Reciprocal Teaching in Fostering Listening Skills among Secondary Level Students

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Abstract

Reciprocal teaching strategy is a cognitive strategy employed in fostering the learners' reading comprehension skills. This paper explores the effectiveness of the strategy by far referring to the various researches done by various researchers and justifies why reciprocal teaching strategies are useful tools to enhance the listening skills of learners. The paper also focuses on various contemporary pedagogic theories that this strategy concurs with thus proving itself to be an

effective strategy that can be employed in classrooms. To conclude the paper sheds light on the importance of listening skills and how reciprocal teaching strategies can not only be used to enhance the higher-order thinking skills of the learners but also to subsequently engage learners in a meaningful and active conversation thus improving their speaking skills. The paper invariably discusses the significance of active learning and its role in bolstering the language skills of the learners.

Keywords: Reciprocal Teaching Strategies, Active Learning, Scaffolding, Listening Skills

1. Introduction

Listening to comprehend is an ultimate skill that one needs when using a language; as the ultimate purpose of a language is to understand what is being said and to be understood or in other terms to communicate (speaking). Nevertheless, for ages we have been focusing on reading and writing when teaching a second language. In this context, teaching English in a formal setting focuses more on textual comprehension and writing for various purposes and Indian education is no different. There have been numerous researches conducted in understanding the process of learning a second language and many theories have been developed to enhance the language skills. One such strategy that gained the attention and praise of educationists was the ‘Reciprocal Teaching Strategy’.

1.1 Reciprocal teaching Method.

Reciprocal teaching strategy/method is an instructional approach devised in fostering the learners’ comprehension of a text more systematically. This theory has gained much attention

due to its step by step approach of comprehending a text in a realistic and social context allowing learners to make the meaning of the text themselves with the necessary intervention of the teachers, thus allowing learners to take the responsibility of their learning. This strategy was first developed by Annemarie Sullivan Palincsar in 1984. Reading an unfamiliar text is not an easy task to achieve by all learners, it demands some comprehension and decoding strategies in place. These strategies can be of any type; from slowing the pace of reading to finding the meaning of a word from the context or simply by breaking it down to smaller meaningful chunks. Some learners avoid the text or get stuck at the part wondering the context of the word or an incident. Therefore, some comprehension strategies needed to be devised at least for the learners who are facing difficulties decoding a text. The 4 stages of reciprocal teaching helped learners to decode a text better, as they involve in a meaningful conversation. There are two types of reciprocal teaching: a) Reciprocal teaching only, b) Explicit teaching before Reciprocal teaching. The former directly engages learners in the 4 stages of the method and explains the method as it is being conducted, the latter is giving explicit information about the method before the reciprocal teaching.

1.2 Stages of Reciprocal Teaching Methods.

The primary focus of reciprocal teaching is on teaching students specific concrete comprehension strategies that can be employed in reading a new text and the instruction takes place between the teacher and a student as a dialogue thus making this a student-centered approach. The four stages that are involved in reciprocal teaching methods are: generating questions, summarizing, attempting to clarify word meaning, predicting respectively. This method takes place in a small group of students with an unfamiliar text to comprehend. They are

to read the text as a group and generate questions based on the text to check the initial understanding of the text and peers or the teacher intervene to help a learner understand the text during this stage. Followed by, Summarizing, which is when the learners share their overall understanding of the text thereby understanding the purpose, context and tone of the text, this again takes place in a collaborative way where one steps in to explain a part that was either missed out or misunderstood. The third stage is 'Clarifying', learners figure out the words or phrases that were difficult and discuss the context of it or seek teacher's assistance. The final stage is 'Prediction', learners predict what would happen next thus being piquing their curiosity for the text and making them more imaginative leading to higher-order thinking skills.

1.3. Reciprocal teaching to enhance Listening and subsequently Speaking skills.

This strategy initiates discussion and elicits learners' reactions to the text. Students' engagement can include, elaborating and commenting on another student's summary, suggest others' questions, commenting on others' predictions, requesting clarification of material they did not understand and help to clear the misunderstanding thereby encourage students to use grammatical structures in their oral exchange. These stages of reciprocal teaching can also foster the listening skills in the learners as it is important for the learners to make complete sense of a speech that they hear instead of looking for a word or a synonym. Taking into account the type of listening test that we conduct in class, these tests check the learners' memory and vocabulary skills majorly. Most of the listening skills exercise are filling in the blank with the missing word used by the speaker or looking for specific information. The skills required to comprehend a text don't go beyond skimming and scanning the lowest two thinking skills according to Bloom's taxonomy is put to use when testing the listening comprehension. In a similar listening test, when

a student was asked to give a gist of the conversation, s/he was unable to summarize as s/he was looking for specific information anticipation the part of the recording to enunciate the answer to be filed in the blank. Learners need to be given practice in listening and comprehending a text comprehensively. They should be able to predict the purpose and context of the audio played may it be a conversation, speech, interview or even a statement. Students should be able to understand the speaker's tone and mood according to the context, understand and predict the speakers' intension, understand the satire or sarcasm using the tone and intonation and all these have to be consciously taught and learned. When learners are engaged in meaningful conversation they are likely to overcome the fear and hesitation that impedes their speaking skills.

