

Moving Beyond the Mill: Application of the Eclectic Approach to Improve Teaching English as a Second Language for Tertiary Level Learners

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Abstract

Teaching English as a second language has been among the few persistent failures in the Sri Lankan education system nearly for six decades. The dogmatic devotion to limited approaches, inadequacy at theoretical, creative and practical expertise of teachers and learner isolation have been negatively affected the scenario, where tertiary level learners are at a dire stake, against the exceptionally competitive employment market. Hence, the need of a complementary holistic approach is a demand of the time, to compensate the gap and to empower the intellectual youth of the island. Thus this study endeavoured to investigate the effect of the application of eclectic approach as a teaching pedagogy on the performance of the tertiary level learners following English as a second language in Sri Lanka. Experimental research design was utilized having based on the theoretical principles of Kumaravadivelu's Macro Strategic Framework of Post Method Pedagogy, Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis of Krashan's Theory of Second Language Acquisition. The simple random sampling method was used to select 100 first year students from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura Sri Lanka, and divided into control and experimental groups having 50 in each. The study was conducted for 15 weeks and Pretest Posttest Equivalent Group Design was used to collected data. Both descriptive statistical tools, i.e., mean, standard deviation, inferential statistics, i.e., t test were used to analyze the collected data. The results of the study indicated that the eclectic approach has a significant effect on the learner performance against the traditional method of teaching.

Keywords: Eclectic Approach, Effective Teaching Pedagogy, Second Language Teaching, Tertiary Level Learners

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Introduction

Teaching English as a second language was one of the constitutionalized policies, since the liberation from the colonial manacles in Sri Lanka (Perera, 2010). Irrespective of numerous amendments implemented to make each and every individual in the country to be equally empowered with the language, it has been among the few persistent failures in the Sri Lankan education system, nearly for six decades. The dogmatic devotion to limited teaching and learning approaches, inadequacy at theoretical, creative and practical expertise of teachers, unequal distribution of human resources, especially to the schools in the rural areas and learner isolation have been negatively affected the scenario, where tertiary level learners are at a dire stake, against the exceptionally competitive employment market. According to the statistics, nearly a 20% of the university entrants have achieved the minimum qualification in the subject of General English at the G.C.E. Advanced Level Examination after thirteen years of school education having been taught English as a second language. Though the university education stands as the third circle of education in the country, majority of the fresh undergraduates are at the beginners' level in their English language competency. Securing a pass grade for English in the University Test of English Language (UTEL) has been made as a mandatory requirement to be a successful graduate in the country and the very step to promote the importance of English language competency in the tertiary level learners has become a hindrance for many to achieve the dream of being a graduate, irrespective of their high grades scored for selected subject. Hence, the need of a complementary holistic approach is a demand of the time, to compensate the gap and to empower the intellectual youth of the island.

With respect to the evolution of teaching English as a second language, a number of different teaching and learning methods and strategies have been experimented by language scholars in education (Ajere and Omolua, 2010). Though most of them have been successful in the conduction of the language teaching process and productive language reception contexts against the traditional methods of teaching, (Agboghorom, 2014; Adeyemo and Babajide, 2014) none of them have been fully successful to produce a competent language learner (Perera 2010). The intention of utilizing the eclectic method is to link experiences derive from the real life situations with language teaching and learning process to make a more hospitable nexus between the language learner and the target language (Kumar 2013).

This study endeavoured to investigate the effects of the application of eclectic approach as a teaching pedagogy on the language learning performance of the of the tertiary level learners following English as a second language in Sri Lanka . The sample of the research was selected from the largest public university in the country. A sample of 100 undergraduates are exposed to 150 hours of English language teaching and pretest posttest equivalent group design was utilized to collect data in a form of a skills assessment paper carrying 100 marks conducted before and after the experiment.

