



Enhancing language skills through English novel instruction

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Abstract

The use of literature, particularly novels, is crucial in English-as-Foreign-Language (EFL) classrooms for language skill development. Education today emphasizes holistic learning, fostering independence, and personality development. This approach requires rethinking traditional teaching methods and considering interdisciplinary aspects. English holds a pivotal role in creativity and communication fields, making it essential for fostering intercultural competence, identity development, altered perspectives, and tolerance. Literature greatly contributes to these goals. The study focuses on the impact of teaching novels in EFL classrooms, determining suitable texts for language learning. Novels are unanimously recognized as an effective tool for instilling reading habits in students. The primary objective of this study is to investigate the novel's potential to enhance students' language skills, focusing on vocabulary expansion and grammatical structure acquisition. Additionally, the study aims to identify shortcomings in current teaching methods employed for novels in classrooms. Through statistical analysis of tests conducted, this research successfully demonstrates that when novels are methodically and earnestly integrated into linguistic instruction, they significantly contribute to learners' language development. Despite the importance of novels in language education, their full potential remains untapped due to inadequate teaching approaches. The study reveals a notable disparity between students' pre-test and post-test scores, highlighting the impactful role of comprehensive and effective novel-based language teaching methods.

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Introduction

Over time, English has become exceedingly important and globally recognized. Around 600 million individuals across various countries speak English as their native language, contributing to its widespread use. The language's popularity stems from its status as a universal means of communication, facilitating international trade, cultural exchange, and the sharing of diverse values and beliefs among nations. The linguistic diversity in India is vast, with several prominent languages spoken across different states. States in India are often delineated along linguistic lines, each with its own rich history, culture, and value system, akin to the diversity within the European Union. For instance, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, where Telugu is the local language, have a combined population larger than that of several countries like France, South Korea, and Turkey. However, the prevalent use of English within these states, especially for intrastate business and governance, is undermining the native language's prominence. While English holds significance for interstate communication, central government dealings, and interactions with foreign entities, its extensive use within states where the majority speaks the same mother tongue seems unnecessary.

It's crucial to teach English, the modern lingua franca, yet it should be taught as a second language from an early age. The current statistics on English proficiency are somewhat unreliable due to political reasons, but approximately 30% of the population can speak English to varying degrees, with only about a third possessing reading and writing proficiency. This leaves a significant portion, around 70-80% of Indians, linguistically marginalized on a daily basis. This issue impacts anywhere from 770-900 million people or potentially even more, even considering the literacy rates. This number is considerably larger than the population of the UK. This situation, in a country that proclaims itself a "socialist democracy," is a glaring disenfranchisement. Rectifying this linguistic imbalance is arguably one of the simpler social constructs in India to address and amend.

The English language holds significant importance as a means of communication in various professional domains like administration, science, medicine, law, and engineering. The prevalence of English in these fields ensures its continuation for several decades to come. Moreover, reading plays a pivotal role in enhancing vocabulary and language skills. It goes beyond recognizing words or decoding their meanings; it involves a conscious and subconscious thinking process. Readers use their existing knowledge to interpret texts, and this is particularly crucial for second-language learners. Their cultural background and thinking patterns influence how they understand the text compared to native speakers. English teachers aiming to develop reading skills among second language learners need to focus on teaching thinking skills similar to those practised by native speakers. Effective reading skills not only alter a learner's cognitive perception but also impact their cultural beliefs and values. These skills can be honed in an English language lab, emphasizing practices such as previewing, predicting outcomes, questioning author intentions, and identifying relationships between ideas. It's important to teach these skills one at a time, encouraging learners to work collaboratively and discuss their thoughts. Additionally, making learners aware of comprehension processes and strategies they apply while reading aids in better learning. Reading extensively and multiple exposures to the same words further enhance learning. Interactive lessons on specific reading texts provide learners with ample opportunities to express their interpretations. Teaching English reading skills to second-language learners requires a conscious effort from both learners and teachers to achieve the desired results. The study delves into teaching novels and their influence on language skills. In EFL classrooms, literature holds great importance, especially in determining suitable texts for language learning. Among these, novels stand out as the most effective tool for instilling reading habits in students.

