students in writing. (90%) I know few engaging activities. (10%)

The findings showed that most of the teachers assign essay and letter-writing tasks to their learners. Most of the time their learners do not apply letter writing in their daily routine. The crucial problem was that teachers did not teach writing lessons in the classroom but asked students to do the tasks as homework. From the findings, 90 per cent of the participant teachers do not know writing approaches and writing activities to engage their learners. Moreover, 90 per cent of them believed that they should always mark learners' writing tasks. That led them to teach writing once a month.

The intervention

To answer the teachers' problems, we suggested they use the product approach and the process approach to writing and include in their lessons two writing activities which we will describe later in this section.

We suggested they use the product approach with low-level learners or beginners, and we recommended this approach as it is more creative. It also requires students' critical thinking.

The product approach

Procedure:

1. Give a model text and ask your students to read the text silently.
2. Students first read quickly to answer the gist questions you will ask.
3. You give another text type, not in order.
4. You focus on the organisation of the text (ask your students to match paragraphs to headings or put scrambled paragraphs in order).
5. You focus on some useful language features (linking words, formal language or grammar). You will ask your students to order the paragraphs to get a meaningful text.
6. Ask your students to brainstorm ideas and plan their own texts.
7. Ask your students to write the first draft.
8. Ask your students to compare with a different group/partner to edit the text for accuracy.
9. Ask them to write the final version.

The process approach

Procedure:

1. Ask your students to brainstorm ideas in groups/pairs.
2. Ask your students to write a first draft.
3. Ask your students to compare their draft with another group/partner. You monitor. Students can do this by focusing on the organisation of the text, use of paragraphs, organisation of paragraphs with topic sentences, e.g. This picture is talking about ..., supporting sentences and appropriate style (formal, semi-formal, informal). You also ask them to check word count (how many words you want them to achieve).
4. Ask your students to write a second draft.
5. Ask your students to compare with a different group/partner to edit the text for accuracy. Accuracy elements are grammar and conventional expression for text type – e.g. I'm writing to ..., Dear ..., if a letter, spelling and punctuation. You monitor to help as they do this and can highlight common areas on the board.
6. Ask your students to write the final version.

The writing activities we suggested as games were:

Problem page: This game consists of putting students in two groups. Group 1 writes a problem and group 2 replies by giving the solutions.

Letter/email-writing game: In this game, there are two groups. Group 1 writes the letter or the email, group 2 replies.

The results

When we observed the videos showing the teachers in action, we noticed a great change in the way teachers conducted a writing lesson, as well as in students' attitudes. We believed there were positive changes.

First, teachers were motivated and engaged to teach writing skills. They could effectively manage the product and process approaches, as well as the game activities. Since then, they have started to teach writing skills in their classroom, instead of leaving the development of writing as homework.

Second, we conducted a survey to evaluate the effectiveness of the approaches. Teachers reported that they were comfortable when teaching writing. Eighty per cent of them said they taught writing more frequently (once a week or twice a week). Moreover, they reported that their learners could write a well-structured paragraph. That is a significant improvement in the development of writing skills. According to the survey, 70 per cent of teachers said their writing lessons were successful and they were happy to have learned the process and product approaches. A participant said: 'I'm happy to have learned the process approach as my students developed their writing skills. Honestly, I had not been trained in this at teachers' training school.'

Lastly, from the video observations and photos, we could notice that learners were motivated and engaged. Teachers reported that their students liked the problem page and the letter game.

Lesson learned

From this exploratory action research, I learned that many teachers found writing skills very challenging, and their learners were not well trained in this area of language learning. We understood that when you provide good teaching methods to teachers, they can overcome most of the problems they encounter in the classroom. This makes them more comfortable and helps students to learn much more.

Conclusions

The research we carried out had a positive impact on both the teachers and their learners. The product and process approaches and the game activities helped teachers to address problems with teaching writing skills. We are convinced that exploratory action research is a powerful tool to enhance teachers' continuing professional development. It is also important to note that this research was very challenging for both the researchers and the participants, as it happened in the context of Covid-19. It was carried out remotely. Therefore, some teachers were not familiar with this, and other participants withdrew from the research project before the end of the term.

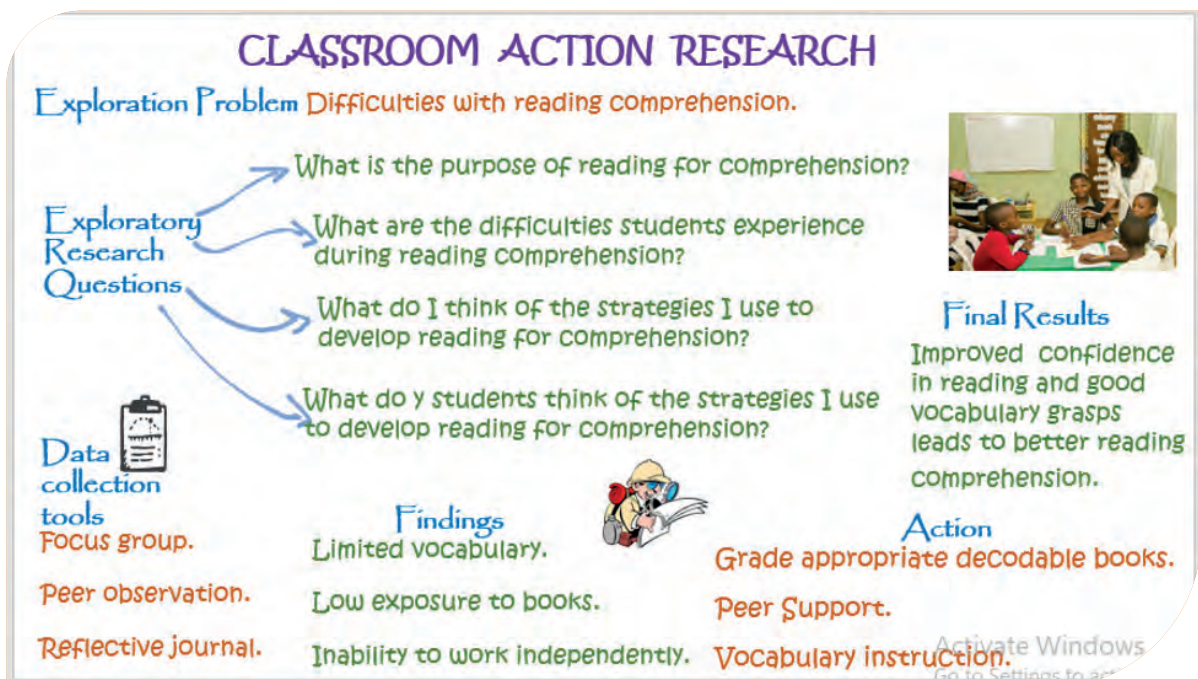
Although it was difficult, this research was innovative as nothing similar has been carried out at secondary schools in Mali before.



Students' difficulties with reading comprehension

Anita Nchat Kevin

Country: Nigeria





Anita Nchat Kevin

is a dyslexia practitioner with a minor in English and holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Education. Anita has 14 years of experience in preschool and key stage one teaching, working in private and public education systems in Kaduna, Nigeria

Nigeria

Research background

My name is Anita Nchat Kevin. I teach literacy at Amina Dyslexia Centre. This is an informal education provider for people who have dyslexia. It is located in Kaduna State, Nor-th-West Nigeria. The children I teach are aged 10 to 14 years from mid-income families living in urban areas.

This report documents a teacher-initiated, classroom-based exploratory action research, which explored the difficulties learners with dyslexia experience during reading for comprehension.

Aside from the fact that my learners experience dyslexia, I believe other factors were responsible for their inability to achieve reading for comprehension. So, I decided to use classroom action research to investigate my assumptions.

Research focus

I focused on exploring the root causes of my learners' difficulties with reading for comprehension to enable me to understand the difficulties they experience better. I wanted to understand how other factors aside from their neurological conditions affect the learners' ability to participate in reading for comprehension activities. This knowledge would enable me to design the right activities that would help my learners to effectively read and comprehend any text they come across.

To enable me to have a perspective on the issue, I explored it using the following questions:

- 1. What is the purpose of reading for comprehension for my learners?**
- 2. What are the difficulties the students experience during reading for comprehension?**
- 3. What do I think of the strategies I use to develop reading for comprehension?**
- 4. What do my students think of the strategies I use to develop reading for comprehension?**

To answer these questions, I collected data through a focus group interview with all eight learners in my classroom. I also recorded my perceptions about the questions in a reflective journal. The journal enabled me to develop a critical eye on troubleshooting the issue of poor reading for comprehension among my learners, while the focus group interview allowed me to have my learners' perceptions of the questions.

Research findings

Through the focus group interview, I established that two of my learners think that the purpose of reading for comprehension is to help them develop the necessary skills to become good readers. The others said that reading for comprehension helps them understand the meaning of texts.

Also, all eight learners said that they find it difficult to pronounce some words in the text and, because of this, they are unable to make out the meaning of the text. A few of my learners also said that they had difficulty knowing the meaning of a lot of words in the text, which makes reading uninteresting and comprehension difficult.

In my reflective journal, I noted that my learners do not have a good grasp of the structure of a story, which might hinder their ability to understand the text they read. Also, my learners have difficulty with reading for comprehension because they do not have a good foundation in English vocabulary. I noted that most of the strategies I use in developing reading comprehension are not very effective. Some of my learners have challenges with various strategies, like circle time, because time management is a problem and the language of the text used is too advanced. The text we use for circle time is Aesop's Fables.

I also noted that the strategies I use to develop reading for comprehension work differently for different learners. Learners do not have the skills to work independently as required by most of these strategies. During the focus group interview, some of my learners said they prefer hearing explanations from fellow students and using strategies that enable them to work with others. All the learners said they do not know a lot of words; therefore, they do not like the strategies that make them work alone.

In summary, my learners were having difficulty with reading for comprehension due to a weakness in their English language vocabulary, which affects their ability to participate in activities and comprehend text. They also experience difficulties because the strategies I use involve them working independently. They prefer more learner-centred methods that allow them to work with others.

Action plan

Based on these findings, I designed an action plan that involves seven steps to help remedy the situation. This action plan was carried out for three weeks over nine lessons in a class of eight learners.

In the first step, I provided books at their reading level. In order to find the right books for the class, I used a reading-age assessment to establish an average reading age for my eight students.

The second step in the action plan was to briefly revise spelling rules, so as to ensure that learners remember to use these rules while reading. The spelling rules are written as short sentences for practice. An example of the spelling rules I revised with my learners during reading for comprehension can be seen in the image.

Introduce tricky words 'any, pretty, buy, many, very'

Short sentences

I am very pretty.

I had a yellow boat.

There are red bananas and green mangoes in the basket.

Mona said yuck! When he saw the slug.

We saw a flock of yak on the hill.

Dad will cook yams for the picnic.

Yes! I want to run to Gran.

Do not yell at the flamingoes.

Are we at the camp yet?

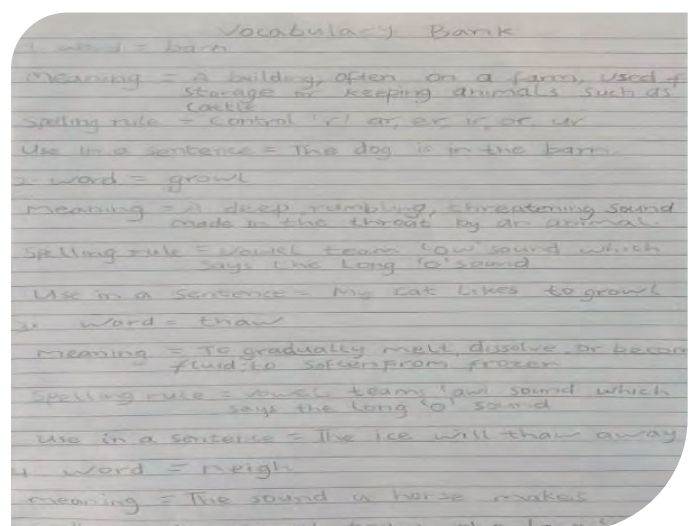
The yams are big.

Sample short sentences used in class

The third step was 'read-aloud', where one learner volunteers to read for the entire class while the other learners read silently from individual books. The read-aloud sessions were to encourage learners to process text while listening. These read-aloud activities help both the reader and other learners to build correct word pronunciation, rhythm and correct usage of words. It also builds their confidence while reading.

In addition to the read-aloud activity, I used pair reading. I tried a direct explanation of what is read as learners work in pairs, during pair reading. This provided learners with feedback on correct word pronunciation, rhythm and correct usage of words. It also builds their confidence while reading. The pair reading facilitated peer-assisted learning.

After the read-aloud or pair-reading session, the fourth step was vocabulary instruction to enable my learners to understand the new words they had identified while the volunteer was reading the text. 'New words' here means words that they have not come across in previous texts, words that do not follow the spelling rules that they have been taught previously or words whose meaning is not easily deduced from the context of the text. We developed a vocabulary bank where we deposit these words, their meaning and their usage. These words would then be used to make sentences at different times in the classroom. A sample vocabulary bank is shown below.



Sample personal dictionary developed from texts read

The next step is a discussion about the context of the text to help learners process the storyline and the story structure. After the discussion, I encouraged learners to reread the text to understand both the content and context of the text. Finally, I ask learners questions from the text to assess their comprehension.

To monitor the effect of the action plan, I used a reflective journal and peer observation. A colleague of mine took peer-observation notes to offer feedback on the steps and strategies I used during all nine lessons I implemented in the action plan. The reflective journal enabled me to explore my own perceptions of the steps and strategies of the action plan.

Results

In my reflective journal, I noted that providing text that is age-appropriate for learners improved vocabulary acquisition and usage. My learners were able to use the vocabulary they learned from reading for comprehension in conversations. Reviewing spelling rules before engaging in reading helped learners decode the words they come across. This action helped in developing reading fluency.

My action plan provided learners with the opportunity to read the text twice. When my learners read a text the first time, and they did not understand it, they read the text a second time after we had discussed the storyline and the story structure. The observations revealed that this action significantly improved my learners' reading for comprehension and enabled them to answer most of the questions I asked them about the text they read.

During the peer observation, my colleagues observed that my learners were ready to engage in reading aloud, not minding mistakes because they knew that they would receive immediate feedback to correct the mistakes. My observer also noted that age-appropriate text was very useful in building vocabulary.

My observer noted that the vocabulary instruction I gave as part of the action plan made reading more fluent and comprehensive for my learners. The peer-observer noted that the peer-reading step and the spelling rules review built my learners' confidence to read and to build vocabulary which makes comprehension easier. My colleagues also observed that reading the text twice offered learners an opportunity to assimilate the text and digest it effectively, which has also improved their comprehension skills.

