Classroom Management and Quality Control - An Action Research

T. Jayasudha M.A., Ph.D.

Introduction

Classroom reforms with Quality methods are assumed to enable teachers solve their individual classroom teaching problems to foster better learning in the learner. Most of the institutions that are sought after these days are those that provide need-based "quality" education. Hence any institution that wants to survive the competition should go for Quality to attract learners. The key factor in any Quality system is to satisfy the needs of the customers, clients or learners in this case. This research aimed to identify the gaps in the system and try alternative strategies to increase the learners' employability prospects.

The writer of this paper involved herself in observing classroom behaviour of the learners and she wrote notes about her own teaching to collect information to be used to improve or alter her own or learners' behaviour. Lesson plans, self-observation and self-evaluation records enabled her to reflect on classroom teaching and remedial processes.

An Action Research Program

Indian English usage through newspaper articles, reports, magazines and the like were used in the language curriculum to expose learners to the language as this would enable the learners empathize with the text at ease and unconsciously imbibe the vocabulary, structure and the meaning. This research sensitized the learners to the Indian variety of English through the language materials that were used in the classes other than those that were prescribed.

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Quality as Tool for the Action Research and Classroom Management

It was realized that to adopt theories and texts and deliver them to suit the Indian socio-cultural context, a suitable standard framework was a must. Quality management principles have been adopted by the leading institutions of the world to provide quality education.

- fitness for use (Juran)

- conformance to requirements (Crosby)

- Product or service which helps someone and enjoys sustainable markets (Deming)

- Provisions to internal and external customers of innovative products and service which fully satisfy their needs. (Xerox)

(Liston 11)

ISO, which is International Organization for standardization to promote the development of standards, testing and services has been deployed in the study. The following clauses have been used:

Quality System (2)

Design Control (4)

Process Control (9)

Control of Non-conforming product (13)

Corrective Action (14)

Quality Records (16)

Steps Taken

A Quality manual was evolved to implement the principles in everyday classroom teaching. The objectives for a particular course form its Quality Policy and it includes the needs of the learner. Design control includes Design Input and Design Output, and lesson plans are intermediaries that are actually used for the course delivery.

Classroom teaching was planned through lesson plans and evaluated through self and peer evaluation. Collaborative teaching/ learning has been identified as a crucial component in second language teaching/learning. Any non-conformity in the course content or delivery is documented through Process Control.

Documentation enables easy access to information and avoids irrelevant issues. Changes in curriculum too can be documented as Design Changes with the purpose and objectives clearly stated for easy identification and retrieval at a later stage. Some of the principles that Quality system promotes and stands for, and are relevant to the present study are:

- Goals and objectives: to meet learner needs and market needs.

- Standards: employability should be ensured.

- Teaching and learning: program should be pedagogically sound and need-based.

- Evaluation: should have met the goals at the end of the course.

    Quality methods were chosen as they are

    1. client focused
    2. process-oriented
    3. prevention of defects oriented (not detection of errors)
    4. systematic and methodical
    5. directed towards continuous improvement
    6. holistic in approach.

Records

Quality records can help as a teacher's plan is recorded, observed and evaluated by the teacher himself/herself, observed and evaluated by peers and co-teachers if the teacher is willing. The individual teacher can check how far the class had been effective with the teacher's own evaluation and the evaluation of the peers. The Quality records serve not only the practising teacher, but the co-teachers as well, as it recorded and available for reference. Quality control can be used as a tool to check effective course design, delivery and for restructuring syllabi.

Framework

Course Details

- Title
- Year in which the course was offered

Changes in the course

- Revision or restructuring with reasons

Course Objectives

- Method
- How to help achieve objectives

Links to external community
- Benchmarking with other institutions

Student Profile
- Level of the learner

Resources
- Library/infrastructure

Costing

Graduate outcomes

Classroom Management

Classroom Management focuses on three major components: content management, conduct management and convenant management.

When Quality Management principles are involved, the process of delivering products poses a problem in measurement and methodology when they involve teaching or research. It is interesting to note that the Communicative Method lays emphasis on the "process" rather than the "product" or "outcome".