Incorporating literature into the classroom, it's crucial to choose appropriate books suited for the learners. One method for finding the right literature involves the "three C's - catalogue, canon, criteria." Catalogues list books by age or reading level, allowing teachers to select relevant and inspiring material for their class based on their understanding of the students. Canons provide guidelines for selecting 'good' literature, though they might sometimes present challenges as certain works could be too advanced for specific age groups, risking disinterest among students. Another approach involves a combination of teacher guidance and student involvement in the selection process.

This method recognizes the importance of understanding the language, content, and cultural aspects of foreign-language texts. It breaks down the process into three phases: pre-reading, reading, and post-reading. Each phase aims to support learners in interacting with the text and developing interpretation strategies. It emphasizes that reading and comprehension are complex skills that require step-by-step training.

Pre-reading phase

The pre-reading phase is a crucial step in 'learning to learn', preparing students for text engagement and fostering their sense of responsibility for learning. Essentially, it acts as groundwork and is essential for subsequent phases. This phase aims to pique students' interest, curiosity, and focus, ensuring they approach an unknown text with the right mindset. Additionally, it serves to uncover and activate students' prior cultural and linguistic knowledge, potentially providing supplementary information. Possible pre-reading activities include utilizing visual or auditory media like pictures, videos, or photos, initiating brainstorming sessions, or introducing texts such as journal articles.

While-reading phase

The primary aim of the while-reading phase is to ensure students effectively engage with the text and encourage active reading. As longer literary texts cannot be entirely covered in class and require at-home perusal, learners need to be engaged through specialized tasks or worksheets. These methods intend to cultivate creativity in students, encourage them to note down significant information, develop their ability to form and express personal opinions, and foster reflection on the text. Reading activities come in various forms, blending both playful and systematic approaches. For instance, a playful activity could involve "jumbled phrases," where students arrange sentences from the text in the correct chronological order. Conversely, systematic activities like "Multiple-choice" questions allow students to test their current understanding of the material.

Post-reading phase

Following the completion of reading, it's essential to incorporate post-reading activities. These activities aim to prompt students to apply their analytical and creative skills to the text and also extend their thinking beyond it. They encourage students to explore new insights or broader issues. One way to achieve this is by engaging students in rewriting passages into different text formats, expanding upon or providing clear definitions of specific text excerpts. Additionally, learners can critically and personally engage with the material by writing reading recommendations or enhancing their vocabulary through word exploration in a dictionary.

Adequate reading instruction involves several key elements for children to develop their reading skills effectively:

1. **Meaningful Reading:** Understanding the meaning conveyed through printed text.
2. **Frequent Reading Opportunities:** Regular and intensive reading experiences.
3. **Spelling-Sound Relationships:** Consistent exposure to spelling and sound correlations.
4. **Understanding Alphabetic Writing System:** Learning about the alphabet's nature and functionality.

5. **Understanding Spoken Word Structures:** Recognizing the structure of spoken words.

Moreover, further progress in reading proficiency depends on:

1. **Alphabetic Sound Representations:** Grasping how sounds are symbolized in the alphabet.
2. **Extensive Reading Practice:** Engaging in varied text types to achieve fluency.
3. **Background Knowledge & Vocabulary:** Having adequate knowledge and vocabulary for comprehension.
4. **Comprehension Monitoring:** Developing strategies to monitor and rectify misunderstandings.
5. **Continued Interest in Reading:** Maintaining motivation to read for diverse purposes.

Successful acquisition of reading skills typically aligns with normal or above-average language abilities, early childhood experiences that foster literacy motivation, exposure to letters and spoken word structures, and effective reading instruction in schools. Disruptions in any of these factors may delay or hinder reading development. Poor reading outcomes, often linked with poverty and minority status, are attributed to various risk factors such as limited access to literacy-rich preschool environments and insufficient quality reading instruction.