Final reflection

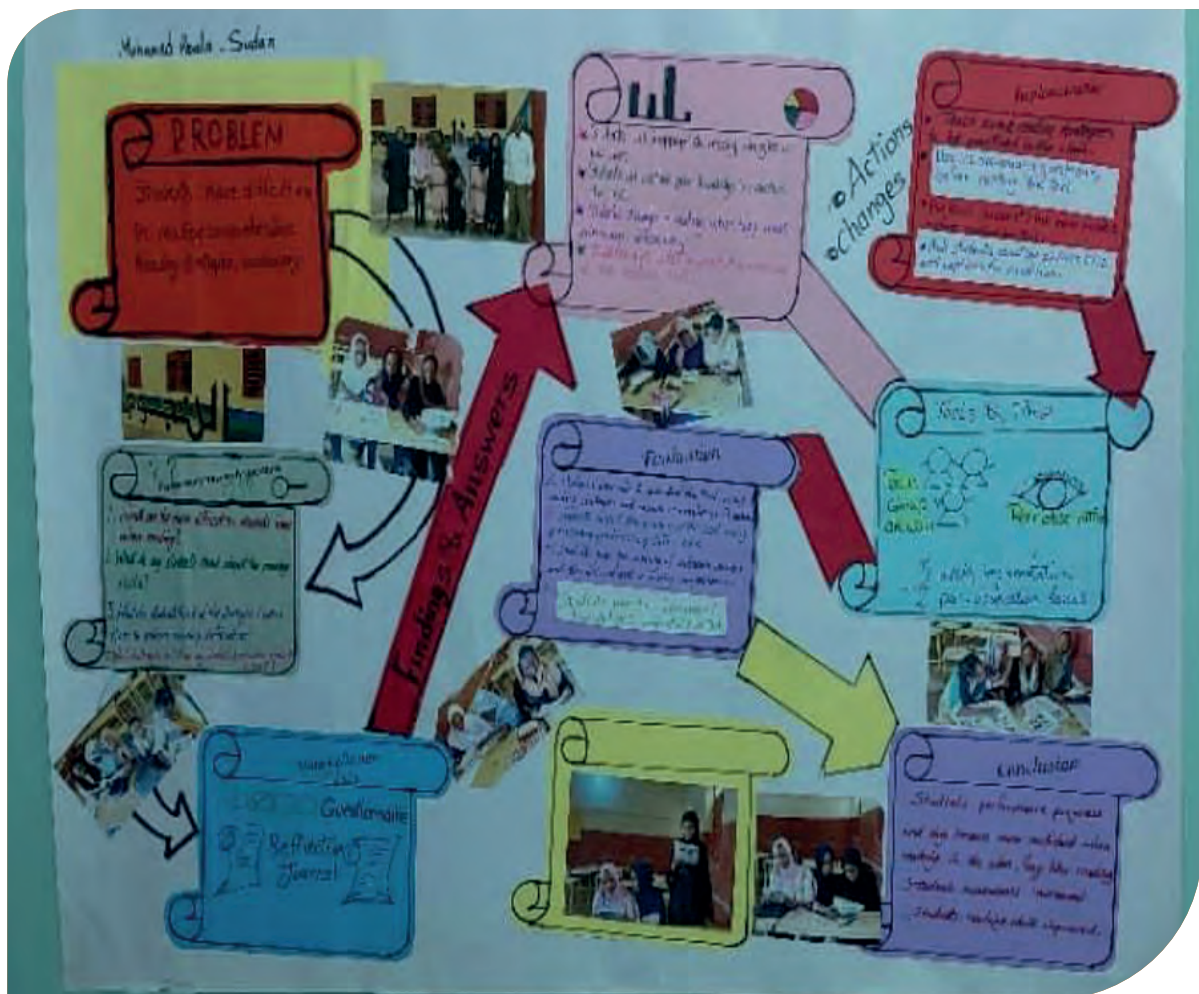
As a general rule, I will employ classroom exploratory action research to decipher the challenges I face in my classroom and I will use the findings to improve the learning outcomes of my students. This exploratory action research has helped me to see the value of involving my students in the process of helping them overcome their learning difficulties.



Exploratory action research on students' reading difficulties

Mohamed Abdalla Ibrahim

Country: Sudan





Mohamed Abdalla Ibrahim

is an English teacher and trainer with a diploma in teaching English as a foreign language and holds a master's degree in English language teaching. He has participated in many courses in teaching methodology for intermediate and young learners. Also, he has more than 30 years of teaching experience in teaching English to young learners. Mohamed has experience in teacher training. In addition to that, he works in private schools in Sudan, Northern Kordofan State in Elobeid

Sudan

I work in the In-Services Training Institute as a trainer and teacher in Elnojoom Intermediate School for Girls situated in Sudan's Northern Kordofan State, Elobeid. I teach Grade 1 five lessons per week. I have noticed that most of the students in Grade 1 have problems in reading comprehension, especially when reading a text containing new vocabulary. Most of the students fail to predict the meaning of the new words. They also have problems answering comprehension questions during class. In a bid to understand this problem, I carried out this exploratory action research (EAR) in order to find out what the problem really was.

I chose this EAR to find out some of the comprehension difficulties that they face, as well as their perceptions of reading in the class and their feelings about the reading strategies they use in the class. I chose this topic because reading comprehension is an important skill that enables students to increase their understanding of a text read. It also helps learners learn new information and interact with the text. Reading comprehension is also an important skill in understanding the English language.

To help me explore the problem, I came up with the following questions:

- 1. What are the main reading difficulties my students face when reading?**
- 2. What do the students think about reading skills?**
- 3. What do the students think of the strategies I use during class to address reading difficulties?**
- 4. What challenges do students have when reading in class?**

To find answers to these questions, I used two tools: questionnaires and reflective journals. The reflective journal was important to help me explore my perceptions of the issue at hand. Furthermore, I used a reflective journal to record the actions and the events that happened and those that happened in the class during reading activities. I documented what was happening in the class to make use of it in providing responses to some of the exploratory questions. I chose the questionnaire because it enabled me to receive massive amounts of information from the learners in a short period of time in addition to its practicability. Thirty-one students participated in giving responses. The questionnaire included about five different questions addressing the exploratory aspects and focusing on students' perceptions of what reading comprehension difficulties they face. The questionnaire was carried out in Arabic to make the students understand it without any help and feel confident and free to participate in responding.

In terms of the main difficulties my students face when reading, the results of the exploration indicated that 24 out of the 31 students felt a willingness and motivation to read in the class. Ten of the students expressed that they did not use the title, captions, pictures or other contextual clues when reading a text, whereas six of the students did not tap on prior knowledge to understand the text. Nineteen of the learners did not use their prior knowledge to predict the text.

Almost all the learners determined the importance of a text and rephrased them. Eleven learners indicated that they could not decode the meaning of the new words, while 17 of the learners indicated that they lacked enough prior knowledge of the text.

In terms of what the students thought about reading skills, the results showed that the students stopped reading when they met new words. By this, they could not connect ideas in the text and so lacked concentration while reading. In terms of students' thoughts about the strategies used in the class, the results indicated that the majority of the learners thought that the strategies used in addressing reading were very good. I explored further through a reflective journal, and this indicated that the strategies were presented in a way that enabled the students to use them to read and understand the text. In the questionnaire, a few of them (9) said the strategies supported them in understanding the text. Generally, the results indicated that students had a challenge in interpreting the strategies used to predict meaning. They also had problems with decoding the meaning of new words, without which they lack sufficient prior knowledge to make sense of the text. Some had a problem with understanding vocabulary altogether. Whereas some learners face challenges in reading when they meet new words, others cannot connect to the ideas of the text. They also had a problem in using these strategies to help them read.

Based on these findings, I decided to create an action plan to address some of the issues identified. The action plan included teaching reading strategies and techniques to develop reading comprehension and was carried out for almost three weeks. It included the following.

1. Teaching some reading strategies, like teaching students how to use context clues to determine the meaning of unknown words in addition to:

- discussing or activating prior knowledge
- developing questions while reading
- connecting what they are reading to another text, something they have seen or something they have experienced
- visualising or picturing what they are reading
- making predictions about what will come next in the text
- looking back for keywords and rereading in order to clarify or answer questions.

2. Writing and designing three pre-reading questions for the students to read before reading the texts. This would help them read with a focus.

3. Presenting and modelling the new vocabulary before reading the text and asking them to highlight or underline the difficult ones. This would increase understanding and avoid them stopping at new words.

5. Designing questions about the use of the pictures and the title to help the students predict the meaning of the text, using their knowledge.

The action plan took three weeks to implement.

To evaluate the effect of the action plan, I used a focus group interview in addition to a peer observation carried out by one of my colleagues. The observer would focus on students' actions as well as the impact of various actions implemented – using pre-reading questions before reading, teaching the vocabulary before practising the reading activity, making use of the pictures, captions and title, and the prior knowledge to predict the meaning of the text. The students were asked about their insights regarding the action plan strategies. A total of five students participated in the focus group interview after the implementation. To gain the students' opinions regarding the action plan carried out, questions sought to get more information about the impact of the action plan. The design of the questions was guided by the results from the exploratory phase of this research.

The analysis of the data obtained established that the students were able to understand the text and answer the questions more easily compared to previously, according to the results of the action plan and the performance of the students. In the focus group, students said they were happy to use the strategies that allowed them to comprehend the content better. They indicated that they looked forward to reading after learning the meaning of new vocabulary. One student said: 'This increased my understanding of what I was reading'. They also suggested that by pre-reading the questions, their curiosity was increased and they were eager to know the answers to the questions. In the observation, my colleague noticed that they seemed interested in the material read and they were consistently interested in new things. By the end of the three weeks, students asked me to give them more time to experiment and learn more. Furthermore, some of the students began to ask many questions about the texts. This means that they were engaging more with the texts. This made them read with a focus on increasing their comprehension.

Additionally, the observations revealed that students made use of the pre-reading questions, so they began to use skimming and scanning skills to answer the comprehension questions. By practising skimming, they understood what the text was about. The pre-reading knowledge helped them to understand the text. The students were able to understand the meaning of the new vocabulary much more easily by speculating their meaning from the context and they were able to ask about unknown words. The pre-teaching of new vocabulary made the students get the meaning from the context, they were able to complete the vocabulary activities and so they felt more confident in reading. The previewing vocabulary and pre-reading strategies were also very advantageous because they provided the students with knowledge that they used during reading. This was clearly seen in answering the comprehension questions. The observations suggested that students seemed to perform better in reading than before.

Moreover, students were able to predict the meaning of the texts using the pictures, the captions, the title and their prior knowledge by asking questions about the pictures and titles of the text and by talking about them. I guided them by supporting them with clues. This activated the students' prior knowledge before reading. I ensured that students benefited from these actions and were able to connect to the new information, and this helped to support their comprehension. The pre-reading activities enabled them to predict the meaning of the vocabulary.

Through the actions I carried out, I realised that teaching reading strategies provided students with the tools needed to become aware of their thinking and provide confidence in their ability to think and analyse the text. Good readers constantly connect their back-ground knowledge to the new knowledge they encounter in a text. They relate the written word to their previous experiences to make reading more personal, which helps them to both understand and remember what they have read. Modelling or presenting the new vocabulary facilitates reading and motivates students to practise it without difficulties. It also reduces the students' anxiety which may also lead to boredom.

Before reading, we should encourage the use of a prediction strategy to involve the ability of readers to get meanings from a text through making informed predictions. We should help students through predictions by connecting their existing knowledge to new information from a text, to get meaning from what they read. Students must use the title of a text to trigger memories of texts with similar content. I led the students to use some clues from the text and their own experiences or knowledge that are relevant to the text to predict. I also encouraged them to use the title or the pictures and guess what the text will be about so that they connect to the text.

I would like to say that I feel confident in using my results in teaching reading. I can also now help other teachers to use EAR to solve students' problems anywhere. I found out that if teachers systematically investigate learning problems, they will solve them.

Finally, I would like to thank the British Council for the unique opportunity. I feel like a hero because I helped my students solve their problems and made them feel happy.



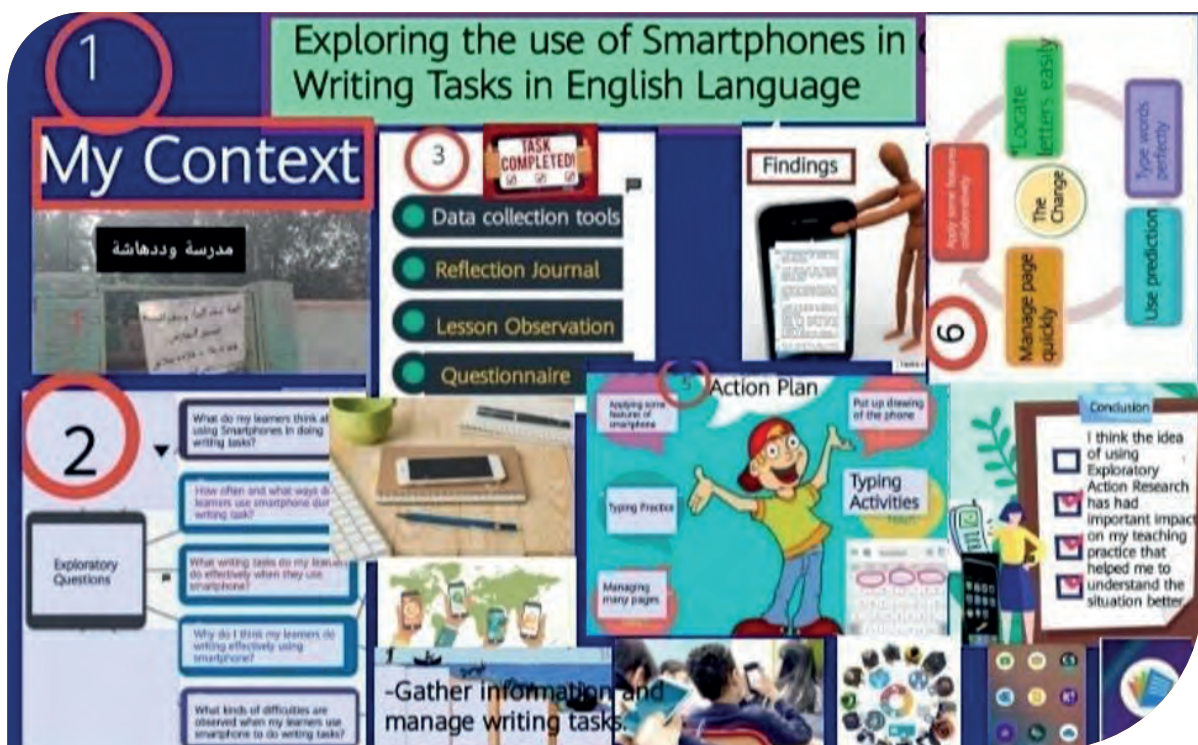
Students in class



Exploring the use of smartphones for writing tasks in the English classroom

Sufian Mabarak

Country: Sudan





Sufian Mabarook

is a teacher of English language and literature at secondary school level. He is also an English for specific purpose (ESP) and English for general purpose (EGP) instructor at universities in Sudan. Sufian holds a master's degree in applied linguistics in English language teaching and a certificate of Fulbright Teaching Excellence and Achievement from Massachusetts University in the USA. Sufian has more than 16 years of teaching experience.

