Vocabulary Learning among Less Proficient Young Adults Using Children's Stories[1]

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to investigate whether stories originally written for children could be used to develop vocabulary learning among young adults who are less proficient in the English language. This study was also carried out to explore the perceptions of these not so proficient students and their teacher regarding the use of children's stories in developing vocabulary learning. The study involved 15 students in a secondary school in Kelantan, Malaysia. All of the students were 14 years of age and had learned English as their second language. This study employed a one group pre-test and post-test experimental design. Triangulation, involving semi-structured interviews and written accounts in learning diaries, was used. Findings showed that children's stories did contribute to the development of vocabulary learning among less proficient young adult learners. The use of children's stories in developing vocabulary learning among less proficient young adult learners was also perceived positively by both the learners and the teacher as determined by the interviews.

Resumen

El propósito principal de este estudio era investigar si las historias escritas originalmente para niños podrían ser ocupadas para el desarrollo en el aprendizaje del vocabulario entre jóvenes adultos quienes son menos proficientes en el idioma inglés. Este estudio también se llevó a cabo para explorar las percepciones de estos estudiantes no tan proficientes y sus maestros acerca del uso de las historias para niños en el desarrollo de su aprendizaje de vocabulario. El estudio involucró 15 estudiantes en una escuela secundaria en Kelantan, Malaysia. Todo los estudiantes tenían 14 años de edad y habían aprendido el inglés como sus segundo idioma. Este estudio empleó un diseño experimental con pre-examen y post-examen aplicado a un grupo. La triangulación fue ocupada, involucrando, entrevistas medio-estructurado y relatos escritos en diarios de aprendizaje. Los resultados mostraron que los cuentos de niños sí contribuyeron al desarrollo del aprendizaje de vocabulario entre los aprendices jóvenes adultos menos proficientes. El uso de los cuentos de niños también fue percibido positivamente por ambos aprendices y el maestro como fue determinado a través de las entrevistas.

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Introduction

Less proficient students in secondary schools, especially those in lower grades, had problems understanding the materials set for students at their age mainly due to a lack of vocabulary and an inability to master the structures of the language (Latsanyphone & Bouangeune 2009). This gravely hindered their understanding and progress in learning English compared to more proficient students. As a result, they found it more stressful in the classroom to 'digest' the materials given to them and this lowered their level of motivation to learn English. Poor language command among less proficient young adults has raised a set of issues among teachers, parents and ministers concerning the appropriate approach to develop English literacy for these weaker students.

With permission gained from the Education Planning and Research Department of the Malaysian Ministry of Education, this research explored a specific approach to developing the English proficiency of less proficient secondary school students in Malaysia. The selection of the weaker students was based on the band score for School Based Oral Assessment (SBOA) and a writing test outlined by the Ministry of Education. For the purpose of this paper, less proficient students were those who scored below the Satisfied Band for both the SBOA and the writing test. The focus of the research is based upon the learning process using simple, yet interesting materials in the classroom in order to cater to the needs of the disadvantaged students. Specifically, this research shall explore the effectiveness of using a story-based approach in order to help these students increase their English vocabulary in more enjoyable and productive ways. A story-based approach, as discussed in this paper, refers to the use of children's stories as students' primary reading texts in the classroom.

Vocabulary Learning through Stories

Vocabulary learning through stories has been of interest to several researchers in second language acquisition. Many of them have studied the potential of stories in fostering vocabulary development especially in early childhood education (e.g., Collins 2005; Coyne 2007; Elley 1989; Hoffernbeg 1997; Manson 2005). Children are exposed to stories at an early age to help them acquire high frequency words which are necessary for their language development (Nation 2001).

Sasson (2007) has listed four main stages of new vocabulary acquisition. The first stage is the learner noticing the new words with the help of more capable adults such as parents and teachers. The second stage is the learner recognizing the words with the help of the more capable adults. The next stage is the learner identifying the words on his/her own and the last stage is

the learner both recognizing vocabulary and producing it. The author further emphasizes that the learning process throughout the stages must be made interesting so that students are motivated to learn vocabulary. Students progress through the stages effectively if they use materials which provide them with the input needed at each stage, while at the same time maintaining their interest in learning new vocabulary. This notion implies that stories could be considered as material to enrich learning in more appealing ways. This is because teachers can choose interesting stories which suit the linguistic needs of students at each stage of their development in order to provide a motivating environment in which learning can take place. In this study we specifically used children's stories.