The approach of group or partner reading can significantly improve fluency and vocabulary among young readers. When a struggling reader is supported by others, it boosts their confidence in tackling a book. Techniques like echo reading, where a line is read and repeated by the class, or group reading familiar texts can aid comprehension. Retelling stories post-reading enhances comprehension. Students summarizing the story verbally, through drawings, or dramatic reenactments encourage the use of new vocabulary words and test their understanding. If a student struggles to retell the story, it often signifies a lack of comprehension due to text difficulty. In an effort to strengthen language skills through literature, performance tests, both pre-and post-tests, are conducted. The pre-test assesses the students' existing knowledge and aims to understand the novel's role in language development. 60 students (30 males and 30 females) from class V, proficient in English as a foreign language, constitute the sample group. The primary objective is to evaluate linguistic development in English as a foreign language after the post-test intervention.

The two-hour session includes instruction in various language arts, focusing initially on reading and then writing. This involves activities like vocabulary development, word identification, and comprehension exercises. Students engage in repeated readings of the same text to enhance reading speed, sight vocabulary, and comprehension. Additionally, spelling programs are tailored to practice frequently misspelt words, and high-frequency terms while writing. The students not only read and comprehend the novel but also share their ideas, thereby enhancing their speaking abilities. The selected novel, "Animal Farm" by George Orwell, portrays Old Major's dream of animals living free from human oppression, leading to the establishment of Animal Farm. However, power struggles among the animals, particularly Napoleon's rise to dominance, lead to corruption and a return to human-like behaviour. The novel's style offers numerous teaching possibilities, especially to relate societal aspects. It is presented in the past tense, filled with humour and offers

high-frequency vocabulary and practical sentence structures for English learners. Teachers utilize pictures from the novel to enhance detailed descriptions, write down unfamiliar words, and stimulate students' verbal and cognitive competencies, fostering interest and curiosity in the story. Certainly! Here's an organized breakdown of exercises and approaches that can aid students in comprehensive reading:

1. **Page Titling:** Assigning titles to each page helps in referencing specific events or moments within the text.
2. **Critical Quotes:** Identifying and discussing quotes that hold significant meaning or provoke thoughtful discussion points.
3. **Anticipatory Questions per Chapter:** Formulating questions before delving into a chapter can provide cues about essential elements or themes in that chapter.
4. **Question Jotting:** Taking note of questions while reading helps in reviewing critical information, predicting upcoming events, and fostering engagement with the text.
5. **Vocabulary Identification:** Underlining or noting crucial vocabulary assists in understanding the story. Students can define these words using context clues, distinguishing between unfamiliar words that are crucial and those that are less essential to comprehending the text.
6. **Literary Device Recognition:** Noting and analysing the use of literary devices by the author and identifying how they contribute to the story's theme or plot development.
7. **Psychological Aspects:** Understanding psychological aspects embedded in the text, analysing their significance, and organizing thoughts to comprehend the novel better. This involves identifying connections between excerpts, exploring themes, understanding implied or omitted information by the author, and relating it to essential questions about the theme.

These exercises collectively enhance students' comprehension, analytical, and critical thinking skills while engaging deeply with the text.

Students may also begin to share writing from other sources which they come across in their own reading experiences. While not all of it may be suitable for classroom reading or discussion. At the end of the post-reading, the students need to introspect on certain questions,

1. **Meaning in the Context of the Whole Work:** Reflecting on the text's significance in relation to the entire work aids in understanding its broader implications and themes.
2. **Author's Explicit vs. Implied Statements:** Differentiating between what the author explicitly states and what might be implied encourages critical thinking and analysis.
3. **Impact of New Content on Existing Knowledge:** Evaluating how newly encountered content influences existing knowledge and shapes expectations for the rest of the text helps in building a comprehensive understanding.
4. **Fitting into Historical Contexts:** Understanding the text's relevance to historical contexts provides insight into the socio-cultural aspects influencing the narrative.
5. **Relation to Theme and Essential Questions:** Assessing how the text aligns with the overarching themes and answers or raises essential questions formulated throughout the reading process.

6. **Unanswered Questions and Lacking Information:** Identifying lingering or unanswered questions prompts students to recognize gaps in their understanding and the information they need to fill those gaps.
7. **Emergence of New Questions:** Noting new inquiries that arise from the reading helps in continuously engaging with the text and exploring further aspects.