Background Literature

A theoretical landscape to the study

Language learning is a purposeful cognitive performance that requires multiple biological, psychological, sociological strengths. Perfection of language learning is not a result after a rigorous drill or a laborious mission. The general assumption of the language learning in mid 90s was first to learn the structure, then to practice the structure and finally to achieve accuracy and fluency through practice. Dashing these common attitudes of language learning, the Input Hypothesis of Krashen (1985) explained that, the complete reverse of the existing believes of the actual language learning route was the way to achieve successful second language acquisition. According to Krashen (1982) “we acquire by going for meaning first and as a result we acquire structures” (p 20). Therefore, comprehensive input is essential to understand the target language, which is empowered by the extra linguistics knowledge and once it is acquired through successful communication, (i + 1) is automatically achieved. (Gass, Susan M. & Selinker.2008). On the contrary, learner’s ability to understand and contextualize what he/she learns would bring him/her further in the stages of language learning process. And to cater for this comprehensive input , four intrinsic psychological factors were introduced as Affective Filter Hypothesis, that manipulated the language learning process in an individual. The levels of motivation, anxiety, fear and self-confidence accordingly contribute to the language learning process (,Krashen 1985, Ellis 1994). And According to Du (2009) “Teachers can find out the effective teaching tactics which can cultivate the students’ active learning through the analysis on the inner connection between the students’ affective factors and L2 learning”(p164).Therefore, second language teaching and learning process should have more focus on comprehensibility of the input, exposed to the learner than the traditional explicit drilling of structures one after the other with no authentic touch of the contexts in which it could occur. Apart from that, teachers, educators should have equal emphasis on the affective factors that are individually unique to learners and design teaching techniques to combat with these psychological barricades.

During 1990 many researches on language studies and teachers of second language teaching realized that there is no single method or study conducted that eventually lead for a successful second language teaching or learning accomplishment (Brown 2002). And this eventual realization gave rise to the Post Method Era, which explored for an alternative to method. According to Kumaravadivelu (2003), teacher autonomy and principled pragmatism were observed as salient features of this post method condition while drawing three pedagogic parameters as Particularity, Practicality and Possibility. The essence of the triplet of parameters was language teaching should be a conscious and pragmatic combination of theory and practice, which must be enveloped with higher levels of flexibility to accept, respect and operate according to the demands of the learner and teacher’s spacious role in exploring methods and strategies to bring out a productive teaching process that ultimately gift the learner with a rich sense of language learning experience (Kumaravadivelu 2006). The ten macro strategic framework of post method pedagogy drew general guiding principles that suited for a classroom atmosphere (Kumaravadivelu 2003) amply provided with micro strategies to boost learner performance with an animated sense of interaction with the target language and a sustainable level of language retention.

Rationale for the selection of eclectic method

The genesis of the eclectic method was a counter response to the “profusion” of language teaching strategies proliferated in 1970s and 1980s, most of which were either not flexible or singularly less productive (Suleman & Hussain 2016). Eclecticism is a teaching mechanism escorting the teacher beyond the borders of one particular strategy in order to integrate a number of different methodologies, principles with respect to the needs of the learners. (Lazarus & Beutler, 1993). According to Kumar (2013) “language should not be separated into chunks like pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary (p 1)”. Rivers (1981) believed that eclectic method “absorbed the best technique of all the well-known language teaching methods” (quoted by Stern 2003) to fulfill the fullest sense of accomplishment of the language competency (Hammerly 1985, Drozdial- Szelest & Pawlak 2013). Palmer (1964) was one of the exponents of the eclectic approach, illustrated its operation as “find the right stone to kill the right bird and it is advisable to kill one bird with more than one stone” (Drozdial- Szelest & Pawlak 2013). This aspect of the method can be further understood according to Rivers (1981) as it generates an enthusiastic learning atmosphere which is devoid of fear and deliberate practice, students are animatedly persuaded to exchange and interact with the target language more lively through the activities, intentionally selected by the teacher understanding the need and the talent of the students. The variety of activities, elevated amount of students interaction and active learning, objective correlative and quick results are the predominant features of the method (Kumar 2013) bring out not only academic achievement, but also the trust, attention and positive attitudes of students regarding the language learning process (Yapici 2016).

