EXPLORING THE EFFECT OF VISUALS AS ADVANCE ORGANIZERS IN FACILITATING STUDENT'S READING COMPREHENSION: A STUDY REPORT

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Abstract

In this paper I would like to present my observations during a study conducted with sixty Engineering students to study the effect of visuals as advanced organizers in facilitating reading comprehension. It is believed that technology can offer new educational possibilities thatnot only empower both teachers and studentsbut also enhance their skill development. Out of the four skills of language learning, Reading is the main source of language input in English as a second language (ESL) learning situation, like India.

In most of the English classes English is taught like a content based subject rather than a skill. As far as teaching reading skill is considered, it is less taught and more tested and evaluated. Most of the students are indifferent to reading anything beyond the prescribed English text books. At the same time they are found more interested in the technical aspects of learning. It was felt that this enthusiasm could be tapped to involve them in more exciting ways of learning.

Multimedia media learning which is defined as acquiring knowledge in a domain through interacting with an educational environment that presents information using multiple sources (e.g., newspapers, videos, animations, maps, charts, internet etc,). In this study our inputs are visuals as advanced organizers through digital texts.

It was observed that the learners became more interested in the learning process and participated in the tasks as active learners rather than mere passive learners.

Key words: *digital texts, visuals, multimedia, advanced organizers*

Introduction

In view of growing importance of English as a tool for global communication, it is the responsibility of teachers to prepare the students to acquire communicative competence. In English classes, the focus should be on the skills of reading, speaking, writing and listening. For this the teachers have to bring innovation to their teaching.

Reading is the main source of language input in English as a second language (ESL) learning situation, like India. A source of misgiving to many English teachers is the general indifference observed among the secondary level students to reading anything beyond the prescribed English textbooks. At the same time they seem to evince a great deal of interest in subjects that make them work with technology resources. It was felt that this enthusiasm could be tapped to counter the indifference to reading and to motivate students' interest in extensive reading by exposing them to reading texts online especially as the resources available on the internet are almost infinite.

Back ground

The quality of reading instruction should aim at moulding the child to become an active reader rather than just being forced to sit in the class. There is a need to break the monotony which prevails in most of the schools due to the lack of quality of teaching. 'It is asimportant to have "quality" education as much as it is to bring the child to school', Here quality is

equated with infrastructure; there are more teachers; more formalqualifications but hardly any attempt towards innovation in terms of **what** is beingtaught, and **how** it is being taught. Thisimplies designing materials to encourage self learning, group learning and peer learning where the teacher would act as a facilitator. By using multimedia sources in the teaching methodology, the teachers can motivate the students towards more self-learning and thereby reducing the student's dependency on the teacher.

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In this study we believe that technology can offer new educational possibilities thatnot only empower both teachers and studentsbut also enhance their skill development.It is also aimed at integrating technology into daily teaching, so that it motivates the learners to develop their interest and become proficient in using the language thereby improving their communicative competence.

Of all the four language skills, reading has always been the core of school English courses and it occupies a central position in the second language curriculum in our country. It is recognized as an essential skill to be acquired and mastered since every person is required to read and understand l academic as well as non-academic texts. Many students think they know how to read and go on reading with far less understanding than they are capable of achieving. The fact remains that reading is the chief tool of learning at schools and students who do not get all they should out of reading face trouble. Such students, however genuine their desire for an education is, encounter real obstacles in college, where reading tasks are complex and demanding.

Reading appears to be one of the most ignored areas in language learning and instruction in reading is more often not a distinct curricular area. Because of the importance of reading in the child's developmental years and in the educational system, this skill has been selected for the purpose of this study.

Reasons for Poor Performance of the Learners

These are some of the reasons we noticed for the poor performance of the learners. They are:

a)   unwillingness to learn because of the parental background and atmosphere and lack of awareness about the importance of English

b)   physical and organizational (no pair and group work is conducted in classes) problems in the learning and teaching of English

c)   insufficient time for learning and teaching of English

d)   mismatch between materials and methodology

e)   inadequate preparation by the teachers and lack of enthusiasm for innovation

f)   lack of interest

g)   lack of exposure

h)   lack of motivation

i)   learner difficulties in reading comprehension

It was felt that the only way to motivate learners who were not fond of reading is to break away from the conventional reading task design based on reading formats which focus mostly on the lower levels of comprehension. It is not that reader-friendly tasks do not exist in print but reading exercises for young readers may not always incorporate a very wide variety of tasks offering opportunities for more creative and critical thinking. Another strategy to motivate reading was to expose them to a range of multimedia reading texts and give them the option to choose topics of their interest.

