

Concept of Best Practices in English Language Teaching to Pakistani ELT Fraternity

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Abstract

Teaching industry of English as a second or foreign language has grown massively in recent times in Pakistan. There are many public sectors universities and English academies established all over Pakistan offering English language proficiency courses. Therefore, this wave led to conduct this research. The purpose of conducting this study was to investigate contemporary pedagogical techniques used for teaching and learning English and to introduce the concept of ESL /EFL Best Practices for effective language teaching in Pakistan. Purposive Sampling method was used to collect the information from respondents regarding their contemporary-used teaching techniques in ESL/EFL class. The questionnaire was implied as the main tool for data collection among twenty English language teachers from two public sector universities. The results of the study indicated that teachers were attached with some outdated techniques and activities secondly, they also faced problems applying new techniques while teaching in a large multilevel classrooms, thirdly, teachers' had willingness to adopt and employ innovative techniques in classrooms and lastly, the notion of ESL best practices was uncommon among them. Most of the teaching strategies do not create better learning environment, and learners do not interestingly participate due outdated activities. Therefore, the suggested solution was utilizing best practices that are based on modern techniques, approaches considerable for multiple levels depending upon the needs and developmental state of the individual learners.

Keywords: pedagogical strategies, ESL/EFL Best Practices, Pakistani teachers, English teaching/learning

1. Introduction

Utilizing best practices in classroom definitely affects learners by providing motivation to learn and promoting achievement in a global world (NC Teacher, 2006). According to Perry (2003) "Best Practices are the practical teaching, techniques, tips, strategies, methods, and exercises that result in excellent product for program delivery".(p.01). As identified by Nawab (2012) that traditional approaches to teaching English language to learners of diverse backgrounds have not been effective in Pakistan. This is because teachers are employing outdated activities and to cope this situation of utilizing traditional techniques. This study is attempted to provide the solution to their pedagogic problems seem to be that new techniques and strategies must be put in place. Friedmen (2005) refers that in order to survive in the 21st century contemporary teachers will need problem-solving capabilities, creativeness, a enthusiasm for teaching, a dedicated work ethic and lifelong teaching opportunities. Best Practices are selected to focus on those features of classroom teaching competence that is evident to one-self and to others as well (Drummond, 1995). It believed that learners can gain good command over the language skills if they are properly given exposure to language development activities (Watkins, 2007). Unfortunately, scarcity of professionally trained teachers of English language has constantly emerged as a big challenge in Pakistan (Behlol, et al., 2001; Shamim, 2008; Aslam, et al., 2010; Nawab, 2012). A report conducted by a Civil Society in Curricula and Textbooks Reforms (2003), a project of Pakistan-based Sustainable Development Policy Institute, rightly pointed out serious drawbacks in teaching of English language. The first drawback is that syllabuses omitted conceptual, action-packed, and real life materials that critically enable learners to contemplate, create critical self-awareness among learners, secondly, incoherent and non-operational pedagogical practices, strategies that hinder the nourishment of interest and insight among learners. This raises the question that whether the teachers of English in Pakistan aim at integrating approach towards basic skills of English language or teach English into segments? Therefore, this study aims to investigate what kind of instructional techniques, activities of English teachers utilize in their classes at university level and to what extent teachers expose learners to various language skills in terms of best practices.

2. Literature Review

Teachers have been described as agents of transformation. Best Practices are well-planned instructional strategies, techniques, or activities that contribute to a successful step in teacher development. As this study focused on introducing the notion of Best Practices—it would be better to review inception, principles, and application of Best Practice.

2.1 Origin of Best Practices

The term is originally coined from practical field, later associated in teaching. However, Zemelman et al., (1998) stated that we borrowed the expression “Best Practice” indeed from the professions of law and medicine, where “good practice” and “best practice” are everyday phrases used to tell solid, reputable, and state-of-the-art work in a field. Thus, the expression “Best Practice” since has been inducted in education.

2.2 Principles of Best Practices

These principles are integrated principles which are categorically defined and analysed by Zemelman, et al. (1998) as under:

Learner-centered Principle: This is a principle of teaching in the class which can be effective and fruitful to implement in the language class. Learner-centered class pays attention to learners’ questions and highlights on their concerns and interests (Zemelman, et al. 1998). Learner-centered class bridges the gap between teacher and learner by providing a balance between teacher-learner-led activities.

Experiential Principle: This learning promotes learners-based learning content through active, hands-on practices (Zemelman, et al. 1998). This principle can take on many aspects such as opinions sharing, dramatizations.

Holistic Principle: This teaching principle makes equilibrium relations between the teaching and the learning situation. According to Zemelman, et al. (1998) holistic learning bases on the principle that learners learn best when they are exposed to syllabus in focused contexts rather presenting in isolated segments.

