

Research article

The problems of teaching English at University of Tabuk as perceived by instructors

Hussein Theeb. Albakrawi & Mutasim Mahadin

Department of Science and Basic studies

University of Tabuk, Tabuk, KSA

Tele fax: 00966144273044

Corresponding Author: halbakrawi@ut.edu.sa



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Abstract

This study aims to identify the problems of English classroom activities in the preparatory year in the University of Tabuk as perceived by instructors. The study attempted to answer the following question:

What are the problems of English classroom activities in the Preparatory Year Program at the University of Tabuk as perceived by English instructors?

The study population consisted of all English instructors who taught English in the Preparatory Year Program. They are about 112 male instructors. The study sample consisted of all instructors who teach ELS 001 and ELS 002 in the preparatory year program at the University of Tabuk. The total number of the sample was 112 instructors.

The instrument which consisted of 17 items on classroom activities. It was developed by the researchers. The questionnaire was given to a jury of professors to figure out its validity and reliability.

The study results revealed that co-curricular activities should be considered as a main source of students' weakness in classroom activities and the importance of the student background. In addition, students' interests were not considered. Finally, the existence of interesting games as an important part of classroom activities were not considered in classroom and classroom activities and they did not use visual aids effectively.

Key words Preparatory Year Program, ELS, University of Tabuk, Intensive English Program, EFL.

Introduction

Generally speaking, the treatment of any problem or difficulty might start with the identification of the problem itself. Then comes the classification of the problem in the category to which it belongs, following that, the suitable remedial work comes into existence. It goes without saying that final step can not take place without the first and the second ones. In line with this, this study will take the identification of methodology problems in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in the University of Tabuk as its major goal.

So the problem of this study was to identify problems of teaching English as Foreign Language in the University of Tabuk to areas Classroom activities.

Needless to say that perfect educational systems are impossible to take place, because of the existence of unavoidable weakness that may emerge from the fact that educational systems are established to deal with an unstable creature i.e. human being. So teaching a language as foreigners may be associated with difficulties and setbacks. Beside, teaching languages may not be as easy as it seems to be. Strevens (1977) stated that:

"The complex circumstances of teaching and learning-with different kinds of pupils, teachers, aims, objectives, approaches, methods and materials, classroom techniques and standards of achievement-make it inconceivable that any single method could achieve optimum success in all circumstances".

In this context it would be proper to determine some of the problems inherent in foreign language teaching. Aldinger (1983) argued that problems of foreign language teaching may emerge in teachers' quality, students' attitudes, teaching aids, and teaching atmosphere.

In addition to that, Rabie (1979), in his attempt to find out the usefulness of audio-visual materials needed in teaching English in Iranian schools, emphasized that lack of audio-visual aids, poor facilities, preparing teachers on the use of these materials were the main reasons of the weakness of Iranian English curriculum.

Another problem that stems from teaching English as a foreign language lies in the differences between the learners' culture and the foreign language culture which. Lado (1957) argues about the unavoidable connection between foreign language teaching and Learning, and the cultures of the native language and the foreign language. Following that, and gradually, culture became an important aspect of textbooks and methods of teaching. Currently speaking, culture was emphasized by many researchers like Brumfit (1980), Byrne (1980), Alptekin & Margaret (1983), Lebauer (1985), Nelson (1987), Abdelâ & Eirlys (1988), Brown (1990). All these researchers have emphasized the significant of culture in any modification process in classroom textbooks or methods and activities.

In addition to the contrast between the native and target culture, the most serious problem in language teaching might be the gap between theory and practice. Some experts in methodology have shed light on the existence of this gap; Brumfit (1980), Smith (1982), Atiya (1987) and Finally Wallace (1991). The existence of such fossilized gap can not be denied, and all that we can do about it is to reduce its negative effect on language teaching.

However, the problem here is not only the gap between theory and practice, but also in the resources from which the teacher gets this theoretical knowledge. To clarify this idea, examples, like using the mother tongue in classroom and different teaching techniques may be a good instance of unstable sources of knowledge; Atkinson (1986) claims that the use of the mother tongue in classroom must not be neglected, while communicative language teaching prevents the use of translation in the classroom. Moreover, experts of methodology have not reached any conclusion concerning the meaning and the role of some methodological concepts, like teacher-role, student-role, best method to be used, competence and performance. The impossibility of capturing all these variables in language teaching led some experts, like Eble (1976) and Girard (1986) to take a compromised attitude concerning language teaching method, Eble expresses his stand by saying:

"For myself, teaching varies with every class, every hour, every new group of students".

and what makes the problem of methodology more complicated are the findings of some researchers and the claims of some writers asserting that teacher knowledge, years of experience, training, qualification and competence have little effect on student achievement. Gehbaner (1978), Smith (1981).