Sudan

Teaching context

I teach in Wad-Dahasha public secondary school in Khartoum, Sudan. There I teach English writing courses to Grade 9 students who are between 16 and 18 years old. The students take two hours of writing skills weekly. Most of these students have problems with vocabulary, content and knowledge of topics that the teacher expects them to write about. They do not have resources to use when they want to do writing tasks, and even the technology to help them is limited. The students that participated in this exploratory action research (EAR) project are in Grade 9. In my country, students are mostly taught reading skills, whereas the other three skills are neglected, and so they are very weak in writing skills. This caused me to think of applying smartphones in teaching writing skills to enable my students to undertake their written tasks in an interesting and easy way.

My research focus

I focused my EAR on the use of smartphones when doing writing tasks in English. I had noticed that, in my class, all students had smartphones which they brought with them to school, but which they did not use to benefit their learning. I also noticed that all students got excited when they were required to use their smartphones to check up on anything during the English lessons. Therefore, I thought of exploring the use of smartphones when doing writing tasks.

The relevance of the topic

As I explained before, I decided to focus my research on the use of smartphones in writing tasks because I think smartphones can help students to check vocabulary, get information, draft, take notes and send emails, and since students are in this new level, I thought this was a good chance to help them apply smartphones for English writing tasks. In the 21st century, digital skills have become very important in the world, and since this generation is growing up with technology, they need a learning environment that supports this. Additionally, Covid-19 changed the way of teaching and learning from face-to-face to virtual engagements, so the smartphone can help in learning and especially writing. I think using the smartphone will be useful not only in doing writing tasks in English but also in mathematics, assignments and other learning activities at school.

However, I needed to explore this situation first, and to do that I asked myself the following questions:

1. **What do my learners think about using their smartphones when doing writing tasks in the English language?**
2. **How often and in what ways do my learners use smartphones during writing tasks?**
3. **What writing tasks do my learners do effectively using smartphones?**
4. **Why do I think my learners do writing tasks effectively using smartphones?**
5. **What kinds of difficulties are observed when my learners use smartphones in writing tasks?**

Methods used to collect initial data

To answer these questions, I decided to collect data using a questionnaire, lesson observations and a reflective journal. I used a questionnaire to find out students' thoughts for Questions 1 and 2, which consisted of five questions for each, and I also used a Likert scale. Regarding the lesson observations, a colleague of mine carried out one lesson observation in my classroom because I wanted to observe students using their smartphones freely. During the lesson observation, my colleague collected information to answer six questions that were designed to address the exploratory questions and focused on the writing tasks that my students were carrying out with their smartphones. Finally, I wrote in my reflective journal, keeping notes of my observations of my students while they used smartphones.

My findings

After analysing the data, I was surprised at what it showed me. First, (for Question 1) I found out that my learners used their smartphones to gather information and manage writing tasks collaboratively. Second, most learners used their smartphones during tasks to review vocabulary, access the internet, take notes, and draft and check their writing (Question 2). They liked using the online dictionary to retrieve vocabulary. One of my students said that 'writing became very easy when I used the soft dictionary in (sic) the smartphone.' By this, they meant vocabulary was the problem for them and now they had a solution for it. I also discovered that (Question 3) the writing tasks where my learners used smartphones more effectively were writing short paragraphs, blogs, emails and short messages on Snapchat. My colleague observed that my students carried out writing tasks effectively when they used their phones because I provided them with guidelines before a task. Additionally, one of the learners said, 'I loved applying the smartphone to do writing tasks because it allowed me to collaborate with my colleagues.' However, I also observed less positive aspects of this, since some learners were distracted by other unrelated postings on the phone and lost focus on writing and managing pages, especially when there were too many writing tasks to do. Some learners also had challenges applying some features of the smartphone, while others had difficulties locating the alphabet on the keypad to enable them to type easily (Question 5).

In summary, what I found out was that although my learners could use the smartphones to gather information and collaborate on writing tasks, they also had problems locating letters of the alphabet, posting using their smartphones, controlling pages and applying some features of the smartphone. This led me to develop an action plan in order to find solutions to these problems.

The intervention/action plan

With this information, I decided to make some changes. Before doing any activity, I taught my students some strategies for using smartphones. I taught this for six lessons over a period of three weeks. I put up a drawing of the phone to enable students to learn how to locate letters of the alphabet on the keypad. Then I supported them in their typing challenges by giving them more practice in typing on the phone.

I also taught them how to manage many pages of a writing task and I supported individual learners who had challenges applying some features of the smartphone.

Evaluation methods

To evaluate the effects of the lessons and strategies applied in the action plan, I used focus group discussion and peer observation. Two peer observations were carried out using an observation instrument for the observer. Again, the observer was instructed to focus his attention on the observable reactions of my students while using the smartphones in the class. During the focus group, the students were asked about their views regarding the action plan strategies and lessons. Ten students participated in the focus group discussions.

Findings

After analysing the data obtained, this is what I found.

My learners were able to locate letters on the phone in a controlled practice task. My colleague observed that this happened after several practice sessions using the prediction game which I developed to help students find letters of the alphabet. In the beginning, the students missed the letters, but gradually they were able to locate them and type short texts. During the focus group, the students were asked about their views on using smartphones in doing writing tasks. One learner said, 'I think the idea of practising more lessons helped me to find the letters easily.' Moreover, my colleague observed that my learners were able to manage pages quickly and effectively without a lot of struggle. Also, they were able to apply some features to their phones collaboratively and effectively.

The main effect of using their smartphones when doing writing tasks was growth in the students' confidence and ease of locating letters, writing emails, typing, managing pages and applying some features of the smartphone. One of the students said:



I now feel good when I do writing tasks using the smartphone. Using the smartphone is useful because I can now do writing tasks in English and I have confidence that I can send emails not only to my classmates but also to my family.

Some features of smartphones also helped the students to gather information, retrieve vocabulary and do peer feedback, thus achieving writing tasks more effectively. A student mentioned: 'I love these features because we were able to gather information when we did writing tasks collaboratively.'

Additionally, one student said: 'The prediction game was a good chance to improve our locating and typing letters.' My colleague who did classroom observation noticed that students applied their smartphones in the class to post, gather information and draft collaboratively and in a motivational way. This means that learners had improved and extended the way they applied smartphones to enhance their writing skills.

The actions I carried out in the lessons, like having more practice lessons, using letter location games and dividing students into groups before applying phones, were very good as they enhanced understanding. By working collaboratively, students improved and were enriched, as opposed to just asking them to use smartphones to do their writing tasks.

My learning and future actions

In conclusion, I feel satisfied with the results as they emerged from my learners' experiences. Learners also bonded because they were given the chance. I need to encourage my students to use smartphones in doing tasks, rather than forbidding their use, and give it a purpose in students' collaborative work. What I would like to say is that I will collaborate with my colleagues in my teaching and share my ideas with them, because EAR taught me that I should not depend on my own thoughts and perception only. I can also listen and learn from others, who include my colleagues and learners.

Finally, I would like to say that using exploratory action has impacted my teaching and helped me to understand the situation better because, without this research, I could not have understood how to apply smartphones in an informed way in my teaching. EAR helped me with problem-solving skills in my teaching that supported me with many teaching ideas, which made me change my thoughts towards teaching in a modern way. Also, I have learned from EAR that 'one hand can't clap, and when we use our other hand, then we do better.' I like the idea of mentoring and collaboration in teaching and learning.



Creating motivation for reading recommended literary texts by teachers-in-training

Sarah Balogun

Country: Nigeria





Sarah Balogun

is a teacher-trainer who majors in English language and literature. Sarah holds a master's degree in the English language and a National Certificate in Education in English and social studies. She has more than 12 years of experience as a teacher in secondary schools (private sector) and 11 years training teachers-to-be in tertiary institutions.

Nigeria

My context

I work in the Department of English, School of Secondary Education (Languages), Federal College of Education, Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria. It is a teacher-training institution where teachers-to-be get their minimum teaching certificates before they can become qualified teachers. I teach English and literature courses to Year 1 to Year 3 students. The students used for this research are 50 Year 2 (NCE II) students studying English language as a single major, who are between the ages of 18 and 20 years. Most of these students attend public secondary schools (high school), are not really exposed to the use of technology and are not fluent in the English language. They are mostly from mid-low socio-economic backgrounds, and the majority of them are from homes with uneducated parents, hence do not have encouragement to study at home.

My research focus

I chose to explore the students' lack of motivation and interest in reading recommended literary texts. As English language students, they are expected to take literature courses that demand the reading of literary texts in all genres (drama, prose and poetry). Be that as it may, these students do not like to read the texts that are recommended. They would rather fail their courses than read the texts.

I decided to tackle this problem by finding out the immediate and remote causes of their lack of interest and to find out if this is caused by the teachers' methods of instruction or if the recommended books were to blame.

This topic is very relevant to my teaching because it is such a herculean task teaching a literary text to a group of students who have not read the text you are talking about. They just cannot grasp what you are explaining. They cannot follow your line of thought as well as the discourse. It is a very relevant topic to explore for my students' learning because, every semester, they have courses that require them to read recommended literary texts. Besides this the curriculum demands that, as a language and literature teacher, I teach courses that warrant the reading of literary texts. Therefore, finding a solution to the lingering problem of not reading recommended texts is not just beneficial to the students alone, it is also of benefit to me as well.

To explore this problem, I used four questions:

1. **What do my students think about reading recommended literary texts?**
2. **What kinds of texts are recommended for literary courses?**
3. **How do my colleagues teach literary-based courses that warrant recommended texts?**
4. **What are the benefits of reading recommended literary texts for my students?**

To collect my initial data, I used a reflective journal, focus group and questionnaire. A personal reflective journal helped me collect my thoughts. I wrote down all my thoughts concerning this problem and the motivation for me to continue with the research and see it to the end. The focus group comprised all the teachers teaching literature-based courses in the department. We scheduled three times a week to meet to discuss ways in which we can motivate our learners to develop an interest in reading literary texts. A questionnaire was given to the students to elicit answers about their thoughts on the literary texts recommended for them.

My exploration findings

After the collection of the data, I found that my students know the importance of reading recommended texts. However, they feel that the texts were boring, they are stressed from their schoolwork and so do not have the time to read and they also feel that some of the texts are complex to understand and the language used is complex. They also feel that the texts recommended are sometimes too bulky and focus on issues that are not contemporary, like romance and thrillers. This is evident from the responses in the questionnaire, where 20 per cent (n=10 out of 50) of the learners felt that the recommended texts are too complex and archaic, 12.5 per cent (n=6) felt that the texts were imposed on them and that puts them off reading, another 12.5 per cent also felt that the texts are boring, five students were of the opinion that the recommended texts are often too bulky, three students thought that reading these texts is time-wasting, while two out of 50 felt that the texts are stressful to read.

The students outlined various ways that they benefit from reading recommended literary texts. Almost half (45 per cent; 23 out of 50) believed that reading recommended literary texts improves vocabulary, another 23 also thought that reading recommended texts impacts their overall knowledge and education, and 30 per cent (n=15) of learners thought that reading these texts opens their eyes to the cultures of people around the world. Twelve students believed that reading recommended texts improves language usage, another 12 also felt that reading these texts improved reading and writing skills, six believed that recommended texts improve critical thinking, five felt that reading texts boosts memory, while three were of the opinion that it improves imagination and creativity, and another three out of 50 felt that it helps them with conflict resolution.

My intervention

Considering the findings above, that they felt they had no time after the stress of other lectures, that the language used in the texts is complex and that the storylines in the text are not contemporary, I decided to involve them in activities that would turn these negativities around. Hence, I came up with an intervention that included the following activities to help my learners develop an interest in reading recommended texts. The activities were:

- 1. reading aloud**
- 2. group reading**
- 3. role play.**



For reading aloud, I selected a poem ('The Solitary Reaper' by William Wordsworth) and assigned a few students to read it aloud in the class while others followed. I thereafter asked the class to discuss the theme, the tone, the rhyming scheme and the literary devices they could find in the poem.

For group reading, the class was divided into groups of five students, and each group of students was assigned to read a chapter from a prose (Lord of the Flies by William Golding). The students were then asked to discuss the thematic focus of the text, the plot structure, the narrative technique, as well as the characterisation of the text.

For role play, a drama text (Great Expectations by Charles Dickens) was also given to the students. Students were asked to volunteer to play each character. In order to collect evidence to evaluate the effects of my intervention, I used the following tools:

- A. questionnaire**
- B. peer observation**
- C. reflective notes.**

Questionnaires were given to the students to ascertain if they felt any impact from the actions/intervention carried out. A colleague was invited to participate in all the lessons – six in total – used for the intervention as a third eye for validating the intervention. I also kept a journal of what I thought about each of the lessons used for the intervention.

My results

My first finding is that the students were able to read aloud the poem assigned to them with meaning, taking notes of the rhymes and rhythm and identifying the literary devices there. They were also able to identify the differences between the language of regular

essays and poetic language. One of the students said, 'I have always hated reading poetry. I never seem to understand it. But these classes have opened my eyes to the beauty of poetry. I think I can now read and analyse any poem that comes my way!' This goes to show that the intervention worked because before now, the students were simply given a list of literary texts to buy and read, and the majority of them neither bought nor read them, hence the mass failure in literature courses.

I also found that the students enjoyed reading together and discussing the texts in class. They were able to answer questions about, for example, the narrative technique used by the author, the thematic preoccupation of the text, the type of plot and the characterisation. These are questions that are usually very difficult for them to attempt. Hence, a good number of the class failed Year 1 first and second semester's literature exams.

The discussions were no longer one-sided (the teacher alone doing all the talking). The students all had something to say based on what they had read and were actually eager to contribute to the class discussion. Analysing data from the questionnaires given to them, 70 per cent (35) of the students agreed that group reading helped them a great deal in completing the portions assigned to them. Eleven of the students said that group reading reignited their interests in reading literary texts, while nine promised to continue group reading even after this semester. A student said, 'I am a very conservative person in the class, but this group reading has made me social, I can now relate with my classmates without the inferiority complex.'

Again, I found that the students who were assigned to play the role of the characters in the drama text were delighted to be temporary actors, and they were absolutely amazed at how interesting the texts were that they initially felt were boring.

They were able to memorise the parts assigned to them and carried out the actions on the stage. Those who were not acting formed the audience and the critics, and they were able to point out the areas of strengths and weaknesses in the play by their classmates. It was fun for all. In filling out their questionnaires, 62 per cent (31) of the students said they have come to love drama texts as a result of the implementation of the action plan; 19 are willing to try it out in the subsequent semesters if they are given drama texts to read again.