Hence this research looks at the effectiveness of the process of course delivery and the process of learning.

According to specialists in the field of education, classroom management aims at encouraging and establishing student self-control through a process of promoting positive student achievement and behavior. Thus academic achievement, teacher efficacy, and teacher and student behavior are directly linked with the concept of classroom management.

Action Research and Case Studies

Needs analysis – learner, and market needs, learner's background study, product vs process orientation and case studies are the basis for the Action Research study.

Action Research is defined as

> Teacher initiated classroom investigation which seeks to increase the teacher's understanding of classroom teaching and learning, and brings about a change in classroom practice. (Richards et. al)

Why Action Research?

Reflection on one's own practices can trigger a deeper understanding of teaching. Evaluation of one's own teaching is possible through reflection. Then change becomes inevitable and it enables teachers feel confident in experimenting different options in the process of teaching.

Types of Action Research

There are two principal kinds of Action Research and classroom observation can have a role to play in both. The first type is largely rational-reactive. The investigator looks at what is happening in the classroom, usually with a specific focus on something known to be a problem or in need of improvement, and then draws up a program to react to, or remediate, what has been discovered. The second type is more intuitive-proactive, which means that the researcher or prime movers know, or they think they know, what needs to be done. A proactive approach is like syllabus design.

Tasks were designed with Nunan's framework with Goals, Input, activities, Teacher Role, Learner Role and Settings as guidelines. Tasks were designed on a seven-point scale variety, pace, interest, collaboration, individualization, personalization, choice and open-endedness. Tasks that call for specific answers like multiple choice questions, fill in the blanks are close-ended ones, while completing sentences, picture composition, interpreting graphic texts like Venn diagram or pie charts are open-ended.

Data for the Research

Observation is a very important technique of data collection though it is very expensive and time-consuming. Two types of observation were employed in the present research. Market survey analysis and needs assessment data were gathered by random sampling rather than through any specific method and so are subjective in nature and are "simple observation data". Questionnaires, lesson plans, self-observation, Quality records, etc., are not totally subjective and so are "systematic observation data".

Surveys and questionnaires are very useful to a teacher researching on the classroom methods as they enable the researcher gather information about the effective dimensions of teaching and learning, preferences, motivation and requirements for employment. In recent years, the importance of learner's perspective is recognized in virtually all modern approaches to language learning.

Concepts such as attitude, motivation, self-confidence and anxiety are frequently invoked in discussions of what makes a successful language learner. Learners have needs which influences their learning process.

The most obvious way to ask the learners about their needs is through questionnaires. An alternative means of getting learners' views is through observation and interviews. This research used questionnaires to elicit information from the learners. The evolving job opportunities and the needs of the hour to make graduates employable were observed.

Advantages of Action Research

Generally, an Action Research is carried out in roughly four stages:

1. Planning
2. Action (Lesson Report and Execution)
3. Observation (to check effectiveness)
4. Evaluation

Action Research enables the teacher to reflect on his/her own practices which in turn triggers a deeper understanding of teaching. Critical reflection involves examining classroom teachings to discover gaps between what is taught and what is learnt. The lesson plan is in Action Research, the action plan for teaching. It should not be mistaken for what actually happened during the teaching as it is only a plan which records the features of the lesson effectively.

Thus the need to reflect on how far the objectives outlined and listed in the lesson plan were effective becomes imperative. As Action Research promotes change, reporting the effects of the change before and after the change are necessary.

Usefulness of Action Research

Action Research is very useful as:

- content and method are interlinked.
- theory is derived from practice.
- the approach is bottom up.
- content is learner-centered and tasks are graded and are challenging.
- It is relevant to the social set-up of both the learner and the teacher.

Usefulness of Case Studies

Case studies are conducted to evaluate teaching and learning outcomes. They enable us form insights into the learner's relative abilities and their mode of learning. Research on teaching has been producing case studies – rich and thick descriptions of classroom events ranging in duration from a few moments to an entire year.