2. Literary Review

Reciprocal teaching methods align with many modern teaching approaches that place students as the center. According to Palinscar and Brown, 1989, they have no based their teaching methods on any of the following approaches as there were no references of these approaches in their works, however, these reciprocal teaching strategies coincidentally align with a few contemporary pedagogic approaches in use. The approaches are as follow:

2.1. Constructivist Approach

Reciprocal teaching is conducted in small groups of students in collaboration. According to Vygotsky's Social Constructivist theory, knowledge is constructed when communication takes place in a social context and ideas exchanged in the target language. Learners in reciprocal teaching are engaged in questioning each other's understanding of the text and summarizing the

text individually to the others in the group while others add points that are overlooked by the other students. Therefore, students work in collaboration and are engaged in an active interaction in the target language. Teachers in this strategy would initially give sentence structure to support questioning and prediction for grammatic accuracy. Teacher's instructions are initially explicit; they model the process of using these strategies until the students are familiar with the process, later the teachers support the students when their peers also fail to contribute. Specific feedbacks are given during the process. The tasks are set to the level of the learners and as the difficulty bar is slowly raised challenging the students more and more. This takes me to the next point Zone of proximal development.

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) was a concept developed by Lev Vygotsky. Zone of proximal development is "the distance between the actual development level as determined by individual problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotskij and Cole, 1981). The zone of proximal development is a stage where the learners are given external assistance to boost the confidence of the students. To achieve this, we need three major components, the more knowledgeable other, social interaction and Scaffolding. The more knowledgeable other is either an adult (teacher/parent) with a deeper knowledge of the subject than the student. Social interaction is one of the key features of social constructivism, in this context the learner interacts with the skillful learner and imitates. The final component is activities or a challenge given by the teacher or any peer who is more knowledgeable to conduct the learner through the ZPD and make him or her an independent learner. Reciprocal teaching methods precisely involves in making students more independent by slowly drawing the support and nudging them to the self-attainment.

2.2 Active learning:

Active learning is an extension of the constructivist theory which calls for learner-centered classes where learners take the responsibility of their learning while teachers monitor them and intervenes whenever needed. Active learning encourages group work where learners with the help of the material provided by the teacher make the meaning of the text using peers as their primary resource. To conduct seamless active learning sessions students should be given clear instructions and success criteria or rubrics should be shared during the activity for the students to have clear clarity on what they are expected to do. All the students during reciprocal teaching are aware that they need to make a complete understanding of the text to frame question and summarize once they make the complete sense of the text they help each other to clarify any doubts that linger in the group and take it to the next level of the thinking skills that is create/predict 'what next'. Thus, Reciprocal teaching actively engages in the comprehension of the text as the learners are given the complete responsibility of understanding the text instead of the teacher reading each line and explaining it to them. This also doesn't mean that the teachers don't have a role, in fact teachers now have a more sophisticated and significant role in understanding each student's performance and present students with necessary support material and orchestrating the leading to the desired learning outcome.

2.3 Scaffolding

Instructional scaffolding was a term first used by Jerome Bruner a cognitive psychologist. In the reciprocal teaching method, a teacher acts as a guide to the novice until the learners show little to an average understanding of the method. They are given smaller tasks until they are acclimatized with the method and slowly raise the challenge. Eventually they are ceded with

more tasks and more responsibilities until they become independent and experts themselves. The teacher during scaffolding reduces the complexity of the task based on the level of the students to more manageable tasks. They also pick resources to maintain students' interest, make critical features and demonstrate solutions when learners can recognize them. Scaffolding is more or less like the zone of proximal development. The scaffolding can be given in the form of cue cards, peer or teacher intervention, resources, etc.