My learning

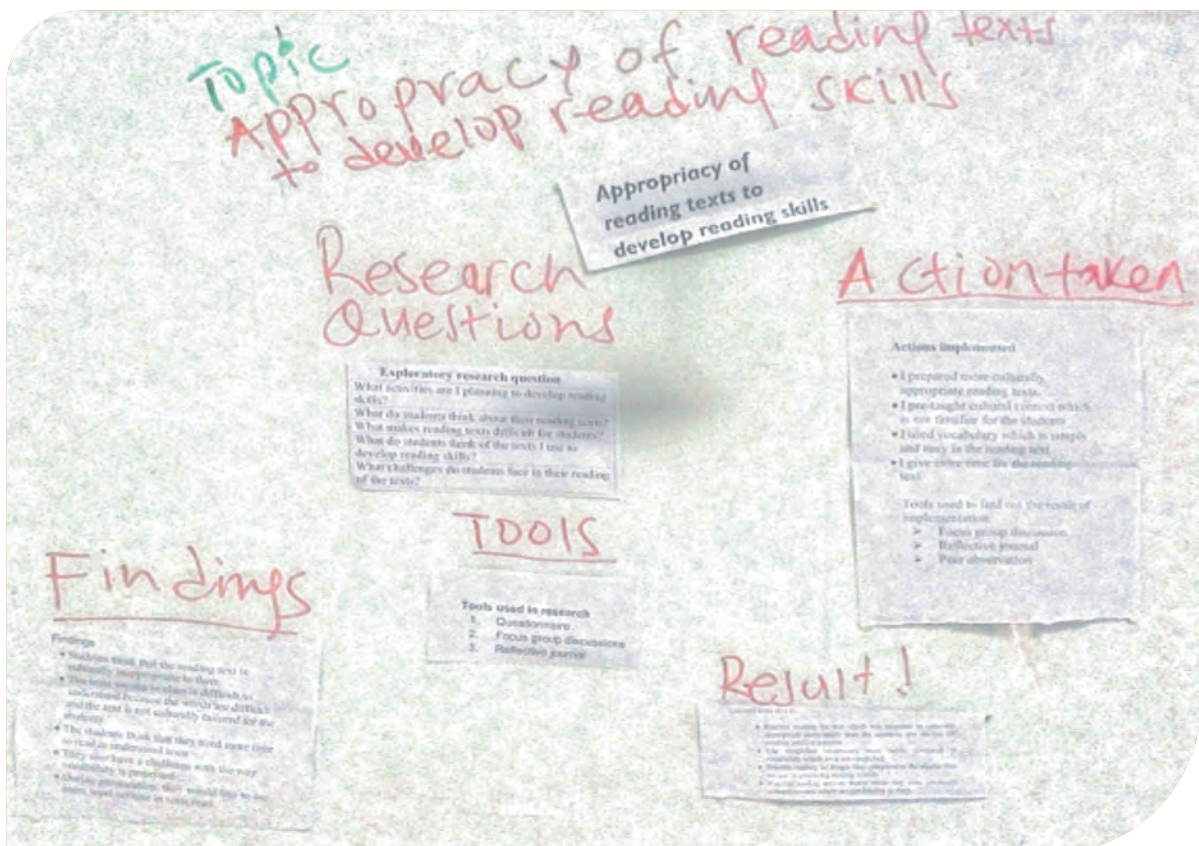
The actions carried out really helped me in motivating my class to develop an interest in reading recommended literary texts. This experience has been exhilarating and eventful. It has taught me a lot. It has clearly shown me that the lecture method of teaching is unproductive. It cannot cater for the needs of the 21st-century classroom. I have learned the need to be engaging and look for creative ways to engage my students in fun activities. This exploratory action research has taught me that instead of feeling frustrated over the challenges I encounter in my classroom, I can always explore them in order to understand the problem and try to figure out solutions. I have also learned the importance of having a colleague assist with the research. This could be during the period of exploration or at the point of action. All in all, I have learned the value of teamwork.



The appropriacy of reading texts to develop reading skills

Geremew Wozie

Country: Ethiopia





Geremew Wozie

is a lecturer at Ethiopian Police University. He teaches English to police officers. He has ten years of teaching experience in English. He holds an MA from Addis Ababa University in teaching English as a foreign language.

Ethiopia

My name is Geremew Wozie and I work for the Ethiopian Police University Peacekeeping Language Centre located in Addis Ababa near Mexico Square. My students are police officers who are learning English ready to be deployed later as peacekeepers on English-speaking UN peacekeeping missions. They are adult intermediate-level students. The textbooks we use are Campaign English for the Military and Campaign English for Law Enforcement, which are specially prepared for peacekeepers. There are three levels in our peacekeeping language centre. Level one is equal to elementary, level two is equal to intermediate level and level three is equal to upper intermediate or advanced level. My students were level-two students, which is equivalent to a lower intermediate level. The courses are given half a day for three hours from Monday to Friday for four months at each level.

My reason for conducting this exploratory action research is that I observed my students struggling to understand the reading text I use in class and their lack of understanding thereof in some of the reading activities when we practise the development of their reading skills. Reading is one of the four major skills that we practise in class as it is a key language skill.

To help me understand the problem facing my students, I used the following exploratory research questions:

- 1. What do students think about their reading texts?**
- 2. What makes reading texts difficult for students?**
- 3. What do students think of the texts I use to develop reading skills?**
- 4. What challenges do students face in their reading of the texts?**

These questions enabled me to put the problem into perspective. To gather data on these questions, I used the following research tools: questionnaires, focus group discussions and a reflective journal. I had 30 students in the class and, from these, ten students participated in answering the questionnaire and five participated in a focus group discussion. The questionnaire asked students about the reading text we use in the class, its cultural appropriacy, the words used in the reading practice and the time allocated to the reading. In a focus group discussion, the points covered were students' preference of kinds of reading, students' opinion of reading texts we use in the class, challenges students face when practising reading in the class and what could be done to solve the challenges. I used a reflective journal to record my perceptions and observations in class before and after the implementation of the action. I took notes on the reading activities I was developing and what I expected to achieve through them. I also focused on why developing reading skills was important to me, as well as what I wanted to see happening with the learners' reading skills. Finally, I reflected on the kind of texts I used to develop learners' reading skills, what I expected from using these texts and the difficulties I had experienced in using them to develop reading skills.

After the analysis of the data, three students indicated that the text I used during reading

practice in the class was culturally inappropriate and complained about its difficulty and unfamiliarity with its content. The three students also indicated that they were unfamiliar with the reading material context. The textbooks that we use are Campaign English for the Military and Campaign English for Law Enforcement. The students said that the cultural aspect of the reading is based on the NATO context and it deals with European and American issues which were completely unfamiliar to them. That was why learners were complaining about its difficulty (focus group interview).

The findings also revealed that the time given for reading practice was not adequate, and two students complained that they did not complete the reading tasks in the time allocated and thus were unable to engage with the text further. This was corroborated by the questionnaire, where seven of the students indicated that the time given to practise reading was inadequate.

The vocabulary in the reading text was difficult for students as well. In the observations, students were seen struggling to comprehend and practise reading. They would stop at unfamiliar words, interfering with the reading pace and speed. They would lose focus while reading, no longer following the meaning of the text. About six students agreed with this issue, saying that the words used in the reading text make the reading difficult.

Based on these findings, I designed an action plan. After understanding the situation, the actions I implemented to solve problems, which I deemed to be appropriate to help with the situation, were as follows.

- **I prepared more culturally appropriate reading texts to enable students to relate to the texts, thus increasing comprehension.**
- **I pre-taught culturally contextual texts which were not familiar to the students. This would go to help provide a needed background to facilitate understanding of materials.**
- **I used vocabulary which is simple and easy in the reading text. During the pre-reading of the text, I pre-taught vocabulary. This ensured that students approached the reading with some level of understanding of the vocabulary. This would enable them to avoid stopping upon arrival at unfamiliar words.**
- **To respond to the issue of reading time, I gave more time for the reading text.**

These actions were implemented in class for four weeks for a total of about 12 hours.

To monitor and evaluate the effect of the actions, I used focus group interviews, peer observations and a reflective journal as research tools. Five students participated in the focus group discussions, in which they reflected on their opinions of the actions implemented and their effects. For the second tool – a reflective journal – I noted the changes observed and personal reflections after the action was implemented. I used peer observation with the help of a fellow teacher who observed my class for about four sessions, after which he reflected on what he observed in the class.

As a result of the action plan carried out, the observations showed that the learners were able to practise reading the text — which was more culturally appropriate — more easily than the text we used before for reading practice purposes. I noticed that as time went by, they did not stop reading unfamiliar words, since these had already been pre-taught.

This was not only my observation. In the focus group, students explained that culturally appropriate texts are simple and more manageable.

Students indicated that the use of simplified vocabulary enabled them to read more easily, compared to vocabulary that was not simplified. In the observations, my colleague noticed that they seemed to enjoy using the vocabulary and would be seen to emphasise the words whenever they pronounced them. Furthermore, students were seen reading the texts that included simplified vocabulary and seemed to read for a longer time than before. Additionally, learners did the reading activities better when the cultural context was pre-taught than when this was not familiar to them. Most of the students indicated that the way the teacher presented the text – pre-teaching cultural context – was very useful (focus group interview).

Thanks to the actions I carried out, I was able to understand that the familiar cultural context of reading texts needs to be considered when preparing them. Culturally appropriate reading texts make practising reading active, simple and easy for the learners. I learned that we need to check the difficulty of the vocabulary we use in reading texts. If the vocabulary we use is difficult, it makes reading practice difficult. Reducing the number of unfamiliar words facilitates a better comprehension of a text. We should also be sure that the time we assign for reading practice is enough and appropriate. We need to know exactly how much is adequate. Before we let students practise reading, we must be sure that there are no situations or aspects which may make reading practice difficult.

From this exploratory action research, I learned that teachers are challenged with different difficulties in the class. The challenges may come from the texts we use – as happened to me – classroom management, students' motivation for learning and school management, among others. When teachers reflect on their daily activities, they can identify the problem and find a solution. Teachers need to reflect on their challenges and success in classroom teaching activities, and exploratory action research serves as a tool for that. It is cyclical and never stops. When a teacher conducts exploratory action research and fixes the problem in the class, this does not mean that the teacher should stop there, since we may find some other challenges needing to be fixed for better performance. If teachers reflect on their classroom activities, we improve and become more effective at what we do by identifying our weaknesses and strengths. Then we can work on these weaknesses for better performance and keep on improving on our strengths.



Exploratory action research on handling a large class

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Country: Ethiopia





Abdisalan Muhumed

is a lecturer at Jigjiga University, Department of Human Nutrition, under the College of Dryland Agriculture, and holds a master's degree in nutrition. Abdisalan has more than five years of experience in teaching undergraduate students at Jigjiga University, Ethiopia.

Ethiopia

My name is Abdisalan Muhumed. I work at Jijiga University, Ethiopia College of Dryland Agriculture, in the department of Human Nutrition. The college is located in the capital city of the Somali region of Jijiga, near the pastoral and agro-pastoral research institute of the Ethiopian Somali region (ESORPARI). The levels and target groups I teach for the institution are undergraduates, and their ages are between 20 and 30 years old.

The numbers of students in my classes have swelled recently. Thus, my topic for this exploratory action research is 'Handling a large class'. This study was conducted among freshman students. This topic was necessary and would be useful to my institution since, in recent years, we started a new freshman programme. This involved assigning limitless numbers of students in each class. As a result, the classes became overcrowded. Previously, we had an average number of students per class. This increased more than usual. My concern became how to make teaching and learning more effective in a large class, and this is why I focused my research on handling a large class. I was also concerned about how my students felt about being in a large class.

I began this exploratory action research by exploring the problem to enable me to establish the real issue, using the following questions as a guide:

- 1. How do my students feel about being in a large class?**
- 2. What do my students think about the strategies I use in a large class?**
- 3. How do my colleagues handle students in a large class?**

I used one focus group interview, which had eight students (five male and three female), interviews with teachers and peer observations to collect data. The focus group interview helped me to explore how students feel about being in a large class and their thoughts on the strategies I use in a large class. In the selection of students/participants, there were inclusion and exclusion criteria, for instance those who participate in class activity and show up all the time were included in the focus group discussions (FGDs), while those who do not attend the class and had discipline issues were excluded.

Three peer observations were used to observe students' behaviour, and their engagement in a large class was recorded. Finally, interviews with two colleagues on how they handle students in a large class were also conducted.

The results indicated that most of the students were not happy about being in a large class, and strongly agreed that it is tough and difficult to promote active learning in a large class. Some mentioned that it is difficult to hear individual responses, and a few said that the noise of the class is very high and suggested that we should have smaller classes for an effective and efficient teaching and learning environment. Additionally, in the observations, the observer noticed that the students' engagement was reduced. Observation also revealed that students did not pay attention during the class session as they were busy chatting among themselves. Class control seemed problematic, and students were largely inattentive.

I also sought my colleagues' views on how they handle large classes and their challenges. Through the interviews, they responded that they try to handle large classes by assessing students' prior knowledge and tailoring lessons to build on what students already know, by allowing students to collaborate and assigning tasks during the lessons (interview). Another said that he tries to get to know students by asking and giving students preference in choosing how they would like to learn. He tries to show interest by learning about students' hobbies and aspirations. This, he said, helped him to achieve rapport between teacher and students and keep their attention. However, they had problems with providing detailed feedback due to the high numbers.

Students observed that I used a teacher-centred strategy, specifically a show-and-tell strategy (FGD 1). Also, explanations were done by me, the teacher. In the focus group, half of the students said that they were satisfied with the strategy and teaching method I used, and a few students mentioned that they do not mind whether we change or continue the strategy we use at the moment. Some students suggested that the method I use is not suitable and appropriate for a large number of students, so they suggested that we could use strategies that enable students to understand what is being raised in class. The students also claimed that there is a gap between students and teachers – teachers do not make their teaching strategy student-based – agreeing with the observation report. Half of the students were largely unhappy with the situation as it currently was. I had to seek methods of intervention to ensure that students get the most out of learning in a large class.

Following an analysis of the results of the exploration, I concluded that the majority of the students feel unhappy about being in a large class, mainly because they feel that it is difficult to promote active learning. They have difficulty listening to individual student responses due to high noise levels. The majority of my colleagues indicated having problems providing detailed feedback, controlling the class and instituting discipline. Another key issue from the exploration was that the teaching approach currently used is teacher-centred, thus failing to promote active learning.

Therefore, I came up with a new strategy of teaching think-pair-share – that would allow students to speak and hear one another. This is a learner-centred strategy that helps minimise unproductive noise as students get actively involved in learning. I also introduced peer feedback mechanisms (I prepared responses to questions, and learners exchanged their books and assessed to reduce pressure on marking by the teacher). In addition, I used team assignments to reduce the pressure of marking on the teacher, encouraging collaborative learning.

I then sought to evaluate the effect of the intervention on my students' learning through four peer observations and two focus group discussions over a four-week period. FGD 1 consisted of eight students/participants (five were males, while the other three were females); FGD 2 consisted of ten students/participants (six were females, while the other four were males). My concern at this point was to establish the effect of my actions on students' learning and compare them against their initial responses during the exploration phase.



As I indicated above, the new teaching strategy implemented – think-pair-share – was learner-centred in the sense that it allowed students to know and get close to each other. Hence, it was observed that students did not feel shy to ask what they had not understood. Learners supported each other in pairs as they identified and discovered new ideas (FGD 1). If there was a random question being asked in the lessons, Student A might not get the answer, but Student B would thus promote active learning and improved understanding. One student stated that ‘the teaching strategy changed, in general, the quality education of the institution and specifically our class lessons’ (FGD 2). The classes were lively. Though there were ‘noises’, it was productive noise as students spoke to one another on learning points (FGD 2). They were productively engaged in discussions and did not see this as interfering with learning, since it was beneficial and useful to students (FGD 1).

In addition to the above findings, it was observed that peer feedback mechanisms and team assignments paved the way for better teaching and learning methods, as well as quality education which enabled learners to promote and improve their understanding of the material taught. As one student suggested, ‘My friend was able to show me where I made a mistake after marking my work’ (FGD 2).