Case studies can serve a number of valuable purposes for teachers, including illustration of concepts and theoretical models in context, providing opportunities to analyze and reflect on real classroom events from a variety of disciplinary points of view and illustrating how the perspective held by the researcher shapes and limits the form and content of the resulting case study.

All processes are recorded and so serve as second language theory for future practitioners.

Procedures Adopted for This Study

Three batches of learners were taken for study. The texts that were already prescribed were adapted to enhance better learning. The lessons were divided into simpler units based on the entry level of the learners. The lessons and teaching items were graded in the order of difficulty to enable easy learning. The lessons were also translated when necessary (Grammar Translation) as most of the learners were first generation learners and have no guidance outside the college premises. More time was devoted to the process of writing, as it is the only skill that is tested but has traditionally been neglected or taken for granted.

Learners were motivated to attempt to write on their own whenever possible and rote-learning was discouraged. Slow learners were given special attention and paired with peers to enable them perform better.

A statistical analysis of the learners' performances was done at the end of the course to assess the teacher's teaching and learner's learning. The level of the learners at the end of the course was compared with the entry level.

A statistical analysis of the three batches of learners was recorded as case studies wherein the effectiveness of the approach was studied. A questionnaire was distributed to the administrative heads of five government colleges in Chennai. It focused mainly on policy matters and classroom teaching. Questions ranged from learner background information, continuous assessment, bridge courses, and entry tests to the feedback on whether part II foundation English course had met the

objectives. 40% of the respondents felt that the foundation English courses had not fulfilled the objectives.

Case Study 1: Evaluation: Mathematics EM+TM students

Sixty percent (18 out of 30) of the vernacular medium learners improved in their communication skills. They were able to read and comprehend texts on their own at the end of the course. The written communication skill also improved as the learners were observed to commit fewer errors. The learners still were shy to speak in public, but a few of them improved on the job once they were employed.
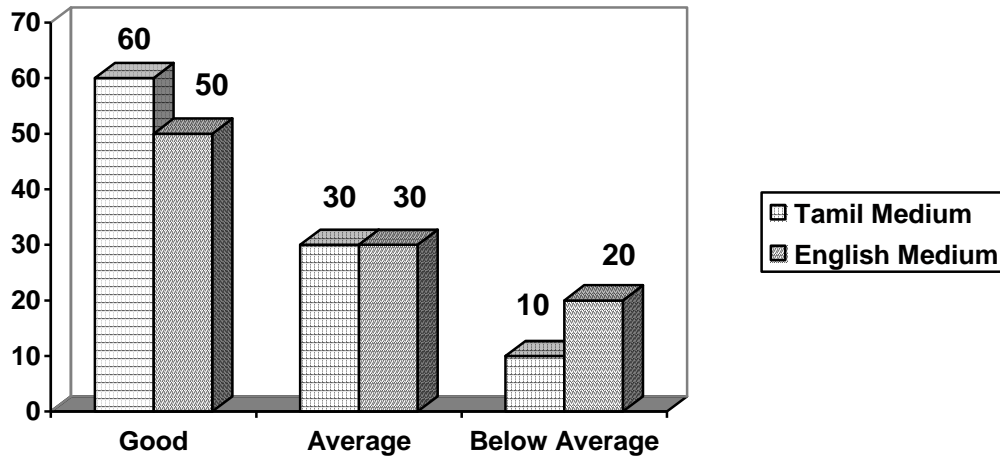

Case Study 2: Evaluation: English Literature students

The performance of the learners was very good. In both the semesters the pass percentage was very high. Forty-three out of forty five learners passed in the first semester with 96 percent pass percentage and all the learners passed in the second semester with 100 percent pass percentage. The learners cultivated the habit of reading newspapers and the Newspaper supplement 'Young World' when they had time to visit the college library.

