

A Note on Comprehension Checking

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The focus in this note is on comprehension checking during aural/oral interaction, e.g. interrupting the telling of a story and asking students if they understood. There are two kinds of questions used for this kind of comprehension checking: Global, e.g. “Did you understand?” and Local, focused on a particular item used in the story or discussion, e.g. What does “vicarious” mean? To simplify discussion, the focus here is on comprehension checking while the teacher is telling the class a story.

The goal of comprehension checking during a story is to inform the teacher if input is comprehensible. We must ask whether comprehension checking is necessary.

Students generally (but not always, see below) know when they have not understood a message. If students feel that they have not understood, they should be able to communicate this to the teacher. In other words, if students know when they have understood, there is no need for comprehension checking.

Certain conditions must be met for this to happen: Most important, students must feel free to interact with the teacher.

Teacher-imposed comprehension checking (e.g. “tell me what I just said”) is only necessary when students will not indicate lack of comprehension, that is, when they feel they have no control over the

situation.

When comprehension checking is Interpreted as a test

Whether comprehension checks are aimed at global or local comprehension they can be interpreted as a test, raise anxiety, and take the focus away from understanding. Instead, the focus will be on preparing for the comprehension question, which often means having a translation ready to demonstrate comprehension. Also, local comprehension checking sends the message that students should fully understand every word and understand each word well enough to give an accurate translation, which is counter to what we know about vocabulary acquisition.

Reducing the need for comprehension clarification requests

Students need to be informed that they do not have to understand every word: Even optimal input will contain a little “noise,” a little incomprehensible input (unknown vocabulary, unacquired grammar). This is normal and harmless if it does not seriously impair comprehension.

When there are comprehension problems, in many cases, comprehension of the story will improve with more input; even the very next thing the teacher says may help listeners understand the flow of the story

and lead to more language acquisition. Students need to know this. Similar advice applies to reading as all.

Arguments in favor of comprehension-checking.

There are two arguments used to support teacher-initiated comprehension checks:

First, students sometimes think they understand but they don't. But errors in comprehension, as noted just above, often work themselves out with more input. Of course, when input is impoverished, when it consists of only a few sentences, one cannot be sure. But with longer, more natural input, we generally arrive at the correct interpretation.

A second justification for comprehension checks is that they force students to pay attention to input they would normally not pay attention to. Knowledge that a comprehension check is coming acts as an incentive to attend to a text or presentation that is difficult or boring. Surely a better way is to provide more interesting and more comprehensible input.

Nearly all language acquisition proceeds quite well without external comprehension checking. If we make sure input is interesting and comprehensible, are sensitive to students' indications of lack of comprehension, and make sure that students feel comfortable indicating lack of comprehension, there will be no need for a great deal of comprehension checking. Even shy students will not hesitate to ask for clarification when necessary; with truly compelling stories, students will really want to know what is taking place.

We have arrived at the same conclusions McQuillan and Tse (1999) did. Seely and Ray

(1999) argued that "it is impossible to know whether every student is ... understanding unless further steps are taken." Moreover, it must take place "early in the process of vocabulary acquisition...(and be) nearly instantaneous..." (p. 5).

But McQuillan and Tse point out that there should be "no expectation that students will understand every word of the story, nor [should they be] held accountable for such a standard ... Freed of this burden, students are much more likely to be engaged. As real listeners, students feel more comfortable asking questions or indicating a breakdown in comprehension when they do not understand. If that atmosphere is absent, then the problem is with the teacher, not the students. We believe that putting students on the spot with constant comprehension checking is counterproductive because it may raise student anxiety and certainly will break the flow of the storytelling itself" (p. 6).

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This paper was presented at the 2018/27th International Symposium on English Language Teaching and Book Exhibit, Taipei, Taiwan, November 9, 2018.

Using Sports Vocabulary to Strengthen English Language Skills of Engineering Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a small study that was taken up to examine whether using sports vocabulary in classroom assignments could influence and motivate undergraduate engineering students to take more interest in their English learning. Culturally Indians are observed to be very sports loving. One hundred and twelve 2nd year electrical engineering students were considered for the study and were divided into two groups, group 1 comprising the experimental group, and group 2 comprising the control group. Specific language tasks based on sports were given to the experimental group to ascertain their level of interest. A pre and post-test method was applied, in addition to obtaining qualitative feedback from group 1 students. The results reveal that there was a marked improvement in the interest level and in the score level of the students who were subjected to the intervention process.