I noticed that think-pair-share, peer feedback and team assignment strategies work well in a large class and helped me to easily know and identify the levels of my students and their capabilities. It enables active learning in a large class. Previously, I could not differentiate the level of students, so we can say that the actions implemented influenced us positively; both the students and the instructors will continue to improve further.

As an instructor, I also noticed that assuming an understanding of a situation would be inappropriate. It is important to explore a situation to get empirical evidence on the cause so that the intervention you take speaks to the situation.

Exploratory action research enabled me to get to the root of the problem and address it from an informed point of view. Having used it in my classroom, I trust it as a useful tool for a practising teacher. While I will continue to apply think-pair-share over a period of time, I would use the method to solve other nagging or puzzling questions regarding my students' learning.



What system can I set up in my class in order to manage discipline?

Doussou Keita

Country: Mali



Doussou Keita

is an English teacher in Mali in West Africa. He has been a teacher for seven years. He graduated with a master's degree in unilingual English from the University of Bamako at the Faculty of Letters, Languages and Language. I also graduated from IFM (Institut de Formation des Maîtres) of Kangaba, Mali. He currently works at a secondary school in Gouana, which is south-east of the capital, Bamako.

Mali

My context

I work in a secondary school in Gouana. I give class to seventh, eighth and ninth forms. Gouana is located between Dioila and Fana in the centre of Mali, about 120 kilometres south-east of the capital, Bamako. My students come from four villages around Gouana. Their ages vary between 13 and 17. Most of these students live five to seven kilometres away from Gouana. They come to school by bike every day. They speak Bambara, which is the mother tongue of most of them. They start learning English in the seventh form. As a new language for them, they like it, and they are motivated to learn it.

My research topic

In 2014–15 I was teaching in Daoudabougou secondary school in Bamako. There I taught two seventh forms, one eighth form and one ninth form. Each of my seventh forms had more than 130 pupils. The serious problem I was facing was discipline management. In 2020 we had 64 pupils in the seventh form, 45 in the eighth form and 23 in the ninth form (this is fewer than in previous years). With 64 students in one class, we have experienced serious problems managing discipline. That is why I have chosen discipline management as my topic.

Although I have got some teaching methods and strategies from the Teachers Training Institute (Instituts de Formation des Maîtres), these teaching methods and strategies were not sufficient to fully resolve my concern. I had to wait until 2020 to get the opportunity, which guided me to the possible solutions to address my main concern through research.

Based on the situation described above, I decided to propose the following questions for my research:

1. **What system can I set up in my class in order to manage discipline?**
2. **What can we do to get the students' attention?**
3. **What can we do to keep silence in the class?**

To answer these questions, I used surveys for teachers and pupils and internet research. As for the teachers, 11 answered the survey. For the pupils, I chose one class, and I guided them through answering the questions. For the internet research, I surfed Google to get more information about discipline management. I read some pages on the internet about discipline.

My findings

For the first question, I searched for information on the internet, and here are some of the statements I found on Google that caught my eye:

- ***Classroom discipline is a complex issue and a key concern for teachers, school administrators, students, and parents. The issue also attracts significant attention from the public and from the media.***
- ***No matter how interesting and well prepared our lesson may be, it can be ruined by a confrontation with students.***
- ***For every person wishing to teach, there are thirty persons not wishing to be taught (Anonymous).***

In the survey, most of the teachers in my study said that they stress discipline by making their students aware of the school's rules by setting a good example, and others by emphasising the collective importance of following the rules. Many teachers said that they encourage discipline through group work and interactive teaching methods. They do this by dividing the students into small groups. Two of them indicated that they needed to change students' behaviour or model students' acceptable behaviour and reward those who follow it. They also said that the teachers themselves must demonstrate good behaviour inside the class and outside the class. And one of them said that the teacher must organise their classrooms well to manage discipline.

According to the students who I gave the questionnaire to, to avoid disturbances in the class a teacher must:

- **punish students**
- **request students to be silent**
- **use a symbol (to tell them to speak only English, someone who speaks in his/her mother tongue will take the symbol until they find someone else speaking in his/her mother tongue)**
- **do a warm-up activity**
- **quiz students.**

These suggestions seem to derive from students' own experiences of what has and has not worked in their classrooms. Also, after gathering data from students, I realise that they need certain conditions to follow their teachers' lessons. Among these conditions is the absence of disturbances, which depends on students' behaviour. The others depend on teachers or on the school syllabus, such as the topics studied. They must be interesting and attractive.

With regard to the second question, which focuses on ways to get students' attention, four teachers said that to get students' attention they think about students' interest in the lesson or explain to them the importance of the lesson and the benefits they can get from it. They do that by making clear the objectives of the lesson. Others said that they

take into consideration students' profiles, their morale and learning style. One of them said that the teacher must speak loudly to get students' attention, and another one said that the teacher must respect the duration of each activity. This would allow the students to follow the lesson in a focused way. The longer the lesson is, the less the students will concentrate. To that, we can add warm-up activities, which are an efficient way to get students' attention at the beginning of the lesson.

To keep the class in silence, teachers suggested that they achieve this by keeping students busy during the working activity. Another uses group work, and a few of them keep silent by implementing discipline management strategies. One of them said the watchfulness of the teacher helps him to keep his class silent. Contrary to others, one teacher said that silence is not so important in an English class. As far as he is concerned, an English class must be livened up.

The intervention

According to my findings, I put into practice the recommendations I got from teachers and pupils. The action plan was based on the way to manage discipline in the classroom with five key components:

- 1. use of school rules**
- 2. group work**
- 3. classroom organisation (seating arrangement)**
- 4. interesting topic/stating the importance of the lesson**
- 5. warm-up.**

Some recommendations were carried out for one week, such as school rules and classroom organisation. Some were performed for four to five months.

To evaluate the effects of the strategies included in the action plan, I used video recording and observation by one of my colleagues. I have done four video recordings, which I watched later to analyse the results, and I was observed by a colleague who gave me comments about my lesson.

The results

When I watched the different videos, I saw all the students listening carefully when I was explaining the school rules. In terms of group work, I realised that whenever I divided the class into groups, the pupils were placed with new classmates; therefore, they could not be as noisy as they were with the previous group. However, I was unfortunately unable to gather further evidence of the effects of the action plan proposed. This is still a work in process.

Conclusions

I learned that to get students' attention, teachers must choose interesting topics or topics that interest their students. To manage discipline, teachers must organise their class well. They also need to prepare warm-ups at the beginning of the class to allow students to forget whatever has happened before and concentrate on the lesson. I also realised that using group work is the easiest way to have control over your class and to put all students in activities that help to manage discipline.

To conclude, I can say that the best way to find solutions to a teaching problem or a relevant issue at school is to do research about it. This research has relieved my concern about discipline management. From now I will consider the different recommendations from teachers and students.

Before doing this research, it was hard for me to keep my classroom in silence or get students' attention in large classes. This research has given me an opportunity to cope with these problems. It improves my teaching methods and allows me to help other colleagues, since I have shared my findings with the teachers who participated in this study.

By doing research, we can find solutions to all the problems that cannot be solved easily by one person.



Lifting up students' motivation in their English language learning

**Yassin Mohamed Omar
and Ali Farah Warsama**

Country: Djibouti



Yassin Mohamed Omar

has been teaching English since 2010 in middle schools. Middle school is from 6th to 9th grades. Presently, Yassin teaches English to young children in Excellence school. This is a new school where the best students in the city are placed.



Ali Farah Warsama

was formerly an English teacher in middle schools for ten years. Now he is a pedagogical adviser in charge of supporting novice primary and secondary school teachers to develop their teaching practice skills by preparing training sessions to further teachers' continuing professional development. As hobbies he loves reading and he is a big fan of sports.

We suggest you think of these questions before you continue reading our research:

- **How will you react if your students are not motivated while teaching them English?**
- **What strategies will you use to motivate them in learning English?**

Background

This research was carried out in Fukuzawa and Dogleh middle schools with students aged 15–16. These students live in the capital city, Djibouti. We as English teachers have decided to start this research since we have noticed that our students, in particular when they are in middle school, are lagging behind, or most of them are distracted when it comes to English lessons. They do not seem to be interested in English because of the dominance of the French language in all sectors, whether private or governmental. It is only recently that the government decided that students should begin English as a subject from third grade in primary schools. We asked ourselves what we could do to draw the attention of our students towards learning English. Thus, we tried to consult our seniors regarding the issue. Some said, 'You can motivate your students if you give them prizes and bonus points for those participating', while others said, 'Add fun activities to your lessons and find out which of the skills would interest them, i.e. reading, writing, listening or speaking.' Therefore, in this study, our main intention was to answer the following question. Why do our students lack motivation when they learn the English language?

Data collection methods

In order to answer the question above, we agreed to prepare questionnaires for 50 students to know the language skills students preferred, in order to be able to get some ideas about how we can motivate them. In addition to that, we had interview sessions with five students and five teachers to obtain candid verbal perspectives of both the teachers and the students. Here are some of the questions we asked:

- As a student why is it that you lack motivation when it comes to learning the English language?
- Do you think you require a special talent for learning English?
- As an English teacher, what could be the source of your students' demotivation?
- What could you do differently so as to encourage your students towards learning the English language?

Findings

Here we would like to present to you our findings or the outcome of both the survey and the interview we have had with the teachers and the students.

Our survey and interview indicated that 30 students out of the 50 students we surveyed and interviewed lacked motivation or were less interested in learning the English language for the following reasons. They believe that English is not so important in our country, Djibouti. And it is because of the predominance of the French language. They feel alone in the process of learning English, since the environment and their surroundings are filled with the interest and love that people have for the French language. Some students are afraid of making mistakes, while others feel shy. These obstacles and many others are the cause of the demotivation of our students to learn the English language. Osman, a 9th-grade student in Fukuzawa middle school, said:



I am not interested in the English language and I know that it's an international language, but in my family, they are all French speakers and none of them speaks English. When I am given homework or tasks from school I feel alone since I need help.

Mariam, an 8th-grade student, said, 'I feel shy when it comes to the pronunciation of the language. I am afraid that my classmates make fun of me if I try to speak English, and that's why I am less interested in the English language.'

On the other hand, teachers complained about a number of major issues which they believe are an obstacle to student motivation in learning the English language. Abdirahman, an English teacher in Fukuzawa middle school, said, 'As English teachers, we don't have enough resources, we have big classes and some of our students have family problems, whether financially or socially.' Khaireh, an English teacher in Dogleh middle school, said:



I think the reason why our students lack motivation in learning the English language is that they don't get enough support at home, and most of the time when I give them homework they come back to the class without doing it.

Asma, an English teacher in Fukuzawa middle school, said, 'We need to give a chance to our students to express themselves and their feelings and we should always involve our students in every lesson we teach.'

Therefore, most of the teachers we met during our research believe that if they get enough resources and give their maximum support to their students, the predominance of the French language will not be a major factor in the lack of motivation that the students show when learning English.

Lessons learned

We have discovered from our research that students can be motivated when we, the teachers, give them the opportunity to express their feelings and involve them in any given lesson as much as possible.

We realised that teaching is a demanding job that requires continuous effort and research. It is common for teachers to encounter obstacles in the preparation of lessons or during their delivery. However, you can solve your problems by reflecting on your activities or focusing on what went well or badly after each session.

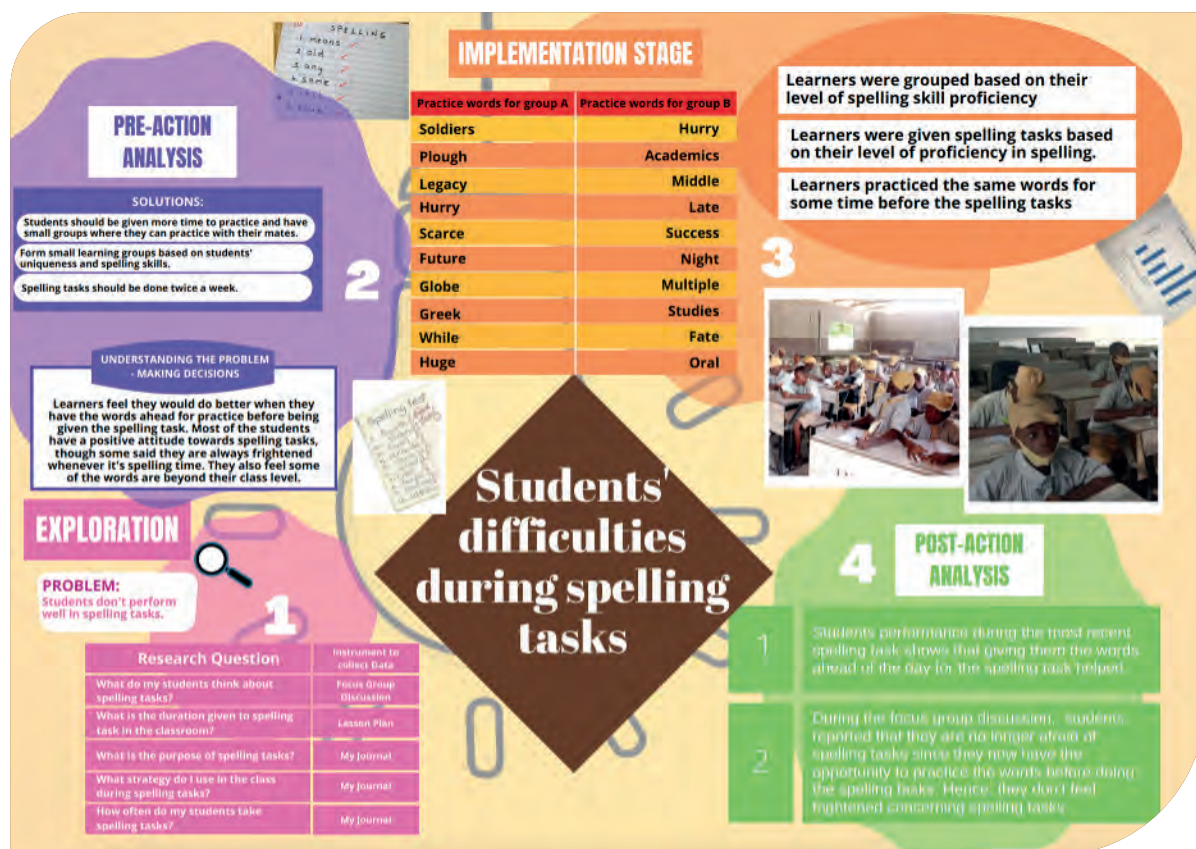
Effective classroom management can also improve instructional self-effectiveness and classroom organisation, better student participation and decrease students' demotivation. A joyful and safe classroom environment will be created for timid or nervous students. For instance, we have both come across situations where our students asked us, 'How could I participate in the English class?' In answer to that, we gave them some moral support very often and it helped them to realise their goals of getting involved in the English lessons. It was at that moment that we realised that the way of explaining a lesson is not enough for making the students understand and have the courage to make their dreams come true. Giving them moral support is also invaluable.