Authentic Principle: this principle provides learners with realistic and in-depth study. This helps learners to examine topics in which they have a vested interest (Zemelman, et al. 1998). Teachers need to utilize creative, purposeful activities with challenging and engaging environment for learners. Now there is a need of creating such environments where the learners can build their knowledge and they can use the learnt lessons in the actual life.

Expressive Principle: According to this principle the learners should be given chances to express their ideas in the class. The learners can learn more through expressive principle. Zemelman et al. (1998) stated that expressive principle in the class by giving opportunities to the learners to absorb the learnt knowledge and use in their daily life.

Reflective Principle: In this principle learners have opportunity to observe and reflect on their learning. This principle enables learners to timely organize their thoughts, opinions, and digest what they have learned, by doing this learners will understand how to surmount obstacles in their real life.

Collaborative Principle: This principle stresses upon cooperation among teacher and learners and learner-to-learner. It is channel for socializing and endows learners with the opportunity to receive valuable feedback from fellow-learners. Collaborative learning is time taking and needs commitment, because cooperation is an important life-time skill.

Democratic Principle: This principle deals with the freedom of the learners in language class. Democratic classrooms are inspiring and more productive. In democratic class the process of learning occurs when learners exercise choice: the topics they investigate, the activities they engage in, and in the books they read. However, it also enables learners to work through conflict-resolutions activities in this way learner’s value and respect one another’s differences.

Cognitive Principle: This principle can be helpful to develop learners’ cognitive power, skills and thinking level. According to Zemelman et al. (1998) these skills include interpretation, analytical reasoning, creative design, metaphorical thinking, drawing inferences, hypothesizing, categorization, and synthesis. It helps learners in developing strategies for completing tasks, reviewing their own work, and making decisions.

Developmental Principle: According to this principle teachers should respect learners’ developing stages. Most of the learners have their personal way of learning. Learners feel boredom and lose their interest if they are taught only by employing one-dimensional technique. Therefore, teachers must utilize age-appropriate activities that activate and allow individual differences among learners (Zemelman et al., 1998).

Constructivist Principle: The constructivist principle gives more stress upon the learners’ personal experience and making their personal meanings. Teachers’ role should not be as a giver of information, rather foster an environment that facilitates learners to make decisions about their work and translate their efforts into meaningful learning.

Every principle builds learner’s interpretive abilities, and transforms classes from teacher-centered to learner-centered approach.

3. Methodology

The research process used for this research was based on quantitative design in terms of questionnaire. This study is based on well constructed twelve (12) items divided into close-ended and open ended questions. First 10 questions were asked to investigate what were the most common activities, and classroom strategies used by the teachers and the other two questions were asked to find out whether the teacher were familiar with the concept of best practices in ESL/EFL.

However, 10 were close ended questions, while 02 open-ended questions, first in order to investigate deeper about the notion of Best Practices and second willingness to adopt updated teaching activities.

3.1 Sample

Ten English language teachers from two public sector universities were participants in this study. Purposive sampling approach was employed for data collection because participants were chosen on specific criteria of minimum five years English language teaching experience. In this perspective, Creswell et al. (2007) emphasized that purposive sampling facilitates researchers to select suitable participants for the study.

3.2 Instrumentation

This study employs well designed questionnaire to gain information about the teachers' qualification and teaching experience, their teaching styles, techniques, strategies, and their teaching efficiencies.

3.3 Respondent Characteristics

All respondents had a minimum five years of teaching English. They are teaching at multilevel learners of English in their institutions.

4. Study Findings and Discussion

This research study revealed valuable insights that teachers of English language need to adopt innovative language teaching techniques to create conducive environment. On the other hand the concept of best practices was uncommon among them.

Table 1. Items to investigate contemporary pedagogical techniques

Item No	Responses to items (Agree) in Percent
1. How frequently do you use innovative language activities	70%
2. What are the most common instructional techniques	70% (Q&A activity)
3. What activities do you implement to develop learners' writing skills?	60% (use story writing)
4. Do you plan activities by considering learners' educational background and levels	90%
5. Do you think that outdated language teaching practices are being used?	80%
6. To what extent do you know about Best Practices?	70%
7. Do you find it difficult to teach a large multilevel class?	90%
8. Do you implement learner-centered teaching practices?	30%
9. Do you use language activities to enhance the ability of your learners	70%
10. Do you face problems when you apply a new language teaching technique?	90%