It s felt that the use of technology, specifically using multimedia within the general classroom setting should be viewed as an opportunity to maximize academic success of **all** students. Technology is for all, but perhaps the most important reason for teaching through multimedia presentation is to provide an opportunity to individualize the learning situation in order to promote a sense of achievement among the students.
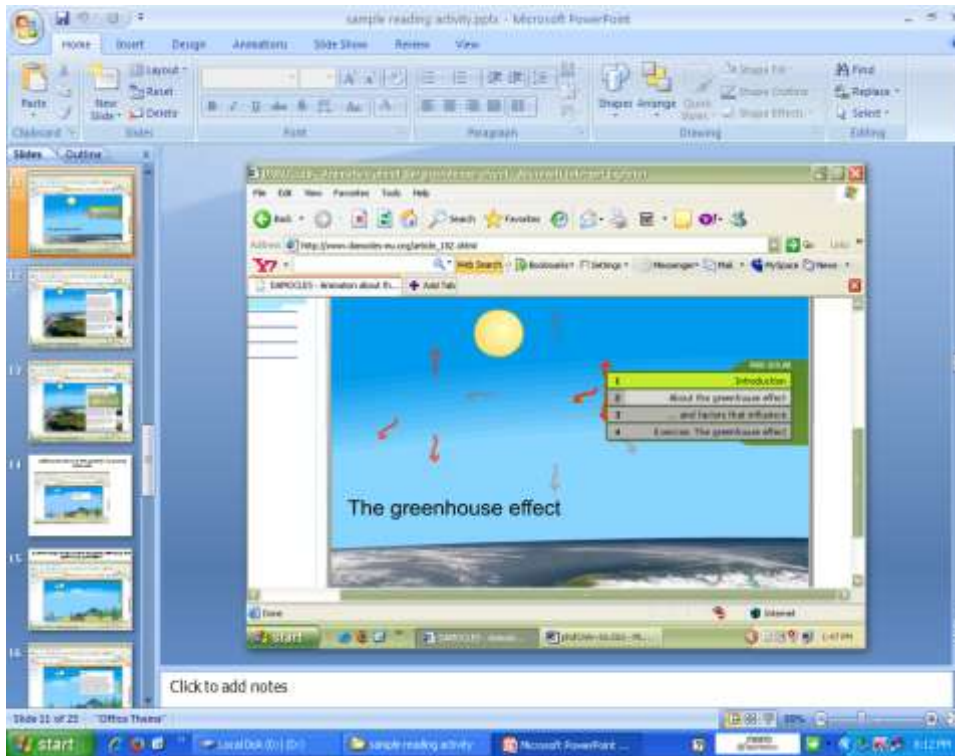
Advanced organizers

The knowledge of how qualities inherent in hypertexts affect the reading process is essential to understand the potential of digital texts to support students' reading development. Advanced organizers include interactive multimedia and are characterized by multi sequential text patterns, which present readers with an array of information resource options online. They are also highly interactive, allowing readers to make choices on the basis of personal interest or purpose. The rich interactive context in the present study offered by online hypertext in the form of organizers can enhance students' comprehension and build new knowledge that is complex and different to acquire from linear print alone. The multimedia features of online text illustrate meaning through audio, video, graphic and kinetic text expressions as well as the printed text.

Pre reading activity

As part of Pre reading activity the learners were provided with a digital text containing four statements regarding the greenhouse effect followed by right and wrong options.

They were supposed to choose the right option and click on it. An activity was further provided to test their ability to work within the technological environment. They were asked to answer the questions designed with the help of advanced organizers to check out the effect of the greenhouse on the planet and its inhabitants. The learners have to click on the activity icon to get access to the activity to be performed. Their scores were recorded instantly and the feedback was provided immediately.

The prereading activity is depicted in the following screenshot.

Intervention through multimedia animated Reading session

The multimedia reading activity was conducted with sixty Engineering students to investigate the effect of visuals as advance organizers in facilitating their reading comprehension. It further investigated the use of visuals as potential strategy to enhance animated instruction designed to deliver a content-based lesson in an ESL context. Specifically this activity was different from the regular text book reading activities in certain aspects: They are: 1. the animation (dynamic visuals) used was designed to complement the verbal (textual) portion of the content 2. The animation was content-based rather than context-based and therefore each sequence of animation displayed information directly related to the content, for example the effect of global warming and the green house effect 3. Questions as advance organizers were used to focus students' attention on crucial information of the content. 4. The study evaluated the effect of the advance organizers to complement animation in an ESL context.