Encouraging students to delve into these aspects fosters critical thinking, deepens comprehension, and prompts a more nuanced understanding of the text's nuances and implications.

Students at the end of the reading practice understand the pattern and meaning of the text written by the novelist. By studying the structure of sentences, paragraphs, pages, and chapters, and then analyzing the ideas within those constructs, the teacher facilitates the students to construct meaning from the texts. This process of understanding the story from pictures however takes up a new dimension of moving into the next strategy of imaging pictures in connection with the text.

Table 1

	Pre-test	Post –test	Gain
Vocabulary	1.67	3.89	2.22
Comprehension	1.82	4.01	2.19
Spelling	1.71	3.82	2.11
Pronunciation	1.55	3.73	2.18
Linguistic ability	1.38	3.55	2.17

This happens out of strenuous practice where students take additional hours of their own interest during their leisure. The teacher can collect records of the students which may include records of books read by students during their silent reading period, teacher anecdotal records of classroom observations, and teacher records of books read by the students to identify changes in him/her.

Table 2

	Pre-test	Post –test	Gain
Upper ability	3.02	4.07	1.05
Middle ability	2.19	3.56	1.37
Lower ability	1.05	2.87	1.82

Looking carefully at Table (1), one can find that the greatest number of the students in the pre-test is quite poor, and their comprehension is very low. Many have even failed, the total number of them had failed to pass the test or give acceptable results in the test. This indicates the need to build up new appropriate strategies and techniques which aim at activating the students to participate actively in dealing with the novel by asking them to do many assignments. This will certainly encourage the students to be active. Then, what is required from the students is to be motivated, active, and creative, not to act as passive learners who wait to get ready-made information from their instructor or from other references. Examining the levels of success and failure in the post-test, one can discover that the student's level is totally different from that in the pre-test. Such a result strongly supports the change and development of the students' language not only is this but it also supports that their ability to comprehend the materials of the novel has risen considerably. After the intervention process, the methods used for reading

motivation caused an increase in reading interest and ability demonstrated by these students, test results and our observations indicate that students were actively involved in their reading habits, attitudes, and abilities. A notable outcome of this study was the dramatic increase in reading comprehension among all students. It is obviously clear that readers had the ability to read but lacked the desire. Later after the period the inculcation of reading books drastically increased with reading abilities. The study survey noted that those students who had the least interest in reading at the beginning of the program were among those who had made the greatest gains in reading achievement in the post-tests.

Conclusion

The study aimed to assess the effectiveness of using novels in developing students' language skills, specifically in terms of vocabulary and grammatical structures. The analysis of both pre-test and post-test results indicated a significant difference, suggesting that proper and serious utilization of novels in language education can yield substantial benefits. The study highlighted the deficiency in the procedures and techniques used in teaching novels in classrooms, attributing the low scores in the pre-test to traditional methods that may neglect active engagement with the text. Students tended to rely on general notes and information provided by teachers or other references rather than engaging directly with the original text. This led to a disregard for the real value and importance of the novel in the classroom setting.

A critical point raised was that the emphasis on literary elements over language activities weakened students' comprehension of language skills and grammatical structures present in the original text. Traditional approaches seemed to overlook the potential of novels to enhance language skills like listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, the study revealed that when approached from a linguistic perspective, novels could offer foreign language learners a rich source of vocabulary items and grammatical structures. It stressed the importance of using novels as a valuable resource in teaching English as a foreign language.

Furthermore, the study recommended six steps for language trainers to increase students' motivation to read and enhance their reading skills. These steps included activities like daily reading aloud, sustained silent reading, encouraging personal reading enjoyment, facilitating book sharing, providing diverse reading materials, and promoting collaborative reading habits. Although simple, these recommendations aimed to cultivate lifelong reading habits among students and could potentially lead to significant improvements in reading comprehension and overall learning. Implementing these simple practices may pose challenges in terms of scheduling within the school day, but the potential benefits for students, making them enthusiastic readers and learners in the long run, outweigh the challenges.

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