The application of the eclectic method to the context of adult learning is timely appropriate as motivation, language retention and participation have become continuously observed as low in operation in most of the occasions irrespective of their geographical and demographic situations. Usefulness of the target language is a key factor in this regard and utilization of eclectic method is so vital to maintain sustainable level of motivation among adult learners as the method can accommodate the requirements of the users in a more time effective manner (Baker & Jones 1998). Unlike the traditional teaching methods uniformly treat all learners alike in a group, the eclectic approach is more flexible towards the individual differences among students, allowing teacher to have a “one –on-one dialogue” with students (Akdeniz 2016). Since learning a foreign language demands a learner to produce the target language verbally, make sense of what he or she listens and reads and finally to produce language which is grammatically and pragmatically accurate (Iscan 2017) because the application of the eclectic approach is much more influential than the application of methods which are limited within their own limits.

According to Biloon (2016) eclectic method is the best mechanism to teach English as second language to tertiary level classrooms with fairly large number of students against the ideal of 15 students in a class, having given fewer face to face teaching opportunities. It gives a tremendous scope to “personalize” the lessons according to the “needs “of the students. In other words eclecticism enables students to learn, practice, engage, understand and finally acquire a satisfactory level of competence because eclectic method favorably caters to “internalize, use and remember “ the target language with its varied sequence of activities on par with their needs. Further

eclectic method is not just a “concrete” method but a productive combination of methods or strategies to address listening, speaking, reading and writing skills all together in to a harmonious whole (Kumar 2013, Hammerly 1985, Sharma 2008). The five successful features demonstrated by Luo, He & Yang (2001) (cited in Lianli 2011) as 1) determine the purpose of the each individual method, 2) be flexible in the selection and application of each method, 3) make each method effective, 4) consider the appropriateness of the each method, 5) maintain the continuity and the process are further arranged into a three stage process as first stage of “ teacher centered at the input stage, second stage of “learner centered at the practice stage and third stage of “ learner centered at the production stage”. This showcases a more student centered, “logical, and pluralistic” (Mellow 2002) scope of this language teaching strategy, allowing language practitioners to carefully select, plan and implement activities to boost the enthusiasm, interaction and language competency of learners.

Application of the salient features of eclectic method

Situational approach was favoured by British linguists, and it focused on the “ close relationship” between the structure of the target language and the context/situations in which it occurred. Because they viewed language learning as a “purposeful activity “ that demanded authenticity (Richards & Rodgers 2001). As Halliday, McIntosh & Stevens (1964) explained “ the emphasis is now on the description of language activity as a part of the whole complex of events which together with the participants and the relevant objects and make up actual situations”. Most importantly, these scholars emphasized more to the development of an approach which is more communicative in its operation than being structural. The focus was more on vocabulary and grammatical structures because they directly related to the improvement of the reading skills (Christison & Murray 2014).

Communicative language teaching approach is another salient feature of eclectic method and in other words it was considered as the “ most influential language teaching methodology” in the world (Canale & Swain 1980).The demand for communicative competence has grown more widely than ever before (Ahamad & Rao 2013) because the primary objective behind this approach is to improve the communicative competency of its learners because proficiency at the language is more regarded than him/her adherence to the structure of the target language. The flexibility and the immense freedom within communicative language teaching to adopt language teaching process to the needs and the ability level of the learners are commendable (Li 2012).