Having discussed the section related to methodology, it would be proper to shift to the other section which is textbooks. Harmer (1983) argued that decisions about the course content are taken by higher authority and these can often tie the teacher to a certain style of teaching. Harmer also stated that teachers are under considerable pressure both because they are obliged to complete the syllabus and the teaching of a number of classes. He concluded by claiming that teachers are to worry about textbooks because they are not written for their classes. This final idea is supported in Eble (1976).

So, as this introduction shows, this study is concerned with problems of teaching English as a foreign language in the PYP at the University of Tabuk in two important areas, these are: classroom strategies and techniques.

Review of literature

Ratzlaff (1980) conducted a study to evaluate English language teaching in Japan. He stated that the problems involved in English language teaching in Japan were enormous. His study called for clear understanding of the reason underlying the present state of EFL in Japan. Some of the problems, he argued, were caused by lack of awareness of the cultural factors inherent in differences between Japanese culture and English speaking cultures. He pointed out that the conception of Japanese culture as being "unique" has been a barrier to the acquisition of spoken English. Finally, some suggestions were presented by the researchers to overcome cultural specific problems associated with EFL methodology and materials.

Lebauer (1985) conducted a study to determine the basic resources of problems in reading comprehension in foreign language teaching. He stated that the problem of misunderstanding of author's intent can stem from a number of sources. These resources can be broken down into: (1) Lexical sources (unknown definitions, misinterpreted figurative usage, unknown clichés and proverbs, problems with connotations and semantic value), (2) Syntactic sources (unknown grammar, lack of knowledge of communicative value of syntactic forms, problems with reference), (3) Nonlinguistic sources (Lack of familiarity with conventions of text), (4) Rhetorical cues, (Lack of recognition of transitional phrase and rhetorical cues, different discourse expectations), and (5) Finally cultural sources (different background knowledge, difference in logical thought patterns). Each of the previous problem sources was covered in detail in this study.

The study concluded that reading problems are sometimes apparent because teachers can pinpoint the misunderstood word, phrase, sentence or paragraph. Finally, the researchers emphasized that lack of aptitude, lack of logic, or stubbornness rather than reading skills might be the case but not always so.

Dixon (1986) conducted a study to help in overcoming the problem of overpopulation in second language classroom. Dixon's main concern was how to teach composition to these classes. He argued that teachers cannot teach composition to these classes with ignorance of the large number of students. He made the following suggestions for teachers who have such a problem:

1. Using group work might be of a good help.
2. Correcting one kind of errors at a time.
3. Let students write compositions that are not to be evaluated.
4. Self-correction might be helpful. Let students correct each other.

In surveying the last twenty-five years of teaching listening comprehension, Brown (1987) stated that in the past the problem of listening was in how to make the students decode the sounds of foreign language: the segments, the word stress, the intonation of sentences. If weaknesses appeared in this area, minimal pair work was required.

But over the last ten years the problem became in how to provide students with authentic examples i.e. from real life situations, and how to teach listening comprehension in context?

Brown claims that teaching listening in context and making it authentic have equal importance. So they both should be considered in teaching Foreign Language.

Doushaq & Sawaf (1988) conducted a study to clarify the problems that are faced by Arab students in learning English phrasal verbs. They argued that problems in English language teaching and learning appear as a result of the difference between the two languages in the following areas: sound system, derivational regularity and the grammatical system. Phrasal verbs, being part of both the grammatical and the derivational systems, from one of the most important difficulties. They claim that the reason for such difficulties is the fact that the phrasal verbs are less commonly used in Arabic.

The findings of the research indicated lack of attention to this linguistic phenomenon, which in turn affects the achievement of students in English. Besides, Arab students vividly suffer from weakness in the understanding and the use of these phrasal verbs.

The study recommended more concentration on the presentation of these important linguistic factors through modernized curriculum that takes into account the structural and functional facets of the phrasal verbs. The study also recommended the teaching of the phrasal verbs in real life situations to reveal their communicative significance.