Lovelock (2002) explains three main characteristics of children's stories which make them interesting and effective in helping young learners to learn vocabulary and to foster language acquisition. First, children's stories provide easily comprehensible contexts through the use of well-known stories. Second, children's stories come with strong visual support to assist further understanding. The pictures help the young readers to grasp and remember the words which appear during the reading. Third, children's stories are written in easily understandable sentences where complex grammar is avoided and sentences are kept short. Jitendra (2004) further argues that children's stories are important sources of rich and diverse vocabulary.

Elley (1989), Manson (2005), and Muller (2005) are among the researchers who have proven that stories are effective in fostering vocabulary acquisition. For example, Elley (1989) conducted a study involving one hundred sixty-eight 7-year-old pupils in New Zealand and he found that the pupils showed improved vocabulary acquisition by having someone read stories to them. Manson (2005) conducted research among first year Japanese students at a junior college in Osaka on vocabulary acquisition through storytelling and he discovered that story telling is as effective as direct instruction in developing vocabulary. In direct instruction, students are asked to find the meanings for a list of vocabulary and memorize the words. However, he stated that short stories are more fun and engaging compared to direct instruction. Muller (2005) found that classroom activities involving stories are enjoyable and non-threatening. She has discovered that her students become more motivated and are willing to read aloud. More importantly, she has observed that they seem to remember the vocabulary better when reading stories.

Even though many researchers (e.g., Elley 1989; Jitendra 2004) argue that children's stories have great potential in fostering vocabulary acquisition among children, not many researchers have explored the use of children's stories in other contexts such as helping older students who are less proficient to further develop their vocabulary learning. Considering the stages

of self-development, there is no significant difference between the children and the less proficient students who are slightly older, as they both need adequate vocabulary for them to be independent readers and take part in social activities using the second language. Furthermore, Esenwein and Stockard (2008) assert that students' needs and their stage of development are among the two major factors that need to be considered in choosing stories for students to read. The stories must suit the linguistic and cognitive needs of the students and must not be too difficult to comprehend. This notion is in line with Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (1981) which states that in order for learning to take place, students must first understand the input given. Lovelock (2002) argues that children's stories are not too childish for low level adult learners. He also claims that the students' affective filter could be lowered by the use of the children's stories. Hence, more research needs to be carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of using children's stories in developing vocabulary learning among less proficient young adults.

Background of Malaysian Secondary Schools

In Malaysia, public secondary schools are the continuation of the national primary schools. Students enter secondary schools when they are 13 years of age. They study in five forms (Form 1, Form 2, Form 3, Form 4 & Form 5) which are also known as grades in other countries. Each form will take a year. At the end of Form 3, the Lower Secondary Evaluation or what is called *Penilaian Menengah Rendah* (PMR) is taken by students. Based on the PMR result, they will be channeled into either the Science area or the Arts area. However, students are allowed to change to the Arts area from the Science area, but rarely vice-versa. This is because students who are channeled to the Arts area usually are those who do not score well in the PMR. At the end of Form 5, students are required to take the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination which is also referred to as *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM), before graduating from secondary school. After the SPM, students from a public secondary school would have a choice of either studying Form 6 or the matriculation of their pre-university level. If they are accepted to continue studying in Form 6, they will also take the Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) which is also known as Malaysian Higher School Certificate examination. Form 6 consists of two years of study which are Lower 6 and Upper 6.

Methods

This study employed a pre-test and post-test experimental design to one group of learners. According to Seliger and Shohamy (1989), this type of design is efficient as it not only controls the loss of subjects, but also controls 'a number of extraneous variables which can affect the homogeneity of

subjects when more than one group is involved' (p. 139). However, they note that the main disadvantage of this approach is that there is no certainty whether the changes and differences experienced by the participants are a direct result of the treatment provided. In this study, the shortcoming was addressed through triangulation by the use of other research instruments such as semi-structured interviews, and written documents such as learning diaries.

