Teaching English through Silly Mistakes of the Students: An Action Research

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Abstract

Teachers' frustration on students' poor performance can lead the institution down. There can be several reasons behind the poor performance of the students; ignorance, carelessness, overgeneralization, hypercorrection, mother tongue interference, wrong input, and so on. Sometimes the students take some subjects very easily so they make several mistakes on such easy tasks. English language learning in English medium private schools is one example here.

This study focuses on the problems raised from the English language teachers in a school. The students were taught English for several years but the mistakes on gender, number, concord and tense were found where teachers had not expected. The grammar teachers teach grammar in isolation. At the same time, other subjects' teachers teach their subjects and search answers in content. In this regard, their grammar use in practice is somehow neglected. Negligence in study is very common in students (Newnham, 2000) which the teachers should recognize and eradicate if not possible, control and minimize in time otherwise it can create big problems in the future. For this, action research can be a good means to reach to the destination. Here students and teachers work together to bring change in existing problems. So, sometimes it is also called a participatory research.

Key Words: Silly mistakes; Action research; Grammar; English; Negligence; Mistakes etc.

Background of the Study

Having taught English grammar and literature from class one, students were found very poor in English language in grade ten in a school. They were fluent to make conversation to the teachers for communicational purpose but once they were asked to write an essay or a letter, there would seem problems. Either they would copy from friends, or from the books. Otherwise, they would ask to the teachers and write the same. Most of their answers would be same; same language, same information, same ideas and styles.

As English medium school children, they feel English subject very easy to pass in exams so they give very less attention, less time and less effort in English subject in the classroom (Ramnathan, 2015). Even the school administrations offer extra tuition classes for Math, Science, Social Study, Account and Nepali but they give hardly a period (40-45 Minutes) a day for English. Probably, this one period would be all for students in most of the schools. Rarely may the students give some time to do the home works otherwise; they pass the exams based on classroom's teaching and learning in the private (Boarding) schools in Nepal.

I studied little about education policy, examination policy, question papers, text books, teaching learning and final results. According to the education policy of Nepal, the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) questions are same to all the students; public, private, urban and rural. So the questions are targeted not only to the students of private schools of urban areas. They are made same for all so it becomes very tough to public and rural schools' children and easy to the private and urban schools' children though their English is also seemed miserable in free writing.

Similarly the text book is also designed in a different way. The children, who have been studying in public schools, have only one English subject in school. So it is very difficult to pass.

But, for the students who have been studying Social Studies, Health and Physical, Science and Account in English medium, they feel the language and vocabulary used in English book very easy in the classroom. It is more practical. The texts are followed by exercises. And, the examination system is also easier than others. 25% of total mark is completely based on practical. Though it is said that the practical covers listening, speaking and reading, schools offer 25 out of 25 without giving any test in the schools. In 75 marks, the boarding schools' children of urban areas can easily secure 50-60 marks from passages, letters, essays, conversation writing and applications. Only 5 marks grammar is there in final exam so they are not found more serious in English as they are found in other subjects like math, social and science. As a result, though they get good marks in English in SLC, their English language is found weaker than they are supposed to be.

Error is a human (Poillon, 1999). As Abdul Kalam, the former president of India says, a person becomes successful because of right decision, right decisions are made from experiences and the experiences are gathered from wrong decisions/deeds. Undertaking this statement, I as an English teacher com administrator, accepted students' mistakes and decided to conduct an action research to minimize the mistakes in English language learning in students looking through their silly mistakes.

Significance of the Study

English language is used almost all over the world; either as a first language, mother tongue, second language, foreign language, official language or a lingua franca. Its popularity is increasing day by day (Johnson, 2009). The countries in which their own languages were given more parities like China, Japan and Korea, they are also getting attracted towards English

language in latter days. These countries have been hiring English Language Instructors in their countries from the other countries where English language is given more priority.

In the countries like Nepal where English language is used as foreign language, the importance of English is far-fetched. Almost in every job English language is must. Medicines are printed in English, latest gadget manuals like mobile, computer and camera are instructed in English, in most of the private institutions teaching medium is also English, and in the public colleges and universities also, the subjects that are taught in Nepali in the classroom teaching are asked questions in English. So I believe this part is to be taken very seriously.