Keywords: ESP, sports, sports vocabulary, classroom assignments, motivation

Introduction

A sport is not merely an institution with various sporting practices, coaches, players, spectators, sponsors, etc. Sport is also an activity that 'communicates a large variety of ideas' (Hill 2006, p.15). In today's times sport is very informative and can even fashion the ideological underpinnings of a society. As once noted by an American novelist, Thomas Wolfe wrote to Arthur Mann in February 1938:

"Is there anything that can evoke spring?"

The first fine days of April? Better than the sound of the ball smacking into the pocket of the big mitt, the sound of the bat as it hits the horsehide..." (Wolfe, 1983)

Arguably, what else can be more motivating than sports? Let us give a thought to this, as to how many Indian teenagers were glued to their televisions for the full schedule of cricket world cup 2015? Probably numerous! Youth is a time of burgeoning independence and overflowing energy. So sports are fun and perceived to develop young people's skills and talents to the

fullest. That is the one thing that they do not carry out to please their parents or satisfy their school obligations. Sports sometimes become a vehicle to stimulate interest in those students who are uninterested in academics (Gentile, L, 1980). Culturally Indians are observed to be sportive people. At National Institute of Technology (NIT), Rourkela, where the study has been conducted, the sporting environs are observed to be exceedingly dynamic with the majority of the students indulging in sports either as players or as spectators. Taking into account this high level of interest in games and sports among the students, it was decided to introduce tasks based on sports to harness the ample learning potential sports as a field had to offer. This was validated once the task was introduced to the students in their Language lab sessions. When the topic of the presentations on sports was given to the students, it was observed that they showed great enthusiasm to work on the task and complete it successfully.

The rationale of the Study

Nowadays educational climate being diverse, language lab sessions play a significant role in learning language skills in a happy atmosphere. In this experiment, it was intended that students who were not that confident about their English skills, develop an interest, and learn the language in a relatively relaxed atmosphere, while at the same time students with better English skills feel motivated to work toward a higher level of proficiency. It was made explicit from the outset that the objective of the task was

to improve the students' English communicative skills that included fluency and confidence, and not grammatical accuracy per se.

The Present Study

At NIT Rourkela, the basic idea behind the lab course is to give the engineering students practical, hands-on experience on English language skills, at the end of which they would be able to give formal presentations, face an audience, and generate enough confidence to face the placement interviews. Thus, while designing each task teachers have to be careful that they do not make the sessions boring for the students or else it becomes difficult for these students to concentrate continuously for three hours on a subject that has no connection to their area of study. The two sections experimented with consisted of 57 and 55 2nd year electrical engineering students respectively who had completed their school exposure to the language. The students had all successfully cleared the strict pan-India engineering entrance examination, and were ranked more or less similar in the test, as a result of which they were able to get into the much sought after the electrical branch. The section with 57 students was named as group 1, the experimental group, and the section with 55 students as group 2, the control group. These individuals use English essentially for wider communication alongside the native languages they speak, so for them achieving native-like competence is often not necessary or desired (Lee McKay, S, 2015). In such a background it becomes a massive

challenge to the teacher to design assignments that can challenge and at the same time interest the students for three hours.

Procedure

Pre-test

The experiment consisted of a pre-test for both the groups, intervention in the form of vocabulary practice and PowerPoint presentation for group 1, and again a post-test for both groups. The pre-test comprised of a list of hundred and ten terms relating to eleven different sports, ten words for each different sport respectively. The words were all carefully selected. Special care was taken to see to it that each term in addition to being related to sports, was also a part of either our daily vocabulary or of official communication. No prior information was given to the students regarding the test. The test was conducted in order to understand the students' previous knowledge of sports vocabulary. The second phase of this experiment was the classroom presentation for group 1. Group 2 being the control group was not assigned with the task. Group 1 students were divided into eleven groups each representing a different sport. The same sports that were selected for the pre-test were chosen by the students for the presentation.

