

Remediation in EFL Challenging Context

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Abstract: It is a known fact that English Language Education (ELE) in educationally backward countries is based on approaches and theories from outside the context. These approaches cannot solve their problems, which are local, specific and need to be solved through indigenously developed approaches and methods. Quick Rising Activity (QRA) is an example of indigenous solutions that best suit classless context because these activities raise the students' writing skills in a very short period. This paper presents how these activities are designed and administered. The study starts with the a critical review related to the need for indigenous solutions to remedy the context, with reference to teaching and learning English in difficult circumstances, low-proficiency and classlessness. A field survey follows with using various methods/instruments for data collection. Based on the results of the two surveys, the activities are designed and tried out with a group of volunteering students in Najran University 2017. The results show the students, who lack the basics of writing and have wrong learning strategies, overcome these problems through the remedial activities designed.

Key words: remediation, classlessness, indigenous approaches, English language education, low-proficient learners.

1. Introduction

There are two major problems faced by EFL context in educationally backward countries namely low-proficiency and classlessness (Das & Almekhlafy, 2012). These are necessary fall-cuts of economic, social, and other problems. As appropriate solutions to these twin problems have not so far been found out, the number of low-proficient learners in a class is on increase making the class classless. One of the important assumptions of any system of education is the existence of classes. Accordingly, syllabuses, materials, methods and evaluations are designed for each class and level. However, the presence of low-proficient learners, in a great number and wide range of abilities in a class, make the class classless.

As these twin problems (low-proficiency and classlessness) are local, specific, and common to EFL situations/context, outside experts will be of no use. In other words, these problems are indigenous and need indigenous solutions. The present study presents one of these indigenous solutions focusing on one of the language skills, which is writing skill as the corner stone of the language profanely.

Although there is no one-size-fit-all solution for such complex problem, the study attempts to design remedial writing activities that can suit students with wide range of abilities exist in one class. Quick Rising Activities (QEA) can play a vital role since these activities raise students' skills and competence in a very short time.

2. Why Remediation?

Remediation is seen as a cure for either little learning, no learning or wrong learning. It rather helps low-proficient learners gain the basic skills to pursue their higher studies. Soliday (2002) determines the role of remediation stating that remediation proponents suggest that the course help underprepared students gain the skills necessary to excel in college and may serve as a tool to integrate students into the school population. Similarly, it is reported that the role of remediation after secondary school had become important to policymakers, educationists, institutional researcher, and universities (Soliday M., 2002; Bettinger E. P., & Long B. T., 2007). These studies and others confirmed the effectiveness of remedial programs to enhance learners' proficiency (Bettinger E. P. & Long B. T., 2009).

Moreover, Chang C. S., Liu E. Z. F., Sung H. Y., Lin C. H., Chen N. S. and Cheng S. S. (2014) asserted that remedial teaching is established to cover to the needs of students who are unable to cope with the class in a normal classroom. They are typically perform at a lower than average level due to learning or learning related problems. Thus, the major objective of remedial teaching is to equip the low-proficient learners with necessary skills that they could not by way or another acquire in normal classes.

3. Challenging Context: Low-proficiency and Classlessness

The two problems mentioned above (i.e., low-proficiency and classlessness) make the context difficult to remedy. The consequences of these two problems are also unmanageable. Therefore, immediate and indigenous solutions should be suggested and practiced otherwise the context will be more complex.

Although the remediation placement exam taken when first arriving on campus has become the key academic gate-keeper to postsecondary study in US Universities (Bettinger E. P. & Long B. T., 2009), the newcomers in some of Saudi Universities join the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) without appearing to any exam. Therefore, the class includes students of very wide range of abilities. The Preparatory Year Class in Najran University is an example of such "classless" context.

To make picture clearer, in Najran University, to join a college the students have to pass one year in PYP. They are placed in English classes regardless of their proficiency level. When officially in the PYP class, the students' skill-wise normally belongs to different classes. Unfortunately, these students with these big gaps in English proficiency are taught with same materials and methods. Consequently, this basic fact makes teaching totally deficit and teaching has failed to achieve any learning dividend in the learners. Thus, remediation comes to the surface and hence PYPs should overhaul the remedial program, so that it tackles the difficult context.