2.4 Bloom's taxonomy

Learning objectives are set according to the complexity of the skill. Constructivist theory believes in achieving Higher order thinking skills such as synthesis (to create) and Evaluate (to assess) by conducting learners from lower-order thinking skills. Although lower-order thinking skills like Knowledge and Comprehension are equally significant skills, in the context of language comprehension and acquisition one needs to extend beyond to analyzing, evaluating and synthesizing. Active learning and constructivist together believe in sharing the learning objectives with the students at the start of the lesson and begin the lesson by testing the prior knowledge thus spiraling from simpler concepts to moving deeper into the subject towards more complex concepts. Reciprocal teaching also begins with simpler tasks and as learners get familiarized with the process and technique, the complexity of the task increases thus challenging the learners to achieve better competence.

2.5 Kolb's experiential learning: Reciprocal teaching is also majorly based on teacher modeling. Initially a teacher explicitly explains the method to her students and even demonstrates it allowing the learners to internalize the methods. This process majorly underpins Kolb's Experiential learning theory where the learner attempts to emulate the teacher and his peers,

slowly applying it in understanding a text and the experience is concrete when s/he can put the model into action finally reflecting on the method and its impact on the learning thus allowing self-reflection.

According to a researcher, John Haitte's groundbreaking work on the effect size of teaching and classroom practices in the learning outcome, reciprocal teaching is considered one of the best strategies that positively ensure the learning outcome. He states that this method allows learners to become more active, reflective and strategic readers (Haitte,2009).

3 Methodology

My work was mostly based on the significance of active learning strategies in enhancing the listening and speaking skills in secondary level learners of Government school, Chennai, Tamil Nadu. I chose a fairly well-reputed Government school in the urban part of the city and conducted a pre-test for 85 students of grade 11 from various groups like science, math, art and commerce. Of the 85 students, I chose 40 students for the study and these students were a mixed group of students with varied performance. Considering the reciprocal teaching method as one of the active learning strategies that can help learners to enhance their listening and speaking skills, I introduced the method to my students. I used the state prescribed textbook and picked the content out of the textbook and used the method in the class to teach the same content. For the listening practice, as the resources were limited in the textbook, I used real-life material/ resources to share with the learners. Before I introduced reciprocal teaching to the group, they were familiar with other active learning strategies such as think-pair-share, Roleplay, Jigsaw, Graphic Organizers (GOs), etc. However, after explicitly explaining and demonstrating the method I conducted it by using simple and shorter audio-visuals. This task was almost similar to

the 'React to the video' activity while the only difference is that the learners look for specific information like a set of vocabulary or the features etc. in 'React to the video' activity instead of comprehending the entire speech comprehensively. The challenge becomes more and more complex after every activity and finally students were asked to comprehend a conversation between an interviewer and interviewee. Initially students were given prompts to frame questions and share opinions such as sentence starters, phrases to share a difference of opinion, etc. subsequently allowing learners to pick the phrases and use them without aid. Two months of using reciprocal teaching strategies periodically, I noticed that students were able to summarize the audio track or even a text with much ease. They are more confident in sharing their ideas and reflecting on their peers' ideas. Not only the overall listening skills have improved but also the process aided in boosting the confidence level of the learners in speaking. The following tables of pre-test and post-test show the improvement in the listening comprehension skills of the learners.

Figure – 1

Figure – 2

3.1 Discussion:

The above shown are the pre-test and post-test results of listening comprehension conducted before and after the implementation of Reciprocal teaching method. In the pre-test none managed to score between 40-50 and after two months of learners being taught using reciprocal learning strategies, they have shown improvement.

According to the data presented above 7.5 percent of the learners score between 40-50, 25 percent of them scored between 30-40, 35 percent of the learners scored between 20-30, 30 percent between 10-20 and only 2.5 percent that is one student score less than 10. This graph compared to the previous graph (Fig.1) should a visible improvement.

4. Conclusion

From some of the learners' feedback I understand that they enjoy while they are actively engaged in the comprehension of a text or audio and that they are able to think more freely and

express their ideas clearly. I have found that the initial shyness and reluctance that they had shown in the beginning of the course was ebbing away and more enthusiasm is taking over. As the learners are able to comprehend the text entirely, they are able to pick the correct answer at the second go. Usually a recording is played twice and learners are able to comprehend the text entirely in the first time and are able to pick the right answer during the second time. This has also reflected in the text comprehension; learners have shown some improvement in comprehending a text.

5. Limitation

One of the limitations of the study was that the learner groups were always the same and were heterogeneous groups. I should have also tried putting the students in homogeneous group to check the competence of the slow-learners. At some instances I have felt that the slow-learners in a heterogeneous group were over-shadowed by the above-grade learners or some even have taken it as a ruse to not participate, however I have asked question while observing the activity in progress to ensure learner participation which could have been limited. Also, I could have used differentiation strategies by assigning differentiated task at process or product level to ensure more challenging task for above-grade learners and simpler-tasks for slow-learners.

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