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## Enhancing Oral Skills in English Language for L2 Learners Using Pictorial Description Technique

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### **Abstract:**

*English Language occupies a unique position in our country and the world at large. It is a unifying agent and a common channel of expression across the globe. The central construct of a language is its spoken form which plays a major role in communication. The existence of a language greatly depends on its usage in terms of listening and speaking and in actuality, it becomes clear that language is essential to give expression to thoughts and feelings of a social group. Man's relationship to society greatly depends upon the use of language with his fellow beings and the harmony he nurtures is reflected in his communication. Speaking skill is the central construct of a language. It plays a vital part in the learning of a language. Oral proficiency is a major qualification in deciding communicative abilities. Hence, it proves imperative to understand the role of language in communication, and to equip oneself to learn language as a life skill rather than a subject of academic instruction.*

*The present research attempts at promoting oral skills in tertiary level, L2 learners using pictorial descriptions working on simple strategies practiced in instructional sessions. Pictures play the role of a visual context, emphasizing on meaning, vocabulary and appropriate expression showing lesser concentration on form. Pictures may be defined as visual representations of objects, scenes, persons or abstractions produced on a surface. Since pictures are fixed, the advantage of picturing the meaning at its clearest point is most appropriate, though they offer little possibility for variation. The present study explores the significance of descriptive technique in enhancing spoken language to language minority learners from Auxilium College, Vellore, Tamil Nadu.*

**Keywords:** *Observe, register, recall, reflect, produce*

### **1. Rationale of the Study**

Sharma (2008, p. 100) refers to 'learning by use', the underlying rationale in the Chinese strategy of language learning in terms of communication. Chinese believe that the law of 'use' lays the foundation for language learning, and 'use' is rightly defined as 'communication' wherein communication invariably involves speaking abilities. Language for communication characterizes its achievement through extensive use, and learning is viewed as a developmental process which must necessarily focus on qualitative change rather than quantitative increase. The ability to use language appropriately and fluently by connecting ideas meaningfully features competency of the language. "The creators of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) explained that children initially develop their vocabularies through oral conversations, wherein context clues and background knowledge can help them determine word meanings" (Marzano & Simms 2013, p. 6). No language is adequately acquired unless it is spoken. Speaking is the principal requirement for appropriate communication, hence speaking decides the communicative competence of a language, wherein use of the language connotes enhancement of oral skills. The primary purpose of language is communication and the ability to use it appropriately determines its level of competence. Savignon (1972, p.9) defines communicative competence as "the ability to function in a truly communicative setting – that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adjust itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors". Communicative competence is the focus on outputs rather than on inputs to learning. It is the ability to handle a language both effectively and efficiently for the purpose of giving information, conveying ideas, exchanging views and conversation. Hymes's (1972) presentation of the concept of communicative competence, which was related to the development of language in the learning process, greatly influenced language teaching for "real life" purposes. "Real life" purposes indicate the use of language in relation to the social contexts in which it is used. Hymes (1972) claimed that communicative competence must entail a theory of 'speech acts', or knowledge of how to use language appropriately in given situations and in given cultural contexts in order to achieve the given communicative objectives. Widdowson (1979) opined that

communicative teaching must focus in the 'use' of the language not only in restricting its usage to textual constructions, but also to extend beyond utterances to the unit of discourse.

## 2. Pictorial Description as a Technique

"Learning activities are conscious activities carried out in an organized way with the purpose of increasing our knowledge about various aspects of the language, related to the skills we want to possess (Usó-Juan, 2006, p. 4)." Activities on pictorial descriptions offer a base for progression of ideas and also help in sequential expression. Description is one of the basic qualities underlying any form of communication that requires a kind of report or analysis. Whether it be learning vocabulary, practicing grammar, engaging in discourse, reporting incidents, writing essays or reading articles or fiction, description is bound to be found in some measure as a construct to the form and hence can be considered as a means which cannot be overlooked in language learning involving skills. Mackey (1967, p. 38) recommends the use of pictures as the best method when compared to the other methods he describes in his article, *The Meaning of Method*. A picture may illustrate the text of a lesson in order to focus the attention of the learner on what the text says, by helping him imagine it. Pictures enable orientation of learners' attention, create interest, prepare students mentally and motivate further participation. Planning a visual representation for execution with an intended meaning helps learners to predict information and offer settings which can initiate and expose learners to new ideas or further develop pre-created one. The present study is an attempt towards this end. It functions on a method that places importance on the learner and learner-abilities, and emphasizes on understanding and meaningful expression of the content.