Case Study 3: Evaluation: History EM+TM students

At the end of the course, nearly 50% of the learners improved their communication skills.
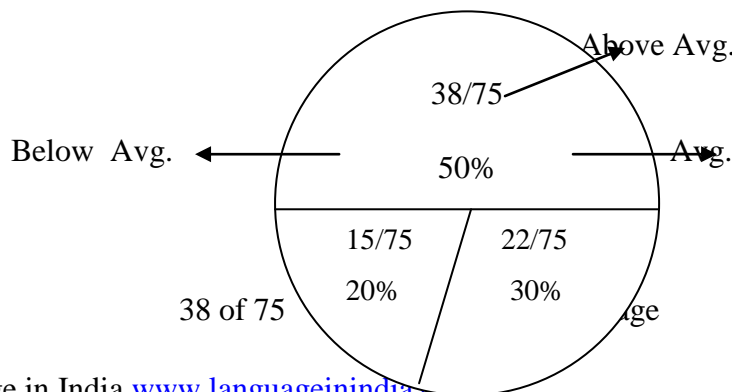
22 of 75	30%	Average
15 of 75	20%	Below average

Generally the pass percentage of History learners in general English ranges from 40-50 percent. But this batch produced nearly 73 per cent of result in both the semesters. When learners were given visuals to be interpreted in the verbal form, it was observed that they were confident only when they had described the visual in detail and elaborately without avoiding even the minutest details. The range of expressions available to the learner was conditioned by the learner's knowledge of the language and the external world.

Overall Observations

Mostly the learners were found to use the strategy of over-elaboration. They resorted to be 'over-informative' as they lacked confidence to communicate. They seemed to operate with the following motto according to Blum-Kulka and Olshtain:

> The less confident that you are that you can get the meaning
> across, the more words and contextual information you use.
>
> (176)

This over-elaboration of the learners provided extra opportunities to identify the intended personality or referent when it was played as a game between groups to improve learners oral communication skills (Catch 20 game). It had its defects in that it at times distracted the listener due to elaborate description of some minor features. Sometimes words from L1 (Vernacular) were used when they did not know L2 (English) equivalents.

Some of the other strategies that learners used to communicate in the classroom are:

a. Circumlocution: to describe the properties of the target object or action.

b. Approximation: to use a term which shares a number of semantic features with the target lexical item.

c. Literal Translation: word for word translation from L1 (Vernacular).

d. Mime: use of non-verbal means of communication.

e. Topic avoidance: when learners did not have any choice of words, they simply avoided talking and remained silent.

Group activities were preferred to increase the quantity of learners' language use, as it enhanced quality of language that the learners' used (range of functions and collaboration), as it provided more opportunity for individualized inspection, as it is a less threatening environment which provided greater motivation for learning through peers. Reformulation of writing tasks helped a lot as it served as a positive feedback which replaced the narrow idea of traditional correction which is an exercise in futility.

Problems Faced

Conducting an action research is not a very easy process. Though it involves only the individual researcher, it can be done only when there is at least limited freedom in the institution where it is conducted. The institution where the research was conducted does not encourage a teacher to handle a class single-handed. It was with intense struggle that the part II classes of case study 1 and caste study 3 had to be adopted for the action research.

The learners were used to many teachers handling the part II English classes. Hence they were very unhappy, in the early stages, to meet the same teacher over and over again. It took nearly a month for the researcher to impress upon the learners of case study 1 that the class was adopted not only for the teacher's benefit but for theirs as well. Once the learners were convinced about the new methodology, there was no looking back at all.

As the study was a process-oriented one, communication was given priority – fluency was more important than accuracy. When marks were awarded for effective communication, (though grammar was imperfect) the teacher was taken to task on two occasions. The issue was raised at the department level where the evaluation strategy was discussed and condemned by many senior co-teachers. Fortunately, the performance of the learners in the university examinations answered all the doubts raised by the co-teachers. There were not so many problems when the second and third case studies were conducted.

Conclusion

Second language teaching is a highly problematic and challenging area of research. As it involves a large number of learners, teachers, time, money and the future of the learners and teachers, planning, decision-making, sound practices and innovation are very important.