In Nepal, we have been teaching English but not about English, since long. So the students should be able to use common grammatical terms correctly. After school either do they go to the job markets or for higher studies where English language is tested as a primary subject. If their English language seems poor, neither do they get the jobs easily into the markets nor their gates get opened for higher studies in good subjects. Furthermore, our job market is quite narrow. So, the students should prepare for abroad studies and jobs as well. For this also they need to be good in English language (Education.com). Otherwise, they will be lacking behind in to this competitive world. Thus, deep attention should be given in English Language Teaching (ELT) focusing on different methods, techniques and strategies.

I hope this article would be a new innovation in teaching English in school and college levels for pre service and in-service teachers in Nepal and the other countries where English is taken as a second (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL).

Rationale of the Study

When I observed the copy correction of some teachers, I found the passages (subjective portion) were checked in surface. In the secondary level students' papers, the mistakes were found

randomly. When I pointed the mistakes, students sometimes corrected themselves. More often, I guess, they did it because of their negligence. And, in my opinion the teachers are equally responsible for this.

Small stumbles can cause great accidents in human life. In case of language teaching and learning, such negligence is to be taken very seriously. Once the mistakes are piled up, they can cause great problems in job markets and higher studies. So, such mistakes should not be neglected though they look simple, easier and correctable from the individual students. Thus, this study rationalize the point that if one wants to get victory over English language teaching in the countries like Nepal , he/she should go through the silly mistakes students often create in their subjective writing.

Silly Mistakes

Silly mistakes are defined here as negligence; common things they know well but they are not serious about them. When their attention is drawn or when they are shown and asked to find out the mistakes, they can point out but while writing and speaking smoothly they often make mistakes here and there. This is a common problem many people face and commit because of the lack of attention (Ingle, 2014). Silly mistakes are the reasons of having not serious or showing a lack of thought, understanding or good judgment (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2015).

Drivers drive very carefully in the mountain areas where the roads are narrow and crumbled but in the plain areas, they find the road very big and easy so they drive very fast and over confidently. In the result they get more accidents. Same thing may happen in language learning. Singular-plural, noun and verb agreement, use of articles, semantic overlapping (right words in right place) etc. are some examples found in schools in English language learning. According to Rusczyak (2015), a person commits silly mistakes because of more familiarity with

the source of error. The task in which he/she feels easy there happens some silly mistakes because of his/her overconfidence. Overconfidence causes restlessness in mind. And, silly mistakes are caused because of the lack of peace in mind, focus on works and confidence in heart (Ramos, 2014).

Mistakes and errors of the students should be accepted easily. It is an important part of the learning process. They are indispensable to learners since the making of errors can be regarded as 'a device the learners uses in order to learn' (Ho, 2003). Where there is no mistake, there is no learning (How to Correct Mistakes, 2015) so; errors are the effective means of improving grammatical accuracy (Ho, 2003). Supporting the above given statements Corder (1991) writes, a mistake is not an issue of knowledge, but it is an issue of its application, how one applies in writings. In the countries where English is taken as a second language (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL), there such mistakes are found almost in everyone's writing. According to Valero, Fernandez, Iseni and Clarkson, (2007), many mistakes are produced by learners making faulty inferences about the rules of the new language and, the inability to apply what they have learned. There, they need timely feedback with right techniques to improve systematically but error feedback in students' writing is a complex task (Ferdouse, 2013) if the students do not understand and accept it positively. "Correction is often a waste of time for the teacher and a discouragement for the students if they receive their work full of red notes. Some students may react badly and thus learn nothing" (Iseni, 2011, p. 66).

Purpose of the Study

Different types of errors we observed in students' writing in general observation. So, particularly focusing on their silly mistakes, this study was launched with the following purposes;

- Observe and find out the silly mistakes prevalent in the students of grade 10

- Apply the pedagogical strategies and observe its effect in the classroom, and

- Minimize the mistakes successfully

Comprehensive writing tasks were provided to each student. They were open to express their ideas and feelings in such subjective wrings. Based on SLC questions, essays, dialogues, applications and paragraph writings were chosen so that they would also help in their final examination. After all, this was an action research. And, the primary aim of action research is to bring positive change in existing problem or practice (parkin, 2009; What is Action Research, 2010; Teacher Action Research, n. d.).

Action Research

Action research is a task oriented research activity in which the researcher (teacher) works from beginning to end to the informants (students) to bring change into the existing problem. In this regard, it is a participative, collaborative, situation and context oriented act where knowledge is created through action at the point of application. It involves problem solving, if the solution on the problem leads to the improvement of practice (What is Action Research, 2010). Citing in the same article, Parkin (2009) writes, the purpose of undertaking action research is to bring about change in specific contexts. And, action research's strength lies in its focus on generating solutions to practical problems and its ability to empower practioners by getting them to engage with development and implementation activities.