## 3. Profile of the Participants

Eighty, first year, female undergraduate students from B.A., B.Sc. and B.Com. courses from Auxilium College, Vellore District, Tamil Nadu, constitute the sample group of the study. It needs to be specified here that this group of learners are from Tamil medium background and are past pupils of Higher Secondary Schools mostly located in rural areas. All the participants could understand English, even though speaking fluently for everyday communication was a difficulty. The Arts and Science College chosen for the present study is affiliated to Thiruvalluvar University, Tamil Nadu (India). The college is a minority institution run for the benefit of the economically weak, socially backward and needy young women of Vellore and its neighboring districts. It handles thirteen courses at the undergraduate level which provides scope for pursuit of heterogeneous goals.

## 4. Methodology Used

The present study explores the significance of descriptive technique in enhancing oral skills and investigates the significance of employing descriptive strategies in promoting language learning. There are two sets of participants – the Control group and the Experimental group comprising of forty students each, who comprise the sample group of the study. The course work includes a Pre-test stage and three Post-Test stages in the learning process, which enable assessment and comparison of results obtained from the performance of the two groups. Picture description is the technique employed in the training sessions and assessment tests. The materials provided for the study were colorful still pictures collected from newspapers, magazines and web sources. The primary function of the materials is to direct the learners' attention towards the visual pictures, generate interest through observation, register details recalling past learning, learn appropriate vocabulary reflecting the contents of the given picture and produce the information orally, attempting to correct errors at each attempt and working progressively towards producing error-free sentences in the successive sessions. Describing pictures develops oral skills besides vocabulary, comprehensibility and to an extent, grammatical and structural skills. Sentence is the basic unit of utterance that is expected of the learners. Participants of the Experimental group attend thirty learning sessions and are educated on simple strategies involving description, while the Control group is devoid of any instruction. At the initial Pre-Test session and at the end of every ten sessions, an oral assessment Post-Test is conducted with an objective to collect data subject to statistical analysis. To further strengthen their validity, the data obtained are statistically represented and estimated through One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). A detail study of the influence of the independent and dependent variables, which constitute the basis of data analysis, is observed, followed by a comparative study of the statistics obtained from the Control and Experimental groups. The data acquired from the tests are analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings of the study highlighting the use of descriptive techniques are based on the results statistically analyzed from the above mentioned phenomena.

## 5. Impact of Descriptive Technique

The findings of the study have shown that the advantages of using pictures can help make a task or situation more convenient to serve the purpose intended, in the process of learning. Brumfit, Pincas & Broughtin, (1978) rationalize the basic principle of language learning and admit firmly that it is a known fact that words and phrases are easier to learn and remember if they are meaningful and in context; it follows that the foreign language should always be taught and practiced in a contextualized form. And when learning is being done in a class situation, every member of the learning group should recognize the learning context. Of the different purposes of visual pictures for language teaching, using them to teach content-specific words through description is one of the methods of presentation for promotion of both speaking and writing skills. Considering description as a component of practice in the language learning scenario, it is evident from this experimental study that learning strategies could be adapted to suit the learning needs and requirements of language acquisition, using description. At the undergraduate level, language exercises include presentations like composition writing, comprehending texts, summarizing or analysing concepts for evaluating the proficiency level of L2 learners in English examinations wherein descriptions contribute largely to the core of the framework. The use of visual aids increase learners'

chances of improving and developing their language abilities. From the current study it was analysed that pictures allow the students to interpret and use physical appearance to a great detail which might otherwise not be obtained with just a textual prompt. The study, therefore, prompts the conclusion that visuals positively affect learning strategies and improve speaking abilities, especially of non-native speakers in English language learning.