Students' difficulties during spelling tasks

Isaac Akinseye

Country: Djibouti





Isaac Akinseye

is a high school teacher. He holds a bachelor's degree in mathematics education but has improved himself to be able to also teach English. Isaac Akinseye has more than six years of teaching experience in primary, secondary and post-secondary education, working in both private and government-owned schools.

Nigeria

Teaching context

I work at Community Junior High School, Idata-Ilagbo, located in Lagos State, Nigeria. I teach Year 9 students (girls and boys) in the age group of 13–16 years. The students have not had an English teacher for long, since the school is located in a rural area and because of the shortage of teachers, so their background in the English language is poor. The school is located in a community with low socio-economic status, so the students do not have the opportunity to get materials to study at home. Also, because they have illiterate parents, they have little or no one to assist them at home to improve their English studies. The students live in a community where very little English is spoken.



Front view of Community Junior High School, Idata-Ilagbo

Research focus

I chose to explore the students' difficulties when doing spelling tasks after noticing their poor performance. I also observed that they lacked interest in taking spelling tasks.

I decided to address this problem by finding out what their thoughts are about spelling tasks, the activities they involve themselves in in class and the materials they use in the classroom. This topic is relevant to my teaching because spelling is an important skill, without which students will not be able to correctly express themselves in writing. Also, poor spelling skills affect students' performances in other subjects, as they usually find it difficult to express themselves in written communication.

Another reason why I decided to focus on spelling was that it has been an area of concern for the school leadership, and they have always wanted me to find a solution in that area.

To understand the situation, I created some exploratory questions:

1. **What are my students' thoughts about spelling tasks?**
2. **What are the activities my students engage in during spelling tasks?**
3. **How often do my students take spelling tasks?**
4. **What is the purpose of spelling tasks?**
5. **What strategies do I use to support my students during spelling tasks?**

Methods of collecting initial data

To answer these questions, I decided to carry out a focus group discussion. I also asked a colleague to observe my teaching in class and I made use of a reflective journal. Seven students (five girls and two boys) took part in the focus group discussion. These students were selected based on their performances in English classes (three high performers and four low performers). The discussion was based on three questions that aimed to know students' perceptions about spelling tasks, the spelling activities they loved to take and their feelings about taking spelling tasks.

Also, a classroom observation was carried out, where I invited one of my colleagues to observe me and answer five questions which were to help answer some of my exploratory research questions. The focus of the observation was to discover the activities that my students engage in during spelling tasks and the strategies I use to support my students in class during spelling tasks.

Lastly, I wrote out some reflections, which I compared with the focus group results and the classroom observation. The focus of the reflections was to ascertain the purpose and importance of spelling tasks, how often my students do spelling tasks in the classroom and how I support my students during spelling tasks.

Answers to the exploratory questions

After analysing all the data obtained, the report from the focus group discussion revealed that most of the learners had a positive perception of spelling tasks. One of the students who took part in the discussion said, 'I love to take spelling tasks and I am really looking forward to it.' Two students said that they dislike taking spelling tasks and when asked further, one of them said, 'I am always afraid whenever it is time for spelling task.' Another student also added, 'I would love to have the words ahead of the lesson so that I can have enough time for practice.' The students seemed to suggest that it would be useful if they knew the words to be used in the lesson prior to the beginning of the lesson in order to practise and perhaps build confidence.

The report from the classroom observation revealed that there were no special classroom activities during spelling tasks in the classroom, and, according to my colleague, 'spelling tasks were taken once in two weeks', and this means that though the students did English studies almost every day, only one day was designated for spelling tasks in two weeks.

In my reflective journal, I wrote: 'The purpose of spelling tasks is to improve their spelling abilities and enhance proficiency in spelling, such that they can also take part in spelling competitions (both local and international).'

In terms of the strategies used to support the students, the report from the classroom observation conducted by my colleague indicated that I wrote the words on the board during the spelling task and that I ensured my voice was audible and the words were said clearly.

Action plan

The findings above indicated that learners felt they can do better in spelling tasks when they have the words ahead of the lesson for practice and that most of the students actually had a positive attitude towards spelling tasks, although some were afraid and the-refore were anxious when it was spelling time.

Therefore, I created an action plan to address the identified issues. The action plan included strategies to develop students' spelling skills and it was carried out for almost three weeks. The strategies included giving students more time to practise and ensuring that they had the words three days before the actual day for the spelling tasks. This ensured that they had the opportunity to practise the same words consistently for three days before taking the spelling tasks. Small groups were also created for students to practise during those three days. Learning groups were based on students' uniqueness and present level of spelling proficiency. Choral repetition was explored in class.

Evaluating the action plan

To evaluate the effects of the strategies in the action plan, I used classroom observations and a focus group discussion that sought to compare students' performance in recent spelling tasks to what it was before the research.

During and after the implementation of the action plan, I invited my colleagues to observe my classes twice. The focus of the observations was to check the activities that the students were engaged in during spelling tasks and observe if the activities met their objectives and to also look out for the students' behaviour during the activities.

Also, seven students (five girls and two boys) took part in the focus group discussion, the same students that participated in the exploratory phase. This time, the discussion was around the impact of the research to evaluate if the implemented actions were appropriate for improving students' spelling skills.

Effects of the action plan

Students' performance during the most recent spelling tasks improved positively. During the focus group discussion, one student declared, 'now we have enough time to practise before taking the spelling tasks, and this has helped us to perform better.' The students' confidence levels also improved, and they were willing to participate in the spelling tasks. One student reported that 'we are no longer afraid of spelling tasks since we now have the opportunity of practising the words before doing it in class.' Five students out of the seven students in the focus group discussion expressed excitement, as they looked forward to spelling lessons, a factor they attributed to the practice of having the words ahead of the day they would be taking the spelling tasks.

According to my colleague who observed my teaching and the classroom activities, the students were actively engaged in the group tasks given by the teacher.

The grouping was done based on students' level of proficiency in spelling, following their performance in the previous class work. There were only two groups in the classroom. According to my colleague, 'I noticed the class was well organised and the students were focused on their individual work as if they already knew the answers to the question.' This is because the students had enough time for practice, and the words are not beyond their level. My colleague said, 'I noticed that students were confident, and each of them showed some level of excitement while doing the spelling task.'

Reflections and learning

This research helped me to understand how best to improve my students' spelling skills. It helped me to realise that the cause of my students' difficulties is the fact that the words given to them during spelling tasks were beyond their individual level of proficiency in spelling and so careful consideration should be made in the choice of words that the students are expected to spell. As a teacher, I should take cognisance of my students' improvement, and that should influence the words they spell at every level of their growth.

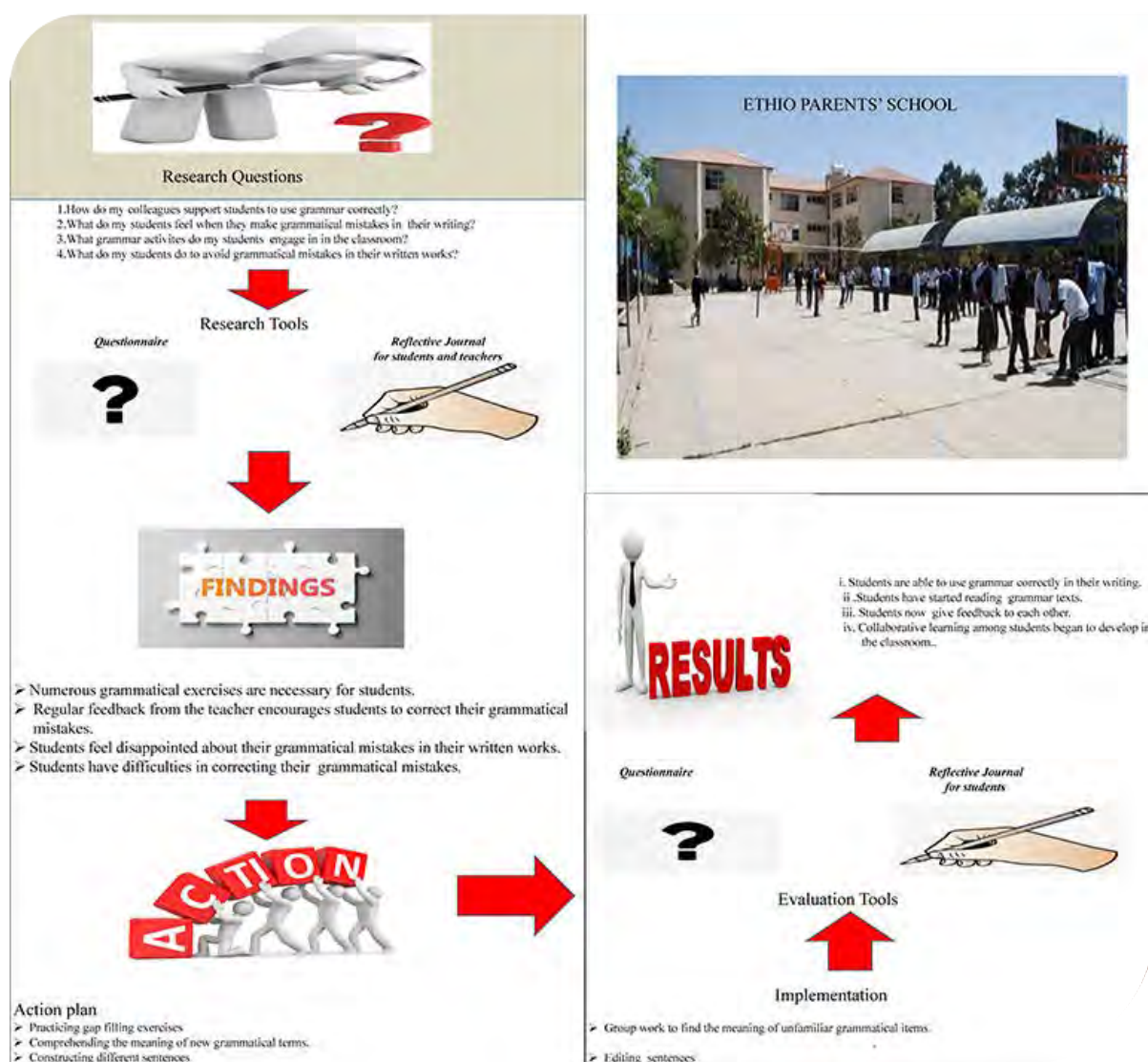
I learned that the best way to give a lasting solution to learners' problems is to first engage in exploration in order to understand the problem and not to assume the cause of the problem. In my own case, concerning my students' difficulties when taking spelling tasks, understanding this problem as the first step of the intervention process made it easy to provide a solution to the problem – an effective one at that.



The use of grammar in writing

Tewodros Gebremichael

Country: Ethiopia





Tewodros Gebremichael

is a secondary school teacher who holds a diploma in Foreign Language and Literature, with a minor in applied linguistics. He also holds a master's degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. He is certified in professional development for teacher trainers. Tewodros has been a primary and secondary teacher in different pri-vate schools for more than 12 years.

Ethiopia

Context

I work in a private school named Ethio Parents School (EPS). The school was set up in 1995 and is administered by volunteer Ethiopian parents who have a strong commitment to their children's future careers. The school has four branches across the country. Three branches are found in the capital city, Addis Ababa, and the last branch is found in Hawassa, located 278 kilometres south of Addis Ababa. The school has more than 2,000 students at the main branch located at Gerji, and this is where I am working.

I teach Grade 11 students, whose ages are between 16 and 17 years old. I teach 96 students in three sections. Each section has approximately 29–37 students. I teach each section for 270 minutes per week. They are preparatory students who are going to join the university in a year's time. The learners have a good background in English since they started learning when they were in kindergarten.

Focus of exploration

The school has a reading and writing programme for students in Grades 5–12. Every week, students take a writing exam that is believed to improve their writing skills, but they always make grammatical mistakes in their written work. One thing I have noticed from the students' exam papers is the presence of grammar mistakes such as verb patterns, sentence structures, subject–verb agreements and connecting words or sentences. As a result, I decided to explore the situation by developing a research project. Some of the reasons why I decided to carry out this research are to help my students make writing the centre of their learning, to enable them to complete their written assignments on time and to get good grades at high school and university levels.

To carry out this study, the following questions were prepared:

1. How do my colleagues support students to use grammar properly?
2. What do my students feel when they make grammatical mistakes in their writing?
3. What grammar activities do my students engage in in the classroom?
4. What do my students do to avoid grammatical mistakes in their written work?

To answer these questions, I used a questionnaire that 36 students completed (18 boys and 18 girls). The questionnaire was meant to obtain information from students about the activities they engage in to develop proper grammar. Ten students also kept journals for reflection to get their thoughts on the activities I organise or should organise in order to improve their grammar. Four colleagues who are teachers of English shared with me their reflections about the way they support students to use grammar properly.

Findings

To answer Question 1 (How do my colleagues support students to use grammar properly?), my colleagues indicated that they use a variety of written work that focuses on real-life situations, like letters, invitations, complaints and requests, with guided writing, which allowed students to use grammar correctly. They also said that they refrain from correcting students who make grammar errors in their work and instead allow students to spot these errors on their own and share peer corrections in the class. They continued by saying that each student indirectly taught grammar by correcting their own or their friends' errors.

Regarding Question 2 (What do my students feel when they make grammatical mistakes in their writing?), ten pupils expressed their unease, disappointment, discomfort and shame as the result of their inability to correct their grammatical errors. They felt embarrassed when their grammatical errors were corrected in public by the teachers.

In relation to Question 3 (What grammar activities do my students engage in in the classroom?), all students preferred more than one activity. Twenty-nine students frequently preferred gap-filling exercises that were useful for developing proper grammar. Of those, 23 students said that learning grammar rules was useful frequently for developing their grammar. Nine of the students from each group preferred problem-solving frequently, using text and text-analysis activities. The majority of the students cited gap-filling exercises, grammatical correction and learning grammar through stories as the most beneficial activities. These activities helped them to focus on grammar and to sustain their interest.

As for Question 4 (What do my students do to avoid grammatical mistakes in their written work?), of the 36 students, 24 said that they corrected their grammar mistakes themselves and sometimes asked their peers to help them; 17 of the learners indicated that they did not ask their teacher to help them correct their grammatical mistakes in their written work. The teachers' reflections also showed that students correct their grammar mistakes in different ways, such as referencing in grammar textbooks, asking their teachers and friends for help and by themselves. Teachers suggested that to avoid grammatical mistakes, students should be paired with students to collaboratively correct their mistakes. They also suggested that the teacher should indicate the errors and write the correct answers instead of marking them with a red pen. Additionally, students emphasised that to avoid grammatical mistakes in their work, they should be given more written assignments and the teachers should recommend grammar textbooks or online materials that will help them develop their grammar skills. Generally, students indicated that they corrected their grammatical errors by referring to different grammar texts that have been published locally.

In summary, the exploratory stage showed that the support given by my colleagues involved giving writing tasks that focus on real-life situations, like letters, invitations, complaints and requests. It was clear that my students felt disappointed when they made grammatical mistakes in their written work and had difficulties correcting these mistakes. However, they used different strategies to correct their mistakes. Gap-filling exercises, learning grammar rules, text substitutions and text-analysis grammar

activities were most preferred by students to learn grammar.

