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ESL Vocabulary Teaching Strategies Used by Primary School Teachers in Sarawak

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Abstract

The core component in any language is its vocabulary and vocabulary instruction lays the framework for pupils to retrieve words successfully in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The application of various techniques will encourage a more comprehensive and well-rounded method for teaching vocabulary. The goal of this study is to investigate the strategies employed by ESL teachers to teach vocabulary in primary schools through quantitative research design. The questionnaire was adapted from a study by Al Ameri (2013), where 16 items were selected, refined and used in this study to gather data from 30 primary school teachers teaching English in Sarawak. The data collected were analysed descriptively and the findings indicated that teachers use a variety of different techniques in the classroom rather than concentrating solely on one. Based on the results, the top three strategies used by teacher to teach vocabulary to their pupils are through group discussions or presentations, using actual objects or pictures and teaching pupils to infer a word's meaning from context. Hence, this study gave the researcher some understanding of the vocabulary teaching strategies utilised by teachers particularly in primary schools in Sarawak.

Keywords: Vocabulary, Teaching Vocabulary, Vocabulary Teaching Strategies, English As A Second Language (ESL), Primary School

Introduction

English has become a global lingua franca, with speakers hailing from a variety of industries and social backgrounds. Because of English's heightened significance in today's globalised world, English language education is becoming increasingly important. For most English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, teaching English as a second language or foreign language has been a difficulty (Abdul Halik & Nusrath, 2020). Teachers around the world face a variety of issues that slow down and weaken their teaching process (Ayah & Al-zayed, 2017) resulting in the failure in English language instruction (Abdul Halik & Nusrath, 2020).

In Malaysia, English is taught as a second language but is frequently used as a third or fourth language by multilingual students because the national Malay language and their mother tongue come first. The Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 is a continuous initiative done by the Ministry of Education Malaysia in three waves to ensure the

country's education system's targets are achieved in terms of access, quality, equity, unity and efficiency. "Shift 2: Ensure every child is proficient in Bahasa Malaysia and English language and is encouraged to learn an additional language" as stated in the MEB is most relevant to the teaching and learning of English. The education system's aspiration is to create "a nation of people who are at least operationally proficient" (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013, p.4-10) in both Bahasa Malaysia and English. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) defined operationally proficient as "linguistic fluency required to participate fully in professional and academic life" (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013, p.4-10).

Students' vocabulary knowledge affects their ability to utilise English since vocabulary serves as the basis for the four language abilities of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Afzal, 2019; Asyiah, 2017; Noviyanti et al., 2019). In order for students and teachers to communicate effectively in a second or foreign language, it is thought that they must learn and use a sufficient amount of words as well as understand how to use them (Bosha & Kenta 2019). Although it is crucial to increase one's vocabulary, non-native English speakers could find it challenging. Alqahtani (2015 as cited in Afzal, 2019) asserts that low knowledge of vocabulary can cause serious challenges for students, obstructing their study of the English language and causing them to be less motivated to utilise the language. The purpose of teaching English to primary school students, according to Biswas (2018), is to help them be able to comprehend and follow straightforward directions, instructions, and requests in English. Therefore, it is important for primary school students to have good vocabulary knowledge in order for them to be proficient in the language.

Teaching vocabulary creates the groundwork for students to successfully retrieve words in listening, speaking, reading, and writing and is never taught as a separate subject. In a conventional classroom, students normally wait for the teacher to explain something (Stavy et al., 2019). They anticipate the teacher to be in charge of the lesson, so they simply wait for the teacher to begin teaching and listing new terms before writing them down in their books. The difficulty of language retention arises in this kind of traditional learning. Stavy et al (2019) suggested that students must be actively participating in the learning activities in order to improve their vocabulary memory. Here, ESL teachers should understand how students learn and how their memory works in order to identify which strategies best suited them. Students also need motivation to learn and ways to help them remember new words they have learned recently.

The vast majority of students, especially those in the sub urban and rural areas, are unaware of what vocabulary learning strategies to utilise that can help them retain their vocabulary knowledge. For many young learners, vocabulary retention becomes challenging and troublesome when the meanings of new terms are not properly comprehended. Teachers need to be aware that introducing new terminology to students in English is different from teaching them vocabulary in their mother tongue. They must also consider how teaching English to young students differs from teaching it to adults. To achieve the goal of language instruction, it is crucial that teachers are aware of the traits of their students and have prepared effective strategies and pertinent materials (Elhamdi & Hezam, 2020).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the vocabulary teaching strategies utilised by ESL teachers in primary schools. In order to accomplish this, the following research questions will be addressed in the paper: What are the vocabulary teaching strategies utilised by ESL teachers in primary schools? In due course, this study looks into ESL teachers' strategies for teaching vocabulary in primary schools in Sarawak, Malaysia.

Literature Review

What is Vocabulary?

Vocabulary is the fundamental component and backbone of any language. When we discuss vocabulary, we are referring to words and every teacher understands what a "word" is. According to Pan and Xu (2011), vocabulary encompasses not only individual words but also sets of words such as phrases and idioms. They divided vocabulary knowledge into internal and external, with both encompassing the "conceptual meaning of vocabulary, grammar, connotation, pragmatic rules, and its socio-cultural message" (Pan & Xu, 2011, p.1586).