Table 1 shows that most teachers (70%) claimed that their teaching practices were updated and innovative, but the most common activity utilized among English language learners (ELLs) was question and answer (70%). However, this question and answer practice is to develop reading comprehension of ELLs. This is an evidence that teachers are attached with some traditional approaches rather being innovative. In other words, there should be shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered. According to Richard et al., (2007) student-centered model is the idea that language instructors are not 'providers of knowledge', but rather 'facilitators of learning'. Additionally teacher-respondents use story writing technique to develop writing skills which seems less integrated approach towards language teaching/learning keeping in view the principles of best practices. Somehow, large number of teacher-participants (80%) agreed that contemporary outdated teaching practices are being used whereas, (30%) teachers employ learner-centered teaching practices. Therefore, effective and skillful language instructors now a day involves creating and maintain an effective conducive learning environment base on a wide range of best practices in teaching and learning English (Richard et al., 2007). When respondents were asked regarding the ESL Best practices they claimed to have basic knowledge. Interestingly, (90%) of teachers find difficult to teach a large multilevel classes and (90%) teachers face problems when applying a new language, in order to cope with such issues in English teaching and learning teachers need to access to research, examples and innovations to learn best practices (National Education Technology Plan, 2005 US Department of Education).

Apart from close ended items in the questionnaire use in this study. Two open-ended items were also included that helped the researchers to dig deeper about the claims that were made of knowing best practices earlier this section of discussion. These open-ended items gave opportunity to find out more about the concept of best practices among Pakistani ELT fraternity and this provided a comprehensive knowledge about best practices and willingness to adopt innovative teaching techniques. In order to obtain deeper knowledge regarding best practices and in response to item

number 06 teacher-respondents claimed to have (70%) knowledge about the concept of best practices. On contrary, this open-ended item how you would define best practices gave the following responses:

Respondent 1: *“The teacher should work on the improvement of learners’ thinking, anticipating, and problem solving abilities. These are the Best Practices.”*

Respondent 2: *“The Best Practices are those through which teachers and learners can achieve their goals.”*

Respondent 3: *“I think so Best Practices means when you give a platform to a language learner to use his language skills and for the most time, he uses his knowledge.”*

Respondent 4: *“My Best Practices are very flexible and keep on changing according to the level and understanding of the learners.”*

Respondent 5: *“The practices which help to increase learners’ learning of second language and achieve goals.”*

Respondent 6: *“Best Practices that motivate learners to participate in class and improve their language manipulation abilities.”*

Respondent 7: *“Those practices which can lead to maximum output in language classes.”*

Respondent 8: *“Listening and speaking skills, Reading and Writing skills”*

Respondent 9: *“I think that Best Practices means motivating learners in their language learning programme.”*

Respondent 10: *“These are the techniques which help teacher to make his class learner-centered and to achieve lesson’s aims successfully.”*

These aforementioned responses revealed that the concept of best practices is uncommon among Pakistani English language teachers. However, after critical censor of the definitions among them respondent number three and ten are closer and others have told characteristics of best practices rather definitions.

The second open-ended item gave the participants a chance to express their ideas freely regarding willingness to adopt innovative teaching techniques for effective teaching of English language. 95% respondents show willingness to adopt innovative teaching techniques. Teachers claimed that techniques they employ in the classroom are updated one. Most teachers used question and answer and story writing activity in teaching of writing skills. According Read (1998) teaching approaches for language learners should be enjoyable, meaningful, supported, social, purposeful and full of practice and in order to do this teachers of English should utilize best practices. In nutshell, findings from the data such as the problems faced while teaching in a large multilevel class, applying new techniques and notion of best practices was uncommon. Consequently, teachers of English language in Pakistan should implement best practices in teaching that involve a comprehensive, holistic instructional model of modern times (Pritchard and Honeycutt, 2007).

5. Limitation of the Study

This study has some limitations to be noted. First, the number of participants in sampling was in fact small. Second, time restriction was another factor. Due to short span of time this research study was not extended and could not collect data from various institutions. Third, only two public institutions were selected consequently the findings of this study cannot be generalized because data was gathered from only two public institutions. Last but not least, the study could be expanded if classrooms were to be observed. However, the results are helpful for concerned teachers who were contributors in this research.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Keeping in view the findings of this study concludes that the concept of best practices is uncommon among teachers of English. Moreover, teachers have shown willingness to adopt and employ innovative techniques in their classrooms and teachers faced problems while teaching in a large multilevel class, applying new techniques. Based on the findings, this study suggested some books consisted of innovative activities such as KWL Chart, Name toss, Alphabets shopping, A bio-poem, Optimistic snapshots, etc which are based on best practices model of techniques and activities. The suggested practices can assist English language teachers choose such instructional strategies that are most appropriate for creating learners’ interested classes. This study stresses best practices does not mean that instructive outcomes for English language teachers will improve magically but rather teachers must be able to work appropriately on best practices by considering multiple levels depending on the needs and developmental stage of the individual learners.

Suggested books:

- Hess, Natalie. Teaching Large Multilevel Classes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
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