Moreover, these students know that they are low-proficient and they do not belong to the class so far their proficiency is concerned. This fact negatively affects their self-concept/efficacy. Therefore, the consequence is that some of them become totally dependent on their classmates who are high-proficient. Some of the students drop out of the PYP because staying in a class with the feeling that one does not belong to the class is difficult. Some of the students just hang on (of whom the researcher calls in-college dropouts) without participating in the activities of the class. What adds fuel to the fire is the wide range of abilities among these low-proficient learners.

4. Methodology

Data were collected from 30 EFL Saudi students enrolled at the Preparatory Year, Najran University, Saudi

Arabia. The participants' age ranged from 19 to 23. All of the participants were male students. The absence of female students in this study was because of the educational system in Saudi Arabia does not allow coeducation. In this context, female students study at different campuses. Therefore, it is difficult to find out female participants.

The participants were chosen based on the class-observations and the analysis of the FMT (First Mid-term Test). Those who have low level and problems in writing skills, they are invited to join the remedial classes. The researcher invited 10 out of the 30 students to attend the remedial classes.

The teacher/researcher used an observation checklist to record the events, in classrooms, in a systematic and effective way. A special kind of observation sheet referred to by James (2001), Scrivener (2005), Wajnryb (2008), Burns A. (2011) was used. The checklist was designed carefully to record in notes what the researcher considered as relevant to the objectives of his study. The pre-preparation of the checklist helped the researcher record the required information and events easily and quickly. The sheet consisted of different headings. Each heading covered one aspect of the observation foci and objectives. Some of the information needed in the checklist could be collected before or after the class that helped the researcher to record the rest of the events and activities carried out in the classroom.

Further, individual and group interviews were conducted after the experimentation. Some pre-prepared guide topics were prepared for the purpose. These guide-lines helped the researcher stick to the main purpose of the interviews and to analyze the data systematically (Burns A., 2011).

Finally, the experimentation of the activities represents the core of the study, which crystallizes the study as an action research, which methodologically undergoes the diagnostic the mixed mode approach depending on the statistical analysis of the FMT results and the classroom observation findings. The teacher/researcher made use of photographs as one of the observational techniques in collecting data. Photographs, by the researcher focused on classroom activities and students' sample of answers.

5. The Preliminary Survey Results

5.1 The FMT Analysis

As mentioned earlier the teacher/researcher starts the study with class-observation and FMT analysis. The answer scripts of 30 students, who got low marks in writing exam, are precisely analyzed. A rubric was prepared by the researcher to make the evaluation of the papers reliable and consistent. Some of the results are summarized in the following Table 1.

Table 1 Mistakes in the Conventions of Writing Skill

Rubric to Evaluate the Conventions of Writing Skill	Handwriting (legible, good spacing, alignment)	Capitalization (Begin sentences with capital letter)	Spelling (almost all words spelled correctly)	Word-order (put the words in the right order in a sentence)	Subject-verb Agreement (verb should be either singular or plural according to the subject)
Students No.	25	28	30	17	30
Percentage	83%	93%	100%	56%	100%

It is found that the targeted students lack basic skills of writing. The majority of them committed mistakes in the conventions of writing which are the surface features of writing skill (Cali K. & Browen K., 2007). They, who come from school, after nine years of learning English, find difficulty in writing simple sentences in English. See

the sample

some other European countries
 they go to school abroad
 countries with a high level of
 utilization of technology.
 students from other

Figure 1 Sample of Students' Writing

From the above example, it is clear that the student has problems even in the basic skill of writing which is handwriting. Moreover, there is a lack in the skill of forming the letters, word boundary, etc. which students should have studied in their early school levels. Consequently, they need immediate remedial classes.

5.2 Classroom Observation Findings

As mentioned earlier, the teacher/researcher used an observation sheet to collect data about classroom settings and to make the observation manageable.