The instructional material used in this study contained a 200 –word reading text on the topic 'Environment' focusing on the effect of greenhouse, factors affecting the greenhouse effect, global warming and its consequences. This text contains general environmental knowledge that secondary level readers might typically learn in their high school as well as more complex concepts likely to be learned in their future advanced classes. For the learners in this study, however, the subject matter is familiar, as they might have been exposed to portions of

the material in their science classes. The material was further developed into a computer-based instructional module by organizing relevant questions, exercises and answers with immediate corrections. This provided the learners with an opportunity to interact with the visual animation.

Learners wereallowed to review the animated visuals as many times as needed by clicking on the "play" button. The study was self-paced. The activities along with three more animated reading textswere used to evaluate learners'comprehension achievement resulting from the intervention.
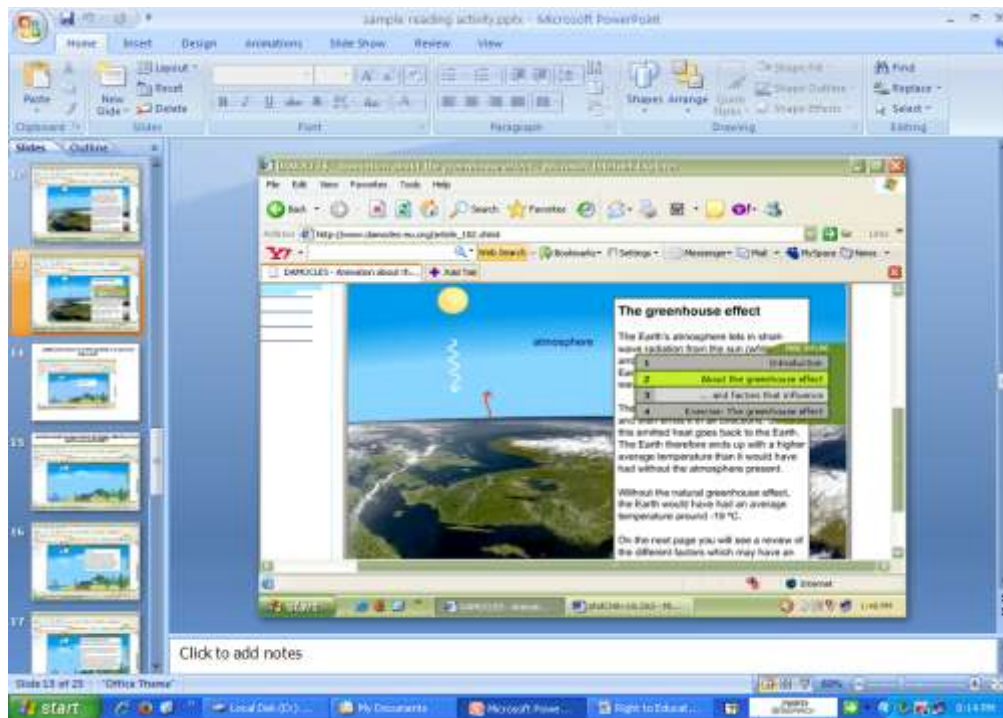
The learners had to complete a gap filling exercise based on their understanding of the digital text. The answers were provided on the right side with a drag in facility. The learners had to drag in the correct response and fit into the blank.

The learners would get an immediate feedback when they clicked on "show correction" button. If the learners provided the correct response there would appear a green icon with a smile. If the responses was incorrect a pink icon would appear. To change the response the learners had to click on the "remove correction" button. To begin once again they had to click on the "start over" button.

Implications

It was observed that the studentsbecame more interested in the learning process and participated in the tasks as active learners rather than just being forced to sit in the class. This implies that we also need proper investment in teachers training and should have school-based training programmes with emphasis on their perspective building. The teacher would act as a facilitator by designing materials to encourage self learning, group learning and peer learning where, we need, not just a student-friendly system, but also teacher-friendly system.

Furthermore, they were observed to have improved in motivation, peer cooperation as well as

learning during the multimedia reading activity. Thus, by encouraging concentration and providing motivating power, the experience became authentic. The students claimed to enjoy reading multimedia presentation more than their academic lessons as this helped them acquire new knowledge and skills in a much enjoyable manner.

Conclusion

Having the skills and strategies to comprehend and respond to information in the given inputs is likely to play a central role in our students' success in improving their comprehension skills. Although our study was limited to a small group of students, it provides important initial insights into the comprehension strategies readers use as they seek information from the text. While this study cannot show that explicit instruction of reading comprehension strategies through advanced organizers can increase reading scores, it can, at the very least, be a starting point for getting students to focus on their own metacognition, which could lead to greater understanding of text. It could also enhance their motivation levels to become lifelong readers.

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