Classroom Presentation by Group 1

Scaffolding was provided to the students through the following guidelines so that slides preparations for their presentations became easier.

- | Prepare a short, exciting presentation.
- | Start with an attractive introduction that will make your presentation stand out from the rest.
- | Then give the necessary details of the sport. Speak about the equipment used, tools and techniques, rules and regulations of the sport, number of countries the sport is played in, worldwide popularity of the sport, basic requirements for that particular sport, etc.
- | Talk about life-changing events in the life of its famous players. Motivate your friends with interesting short incidents and narratives about those players.
- | Along with your closing comments encourage as well as motivate your friends into playing that sport.

One week was provided to the students to prepare their slides. The final presentation including all the eleven groups continued for four weeks. The students were given half an hour to present, and another half hour was consumed in the post-presentation discussions.

Table 1: Example of the sports vocabulary used by the students along with their meanings and daily usage

Game	Word /Phrase	meaning of the word relating to sports/ other meaning	The sentence made with the term on the basis of daily usage.
Swimming	Dive into	Plunge one's body into something/ Start doing something immediately without hesitation	The swimmer <u>dived into</u> the flowing river/ The students of the dance academy <u>dived into</u> their practice as soon as their course started.
Basketball	Dribble	To bounce the ball repeatedly with one hand while running or walking / fall slowly or in thin streams.	He dribbled past a swarm of defenders / Rain dribbled down the window.
Athletics	Front runner	One who is leading in a competition or a race/ Someone who is expected to win	He is the <u>front runner</u> and he will win the next match too/ Sunitha is <u>af</u> <u>ront runner</u> for the new faculty position.
Boxing	Bout	Organized fight in boxing or wrestling/ a short period of some specific activity of some intense kind.	The next bout is between Mary Kom and Nicola Adams/ It was also revealed the 31-year-old suffered severe bouts of depression.

Table 1 shows a small glimpse of the actual words used by the students. E.g. the group that represented swimming used the word 'dive right into' in their presentation, which means, start doing something immediately without hesitation. They used it in a sentence while talking about Michael Phelps, the famous American Olympics swimming champion. The sentence mentioned, 'Michael Phelps dives right into for practice as soon as his day starts.' Here 'dives right into' is a phrase that can be used in our daily life. So the above table explains some of the words that the students used in their presentations.

Post-test

same list of vocabularies given in pre-test was

provided to the students of group 1 as well as group 2, and the post-test was conducted. These were then evaluated, and the result is represented in the following graphs.

Figure 1 shows the marks obtained by each student in group 1. A considerable level of increment can be seen in post-test when compared to pre-test. Some students have a high percentage of increase, while others have low. The low percentage of increment is perceived to be for the students who were observed to be not much interested in the presentations due to their lack of interest in sports. It can be seen that most of the students have shown an increment above average. This is because the majority of the class showed interest in presenting their

topics for which they willingly spent time for study and preparation. Moreover, the high increment is by the students who

showed interest as well as had a high level of proficiency in English speaking and writing skills.