Participatory approach or Freirean approach demonstrates content based instructions to make language learning scenario more of a natural activity. It allows language learners to engage with day to day practical problems they meet in life and use the target language to solve them. According to “ The Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (1970) Paolo Freire explained that a learner should be given a choice about what they learn and how they learn it. On the other hand, it is the responsibility of the teachers to loosen the grip of the teacher centered teaching methods and encourage the learner to have a complete control of the target language fully, with minimum involvement of the teacher. The function of the teacher is to be responsive to the needs of the learners

and make amicable atmosphere to interact with the language. As (Berns, 2010, Phipps & Guilherme 2004)

Most of the researches conducted on eclectic method, were either about the evaluation on the practicality of the approach in a theoretical perspective or its effects on the improvement of language skills individually. However, according to the literature, language teaching need not to be “chunked” (Kumar 2013) because there is an intricate nexus among the skills. Therefore, observation of the contribution of eclectic method to the second language teaching and learning process should be done holistically.

Statement of the Problem

Teaching English as a second language has been in the country’s teaching practice nearly for six decades with mild improvements against the set national goal of empowering each and every individual in the country with equal level of language competency. Irrespective of the number of initiatives taken by the succeeding governments to make a progress in the competency levels of the English language of the nation, a very thin population has acquired the needed level of competency whereas majority of the learner population strive to survive with poor second language aptitude. This aspect of the problem is quite visible among the tertiary level learners, who performed well in the most competitive G.C.E Advanced Level examination to secure a seat in few public universities in the country. Though they are representatives of the averagely intellectual young learners of the country, nearly 80% of them suffer from lack of second language proficiency to combat with the excessively competitive employment market. Having based on this scenario the research problem of this study is “How does the application of eclectic method improve the language skills of tertiary level learners following English as a second language?”

Research Hypothesis

With respect to the aforesaid research question a research hypothesis was formed as:
H1: Application of eclectic method improves the performance of the language skills of tertiary level learners following English as second language.
Following null hypothesis was also tested:
H0: Application of eclectic method does not improve the performance of the language skills of tertiary level learners following English as second language.

Methodology

Research Design

Participants

Two classes carrying 50 first year students in each, out of 18 Compulsory English classes in the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka were randomly selected for the study and their consent for the study was taken prior to the conduction of the experiment. The sample of the participants were homogeneous that as a whole all most all of them share nearly equal levels of education, exposure to the native and the second language, socio political atmosphere and age. Equivalent nature of these

variables will then contributively assist to measure the effects of the experimental group against the control group when they are approximately identical in physical attributes.

Instruments

Main instruments used in the study were pretest and post-test. Each test involved four skill assessment questions to represent four language skills. The pretest carried 100 marks which included 10 questions approximately covering four language skills as an ordinary language competency evaluation test. 25 marks were allocated for each skill though the questions scattered without having a skill specific categorization. Marks were allocated according to the correct number of responses in both reading and listening and grammar based objective questions and two separate marking formulas were used for the question on essay writing and questions appeared to evaluate speaking on a written basis. The posttest also consisted with ten questions, similar to the pretest, was administered at the end of the experiment and same marking formula were used for the evaluation process.

Procedure

The duration of the study was a period of 15 weeks (Three months and three weeks). The second semester of the first year compulsory English course was selected for the study and two lesson units were prescribed to this semester (Lesson 03 – Places and Lesson 04- Forces of Nature). The lesson layout of the two lessons were drawn and activities were carefully selected to assimilate the four language skills on par with the needs of the students. A number of teaching techniques were selected under participatory approach, communicative approach and situational approach as language games, pair group activities, group presentations and discussions, documentary and mute videos, dramatization and role plays, news reading sessions, competitive mind mapping, listening incorporated reading activities, problem solving activities, peer correction, emailing and posting letters and mirror wall were the teaching activities selected to teach the two lesson units along with the text book reference. All the aforesaid teaching techniques were utilized to deliver teaching to the experimental group while no such activities were especially incorporated into the teaching of the control group.

Data Analysis

Data collected from the pretest and the post-test was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Statistics (SPSS) version 22. Descriptive statistical tools, i.e., mean, standard deviation, inferential statistics, i.e., t test were utilized to measure the collected data.