Some of the targeted students were studying writing in different sections, so the teacher/researcher had to observe about 20 writing classes of other teachers. The focus of the observation was on weak students. The results show the wrong or inappropriate learning strategies used by these students. The results are summarized in the Table 2.

Table 2 Wrong Learning Strategies

Wrong Learning Strategies	Learn By Heart	Writing Before Thinking	Dependent
No. of Students	22	27	21
Percentage	73%	90%	70%

The above table shows some of the wrong learning strategies. Firstly, the students memorize everything mindlessly and reproduce them in the paper. In other words, they mug up things without understanding. Secondly, they write without giving themselves time to think and prepare for what they are going to write. Finally, they become dependent on either teacher or their high-proficient classmates.

6. The Description and Experimentation of the Activities

There are many common challenges that may face teachers who conducts remedial classes/courses. On this regard, Tzu-Ching (2007) reported that the choice of the materials and methods that must be chosen to suit students' needs and motivate them to learn. Moreover, the writer recommended that classroom management should give students power and potential to change their learning attitudes and give them the sense of security in class to share and participate actively in the classroom activities. This should be taken into account because students' negative attitudes and motivation towards learning make classroom management difficult and ultimately make students pay no attention to the remedial course. Besides what mentioned by the above researcher, the teacher/researcher has limited time aiming at enhancing the students' proficiency, who are of multi-levels, in

English in that limited time. As mentioned in the introduction of the study, the gaps among these students are very big, which makes the class classless.

Therefore, a suitable activity for all of the students should be used. Additionally, QRA (Quick Rising Activity) was appropriate to such a situation. It was better not to always keep the students in low level; otherwise, they can feel frustrated and even humiliated (Kundu M., 2015). Therefore, the activity was designed in such a way that the students started with generating words and ended with composing poems and writing paragraphs. See Figure 1 below.

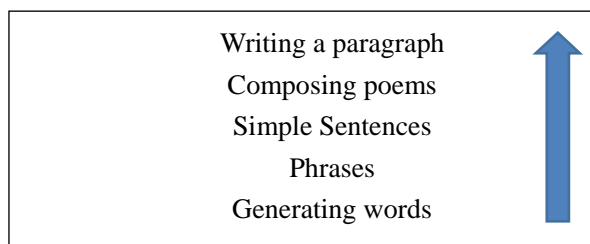


Figure 1 QRA (Quick Rising Activity)

The students stormed their brains to generate words about rain, like this:

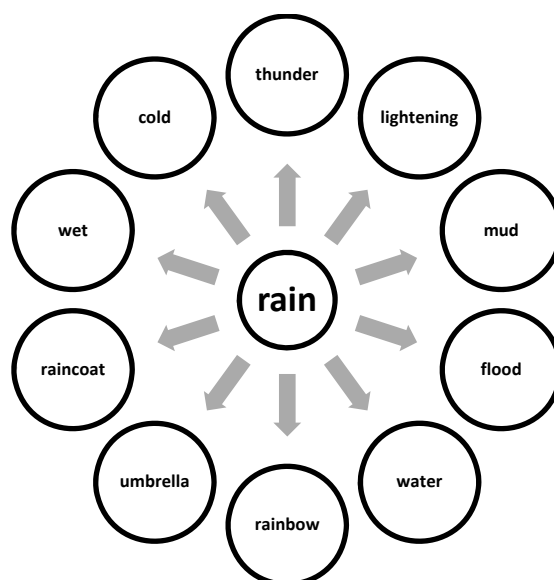


Figure 2 Brainstroming about Rain

In this stage of the activity, the students were very active as the BS encouraged creativity and generated many words quickly (Yusef G. A., Haj A. M., Kundu M. & Satpathy G., 2016).

Those words were developed into simple sentences. The students followed the structure and developed many other sentences from the words above. This type of activities are not fully controlled and guided. The students are given the chance to think and create some other new sentences. The advantage of such type of activities is to provide learners with the language they need to complete the task. Though they are described as old and traditional practices, they still considered as an effective tool in helping learners put words down in paper (Elturki E. & Shaman S., 2013). In addition, they build learners' confidence, as they do not commit mistakes. Controlled practice can still be meaningful despite its limitations.