In case of teaching learning, action research is based on practical problems. Its aim is to bring change is existing problems in the classrooms (What is action research?, 2010). It is a recursive and cyclical process of study designed to achieve concrete change in a specific situation, context or work setting to improve teaching learning simultaneously (Bruce & Pine, 2009). According to Carr and Kemmis (as cited in Newsone, 1988), it is focused on change

where teacher/researcher frequently works simultaneously within some research steps and circle back to students. From this angle, action research is a paradigm not a method (Teacher Action Research n.d.).

In an article published from Sage, Teacher Action Research (n. d.), it is mentioned that, an action research challenges certain assumptions about the research process and educational change. It challenges the separation of the research from action or, the separation of the research from the researched. In action research teachers are the change agents and source of educational reform. They own professional knowledge through the process of action inquiry, interaction, transformation and application reflecting on their practice to improve it. In Ferrance (2000) words, action research is a process in which participants examine their own educational practices systematically and carefully, using the techniques of research. Again focusing more on the same point, he writes, "Action research is not a library project where we learn more about a topic that interests us. It is also not problem solving in the sense of trying to find out what is wrong, but rather a quest for knowledge about how to improve" (p. 2).

According to Burns (2010), action research is a powerful tool for teachers for professional development and high quality teaching. It helps them to link their prior knowledge to new information, obtain from experience, learning and discussion. Similarly Nugent, Malik and Hollingsworth (2012) write, "Action research is helpful in improving the professional experience of teachers, head teachers and administrators. It gives every educators to improve the practices in classroom and schools, which ultimately will improve the quality of teaching and learning leading positively towards the quality improvement" (p. 1).

Focusing action research in English Language Teaching (ELT), British Council mentions, action research is a process in which teachers investigate teaching and learning so as to improve

their own and their students' learning (2014). It believes, more a teacher does action researches in the classrooms, more he/she brings changes in students' learning. So it is necessary to conduct action research from the teachers time and again in the schools, classrooms and out as well. Citing from Sue Davidoff and Owen van den Berg (1990), British Council broadcasts four steps of action research in teaching learning; plan, teach / act, observe and reflect. Here are some guidelines for each step.

Plan

- Identify the problem area.

- Narrow it down so that it is manageable.

- Investigate the problem. When does it happen? Who does it affect?

- Where does it happen?

- Think about what might be causing the problem. Talk to other teachers and/or read to get more ideas about this.

- Think about a solution and how to implement it.

- Think about what evidence you will collect to decide whether your action is successful or not. How will you collect it? How will you analyze it?

Teach / Act

- Implement your solution.

Observe

- Gather evidence which you will analyse to decide whether your solution was successful or not.

Reflect

- Analyse the evidence you gathered. Has the problem been solved? If not, what step will you try next? If yes, what problem will you try to solve now?

Silly Mistakes Prevalent in Students' Writing

In most of the students' writing common grammatical mistakes were found where they could give right answers on their own if discussed into the classroom. Out of 27 students 25 had written the plural of child as 'childrens', 18 wrote parents plural as 'parens' and fox as 'foxens'. Similarly, the problem was found in agreement as 'Does she wants to be a film star?', 'I did't told anything to them.', 'Hostel doesn't provides much feeling of security.', 'Bright future of a children depends on his/her childhood'. , He have taken my pen' etc... At the same time wrong words like 'think' in place of 'thing', 'there' in place of 'their', 'form' in place of 'from', 'than' in place of 'then', 'won't' in place of 'wont' and 'phrase' in place of 'phase' and so on.

I have collected some original sentences with silly mistakes from the students' composition writing. So here I would like to present the real sentences;

1. A: Hi friend! How are you?

   B: I am find here. i hope you are also fine there.

2. Finally the giant called all the childrens to play in his garden.

3. To day I am going to write a letter to u.

4. A child become mature in the society and develops his moral character there.

5. We must grow the children in such a way so that they have a good moral characters.

6. Children's can't share their feeling with teachers, they parents and others.

7. A children can't control his/her anger.

8. Students can't get love and affection from parents if they are out form home in hostel.

9. Every children should have their aim.

10. Children and parents are the two wheel of a car.

11. Parents should give education to their child and care them until they are able to make themsellfs a right dicision.

12. If children are not in right track than they will be engaged in bad activities.

13. So, parent's future and children future is related.

14. Childrens actually compored with the soil of the land which makes it fertile.

15. Parents, at home, should makes strict rules and regulations so they won't involved in other activities which spoils their life.