Figure 1: Pre and post-test marks obtained by the students in group 1

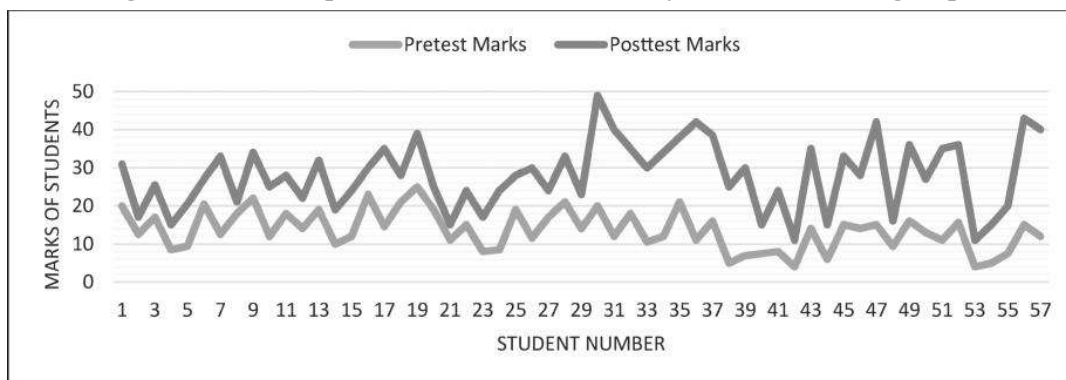


Figure 2: Pre and post-test marks obtained by the students in group 2

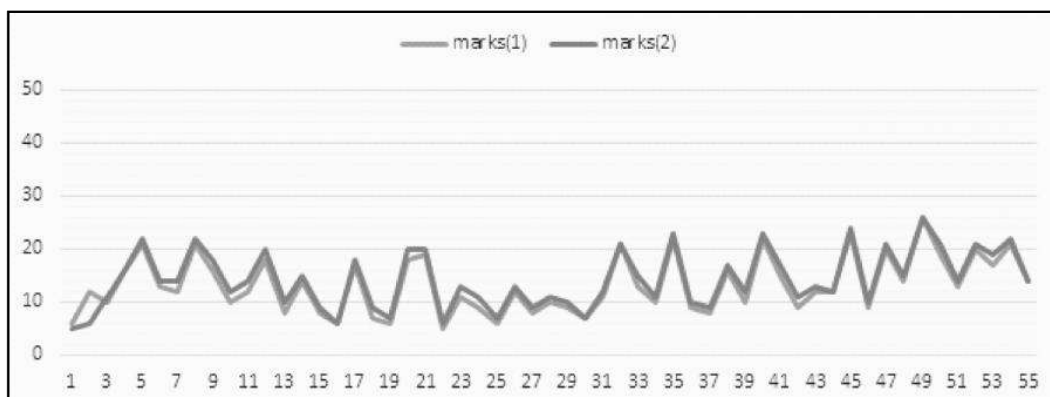


Figure 2 shows the marks obtained by each student in group 2. When compared to group 1 results there is only a marginal increment in the marks obtained in the post-test when compared to the marks obtained in the pre-test. Without any assignment practice being given to them as given to the group 1 students, no notable improvement is noticed in their post-test results.

Results

Student Feedback

Table 2: Feedback Form

Write (Yes/ No/ Not Sure) against each

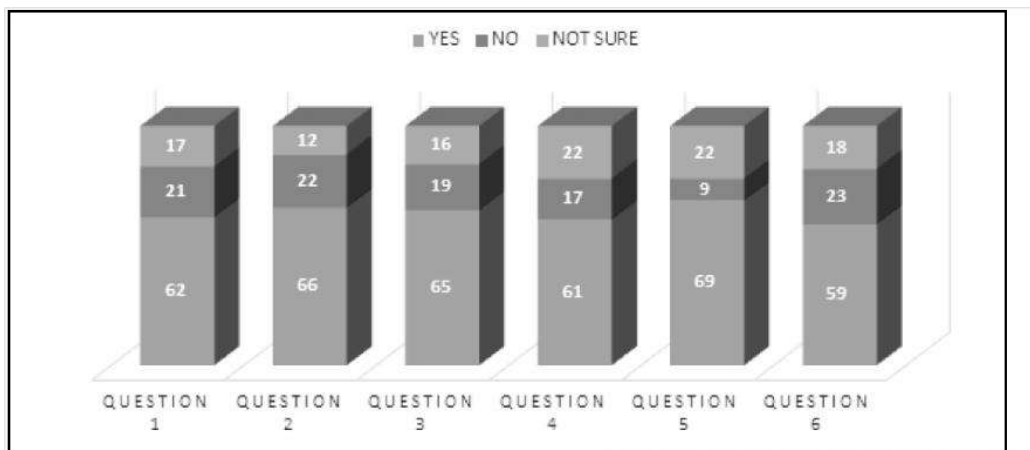
- question. 1) Was the task interesting?
- 2) Was the task interesting because the focus was on 'sports'?
- 3) Has your interest level in the language lab sessions increased?
- 4) Were you motivated towards

exploring more into the vocabulary of English?

5) Has your confidence level improved in order to face an audience?