## 6. Findings of the Study

The findings obtained from classroom observations and statistics presented (Fig.1-Group Statistics) of the Experimental group provide evidence to the fact that teaching oral skills forms a part of the language classroom. The observations revealed that not all students adopted the same strategies of learning, though not all sessions had their outcome clearly stated. Group type 1 represents the Control group while Group type 2 represents the Experimental group in the study.

	Group type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	
Pre-Test Scores	Dimension 1	1.00	40	25.0750	16.16008	2.55513
		2.00	40	23.7000	10.19100	1.61134
Post-Test I Scores	Dimension 1	1.00	40	38.6250	17.63983	2.78910
		2.00	40	55.2250	21.68124	3.42811
Post-Test II Scores	Dimension 1	1.00	40	54.8000	21.69509	3.43029
		2.00	40	74.2500	15.36354	2.42919
Post-Test III Scores	Dimension 1	1.00	40	58.4250	22.85953	3.61441
		2.00	40	76.3500	15.38989	2.43336

Table 1: Group Statistics

Incorporation of ideas and coherence were a few factors that featured differently in the descriptions. Classroom observations further revealed that language learning required necessary input to the learners to initiate formation of learning strategies and refine productivity. Hence, care and effort to develop language proficiency had been taken by the instructor to plan activities accordingly, meaningfully and accessibly. The learners' abilities to verbalize descriptions had a significant impact on their language learning. Results of the oral output of Control and Experimental groups revealed significant differences. Findings after the Pre-Test authenticated consistency in the results of the two groups. Level of oral proficiency, judged on the basis of error-free sentences, was found to reveal almost the same scores indicating the verbal strength of both groups nearly identical. Use of vocabulary in the Pre-Test was found to be rated equally in both groups, as per the statistics of the results. The oral output recorded after the Post-Tests revealed a significant difference in the scores favouring the Experimental group. Descriptions were found to be logically organized and more suitable words were found to be used, while the descriptions of the participants of the Control group were found to show less focus on organising content and using vocabulary. The awareness to think and describe sequentially was observed to be prevalent in the Experimental group. Appropriate use of words and phrases to describe the pictures were proof enough to reveal the quality of their presentations. Coherence of ideas outlined with imagination in framing the descriptions revealed the students' presence of mind in verbally organizing the subject matter. This indicates that learners understood the process of verbalizing and regulating oral descriptions. The Control group, on the other hand, did use ideas and words relevant to the pictorial displays but lack of appropriate coordination in the verbal content seemed obvious. The analysis of their results revealed that learners were unable to draw connections between sequencing ideas and oral skills.

## 7. Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to English language classrooms and the significance of pictorial descriptions in the English language classes. It examines the influence of Activity-based teaching in enhancing oral proficiency in the first year undergraduate students from Tamil medium background. The conclusion of the present study solely depends on description of pictures as the technique employed for this approach and the only form of activity designed for the syllabus. It needs to be pointed out that the results obtained for statistical analysis of the findings of the study are restricted to the oral output recorded after each assessment test of both the Control and Experimental groups.

## 8. Conclusion

Language teaching has never been considered a simple task nor have the movements, packages and methods that are associated to it proved to be simple. Aiming at designing a syllabus with greater emphasis on meaningful use of language, the need is recognized for selection and ordering of what is to be taught, on the communicative needs of the learners, and to provide teaching materials rich enough to satisfy these needs. While traditional methods dominated by teacher-oriented techniques and materials of teaching seemed insufficient to gear up to learners' requirements in language learning, learner-centered methods were found to develop learners' communicative skills through observation and practice. Getting the learners to learn and acquire language depends on the teaching technique peculiar to the method and the individual instructor. The empirical findings of the study show that descriptive strategies could be used as a technique in enhancing spoken skills of learners, and contribute significantly to language acquisition in the language learning scenario.

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