Then, a simple four-lined poem was written on the WB and the students composed similar ones, see the

sample:

Rain causes lightening.

Rain causes thunder.

Rain causes rainbow.

Rain causes water.

After that, the students used the prompts given by the teacher/researcher and composed their own poems. The poem was used as a scaffolding for writing poems which can help them develop an inner compass to discover their own creativity, self-motivation, and emotional intelligence needed for learning and living (Yusef et al., 2016). It is semi-controlled but it enhances creativity among the students by writing poems (Pflaum J., 2016). One of amazing composed ones could be observed through Figure 3.

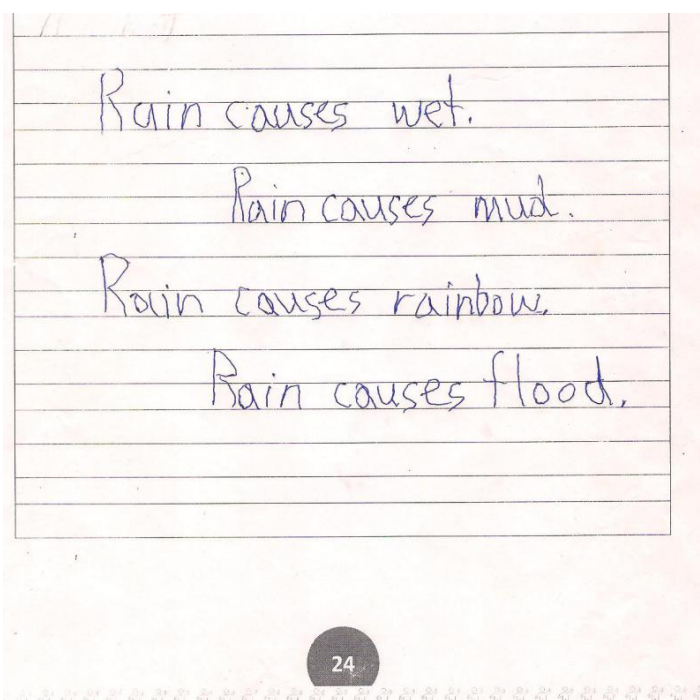


Figure 3 Sample of Student Performance

This was interesting and motivating and it was the first time for the learners to write in English without committing mistakes. Therefore, this creative technique broke the wall of despair. After the experimentation, One of the interviewees commented on this issue in the below excerpt:

“I never thought that I can write poems in English.”

“English is not difficult.”

In both sentences, it is obvious that the activities changed the attitude of the students towards English language. They felt confident that they could speak and write in English, which was our main goal of the remedial activities.

7. Findings and Discussion

The responses from the target learners are overwhelmingly positive. The interviews, experimentation, and observation data are also encouraging. The analysis of the target students answer scripts in the SMT shows the

progress the students achieved in a very short period. Besides, through the data, it could obviously be elicited that the students have overcome the problems they had in the basics in writing. Table 3 provides more insights on this point.

Table 3 SMT Students Scripts Analysis

Conventions of Writing	Handwriting	Capitalization	Spelling	Word-order	Subject-verb Agreement
No. of Students	2	0	4	4	3
Percentage	20%	0%	40%	40%	35%

The table above gives a clear picture of the quick progress achieved by a total of ten students who attended the remedial writing classes. This progress minimizes the gaps among the students in the same class.

Beside achieving the main goal of the study which tends to enhancing the proficiency of the targeted students in writing skill, and changing some of students' wrong strategies of learning, the study comes up with the following results and findings.

7.1 Remediation is Difficult

Helping someone learn what he/she has not learned from previous teaching is always easier than helping unlearn what he/she has wrongly learnt. It is still much more difficult if someone's wrong learning has not been corrected over months and years and the wrong learning, it is needed to know the causes of wrong learning. This requires teachers' active involvement and deep knowledge in the subject. Observing closely to help someone learn what he/she not learned from previous teaching is also not an easy task. If he/she has not benefited from previous teaching, there is no guarantee that he/she will learn if re-taught him/her the same thing in the same way. In order to help him/her learn, one should know the causes of his/her wrong learning from the previous teaching and accordingly reframing and redesigning the methods of teaching is necessary. That stage of the experimentation revealed to the research how remediation was a difficult job.

