



Test preparation strategies for the TOEFL can be diverse and effective.

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ABSTRACT

Teaching and Learning have always been associated together and it is essential that both these processes should achieve the learning outcomes of any given course. Students all over the UAE have to grapple with standardized high-stakes examinations that are benchmarked to international standards. While higher educational institutions compete with each other in terms of recruiting and retaining students, the mandatory requirements for an acceptable score on the TOEFL or IELTS curtail a number of students who aspire to get into the University of their Choice. However, effective test preparation strategies that are different and unusual to some extent can enable students to improve their scores. This small scale study shows that there was a significant difference in the performance of students.

Introduction

Heffernan (2006, pp. 151-170) states that a test preparation program is expected to groom students and the aim is to improve the previous score that has been achieved on the TOEFL test. In this context, it must be noted that ultimately, it is the responsibility of the instructors to make the course appealing to the learners. It must be noted that the TOEFL iBT that was introduced in 2005 tests four different skills of Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking in comparison to the paper-based TOEFL which tests Listening, Reading, Structure and Written Expression.

It was assumed that an English test preparation course can be made more interesting by customizing strategies that suit the specific needs of students who are enrolled on such courses. The objectives of the study were to enhance the academic performance of students taking a standardized examination such as the TOEFL.

The research questions were as follows:

Are there any methods to retain the enthusiasm of a student while he/ she is preparing for a standardized examination?

Is it possible to use diverse techniques to whet the interest of the students?

The hypotheses that were propounded are clearly mentioned in the lines below.

Hypothesis 1: There are various methods to foster enthusiasm to ensure significant improvement in the performance of a student while taking standardized examinations.

Hypothesis 2: It is possible to use diverse strategies to motivate student population.

Literature Review

It is a fact that Educational Testing Service (ETS) has published some research findings that can be accessed through its website. Garcia Laborda (2007, pp 3-9), a researcher has stated that some high-stakes examinations are being highly computerized and others are bound to follow. She suggests, "Learners may need to change their learning skills and their approach to test-taking and adapt themselves to what the test administrators believe is most appropriate in terms of testing knowledge." (Garcia Laborda, 2008 p2) This statement is especially relevant as we consider that students need to prepare for their tests in various ways



and fulfill expectations that focus on a manner of learning that is entirely “North American” in nature. (Garcia Laborda, 2008 pp 2-3)

Rationale for the study

There were numerous challenges in the test preparation class rooms. One of these challenges was based on training students to enhance their reading skills. Apart from trying to adjust to a new educational environment, students had problems balancing their time schedules. Some of them were working students with health problems. The course instructors faced a number of challenges in trying to make sure that students would attend test preparation sessions. Students were aware that test preparation classroom sessions did not bear any credits or improve their academic standing in any way. Therefore, the course instructors were under tremendous pressure to motivate students.

The researcher Nassaji (2003, pp 645-670) says, students will have a lot of difficulties while trying to achieve a high score on the TOEFL if they do not understand the vocabulary as well as the context for situations that are generally presented in an actual TOEFL test. Nassaji also says the quality of some of the strategies that are used could have an implication and decide the success of learners who will acquire the ability to negotiate synonyms of different words, sounds that are difficult to understand and unravel the intricacies of sentences that are difficult to follow. Therefore, it was necessary to use effective test preparation techniques at the risk of being categorized as unconventional practices. The rationale was focused on deriving optimum results through effective strategies.

Methodology

The strategy to use unconventional methods was concentrated on a small group of 20 students enrolled in a Level 3 English Test Preparation course as well as another small group of students enrolled on a Level 2 English test preparation course at a private university in the UAE. At the beginning of the semester, students were not only given a placement test to determine their level, they were also given diagnostic tests to know the specific challenges that they faced. Respondents reported difficulties in comprehending the American accent, which meant they experienced a number of problems related to the listening section on the TOEFL. In addition, they faced some difficulties with the reading section considering the fact that their reading speed was poor. In fact, they did not want to read and were not very different compared to students from other parts of the world who have a pseudo modern approach towards academics.

The disadvantage with TOEFL reading passages is that they do not have attractive pre tasks to elevate student interest. Therefore, students did face difficulties comprehending the given passage as well as vocabulary. In addition, many of them struggled with fatigue as they travelled from distant places while dealing with horrendous traffic congestion. For instance, when students in the Level 2 English test preparation class were assigned a TOEFL reading passage on the revolutionary war to improve their reading speed, half of the students were highly de motivated and the other half showed a tendency to fall asleep. Although the instructor had a tight lesson plan that needed to be followed, the instructor had to do something unconventional in order to get the learners to come out of their lethargic state. The researchers would like to elaborate on one particular strategy that really worked. Students were told that they could listen to a story instead of the reading session and the resulting excitement amongst students was felt throughout the room. The instructor had to delve into her background knowledge regarding American history and even pull out some interesting snippets from the fictional movie, “Gone with the Wind”. The story of the American Civil War kept the students spell bound. There were a number of Sudanese students in the class who interrupted towards the end and mentioned the war between North Sudan and South Sudan. They could connect with the turmoil and disturbance that is caused when a war breaks out. Students could actually empathize with the Americans who faced death and deprivation. They had a chance to get familiar with American names and cities. After the storytelling session, students were asked if they would be interested to read about the



revolutionary war and this time, students were willing and enthusiastic to complete their reading assignment. It was very satisfying to note that every single student in that classroom sat in attentive silence and completed the reading without being distracted. Therefore, it is obvious that instructors should be willing to try new ideas within their classrooms when old ones don't work.