Action plan

As a result of the findings above, I developed an action plan. I used four grammar lessons to teach connecting devices, fundamental sentence structures, ordering adjectives and relative pronouns. Students then worked on gap-filling exercises, constructed a variety of phrases out of jumbled words, linked sentences together using a variety of linking techniques, and edited and arranged the given sentences.

To evaluate the effects of the intervention in the action plan, I selected ten students to reflect on the implemented activities, guided by questions which I developed for this purpose. I also came up with a questionnaire that was completed by 32 students. The focus of both the questionnaire and reflective writing by students was to obtain their perceptions and opinions on the changes done in class regarding developing proper grammar.

Results

Results from both the questionnaire and the reflective journal suggested that students got better in their use of grammar due to the variety of grammar activities I had introduced in the lessons. All the students indicated in the questionnaire that they had some changes in their grammar in the weeks following the introduction of the action plan. One student wrote in their journal, 'I now enjoy learning grammar because the teacher gives us fun activities, like where we fill in gaps and do substitution of texts, which are challenging tasks but also enjoyable.' This seems to suggest that learning grammar in the normal way using notes in grammar textbooks and class exercises may have become boring, and learners needed change. I guess this was the greatest discovery of this project!

For the second key finding, the students were able to develop the art of giving feedback to each other, and this made them write better sentences. Almost all the students who responded to the questionnaire indicated that they do not mind being corrected by their peers, since they do this in the group and not in front of many students. The students seem uneasy with public correction and are willing to try other avenues of getting feed-back. While they are used to the teacher giving them feedback because the teacher is the expert, they felt that the teacher corrected every single error, and this was discouraging. They also seemed to suggest that they should be allowed to work with peers to discuss and work on their grammar. However, one student had a contrary opinion and wrote, 'If everyone is talking in class and trying to help their friend, the class will be very noisy. The best is for the teacher to write the feedback on the blackboard.'

For the third finding, students are now engaged in collaborative learning in the classroom. They shared their grammar points and corrected their peers' mistakes by providing editorial remarks. All the students agreed to the questionnaire item about working collaboratively to improve their grammar. This was captured when one student said, 'I prefer to discuss the exercises with my group members because it makes the work easy, and I now understand more than what I could get if I worked alone.'

Reflection

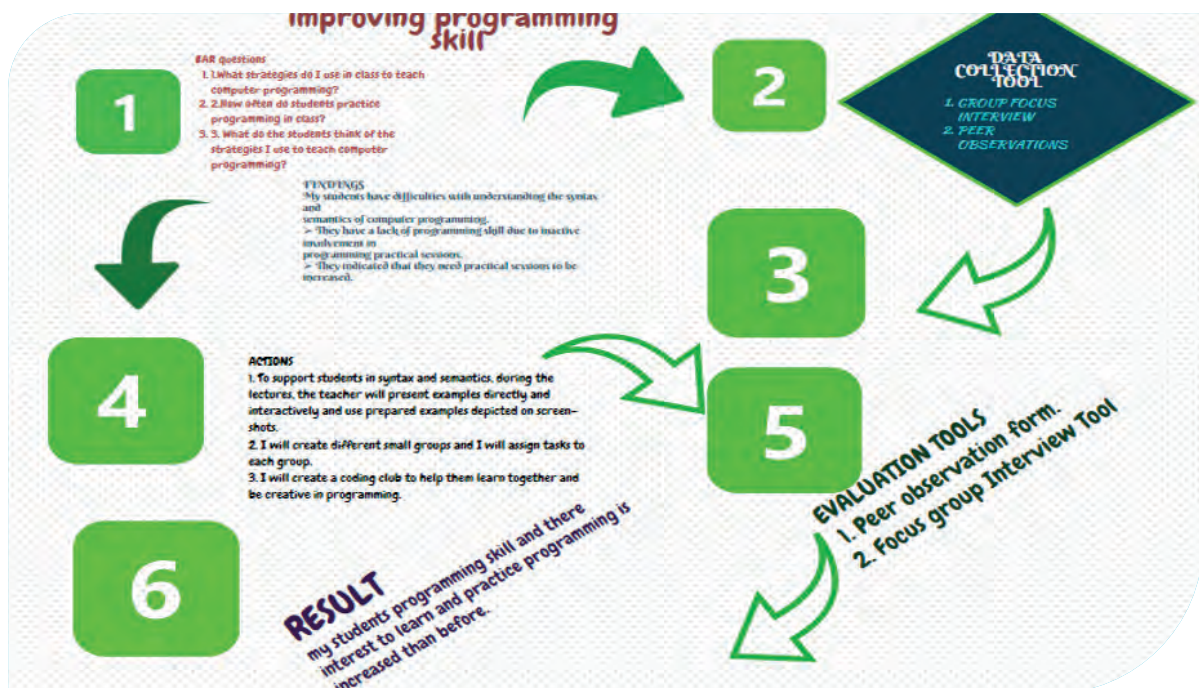
The most important aspect of education is instilling in students a strong desire to learn. This is the reason I participated in the workshop on exploratory action research. The process of this research examines my students' behaviours, interests, skills and learning styles. These were the most important factors in my teaching and learning process. In addition to this, it indicated to me how, why, when and what I taught my students to teach both my grammar lessons and the English language in general. The things I learned from my mentor were my role, my purpose, my situation and the issues I faced in carrying out the exploratory action research. This led me to enhance working with my colleagues and to create a discussion that bound us with some issues about the research points. The major gain point from this research was that I got to know my students' feelings and opinions on my teaching techniques. It also helped me to carry out my own action research to further my professional development in the future.



Improving computer programming skills for computer science students at university level

Aliyi Hassen

Country: Ethiopia





Aliyi Hassen

is a computer science lecturer at Samara University Afar, Ethiopia. He holds a BSc in computer science and is an MSc candidate in computer networking and communication. He has a higher diploma licence as a certified higher education teacher. Aliyi Hassen has more than three years of teaching experience at higher-level education, in a public university.

Ethiopia

What is my teaching context?

I am Aliyi Hassen and I teach at Samara University Afar, Ethiopia. My teaching experience spans three years. My students' ages range from 18 to 23 years old. My university is a public university and it admits students who complete their preparatory school with good grades. However, most of the students have low background knowledge of technology. This is because most of the students are from the countryside and thus not familiar with computer programming because they lacked an opportunity to get enough computers to access while they were learning in lower grades. Because of this, acquiring computer-programming skills is a problem since many of my students are mostly experiencing computer usage for the first time. They lack an understanding of computer programming to develop websites and design systems. In addition, they do not know how to code, and when they attempt to, they only focus on superficial details. They focus on examples alone and never practise enough. They would memorise weird examples, such as focu-sing on the syntax of a programming language to communicate with protocols as facts and many other mistakes.

What is the situation that I chose to explore?

I explored and investigated the views of students on the difficulties they faced in learning computer programming in order to improve their programming skills. I conducted an exploratory action research on the difficulties of computer programming. This is because from anecdotal evidence, I realised that my students had a lack of understanding of the syntax and semantics of programming. Most of my students did not know how to write, debug and execute computer codes. I decided to do this exploratory action research to help me in identifying the key issues with programming so as to enable me to come up with an appropriate intervention.

There were three further reasons why I decided to focus on developing programming skills: (i) I wanted to change the students' mindset from believing that 'learning computers is complicated and pointless' to 'computer programming is useful and easy to learn if you practise more and have interest'; (ii) without question, computer programming is important because so much of our world is automated today; (iii) I also wanted to increase and improve students' problems-solving skills, creativity, and critical thinking.

To begin the exploratory process, I had to establish clearly what I wanted to know more about. To this end, my exploratory questions were:

1. **What strategies do I use in class to teach computer programming?**
2. **How often do students practise programming in class?**
3. **What do the students think of the strategies I use to teach computer programming?**

To answer these questions, I decided to carry out a focus group interview and conduct a peer observation. I arranged my students into six groups. Each group had six members, and I collected data from each group. Additionally, I carried out three classroom observations. I asked a colleague to help me record concrete observable behaviours from the students to answer the question on how often programming is practised, as well as the effect of the strategies used during programming activities. Finally, I wrote reflections and cross-checked information with the focus group results and the classroom observations.

What were the answers to my questions?

In terms of the strategies I used, these included providing visuals, positive feedback (encouraging students with words of affirmation such as 'you will be good at computer programming'), decoding the code, giving peer-to-peer support, creating real-world relevance, grouping the students to share their insights with each other and creating an environment where students feel comfortable asking questions about computer programming. As it was observed, there was very little student involvement in coding, which is the skill they needed to have developed during programming practical sessions. This meant that there was a problem with the activities I used to teach programming. In terms of practice, the observations revealed that students had limited opportunities to practise programming skills, with a two- or three-times-a-week schedule, which was obviously inadequate for effective mastery of the programming. In terms of students' perceptions about the strategies I used, students indicated that these strategies did not help them to effectively program. In the focus groups, students indicated that they felt that my teaching was not quite effective, since the approaches and techniques I used in teaching should be more applicable to the content of programming with different paradigms in order to help them to strengthen basic problem-solving skills. They also mentioned that practical sessions should be increased.

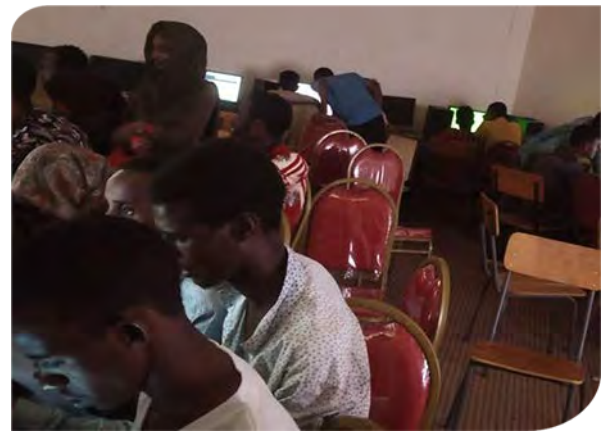
What actions did you take based on what you found?

Based on the above findings, I decided to create an action plan to address some of the issues identified. I proposed to increase opportunities for students to practise programming by assigning tasks in small groups before they do them individually. Small-group practice would also provide opportunities for peer-to-peer support. It would help students understand by using visual examples to enable them to understand how to program. I also proposed creating a coding club to help learners practise more together and inspire their creativity. The action plan also included strategies to develop programming and was carried out over a period of two weeks, spanning six classes.

1. I supported my students by teaching syntax and semantics of computer programming before giving them practical tasks to be carried out.
2. I created different small groups and assigned tasks to each group. This allowed the students to exchange their opinions with each other and increased opportunities for practice.
3. I also created a coding club to help them learn together and be creative in programming. This would increase opportunities to practise and also creativity, as they would do it in a relaxed environment. In addition, we increased the lab sessions and we focused on practice.



Students practising computer programming tasks in the laboratory



Students exchanging their opinions in a group

To evaluate the effects of the strategies included in the action plan, I used classroom observations and focus group interviews. Two classroom observations were carried out. I used the colleague who observed my classroom initially, as it would enable him to make a good comparison of before, during and after the action. The colleague's focus at this point was on observable behaviours of the students, impact of the visuals and algorithms I had facilitated, students' participation and their involvement in coding. During the focus group, the students were asked about their views regarding the action plan strategies. Six students participated in the focus group interviews to see the effects of this project on my learners. I took their opinion through face-to-face interviews at the end of the intervention period.

What were the effects of the action taken?

The results of the intervention indicated that learners were able to understand the syntax and semantics to write computer programming which performs different operations. In the focus groups, they said that this was enabled by a variety of practice exercises. They also reported that they gained the ability to solve different problems and became inquisitive. Besides this, their mathematical and communication skills were increased. As they practised, a student said that they had to think creatively and communicate, thus they improved their mathematical and communication skills.

Almost all learners were able to attend each programming class (laboratory and lecture class), and it was observed that their programming skills were increased. Their ability to write, debug and execute computer programs evidenced this. Classroom observations had revealed that they previously had problems performing these tasks. In addition to these, they became much more punctual and self-motivated, since they seem to look forward to the programming classes. They were available and involved themselves in our sessions. They also participated actively in their coding club group.

It was also observed that learners were able to practise programming tasks freely without fear of making mistakes. In addition, my students were able to raise any doubt they had regarding programming openly. When asked during a focus group interview, a student

said, 'We feel free with one another as we work in our groups and clubs. We ask each other questions.' In addition, they were fully interested in attending the tutorial sessions. In general, my students' programming skills and their interest to learn and practise programming became more increased than before. Activities that involved learners seemed to benefit the learning of programming skills.

The students seem to benefit a lot from the strategies that involve them working in groups to solve tasks. Even though the action plan occurred over a short period of time, I continue to apply these strategies to get the best out of my students. I will continue to teach computer programming by using different approaches and techniques which are applicable to the content of programming supported by different paradigms. In addition, I will focus more on practical sessions and giving students additional support. On top of this, I will encourage students to practise programming among peers, in pairs and in groups. I will further support my teaching with different visuals and examples. I will also accept feedback and comments from students. These seemed to work in my classroom.

What did I learn from this experience?

This exploratory action research provided me with quality data to adjust my teaching strategy based on empirical evidence. In addition, I learned how to identify and understand the problems faced by students and find solutions for these problems. In future, I intend to explore any issues I experience in my classroom to clearly understand them before I proffer a solution. Exploratory action research helped me to implement informed changes. This is my now and future 'tool' to solve classroom problems.



Finally, I would like to say that I cannot wait to help other teachers try exploratory action research to have the same experience and good results as I feel I had. Thank you for the opportunity. I truly feel like a champion!



Teaching grammar in context

Aime Gouede

Country: Ivory Coast



Aime Gouede

is a certified teacher from the Ecole Normale Superieure. I have been teaching English since 1991. In 2019 I became a teacher trainer for the Ministry of Education of Ivory Coast, where I currently work. My institution, which depends on that ministry, is called Antenne de la Pedagogie et de la Formation Continue. This institution is mainly in charge of the continuing professional development of teachers, and it is located in one of the largest districts of Ivory Coast, named Abobo Gare.

Ivory Coast

I work in one of the largest districts of the Ivory Coast, named Abobo Gare. Most of the teachers in the secondary schools in that area are novice teachers. They are students who graduated from university and who are trying to make a living by teaching in private schools. Some have authorisation to teach, but others do not. In addition to these novice teachers, there are also experienced and well-trained teachers from public schools. They graduated from the Secondary School Teachers Training School. Some of them can teach both high and junior secondary schools, while others can only teach junior secondary schools. This categorisation of high school teachers and junior school teachers depends on the diplomas teachers have. The main difference between private and public secondary school teachers is that the latter have a better knowledge of pedagogy and as a result are better at teaching.

My job as a teacher trainer is multifaceted. I am in charge of helping both private and public school teachers with the challenges they might be facing in their teaching practice. In order to give these teachers a hand, training sessions and classroom visits followed by feedback are scheduled by the hierarchy of the institution and executed by the teacher trainers all the school year round. Some schools, private and public, sometimes ask for training sessions for their teachers who need to be aided with teaching.