16. So, the future of the children depend upon their childhood care.

17. Childrens are much more creative & inquisitive so, one should be good, honesty and knowledgeable.

18. Subject: About week condition of our school environment.

19. I saw a advertisement in the news paper….

20. Learning of goods or bads by the children depends on the care of the parens at home.

21. Children are raised up to be perform various professions which contributes to development.

22. We most take care of the children in such a way so that they have a good moral characters and they have a respect to humanity.

23. Children's age is the initial phrase for making their base strong.

24. Parents should give suggest by love not angry.

25. Children thing negative if they are not positive suggested.

26. Parents do not take participate in their children activities by their busy life.

27. If the children learns good things, knowledge in his/her childhood than only there life and future becomes secure.

28. Parents and teachers think very sincerly about the all round development of the children.

29. The <u>success</u> children are those <u>in which</u> parents and teachers play <u>an vital</u> role.

30. We have seen many children change <u>throw</u> bad track to good track.

31. <u>Parent</u> should know the habits and activities which <u>is</u> done by <u>there</u> children.

32. Rich people should not give extra money to <u>there</u> children, so they can't <u>involved</u> in bad activities.

These are only some examples drawn from the students' answer sheets where mostly the grammatical and semantic mistakes are seen. There were many sentences which were illegible and incorrigible as well but I wanted to go through the common and silly mistakes of the students so that they would be more conscious and less negligent. And, hope it would be more interesting to make a discussion in the mass.

Recognition of Mistakes

Errors are the integral parts of language learning (Khansir, 2012). As mention in Bhandari (2012), in error analysis, errors, mistakes and lapses are often used synonymously (p. 214) but here in my study, I have varied mistakes of the students from the errors even though they are not the native speakers of English language. Errors are the ill-formed sentences which students utter or produce because of ignorance (lack of knowledge) but the mistakes, the students know the correct form in a second language but they make the ill-formed sentences they produce due to carelessness, lack of attention and commitment (Khansir, 2012; Funder, 1989; Francois, 2013; Online TEFL, 2013; Ellis, 2008).

The above given definition of mistake is borrowed as it is into my study; the students have known their mistakes if they are given the sentences in isolation. They can correct on their won as well. They have studied grammar especially; singular-plural, concord, capital-small, tense and number from their primary level. Except some exceptional rules, others they can easily

rectify their mistakes on their own. If it is underlined and asked them to say the right answers, there also they can say what mistake is there but why do they write such ill-formed sentences in free writing?- It is not their ignorance but carelessness, lack of attention and commitment, and their attitude towards such ill-formed sentences. On the other hand, these ill-formed sentences are not regular and systematic as well. So here, I have categorized them under a broad term 'mistakes' and call them the silly mistakes of students. For the further treatment, I have taken all the errors; group, individual, graphological, lexical, grammatical and all other available mistakes are dealt simultaneously in this study.

Treatment and Result

Before the identification of the problem in students, the grammar book was continuously followed. The rules and the examples given in the book used to be discussed. After the discussion in the classroom, the exercises following those examples and structures were practiced. Some students who were cleaver used to search the answers from the book with the help of given structures and examples and rest of all would copy from them either in Tiffin break or before the assembly bell.

Grammar teachers would teach just the rules of the grammar so they check the grammatical rules objectively. Similarly, other teachers those who teach other subjects would check the content information of their respective subjects but not the grammars. So the students never got real feedbacks on their silly but genuine mistakes. Therefore, its affect is reflected in composition writing in English. Probably the students would not know how much effect it asserts in English Language Learning (ELL) in real life in the future.

So, first the mistakes were collected from their compositions in a diary systematically. Mistakes of particular students and their code names were mentioned together so that their

problems would be understood while discussing in the classroom but they would not know whose code was that except themselves.

Firstly self correction was given more priority after the red underline assigned into their papers in presence of teacher. Secondly, the students were found more excited to point out their friends' mistakes so the pair correction was implemented. More than teachers, the students would find such silly mistakes in their friends' papers. In pair correction, on the one hand students are more excited to find their friends' mistakes; on the other hand, they become more conscious to minimize their own mistakes as well. In teachers' correction, generally the students' do not raise questions if they have any doubt on correction but in pair correction, students can ask their friends what mistakes they have made and how it would be corrected. Through this discussion, their learning becomes explorative and permanent in nature.