Results and Discussion

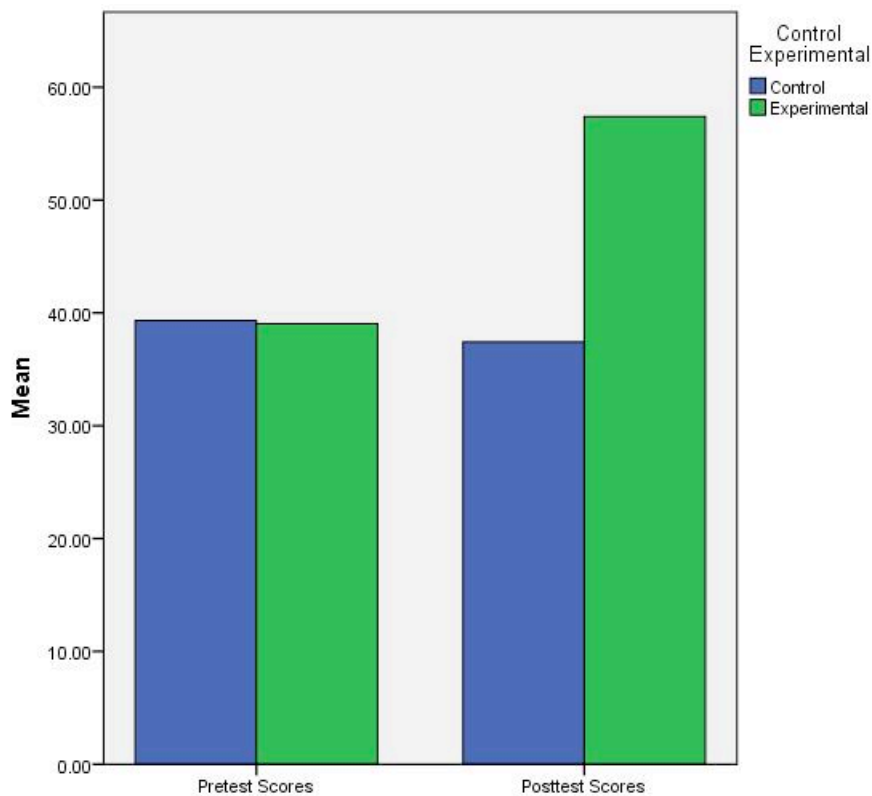
The purpose of the study was to investigate the impact of the application of eclectic method to the improvement of language skills of the tertiary level learners who follow English as second language. Pre-test post-test equivalent groups design was employed to tally with the experimental nature of the study. Raw data was classified, organized, tabulated and analyzed on the basis of descriptive statistics i.e., mean, standard

deviation and inferential statistics i.e., t-test and the interpretation of the data as follows.

Table 1 : Summary of the scores recorded in the post-test

Groups	Descriptive Analysis			Inferential Analysis	
	N	Mean	St.Dev	t - value	p - value
Control	50	37.42	5.5	-14.92	0.000
Experimental	50	57.39	7.73		
Significant	df = 99			table value of t at 0.05 = 1.96	

Table 1, showcases the computed t value was recorded to be -14.92 which is considered as statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) because this computed t value is greater than the tabulated value of t at 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis of “Application of eclectic method does not improve the language skills of tertiary level learners following English as second language” was rejected. Descriptive and inferential analysis associated to the language improvement of students in the control group (Mean = 37.42, SD = 5.50) and experimental group (Mean = 57.39, SD = 7.73) shows the variance in the student performance in post-test approving the alternative hypothesis of “Application of eclectic method improves the language skills of tertiary level learners following English as second language”.



Graph 1: Comparison between the mean scores of the pretest and the posttest

Graph 1 depicts a visual description between the pretest and post-test mean scores that eventually contributed to accept the alternative hypothesis in the study that there is a positive effect of the application of eclectic method on the improvement of language competency of the tertiary level learners following English as a second language.