In this study, the 15 students were selected based on the results of their previous monthly tests. They failed their previous monthly tests and scored average marks in the range of 10 to 15% of 100 in the tests. They were given a vocabulary test prior to the teaching of vocabulary using children's stories. In the test, the students were required to write down the synonym and antonym of the words listed. The items in the test were taken randomly from the syllabus document they had studied earlier. The students then were exposed to three selected children's stories, namely: *Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella*, and *Rumpelstiltskin*. The three stories were abridged versions. The exposure entailed reading aloud and explaining the plot and unfamiliar vocabulary. This was done after school hours by their English teacher once a week for nine weeks. Each of these sessions lasted for one and half hours.

Three sessions were devoted for each children's story and the students had to record their learning experience for each session in their learning diaries. The students were instructed to reflect on the new vocabulary learned and on one of the literary elements such as characters, theme, conflict, or plot of the stories as well as other things which they felt important to be highlighted in their diaries. They were also to finish their final reflection by expressing their feelings and perceptions regarding the use of children's stories in learning vocabulary. These diaries were returned to the teacher towards the end of week nine and collected by the researcher. In analyzing the diaries, the researcher examined the progress of students' language and affective domain week by week. For the purpose of identification and comparison, each reflection was labeled. For instance, reflection written by student A in week one was labeled as SA/W1 while reflection written by student B in week one was labeled as SB/W1.

During the first session, the teacher read the story of *Sleeping Beauty* aloud and explained the plot up to its climax. The teacher did not explain the falling actions, which are the events that follow the climax, in order to encourage students to continue reading the story on their own and at their own pace. During the second session, the students were asked to explain the falling actions and the ending of the story to their friends. They also needed to recognize the synonym and antonym of at least five unfamiliar words they had picked out from the story. They were free to use the dictionary, ask their

friends and/or their teacher, or use the glossary section provided at the end of the story to get the synonyms and antonyms of these unfamiliar words. During the third session, the students shared their vocabulary lists created in the previous session with their friends. This was made by the students writing all the words together with the synonyms and antonyms on a mahjong paper (86 cm. x 86 cm. white paper) and pasting it on the wall. The same process was followed for the other two children's stories of *Cinderella* and *Rumpelstiltskin*.

In week ten, the students were given a vocabulary test. The test had the same format as the pre-test, where the students had to write the synonym and antonym of the words given. The items on the test were taken randomly from the syllabus document and the three children's stories they were exposed to earlier. The pre-test and the post-test were marked and graded according to the grading system of the Malaysian Lower Secondary Evaluation (PMR) in which an A is the highest grade and an E the lowest. The grade was based on the mark in which A is 80% and above, B is 65%-79%, C is 45%-64%, D is 35%-44% and E is 34% and below. The students and the teacher were then interviewed by the researcher in order to obtain their feedback. All of the students and their teacher were interviewed separately in a semi-structured interview session. The interview questions for students were categorized and coded into a few categories, such as the students' view of the use of children's stories to learn vocabulary (Q1), the ways children's stories develop vocabulary (Q2), the learning strategies employed (Q3), and the students' future preference about how to learn vocabulary (Q4). The interview questions for the teacher were also categorized and coded into a number of categories, such as the teacher's view of the use of children's stories to teach vocabulary (Q1), the challenges of using children's stories with less proficient young adult learners (Q2), and the teacher's future preference of using children's stories to teach vocabulary (Q3). The interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and interpreted.

Results

Data were collected from 15 less proficient Form 2 students and an English teacher in a secondary school in Kelantan, Malaysia. The teacher has a bachelor degree in TESL and she has taught at the secondary school level for eleven years. Changes in vocabulary proficiency were analyzed through the comparison of the results of the pre-test and the post-test, as well as their writing in the learning diaries. The writing was analyzed in terms of sentence structure and choice of words. Their perceptions of the use of children's stories were analyzed through semi-structured interviews and their reflections in the learning diaries.