6) Was the task useful? 7) In what way has the task been useful to you and what suggestions would you like to give to improve the course?

Figure 3: Graph showing the responses given by the students in the feedback form in percentage



Analysis of the Feedback

Figure 3 above represents the responses given by the students in the feedback form. The response to the first question clearly shows that quite a high percentage (62%) of the students found the task to be interesting. The second and third question forms the crux of this task justifies the argument put forward in this paper. (66% and 65%) Agreed with the fact that the task was interesting because the focus was on 'sports.' The fourth and the fifth questions show that a good percentage of students (61% and 69%) had accepted that they were motivated towards exploring more into the vocabulary of English and that their confidence level had increased when it came to facing an audience. And the 59% positive

reply to the sixth question suggests that a majority of the class found the lesson to be useful, yet at the same time we cannot ignore the fact that almost one fourth of the class, i.e., 23% of the class did not find the task useful, while some others were unsure about the usefulness of the task. Thus more effort is still required from the instructors to address the concerns raised by these groups of students, and encourage them towards taking more interest in classroom tasks and ultimately towards better English learning.

The open-ended question in the feedback form reveals the perceptions of the students towards the task that has helped us in better understanding the attitude of students towards such classroom tasks. The following

statements are some of the actual responses received from the respondents to the seventh question in the feedback form.

1. This task has improved my confidence to face an audience.
2. Yes, it has increased our interest in the language lab classes but if only we have to talk about our favourite sport.
3. We came to know the nuances of different sports.
4. Since I have come to know some new words, I use it while chatting with friends.
5. I come from a regional medium school which made me struggle with English in the presentation and hence could not speak all that I wanted in the limited time provided to me.
6. Some of the presentations were not very interesting.
7. Yes, I could improve my vocabulary, but the task was too short to bring a credible change in vocabulary intake.
8. I was very inquisitive to research about the sport and later present it before our friends which increased my self-confidence.
9. I have never been into sports, so it was difficult for me to get involved in the presentations fully.
10. The presentations were very fast for me, so I could not grasp much vocabulary from the presentations.

11. I am afraid of speaking before an audience but was able to present in a better manner as I had researched about the topic and was quite excited to convey it to my friends.

Concluding Thoughts

Second language researchers continue to debate how acquisition and learning relate to each other and how both might function in the language classrooms. Ellis (1997) specifies that SLA research findings may not provide straightforward guidance for the teachers, but it offers a wide range of concepts that teachers can interpret and make better sense of their own classroom experiences. At the end of the course analysing we can say that the reasons for the improvement of the vocabularies of the students are the presentations itself. Thus it can be concluded that young people find such tasks meaningful and motivating when the task involves an area that is a centre of their focus and forms a part of their immediate context like sports. The figures depicted above inform us that students have added some new vocabulary to their dictionary, and this has aided towards an increase in their confidence level while using the English language.

One notable drawback of this exercise is that students who are not into sports do not find the task stimulating and motivating enough. This category of students, even though a minority, is a part of the class and need to feel included in classroom tasks. A different problem that was observed was that in some presentations students became so much

engrossed in the sports stories that they got diverted from the real task of focusing on the vocabulary aspect.

The conclusion is not only derived from their test results but also our observations and interactions with the students. Students responded assertively about the increase in confidence level and vocabulary. However, they regretted that as the time provided for the presentation was thirty minutes, i.e., approximately six minutes to each student in the group, many of them were not able to convey all the information that they had gathered regarding the particular sport. Although the time spent in these classes is not enough for the students to become fluent in English, the results show that there were positive gains for the students at the end of the course. We perceive that the students left this language training lab with a new technique for learning and organising vocabulary. This can subsequently help them in increasing their lexical repertoire even outside the formal instructional setting. This was a small experiment conducted within a designated time-frame with a limited number of words at our disposal. Similar classroom tasks, taking into account universal youth interest areas like music, cinema, food, fashion, travel etc.

can be designed to address the needs of ESP students. More time can also be given to the assigned tasks to generate better results among the students. What is proposed in this paper is just an idea and its application suited to these engineering students, but the idea can very well be customised and extended to a different set of students in any other context.

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