Wadden and McGovern (1991) defined negative class participation. They discussed some of the causes of negative participation in the classroom and presented human and effective ways of both preventing its occurrence and responding to it when it does occur. The negative class participation, these are: (1) disruptive talking; (2) inaudible response, (3) sleeping in class; (4) tardiness and poor attendance; (5) failure to complete homework, (6) cheating on tests and quizzes; (7) unwillingness to speak in the target language.

The study concluded that teachers should be taught how to deal with inappropriate classroom behavior. Besides, classroom management and interaction should be taken into account in the teacher preparation programs. Finally, such a problem should not be neglected, because its existence can hinder teachers' best efforts to motivate and teach their students.

Sheen (1992) conducted a study to discuss the constant problem of getting students to ask questions in EFL classroom. He claimed that the main reason of this problem is lack of confidence in students' ability to form questions. He argued that the most effective way of solving this problem is by teaching students how to ask questions. For that purpose, Sheen suggested a five-step procedure in forming a question and claims that this procedure will be helpful for students in forming a question so as to be able to participate.

Xiaochun (1992) attempted to answer the question of how to deal with uncooperative students in group activities? She claims that dealing with these is challenging experience. She also suggested the following ways of dealing with this kind of students:

1. Careful preparation. She means that teachers should try to figure out the reasons behind such inactive behavior, and give passive students some simple problems.
2. Ask these students to do something that does not require speaking.
3. The teacher should try to participate in activities with the uncooperative students.

4. Give each student in the group a different job.
5. Leave them alone; don't pay attention to them, pretend that you are unaware of their uncooperative behavior. As time passes, they might feel that they are left out and try to come back again

Factors inherent in differences between Japanese culture and English speaking cultures. He pointed out that the conception of Japanese culture as being "unique" has been a barrier to the acquisition of spoken English. Finally, some suggestions were presented by the researchers to overcome cultural specific problems associated with EFL methodology and materials.

Methodology

Identifying problems of teaching English as a foreign language at the University of Tabuk, being the principal purpose of this study, needs to be achieved by certain procedures. Therefore, this part is primarily concerned with introducing these procedures. The study population, sample, design and instrumentation will be included in this part.

Consequently, the part will be chiefly concerned with how the cardinal objective of the study will be fulfilled.

The Study Population and Sample:

The study population consisted of all English language instructors employed by the University of Tabuk and the instructors who were employed by the educational companies in the male part. The total number of English language male instructors at the University of Tabuk was 112.

Instrumentation:

To collect data for the purpose of this study, a questionnaire was distributed to the study sample. However, we may say here that the usefulness or validity of an instrument depends largely upon the technique and care with which it has been constructed.

Since the major concern of this study was to identify English teaching problems from the teacher's points of view, the tool included the problems which were relevant to the population of interest a list of some problems which has been identified or recognized by western researchers would be handy but of less value because of the differences in culture and circumstances. Thus, identifying problems from teachers themselves would be the most effective and valid approach. So the researchers have chosen five well-qualified and experienced teachers of English and they were asked to address the prime question of the study. This would help the researchers better understand the nature of the task.

The researchers also elicited some problems from teachers related to the classroom activities in foreign language teaching. The researchers asked them not to write down their names so that they would answer without reservation.

Subsequent to data collection, the researchers have mixed all the problems together so that they could separate the problems that mostly affect the process of teaching. Then, they were classified according to their importance.

The mark on the questionnaire was distributed as the following:

Always (4) Often (3) Sometimes (2) Never (1)

Instrument Validity:

In order to establish the instrument validity, the researchers gave the questionnaire to a jury of specialized (3) instructors, (2) supervisors and (3) university professors and asked them to provide them with any relevant

comments or recommendations that can be incorporated in the final draft of the questionnaire. Depending on these comments and recommendations the tool of the research was modified and improved.

Instrument Reliability:

The instrument reliability was found by the following way:

- Two weeks stability coefficient procedure. The sample was 112 teachers. The reliability was 0.89.

Data Collection:

In first semester of 2013, the questionnaire was distributed and collected by the researchers themselves. The researchers, after explaining the instructions, and answering any question raised by the subjects, and telling them that the research is done for their own benefit, collected the questionnaires.