Results for the Pre-test and Post-test

All participants scored better marks in the post-test compared to the pre-test. Among all the participants, 20% (N=3) showed very significant improvement in the post-test. All of them scored between 35-44 marks which was the equivalent of a D in the pre-test and in the post-test, they scored 65-79 marks which was equal to a B. Another 60% (N=9) scored a grade higher from Grade D in the pre-test to Grade C in the post-test. Another 20% (N=3) maintained their grade D but scored slightly higher in the marks of the post-test compared to the pre-test.

Analysis of Participants' Writing in the Learning Diaries

Among all the participants, 80% (N=12) showed a better mastery of vocabulary in their writing throughout the nine weeks of the study. All of these students are the ones who also scored a better grade in their post-test. They were able to use appropriate vocabulary to convey their meaning and used correct synonyms and antonyms in their writing. Another 20% (N=3) did not improve much in terms of the style of writing and the usage of vocabulary, but they still wrote slightly better in the following weeks. Below are the examples quoted from Student A, who shows an improvement in the use of vocabulary in her learning diaries for week 1, week five and week nine:

> *I like sleeping beauty. The princess beautiful. (SA/W1)*
>
> *I like Cinderella. She is sweet, beautiful, pretty, attractive and good looking. (SA/W5)*

From the data above, it is discernible that Student A had increased her vocabulary bank. In week one, she just used one adjective which was 'beautiful' to describe the character. However in week five, she started to use more adjectives in her description. She used five adjectives which are synonyms of the same adjective. Perhaps, it is to emphasize the appearance of the character which she found admirable.

> *I like Lisa. I dislike Rumpelstiltskin. Lisa is kind, pretty and tall. Rumpelstiltskin is cruel, ugly and short. (SA/W9)*

In week nine, Student A showed her ability to use synonyms and antonyms. She used 'kind', 'pretty' and 'tall' to describe the positive qualities of the character that she liked while 'cruel', 'ugly' and 'short' were used to describe the negative qualities of the character that she disliked.

Another student wrote:

> *I learn many new words today. I learn the word scrumptious. The meaning sedap (delicious). In English, people say sedap as delicious. (SB/W7)*

> *The king always said 'If not I'll cut your head'. It is fun. Now I know meaning of cut and head. (SB/W7)*

Just like Student A described earlier, Student B above also showed that she had learned new vocabulary. She managed to find the synonym of 'scrumptious' which is 'delicious'. She had also managed to translate the word to Malay language which is '*sedap'.* Besides that, through the repetition of the words 'cut' and 'head', she managed to remember the meaning of the two words.

Students' Perceptions of the Use of Children's Stories to Develop Vocabulary

All the participants gave positive feedback on the use of children's stories to learn new vocabulary. When asked whether they enjoyed reading children's stories (Q1), all of them reported that they did. The main reason given by the participants was that the words used in the children's stories were not difficult to pronounce and comprehend. In addition, 73% (N=11) of the participants stated that they liked the plot of the stories and they felt motivated to look up the meaning of unfamiliar words in the dictionary in order to ensure that they had understood the stories correctly. Twenty seven percent (N=4) of the participants claimed that they could easily remember the new words as those words were repeated several times in the stories.

When asked whether the stories contributed to the vocabulary learning (Q2), 87% (N= 13) of the students stated that children's stories enriched their vocabulary. They reported that they learned many new words as well as their synonyms and antonyms. In answering Question 3, what they did in order to ensure their understanding of the stories, 73% (N= 11) stated that they used the dictionary to find the meaning of unfamiliar words. Another 20% (N=3) stated that they made full use of the glossary when they encountered unfamiliar words. On the other hand, 13% (N=2) reported that they felt more comfortable asking their friends and teachers to find the meaning of unfamiliar words.

When answering Questions 4 and 5, which asked whether they would read more children's stories in the future and whether they would recommend their friends to learn vocabulary through children's stories, all of them replied affirmatively. Among the reasons they stated were that they believed that they could improve their English by reading the stories and they felt less stressed as they could understand most of the words used in the stories. All the 15 students reported that they would enjoy reading more children's stories in the future.