> Instead of relying on tradition, popular practice, popular opinion or trial and error, it is necessary for teachers to draw information on "rational inquiry, systematic investigation, and if possible controlled experiment'. (Stern 57)

Political and sociolinguistic factors in the different contexts in which English is taught in India should be considered along with question other questions relating to the process language education.

Language teaching theories do not all explain Indian English language learning/teaching contexts. However, through empirical action research we notice that acquisition of English skills is helped for the following reasons:

- Traditional approach to ELT (through literary texts).

- Failure to consider learner's heterogeneous nature in choosing texts.

- Choice of culturally inappropriate texts.

- English being reduced to a subject.

- Needs of learners and market have been ignored.

The shift from a monolithic view of the Western theories as the only available resources to an understanding of teaching and learning English in culturally and linguistically plural contexts in India is a must. A liberation from the age-old practices is necessary as there has been an unprecedented increase of learner and users of English in the post-1947 period, and as purposes for which English is used have dynamically changed..

As Kachru observes:

> The pedagogical issues concerning the teaching of English are also slowly moving away from the imported methods and models. There is a greater attempt to seek locally appropriate answers to methodological and pedagogical questions. (201)

Any improvement in language teaching for the Indian learners can be brought about through planned hypotheses testing, experimentation and classroom reforms.

Action Research is small-scale research done by the concerned teachers themselves in their own classroom to seek solutions to particular problems. It is the most useful one as it focuses on a particular situation; without bothering about either policies that have already been adopted or policies that would be adopted in the future. It centers around a particular situation taking into account not only the sociological context, but also the psychological aspects and the external and cultural factors that affect and shape language learning.

Problems identified with the existing system are:

1. Texts are purely English (literary)

2. Texts are memory based. So pupils fail in grammar and composition.

3. Teachers of English are not English graduates at the school level. So English is taught as a 'subject'.

4. English has no importance in the school curriculum. English is given value only after graduation.

5. Classes are large. Teachers are unable to give individual attention to learners.

6. English hours are at the fag end of the day when learners are totally worn out.

The study revealed that learners who had the motivation to learn were those who were from the vernacular medium. As their L1 base was reasonably good, their Interlanguage had developed and enabled them to learn English better through their vernacular. The learners of II B.Sc., Mathematics taught using the Tamil medium

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represent this category. The English medium learners of the same batch were found to neglect the vernacular as they assumed that they did not need the vernacular as they knew English. Unfortunately, they were not very good at English too. As the learners were not open-minded, they failed to acquire English skills as their Tamil medium counterparts did.

The learners of case study 3 (History EM + TM) failed mostly because their proficiency in the vernacular itself was below average. The social reasons for their condition were identified as their very poor socio-economic background. Most of them hailed from families of daily wage workers and had been educated in schools that did not provide them the necessary input.

Psychological distance is yet another reason for this batch of learners to be low performers. They had hardly listened to anyone speak in English even in their English classes at school. Those who spoke to them in English, therefore sounded alien and foreign. This shows that the more distanced a learner is from the target language, the less the learner will be able to learn the language. This further necessitates that such learners' should be provided with unlimited exposure to the target language. The exposure should also be experiential, rooted in the socio-cultural context and real-life oriented.

Language teaching should not be separated from real-life and natural impulses of learners. Language teaching should concern itself with the life of the learners as one's observations, perceptions, feelings, emotions and imagination shape the language habits of the individual and are affected by it. Unvarying use of limited vocabulary will dampen the learner's mental growth, deaden skillful use of imagination and creative power. There should be increase in the pupils skill in handling language as a medium of expression than mere mechanical writing – précis, summary, grammar, paraphrase, and essay writing. Learners need to be:

 i. Trained in handling language as a medium of expression.
 ii. Encouraged to think clearly and independently.
 iii. Given enough opportunities to be exposed to language in use so that they use it effectively.
 iv. Taught to use words and structures without bothering about accuracy.
 v. Taught to deal with everyday usage of language.

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T. Jayasudha M.A., P.G.C.T.E., Ph.D.
Department of English
Bharathi Women's College
Chennai 600 108
Tamilnadu, India
sudhatj70@yahoo.co.in