Results

As previously mentioned, the central focus of this study was to identify problems of teaching English in PYP in the University of Tabuk as perceived by English teachers. To be more accurate, problems of classroom activities (methodology) were the main areas in which the problems are to be identified.

In this part, problems of classroom activities are examined from the point of view of the instructors of English in the PYP in the University of Tabuk, in the first semester 2013/2014. In the questionnaires, the instructors were asked to rank the problems of classroom activities in terms of their importance in teaching ELS001 and ELS 002 for the students of PYP in the University of Tabuk and which prevent those students to improve themselves in learning English.

Most of the problems of classroom activities of teaching English presented in the questionnaire were approved by the sampled instructors. The researchers arranged them as follows:

Classroom activities take into account current methods of teaching English.

They allow successful interaction in the classroom

They take into account students' background.

They are flexible (can be modified when necessary).

They neglect the mother tongue.

Classroom activities provide examples from real life situations.

They present vocabulary and structures in appropriate contexts.

They focus on student as the main part of the teaching process.

They encourage student participation.

They include some interesting games.

Classroom activities take into account large classes.

They are based on co-curricular activities.

Booklets (prepared by some teachers) prevent classroom activities from being effective.

Classroom activities are not hindered by supervision.

They require students to work in the classroom.

They use visual aids effectively.

In order to answer the main question of the study:

What are the most serious problems in English methodology as perceived by the instructors?

The following table shows the problems of teaching English as a Foreign Language in the PYP in the University of Tabuk as perceived by teachers and the mean of each item was computed and found and to determine the most serious problems in classroom activities according to teacher's opinions.

Table (1): Problems of classroom activities put in order according to their means

NO.	Rank	The Items	Mean	S.D.
12	1	They are based on co-curricular activities.	1.69	0.76
11	2	Classroom activities take into account large classes.	1.97	0.95
3	3	They take into account students' background.	2.14	0.78
10	4	They include some interesting games.	2.14	0.90
16	5	They use visual aids effectively.	2.35	0.79
5	6	They neglect the mother tongue.	2.35	0.86
14	7	Classroom activities are not hindered by supervision.	2.48	0.79
13	8	Booklets (prepared by some teachers) prevent classroom activities from being effective.	2.54	1.07
4	9	They are flexible (can be modified when necessary).	2.57	0.74
1	10	Classroom activities take into account current methods of teaching English.	2.74	0.79

2	11	They allow successful interaction in the classroom	2.75	0.72
6	12	Classroom activities provide examples from real life situations.	2.83	0.80
17	13	They give student opportunity to practice the language.	2.90	0.79
7	14	They present vocabulary and structures in appropriate contexts.	2.91	0.76
15	15	They require students to work in the classroom.	2.93	0.79
8	16	They focus on student as the main part of the teaching process.	2.98	0.80
9	17	They encourage student participation.	3.12	0.80
TOTAL			43.73	7.16

This table shows that the co-curricular activities are not playing its role in English language teaching and large classes are not been dealt with in a proper way. Student's background is ignored. Besides, interesting games which are a good feedback and provides motivation are neglected in line with the mother tongue. Visual aids are not used effectively during the classroom activities. The table shows that other problems of classroom activities should be taken into account in the process of teaching /learning English as a foreign language.

Conclusions

Having discussed the problems related to the classroom activities, it is time to reveal the following main five problems:

- Lack of co-curricular activities usage as prime source of students' weakness in the University of Tabuk.
- Classroom activities do not consider large classes when giving the English class.
- The classroom activities don't take into account the students' background.
- They do not include interesting games.
- They do not use the visual aids effectively.

For the first finding, this study might be the first in Saudi Arabia to reveal such a problem. The researchers think that the co-curricular activities should be considered as a main source of students' weakness in classroom activities. Dixon (1986) emphasized the idea that large numbers of students should be considered as a problem of foreign language teaching. The third problem that appears in this study introduces us to the importance of the student background. The problem of background knowledge has been mentioned by Lebauer (1985).

Regarding the fourth and fifth problems, they are emphasized in some communicative language teaching books, which is now followed in most of the developed countries, emphasized the ignorance of the mother tongue in foreign classroom activities, not only that but also they confirm the existence of interesting games as an important part of classroom activities. Methodologists consider translation as a source of problems in the acquisition of the second language and treat games as a source of motivation and as a reduction of boredom in the classroom.

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