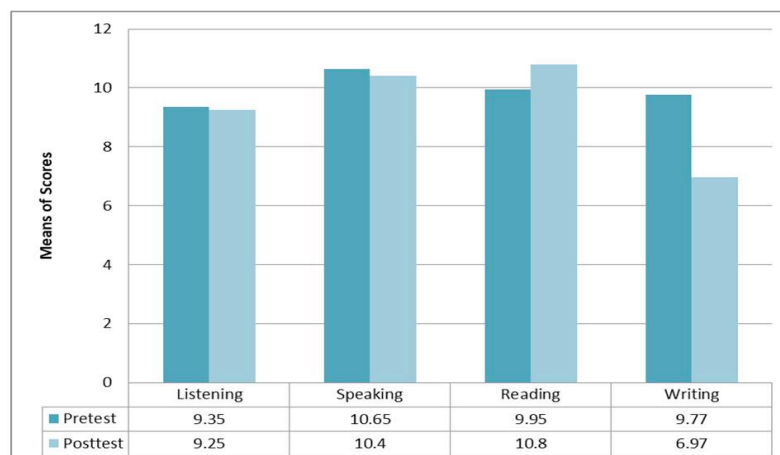
According to descriptive statistics, the mean score of the pre-test of the control group (39.32) is less than the mean score of the post-test as (37.42) showing a decrease in the performance of students who were exposed to traditional teaching strategies. Though there is a slight difference between the mean score values of the pre-test as (39.32) of the control and the experimental group (39.02), the mean score values of the post-test of the experimental group is greater than the posttest as (57.39 > 37.42), highlighting the statistical significance of the application of eclectic method.

Table 2 : Skewness and Kurtosis measures of the posttest of the control group and the experimental group

Control Group				
	n	Statistic	SE	z value
Skewness	50	0.057	0.337	0.16
Kurtosis	50	-0.375	0.662	-0.56
Experimental Group				
	n	Statistic	SE	z value
Skewness	50	0.362	0.333	1.08
Kurtosis	50	0.075	0.656	0.11

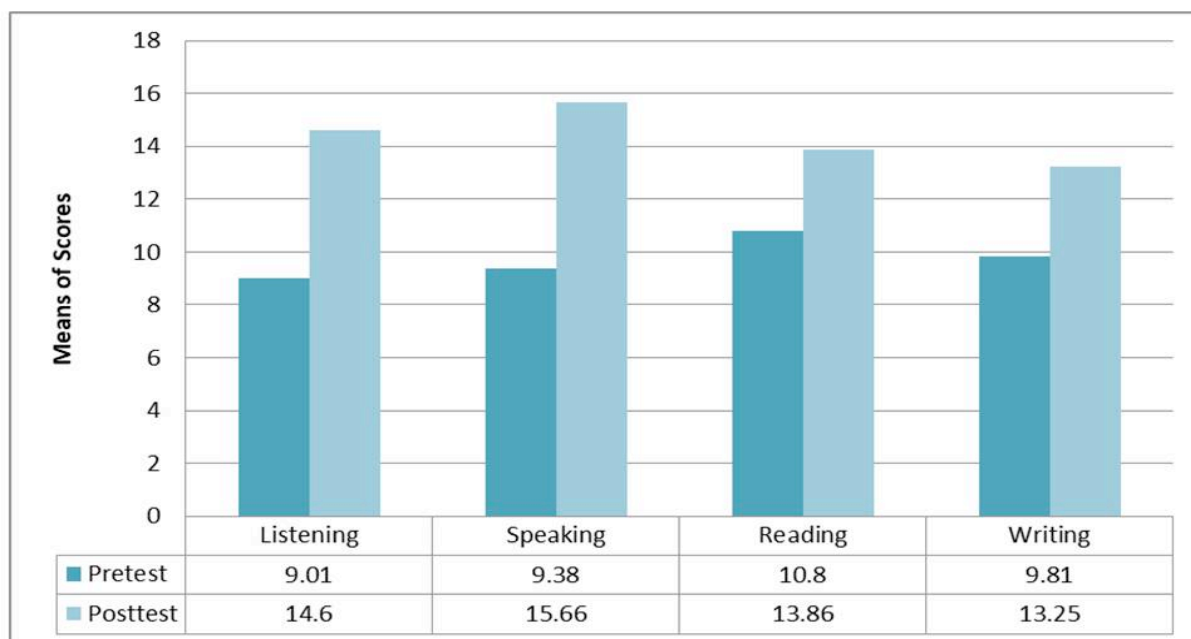
A Shapiro Wilk's test ($p > 0.05$) (Shapiro & Wilk, 1965) and a visual inspection of their histograms, normal Q-Q plots and box plots showed that the test scores were normally distributed for both control and experimental group with a skewness of 0.057 (SE = 0.337) and a kurtosis of -0.375 (SE=0.662) for the control group and a skewness of 0.362 (SE = 0.333) and a Kurtosis of 0.075 (SE=0.656) for the experimental group (Cramer & Howitt, 2004).