Teacher's Perceptions of the Use of Children's Stories to Develop Vocabulary

The English teacher involved in this study had positive perceptions regarding the use of children's stories to increase vocabulary learning among less proficient students. Among the reasons given was that children's stories suited the level of young adults who were not as proficient. However, she asserted that the selection of the texts must be done carefully so that only good quality children's stories would be given to students. She emphasized that whether the stories were too childish for them was not an issue as the age gap was not so wide between children and young adults. She also stated that the fact that some children's stories were familiar to students helped them understand them. With their background knowledge of the stories, they were more motivated to read and comprehend them. In addition, she asserted that the illustrations in the stories motivated the students to read to the end even though they had to rely on their dictionaries.

Among her reactions were:

> *I never see my students who are less proficient become so engaged and motivated in their learning like what they have shown when reading the children stories. (ITA/Q1)*
>
> *I will definitely use children stories to teach less proficient students in my class. It works! (ITA/Q3)*

The above reactions show that Teacher A was impressed with the use of children's stories in cultivating reading habits among her less proficient students. It is noticeable that she has a strong belief that her students will improve their vocabulary by reading the children's stories as she claimed that she would certainly implement children's stories in her classroom to teach vocabulary.

Discussion

The analysis of the data from the vocabulary tests, students' learning diaries and interviews clearly shows that the use of children's stories to develop vocabulary among less proficient young adult learners was effective and was perceived positively by both the students and the teacher. To conclude, all the students involved in this study scored higher marks in the post-test, which indicated that the stories may have had a positive influence. To some extent, this result reflects the potential of children's stories in helping less proficient students who lack high frequency words to develop their vocabulary which is considered as the most important element in second language learning (Nation 2001). The finding is also consistent with an earlier discovery by Muller (2005) which reported that her students remembered vocabulary better by reading stories.

The finding, that all the less proficient students felt less stressed, enjoyed reading children's stories and increased their vocabulary through the reading shows that children's stories may be effective teaching materials in developing enthusiasm and motivating less proficient students to learn and improve their English. Cultivating interest and motivation for students to learn a second language is one of the key factors in determining the success of second language learning (Brown 2001). This is evident in the research in which the students revealed that they would read more children's stories in the future and would also recommend the use of children's stories in learning vocabulary to their friends.

The fact that the teacher did not view children's stories as too childish for young adult learners was another significant finding of this research. It supported the statement given by Lovelock (2002) that children's stories are not too childish for less proficient adult learners. The stories are not considered too young for young adult learners because the age gap between children and young adults is not wide. More importantly, the less proficient young adults are in the same stage of linguistic development as the children who need to gain more vocabulary, especially the high frequency words in order for them to be independent readers and be able to use English in their social activities.

Recommendations

In order to increase vocabulary among less proficient young adult learners, they must be approached using the right teaching technique. As Krashen (1981) has suggested in his Comprehensible Input Hypothesis learners must first be able to comprehend the input in order for learning to take place. Therefore, to help the less proficient learners, materials given to them must suit their cognitive needs and stages of linguistic development. Teachers must take on the role of assessing students' language proficiency and choosing reading texts that can be comprehended by them. If the materials are too difficult for them, students end up not learning anything and they become stressed and less interested in learning English. Children's stories are among the materials which are suitable for less proficient adult learners since they are written using simple words and short sentences and the grammar used is not too complex. Besides that, the stories also come with illustrations which facilitate the students' understanding of the vocabulary and the story line. However, the stories must be selected carefully so that good stories which suit learners' needs and stages of development are used.

Conclusion

In Malaysia, children's stories are still not widely used in helping less proficient young adult learners to develop their vocabulary. Perhaps it is

because there are still not many studies world-wide that relate children's stories to young adult learners. This research allows one to see the potential and the effectiveness of children's stories in increasing vocabulary among less proficient young adult learners. More importantly, it reveals that both the teacher and the less proficient students themselves have positive views on the use of children's stories in vocabulary learning. However, further research is needed to investigate the best way to use children's stories in helping less proficient students to learn vocabulary efficiently.

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