Research focus

From my experience as a teacher and a teacher trainer, I know that one of the challenges teachers face is teaching grammar, so I chose to explore the way grammar was taught in classrooms. I know that there are two main ways of teaching grammar – the inductive and the deductive way. In theory, most teachers know about them, but, in practice, they would rather teach deductively for they find that it is time-saving and easy. This research stemmed from my desire to show what teaching grammar inductively through context is and why it can be more helpful to our students and the teachers themselves. In other words, my main concern in this work is contextualising grammar. Contextualisation in grammar is defined as putting language items into a meaningful and real context, rather than being treated as isolated items of language for language manipulation practice only.

My choice of this topic originated when I discovered in my daughter's English copy-book that the grammar lessons were taught out of context. I read decontextualised sentences, like 'I would be a doctor' and 'My father had bought a car,' in her copybook. This set my mind buzzing with questions such as **Why does the teacher teach the first conditional and the past perfect that way? Does my daughter know what these two grammar points mean? Will she be able to use them in a real-life situation of communication?** Does the teacher know what contextualisation means? Teaching grammar in context then becomes a relevant topic and a must before the use of de-contextualised and meaningless sentences like those above. Grammar should not be taught for the sake of teaching it or just for knowing about the language. It should be taught and used for communicative acts instead. Writing about the importance of teaching grammar in context, Jeremy Harmer holds: Students need to get an idea of how the new language is used by native speakers and the best way of doing this is to present language in context (Harmer, 1991, p.57). This topic is then of the greatest interest, and I realised that if I could help teachers with how to teach grammar in context, they would

feel more comfortable teaching grammar, and, as a consequence, their students would understand grammar lessons better.

Therefore, this research aims at developing teachers' skills in contextualising language points during grammar lessons.

In order to conduct that research, I asked the following research questions:

1. **When do teachers contextualise grammar points?**
2. **What are teachers' and learners' preferred grammar approaches?**

Data collection methods

During my research, I used three methods to collect data – questionnaires, interviews and class observations. Teachers and students answered some questionnaires about the way grammar was taught in their classrooms. The teachers who answered the questions were 27 in number. They told us how they taught grammar and which way of teaching they preferred. Students also answered the questions, saying how they were taught and which way they thought helped them understand grammar more easily. A total of 280 students filled in the questionnaire.

Teachers were also interviewed about teaching grammar in context. They told us what they understood by teaching grammar in context and how they applied it in their classes.

Teachers were also visited during some of their classes. Thus, we had the opportunity to observe how they taught grammar in context. Interviews also followed these classes to help us understand what the teachers had been doing. A limited number of teachers – seven teachers were visited with the aim of seeing them teaching grammar in practice and observing how they contextualised the grammar items they had to teach. We observed full lessons, but our priority was the stage devoted to grammar.

Findings

In the questionnaire, 14 out of 27 teachers said that they created situations of their own to teach grammar, which means they contextualised grammar through stories of their own while teaching. Five teachers said that they explained the rules to their students. Most importantly, teachers contextualise grammar points in the input phase of their lessons, which refers to the exposure learners have to authentic language in use. This can be from various sources, including the teacher, other learners and the environment around the learners.

The teachers we interviewed and the few we saw delivering their classes all used situations and sentences they had devised to teach the new grammar items. In addition, most of them automatically had recourse to explanations to make the meaning clearer. Two teachers, one from a public school and the other one from a private school, both admitted that they referred to explanations to make certain they have driven the points home. A teacher I interviewed told me:



I use situations which are figments of my own imagination, but, immediately after, I explain the grammar rules to my students to make sure they've got me. Sometimes, when the grammar item I have to teach is difficult, I explain the rules instead of using contextualisation.

When we rely on the number of teachers we interviewed and visited, none of them used pictures, realia (real things), fictional stories, texts and songs to contextualise grammar and teach it. The only teacher we visited who used a picture used that picture just for brainstorming. When she realised through our queries that she could also have made use of the pictures to teach the grammar item, she was astonished, and she grinned.

Out of 280 students who filled in the questionnaires, 72 said that their teachers used situations to teach grammar, and 62 said that their teachers resorted to explanations of rules. Teachers and students were asked questions about the efficacy of both methods – teaching grammar in context and explaining grammar rules. Nineteen teachers thought that teaching grammar in context was more effective, whereas eight teachers preferred the explanation of rules as the better way of teaching grammar.

Of the students, 136 said that they understood grammar points better when they were contextualised, and 139 found explanations of rules more effective. Hence, students and teachers still think that the more effective way of teaching grammar is by explaining the rules. Our statistics confirm this point of view, for eight teachers out of 19 said in the interviews that they explained rules to their students. As for the students, 136 of them like rules to be explained to them and think that is the better and more effective way for them to grasp the meaning of the grammar items.

Despite the teachers telling us that they know what contextualisation is, which is partly true, we still think it needs to be explained to them. There are ways of contextualising grammar that they are not currently aware of and which they can make use of. Made-up situations are not the only ones. Activities such as dictogloss, disappearing texts, songs and games can help them teach grammar in context in a way that engages their students and at the same time introduces variety in their practice.

Conclusion

To conclude, the findings from this action research reveal that teachers have a partial idea of what contextualisation means, as the only way of contextualising grammar items they resort to in their lessons is through situations they have designed. There are many other resources, like songs, texts, stories, games, etc., that they are losing sight of. Also, it would be beneficial for teachers to know that contextualising grammar points in the input phase does not imply that learners have to be mute; teachers can involve students through questions that can sometimes lead to the elicitation of the targeted grammatical structure. Since form, meaning and use need to be emphasised during grammar instruction, context can help with that. Thornbury says, Language is context-sensitive. This means that, in the absence of context, it is very difficult to recover the intended meaning of a single word or phrase (Thornbury, 1999, p.69).

Carrying out this first research was not easy at all. There were many hurdles, and the most serious one of them was time. However, I was determined to complete it. I think there were good grounds for that because our colleagues still need to understand what contextualisation is. It is important that they know that despite the everlasting debate about the best way of teaching grammar, teaching grammar in context does have an impact on learners' communicative competence. Context is key.

This is the first time I have conducted action research of this sort. I do not have a good command of it yet, but I find it exciting. Although it is not a panacea to all the classroom issues teachers have, it could help them solve most of them. This report has not been published yet, but I am already looking forward to the next one, whose topic I already have an idea about.

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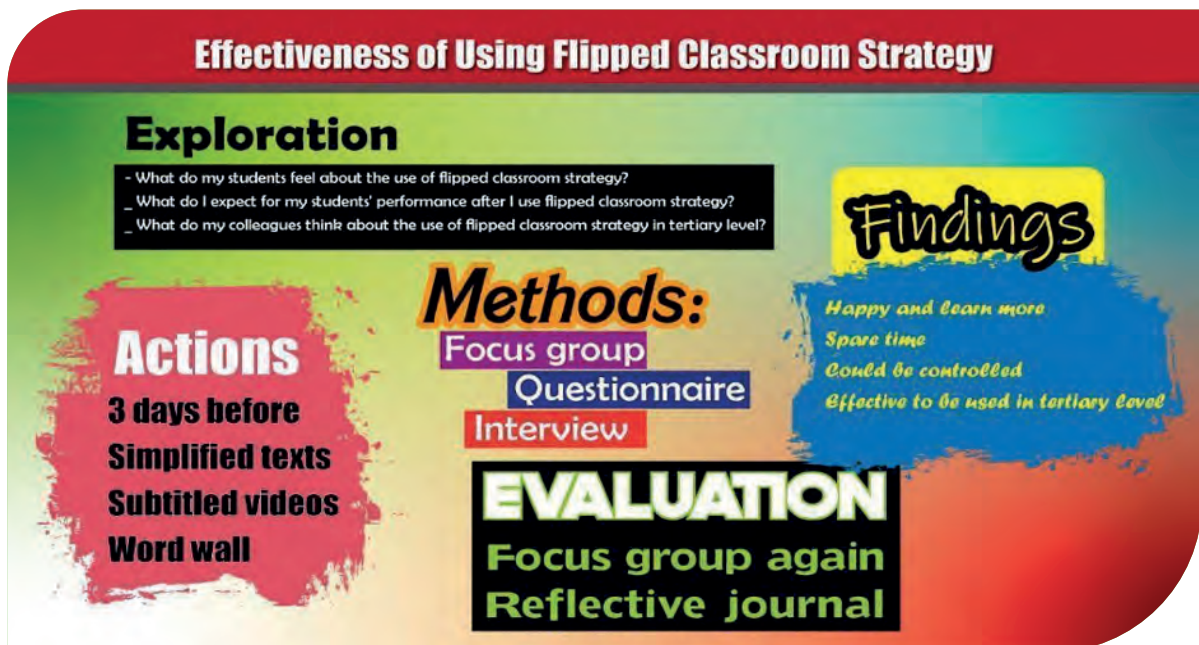
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Effectiveness of using the flipped classroom strategy at Sudanese tertiary level

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Country: Sudan





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Sudan

Context

I am a Sudanese lecturer of the English language at both the International University of Africa and Safat College of Science and Technology. I carried out this exploratory action research on my students of Aviation Engineering at Safat College of Science and Technology, located in Khartoum, Sudan. They are 21 in number and have an almost similar English language proficiency level (elementary).

This research is informed by a heated debate around the efficacy of online teaching at the Sudanese tertiary level, especially after the last wave of Covid-19. Regarding the nature of my course (English for specific purposes) on the one hand, and the situation of technology in my context on the other, I could not adopt the strategy of pure online teaching upon which the last academic council meeting had agreed. Instead, I searched around and I thought that the strategy of using a flipped classroom might be more useful in my context.

I was not going to be able to apply for it unless I did some systematic academic procedures. After I attended a valuable workshop about exploratory action research, facilitated by the British Council, I made use of the knowledge and the practical skills I gained from three amazing trainers. So I decided to explore the usefulness of a flipped classroom strategy in my context. I got permission from my college dean and informed the students about the research.

To understand the context of the situation, I set the following exploratory questions:

- 1. What do my students feel about the use of flipped classroom strategy?**
- 2. What do I expect from my students' performance after the use of flipped classroom strategy?**
- 3. What do my colleagues think about the use of flipped classroom strategy?**

To have clear answers to the aforementioned questions, I used a set of data collection methods. I distributed a questionnaire to the whole class in order to grasp their feelings about the use of a flipped classroom strategy. Furthermore, I used focus group interviews to address the details and get an in-depth understanding of my students' feelings towards the use of a flipped classroom strategy. Regarding the suitable number of the class (21 students), it was easy to include all of them in the first step of collecting the data, which was the questionnaire. For grasping an in-depth understanding, I selected only ten students for a focus group interview. I have chosen these ten students according to their answers to the questionnaire. To include my colleagues' opinions about the use of a flipped classroom strategy, I conducted an interview with five expert lecturers. In relation to my expectations, I developed a list of points in a reflective journal.

Findings

The results of the data collection process indicated that nearly 80 per cent of my students (16 students) felt happy and relaxed when a flipped classroom strategy was used. A student said, 'I felt that we shared in preparing and planning the teaching process.' However, the other 20 per cent seemed to have a problem with the time frame when the materials of the next lecture were shared, as they were taking huge assignments for other courses. In the focus group, one student said, 'We have to do a lot of homework for many other courses. It would be good when we are given more time for the assignments.' In relation to my expectations, I expected my students to show good performance, but this was hampered by problems with vocabulary. Half of my students (50 per cent) answered that they received the materials in an adequate time, but they find it too difficult to figure out the meaning of some specific terms. This problem faced the students in both the written materials and the videos I used to share. I also expected that my students are very good at managing their time, but I discovered that the time I used to share the materials for the next lecture was not adequate.

The interview I conducted with my colleagues showed that five of them welcomed the idea of using a flipped classroom strategy at the Sudanese tertiary level, but they felt that it should be controlled. They meant that it should be well guided, and the materials shared in the next lecture should have clear expectations and linked exercises. Another interviewee highlighted that the exercises should be followed with a simple task to ensure that every student has practised with the shared materials. A participant also averred that great and modern strategies that can motivate the students and involve them more in the academic process should be used.

As a reflection of the exploration findings, I decided on an action plan. First, I started sharing the materials for the next lecture three days before the lecture. I also used much more simplified texts, subtitled videos and posted some word walls to enable them to understand the meaning of new words. In the interest of engagement, the application of 'Kahoot' (an online game) helped me a lot to prepare questions before the beginning of each lecture. I used three questions at the beginning of each lecture as a reflection on a recommendation made by a colleague that 'it should be followed with a simple task to ensure that every student has come across the shared materials.' To make it more interesting and challenging, I utilised the application of Kahoot to start my lectures.

Evaluation

To estimate the impact of the changes implemented, I conducted one focus group inter-view, consisting of nine students, to explore students' perceptions and opinions on the changes done in class regarding the use of flipped classroom strategy. Two lesson observations were also conducted to determine the observable behaviours of students on the use of flipped classroom strategy. The information was used to evaluate if the implemented actions were appropriate for improving the performance of the students during lectures, positively changing their attitude towards the use of flipped classroom strategy

and effectively accelerating the covering of the outlined objectives. The questions that guided the evaluation were:

- 1. What do you think about the materials of the lecture being shared three days in advance?**
- 2. Was the sharing of materials in advance adequate to help you prepare yourself for the lecture?**
- 3. Was the sharing of materials in advance enough for every type of lecture?**
- 4. Do you consider the text shared easy to understand?**
- 5. How many times have you watched the last video shared?**
 - . Has the subtitle helped you understand the video?**
- 7. What do you think about the use of flipped classroom strategy now?**

The data obtained indicated that the use of simplified texts along with the adequate time frame made my students feel more relaxed and later helped them understand the lectures. Observation noted a positive change in their increased participation in class. This was obviously reflected in their enthusiastic way of participating during lectures. They became more confident in their work and thus started submitting their assignments on time. The observation noted that the idea of instructing three questions before lectures through Kahoot made the students focus on the materials prior to them being presented in the class. This enabled them to maintain their other tasks and search more about the topics of the lectures.

The creation of word walls helped the students to recycle new words as they were looking everywhere inside the class. The use of a flipped classroom strategy was not only effective in aiding understanding of lectures but also helped greatly in covering the outlined objectives at ease and early (focus group interview). This early completion made it easy for my students to find time for their communication skills practice. They were further able to deliver high-quality oral presentations in a competition-like session (observation). It was not only proved in the students' performance during lectures but also in their results too. By the end of the semester, the students' analysis chart of the results showed an increase in their English language course average to 96 per cent, compared to the previous semester which was 83 per cent.

Conclusion

I would not have been able to focus on the main factors of the problems if I had not used these systematic steps of collecting data, especially the focus group one. This is because it enabled me to share knowledge and hear from my students. It has also helped me to take evidence-based action towards the development of my teaching practice. I now will never make any single academic decision in my class without an exploration. Moreover, as a training coordinator in the Association of Sudanese Teachers of English Language, I am going to cascade what I have learned from this fruitful project to the other teachers to help share knowledge and solve problems in their classes. It was really helpful as it gave me the ability to have the exact feedback from my teaching. It also helped me in finding

out the source of the problems that might hinder the outcome. Lastly, it was a genuine method to avoid dealing with problems haphazardly! I may have given a wrong diagnosis to the difficult student's experience, leading to the wrong response. Exploratory action research provided the evidence base to enable my targeted actions.



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