These findings are further illustrated using the composition of the skill assessment paper used as the pretest and the post test for the control and experimental groups. The distribution of the 100 marks were approximately sectioned to the four skills carrying 25 marks at each section. The speaking variety even addressed using a written medium as students were asked to write an informal and a formal interview at a given context.



Graph 2 : Skill based performance between the pretest and the post-test in the control group

According to the depiction of graph 2, it is clearly visible that the variation between the pretest and the post-test mean scores is not remarkable and apart from reading (10.8>9.95), all the other skills have recorded less than the pretest in listening, speaking and writing based questions as (9.35>9.25), (10.65>10.4), (9.77>6.97) respectively.



Graph 3 :Skill based performance between the pretest and the post-test in the experimental group

As per the description of graph 3, it vividly illustrates the variation of performance before and after the experiment in the experimental group. The mean score of the posttest at four skill areas are greater than the pretest mean scores as Listening (14.6>9.01), Speaking (15.66>9.38), Reading (13.86>10.8) and Writing (13.25>9.81).

This categorization of questions in the pretest and the posttest into four skills might arouse a curiosity about the practicality of the procedure of the experiment. This approximate composition of skills is much more or less similar to the composition of an ordinary paper which is in use in the country to evaluate the language competency of students. Though the study was not conducted to examine the language improvement of a single skill, this numerical description was utilized to illustrate how each skill was optimistically affected with no intentional skill specific instruction by the holistic exposure of language through the application of eclectic method.

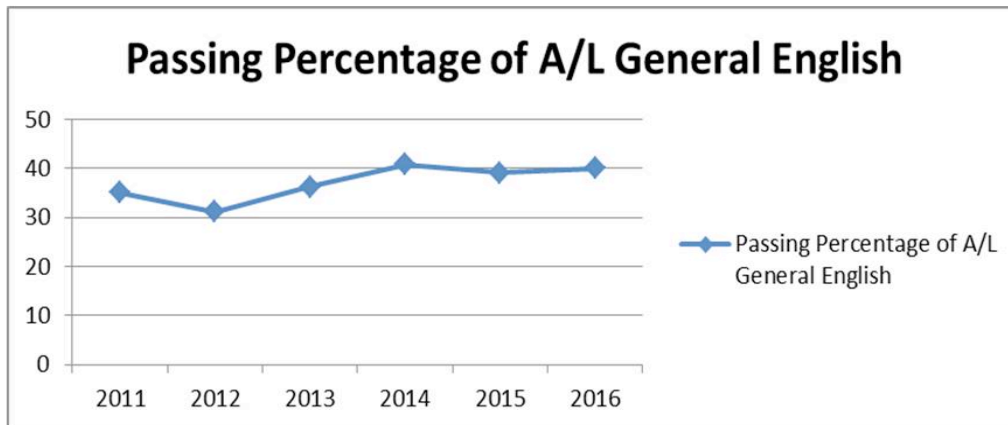
These findings in the study confirmed that most of the traditional teaching strategies were unable to address the multitude of issues experienced by the second language learners because according to (Kumarvadelu,2006) second language classrooms consisted of “such a large variety of language learners, with such divergent learning needs and aptitudes, that the teacher has to employ a fit-for-all teaching technique”.