Teacher's correction was continuously there upon self correction and pair correction. Sometimes, giving some clues of the possible mistakes in papers, the students were asked to review their papers on their own as well. Though it is a self correction, it became more effective than the self correction of the students on teacher's underlined words and sentences.

Though it looked little different, sometimes, it was also found an effective technique to correct students silly mistakes into the composition writings i.e. mistakes shown from the principal or the administrative body. When the mistakes are collected from the teacher and submitted to the principal for further discussion to the students, there the students become more conscious when their mistakes are pointed from the higher bodies. They think their mistakes can be passed to the principal, administrative bodies or to the guardians as well so they can become little more conscious (less negligent) in writing a composition.

Finally, I found a pushed out put (Leeser, 2008) technique is also very much effective in silly mistakes correction. Students of school level hardly like to do something on their own (We can watch a movie 'The Ron Clark Story') in writing. So they should be given tasks and feedbacks continuously. Sometimes the teachers should force them to do on their own as well. If they are compelled to do the things time and again, their language becomes standard gradually. In my study, I gave students to write essays, letters, dialogues, biographies and autobiographies continuously on their own minimum in two to three pages. Sometimes they were compelled to write four and five pages as well. The students who would feel difficult to write one page on their own, started writing three/four pages. And, the grammar was also found very much improved by the end of fifth month.

At the beginning of the action, students felt little odd, difficult or uneasy but gradually they came to know that how their language got changed. They realized that they would pass the English exams easily but why they were getting less marks than their expectations! Their performance got changed along with marks. This brought positive change in students' attitude, behavior and overall activities in the school which received a positive recommendation from other teachers and administrators.

Discussion

In the article, 'English grammar and the views of English teachers', Williams (1994) writes "Confusion of tongues arises from the confusion of thought" (p. 105). Here in this article I am not in favor of this statement. He has mentioned this statement targeting the second/foreign language learners' performance, but the students of my study were also the foreign language learners. They made mistakes not because of the confusion in thought but lack of consciousness. So, conscious-raising (C-R) activities (Rutherford & Sharwood, 1985) should be carried out time

and again in the classrooms either through self correction, pair correction, teacher's correction or through the revision of the texts. Sayers, (2006) writes, awareness-raising should be done time to time for sustainable change in the existing practices.

Boarding/English medium private schools mostly use implicit teaching (Talley & Hui-ling, 2014) in the classrooms focusing on communicative activities. Leech (1994) in 'Students' Grammar-Teachers' Grammar-Learners' Grammar' focuses teaching English in non-native countries through prototype rules or the rules of thumb. He states, rules of thumb, helps in powerful generalization in English language learning. But, in my opinion, the students wrote the wrong forms of singular-plural, present-past and agreements (concord) because of overgeneralizations. Prototype rules would work for the initial learners but once they become in grade nine and ten, explicit instruction (Archer & Hughes, 2011) should be applied time to time in the classroom. Though Ellis (1989) claims, external manipulation of the input does not affect sequence of acquisition, I believe it helps in maintenance of learned knowledge that is in the unaware condition of the students.

Through continuous speaking in the school premises and regular home works in English medium subjects, the students have possessed procedural knowledge (Johnson, 1996), knowledge how to use though some mistakes are found, but now it should be converted into declarative knowledge, what about grammar (Johnson, 1996) so they would grammar correctly. Even if it is not so easy, it should be maintained applying different techniques like drawing notice to rules, remedial activities on exercises, using figurative and emotive description, giving hints and so on. Mistakes happened because of carelessness are the silly mistakes (Mcgarry, 2013) in language learning.

Conclusion

Here is a statement taken from Wines, (2007), "It is very frustrating to encounter a student who obviously understands the concept, but the grades that they receive does not reflect their understanding because of careless errors not taking pride in their work. This frustration served as the catalyst for my action research" (p.1). Very similar thing had happened into my study. The students had been studying English literatures, grammars and all since their childhood but their performance was very poor in composition writing. From this study, it became very clear that the silly mistakes are very common in language learners but such mistakes should not be left as they are. Applying different techniques, methods and strategies, teachers should make students aware to minimize such mistakes in time. For this action research is the best and most applicable.

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