7.2 Wrong Teaching behind Wrong Strategies

Looking precisely at the study results, it could be elicited that most of learner-related problems are system-related ones. Based on the field survey, particularly, classroom observation and experimentation, it is found that the students while doing writing activities, they do not think before doing such activities. This wrong strategy in learning English is the result of following the teacher-centred approach where teachers explain and talk and students passively listen. They never check whether the students understand them or not or even whether the students really listen to them or not. In most cases, the students have to copy mindlessly after the teachers. Therefore, the students are not given any chance to use their minds or to think.

Furthermore, the students depend totally on memorization in their learning of English. They mindlessly memorize everything and reproduce them in their exam papers. They mug up everything without understanding and reproduce them in exams. This is mostly the result of difficult tasks and tests. Students, therefore, develop a survival strategy to get through the tests. Thus, most of the learner-related English problems are system-related.

7.3 Indigenous Approaches to be Applied

Several approaches of teaching used for teaching English are based on a very western idea of what constitutes "good" learning. These approaches and teaching methods are not suitable and appropriate in many contexts. What is suitable to a group of learners cannot be certainly suitable to another. The diversity of local culture, urban/rural, etc. makes it difficult to apply the same methods of teaching to all groups. Rather, one should

employ the teaching methods that are culturally sensitive and productive and suit the learners' educational beliefs (Haj A. M., Yusef G. A. & Kundu M., 2016).

For example, the approaches and methods such as QRA, which go well with the proficiency, culture, and educational beliefs of the learners, proved very effective in enhancing their proficiency in English. These activities make learners generate many words in interesting ways and feel confident that they know many English and there is nothing to fear in learning English. . To quote some of them,

“I feel that what I learnt here is more than what I learnt in the previous courses ... Our friends who could not participate in this course missed a lot.”

It is the first time for them to feel engaged in learning English, which breaks the wall of despair. The focus is on the process not the product. This helps gradually to build their skills of writing. They transfer smoothly and easily from one step to another. Each step builds the confidence of the students to do the next one. In addition to that, the activity is semi-guided and controlled. This gives them no chance to commit mistakes. Thus, they, for the first time, write in English without committing mistakes.

7.4 Limitations

Every study is bound to have some limitations and many of them must bind a study in remediation. Some of these limitations are;

- 1) One month for the experimentation was not typically enough to enhance the learners' proficiency in English. The duration was very short to bring out a positive change in them. In addition, the students had no enough time to attend all the remedial classes, which hindered the study fast progress. Many activities and lessons could not be made due to limitations of time.
- 2) The researcher found difficulties to experiment the activities with larger number of students due to financial problems. The results would be better if tried out with participants in different places and contexts.
- 3) The teacher/researcher found difficulty to find research in the same area (teaching/learning in challenging context).

7.5 Recommendations

Based on the researcher's experience gained through the study findings, the following recommendations can be offered for further research in the area.

- 1) Studies of this type, which involve extensive fieldwork, material evaluation, material production, tryouts, teaching and field visits, could be carried out by a team of researchers over a longer period.
- 2) The study was confined to one area in Saudi Arabia. Similar studies could be conducted with other localities.
- 3) The study was confined to ELE. Research of similar kind could be conducted in the teaching/learning in other subjects.

8. Conclusion

The problems of ELE in the study context and places with similar circumstances are unique and special arising out of their socio-economic and cultural make up. These problems are restricted to the educationally backward areas (not merely confined to English but to all subjects of study). Therefore, one cannot expect western

experts to solve these typical problems in these areas primarily due to the fact that the western context is totally different from our context. The former teaches/learns in comfortable circumstances and the later teach/learn in difficult circumstances. Thus, we have to find solutions to our indigenous problems and these solutions should come mainly from the grassroot practitioners. One example of these solutions is QRA.

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