Application of eclectic method boosted the student participation in language activities steadily in the experimental group and improved the leadership qualities fused with competency and confidence at language due to large range of activities which were selected by the teacher considering the context appropriateness.

Another unique effect that was observed during the experiment and finally proven by the results was that the application of eclectic method further confirmed the operation of the vast intricate integrated network of language skills which are highly interdependent and the teaching of the aforesaid skills indiscriminately brought a conscious awareness of language to the learner because the distance between the content and the form was minimized. This observation is further confirmed by Biloon (2016) because according to his study, the application of eclectic method was the best strategy to teach a classroom with a large number of young adult learners within a shorter duration of time covering all the four language skills simultaneously.

Personalizing the content in a lesson according to the needs of a learner (Biloon,2016) is a highly academic and an democratic way of instruction (Tzu Min – 2009) which demands the teacher to select the best technique to address the correct need is a tricky task. Therefore all the selected language teaching techniques in the study, were carefully selected under the auspicious of the three salient approaches of eclectic method, the situational, communicative and participatory approach to minimize the common criticism on eclectic method of vastness of choice and need of selection. The intension of the application of eclectic method to the said sample, was to examine how the experiment would be pragmatic and instrumental grounds befitting the learners' career aspirations, the ultimate goal.

The significance of the findings of this study is further confirmed by the need of the application of an influential teaching strategy to cope up with the current circumstance of the English language proficiency among the young adults in the country. The sample of the study was selected from the first year undergraduates of the largest university in the country. Graph 4 showcases the performance levels of the General English at the G.C.E.Advanced Level examination which they faced just before the university entrance.



Graph 4 : Student performance at General English at the G.C.E. Advanced level Examination from 2011-2016

Source – Performance of Candidates at G.C.E. Advanced Level 2011-2016
 Research and Development Branch
 National evaluation and Testing Services
 Department of Examinations

The graph 4 demonstrates the summary of the performance level of students at General English at the G.C.E. Advanced Level examination for the last five years. It clearly indicates that the overall performance of passing grades have not even touched the limit of 50% even after spending 60 years of formal education having taught English as a second language. The results displayed in the above graph and the scores of the pretest of both control and experimental groups showed that the average of a student in the English paper is between 37-39. This is the grave reality of the English language competency in the country, which the study investigated to find a positive and a sustainable solution/option which could bring about a prospective hope.

Limitations

The findings of the study should be cautiously followed at this stage, since the study was not devoid of limitations. The size of the sample, the selection of the population of the sample, the limited duration of the study were the limitations that demand the study to be exploited at a larger range to observe its true big picture of the effects of the application. Delayed effects of the application of the eclectic method were not observed in the study which should also need an emphasis. On the contrary the findings of the study were presented through statistical data and only a quantitative analysis would not provide an accurate image about the effects of the application without a qualitative analysis. Regardless of some limitations, the findings of this study positively contributed to the domain of the second language teaching pedagogy.

Conclusion

The results of the study suggest the productive scope of the application of eclectic method to combat with the hindrances so far plagued the overall improvement of the second language competency of young adults in the country. Further it emphasizes the significance of eclectic method as a holistic approach which combines the teacher, language learner, language learning strategies and language skills into a meaningful whole which interdepends on each other pragmatically. The egalitarian conduct of eclectic method, having an ability of comprehension about the learner's learning context which is filtered through a need based analysis prior to the application of the approach is commendable because it is what most of those traditional teaching pedagogies lack.

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