Another part of the methodology used for this research study has been highlighted in this section. Students in the Level 3 English Test Preparation course who were given academic reading passages in classroom settings indicated their disinterest by procrastinating. Therefore, they were taken to the library and asked to choose a journal or book that they liked. In addition, they were asked to write a summary on a chosen article or book chapter. Students evinced tremendous interest as they were given a certain degree of independence to choose their reading passages. They were highly motivated throughout the task and the faculty had an opportunity to enhance the vocabulary of these students.

Furthermore, it was discovered that learners enrolled on the Level 2 and Level 3 English test preparation courses were not able to deal with negative expressions and decode phrasal verbs or idioms. They were very poor listeners at the beginning of the semester. In addition, students had to be taught how to listen for key words and clues related to the context. Also, in order to garner higher scores on the TOEFL, students had to be given plenty of practice with vocabulary. Therefore, they were encouraged to keep a journal, make word lists and use these words with their class partners. Students were also advised to use websites such as testden.com and bestthetest.com at home, take online tests and get more familiar with test taking patterns. In addition, they were advised to watch American movie clips and use a vocabulary guide entitled *400 must have words for the TOEFL (2014) 2nd edition* authored by Lynn Stafford Yilmaz. Intensive practice sessions were also helpful in developing their listening skills further.

Findings

The researchers wanted to use varied test preparation strategies particularly for the components of Reading and Listening as an analysis of past results showed that student scores generally dropped on these sections. It was expected that the hypothesis related to significant improvement in student performance could be proved through effective test preparation techniques. This was proved beyond a doubt towards the end of the semester. It was indeed true that a variety of test preparation methods could generate enthusiasm and enhance the performance of the students while taking standardized examinations.

It must be noted that initially, respondents stated that they came from a Non English speaking background without any knowledge of American politics, geophysical dimensions or scientific knowledge. Furthermore, they were not used to tests that demanded critical thinking skills. As a result, they were not prepared to carry out activities that demanded accuracy and precision. As predicted, they did poorly in the pre test which was a diagnostic test. However, after continuous exposure to motivating test preparation strategies, there was a remarkable improvement in their reading and time management skills. Hypothesis 2 which stated that diverse strategies could motivate the student population was also proved through observation of student attitudes. Their performance and attitude changed over a period of time displaying success and positivity at every step.

The findings indicate that it was possible to generate some enthusiasm within these learners to attend classes on a regular basis. It was also observed that students were more willing to use their free time at home to improve their test taking skills. Furthermore, they were ready to spend enough time in the library honing their skills. The standardized examinations taken by the Level 2 and Level 3 students at the end of the semester showed a high ratio of success. Most of the students were able to acquire good scores on the standardized examinations.

**Discussion**

It is true that the credibility of the TOEFL is unquestionable as it is a gateway to students who wish to benefit from the recognition that it enjoys in most universities across the world. Reading on an actual TOEFL test presents difficulties to students in an area such as vocabulary, along with other areas such as drawing conclusions. Students generally struggle with making inferences and finding the difference between stated and unstated detail. Some of them may have trouble finding the main topic while others are lost when it comes to determining the tone and purpose of a passage. Almost all of them have trouble with their reading speed. In order to enhance their reading speed, instructors should try to use the TOEFL test planner that is freely available on the ETS website. They could upload it on Blackboard or Moodle at the beginning of the semester with due acknowledgements. The numerous reading passages within the planner would familiarize students with TOEFL reading passages and give them a head start.

Recommendations

Leeson (2006, pp 1-24) mentions that learners come from different cultures and they are bound to face different sorts of learning constraints when they are preparing to take the TOEFL iBT or the paper-based test. Therefore, they should consider taking an aptitude test before enrolling for a test preparation course. The Workforce Assessment for Job Fit is an assessment and training program that is carried out by AMIDEAST in the UAE. It measures several behavioral competencies as well as attributes. This assessment works well to predict workplace performance. Although it is meant for employees of an organization, it could prove to be useful for students who are enrolled on a test preparation course as it measures several areas such as problem solving, ingenuity, flexibility, initiative, perseverance as well as resilience. Knowing the competencies of students would assist instructors to simultaneously know the weaknesses and help them to overcome these shortcomings. Additional information regarding this assessment can be acquired by communicating with an ETS advisor at workforcereadiness@ets.org.

On the whole, instructors who are embarking on a mission to assist students to get an acceptable score on the TOEFL will need a carefully revised plan that is tailor made to suit the needs of their students. Furthermore, they will also need to tweak these plans occasionally to unearth the potential of their learners. Utilising alternate methods could be fruitful and effective to a large extent.

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