Afzal (2019), in his study, mentioned that teachers have given a variety of definitions for the term vocabulary. Some teachers think of sight-word vocabularies as students' ability to recognise words right away, while others refer to it as meaning vocabularies, which represent the words that students understand; also referred to as listening vocabularies, which indicate students' comprehension of heard and spoken words. Another definition for vocabulary given by Hiebert and Kamil (2005 as cited in Afzal, 2019) is the knowledge that students should have regarding the meanings of words. They claimed that words can be oral and written, and that knowledge can be receptive (recognise or understand) and productive (speak or write).

The Importance of Vocabulary

The importance of vocabulary can be demonstrated on a daily basis, both within and outside of the classroom, where good learners have the widest range of vocabulary in the classroom. According to Wilkins (1972 as cited in Min & Na, 2016) "Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed". Furthermore, vocabulary knowledge is essential for all language skills in ESL and EFL classrooms. Richards and Renandya (2002) emphasised the importance of vocabulary in foreign language learning and competency, claiming that vocabulary plays a critical role in how well learners listen, speak, read and write. This claim is also mentioned by other researchers stating that learners must have a sufficient amount of vocabulary or lexical knowledge in order to acquire language proficiency in all the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Asyiah, 2017; Asyiah, 2017; Noviyanti et al., 2019).

Apart from that, there is an additional connection between vocabulary knowledge and language usage where language usage improves vocabulary knowledge, and vocabulary knowledge increases language use (Nation, 2001). In reading, for instance, it will be difficult especially for young learners to understand the text if they come across countless unfamiliar words because learners' comprehension is aided by their vocabulary knowledge. Even if they correctly read the words in a text, their comprehension will decline if they do not assign meaning to them.

Vocabulary Teaching Strategies

Vocabulary teaching and learning should be stressed in the classroom because of its value, particularly in second languages. Many teachers are concerned about how to properly teach language and find teaching vocabulary to be one of the most difficult aspects of their jobs because it is frequently seen as a boring and monotonous procedure (Min & Na, 2016). When teaching vocabulary, most teachers aim to introduce lexical items or new vocabulary to their students and want their students to retain those new vocabulary. In order to do so, new vocabulary must then be learned, practised, and reviewed. In primary schools,

vocabulary instruction is an essential component of English teaching. It is critical for English teachers to foster young learners' learning interests and teach successfully by using various teaching styles in vocabulary instruction.

There are lots of teaching techniques that can be employed by teachers to teach vocabulary. This section will discuss the three strategies that were suggested and used by past researchers in teaching vocabulary especially to young language learners.

a. Using real pictures, flashcards, objects and drawing

Pictures, flashcards, objects and drawing can assist young students in quickly comprehending and remembering what they have learnt in the classroom. Using real objects that young learners can visualise afterwards is a fantastic approach for them to learn vocabulary (Alqahtani, 2015; Biswas, 2016) where realia, visual aids, and demonstrations are all used in this technique. When the vocabulary consists of concrete nouns, objects can be used to demonstrate meaning. It is frequently easier for students to visualise the word and memorise it when a new term is introduced by displaying an actual object. Alqahtani (2015) stated that objects can be sketched on the chalkboard or simply shown using flash cards. A flashcard is a sample image printed on paper and may be the most popular visual aid for teaching languages (Siti Ngarofah & Ani Sumarni, 2018). When students are involved, visuals and pictures tend to be the most effective at grabbing their attention (Al-Rahmi et al., 2018) and is a good learning strategy to teach vocabulary to young learners (Siti Ngarofah & Sumarni, 2018).

b. Using language games

Games like Scrabble, Crossword Puzzle, Hidden Pictures and Bingo are fun ways to teach vocabulary to primary school students. They assist students in properly acquiring their vocabulary without feeling bored, and they will readily grasp the lessons (Biswas, 2016). Stavy et al (2019) conducted a study to see how language games affect vocabulary retention among students. The outcome shows that the implementation of six language games was well received by all 64 students in the study. This was demonstrated when they performed better after receiving treatment than when they were taught using the traditional technique of searching up terms in dictionaries, writing dictionary definitions, and utilising the words in sentences. Because they were having fun while learning, the students were more engaged in acquiring vocabulary through language games and the excitement they felt during the lessons resulted in improved vocabulary retention. Since learners learn best via play, Stavy et al. (2019) suggested that teachers should employ diverse language games in a short period with dynamic and engaging tasks for young students with short attention spans.

c. Using Songs

The use of songs in the teaching and learning process is not new. A song, according to Richard (2002) as cited in (Wayan & Dewi, 2020), is a relatively brief composition of music for the human voice that includes lyrics or words. It may contain rhymes and have a language style that differs from that of scholarly or academic writing. The lyrics of a song are sung in a specific tone, rhythm, speed, and style. Songs, if used effectively in English classrooms, can pique students' interest and push them to study and improve their English vocabulary. Nguyen and Nguyen (2020) conducted a study on teachers' views about the use and benefits of songs in vocabulary teaching to EFL young learners. The findings showed that songs are effective in teaching vocabulary to young learners and they are necessary in drawing learners'

attention. Songs are also effective in the learners' vocabulary learning in terms of number of words, increased attention, retention, practise opportunities, friendly environment and meaningful contexts. The great level of agreement among teachers about the success of songs in improving young learners' vocabulary accomplishment or performance is demonstrated in the findings of this study.

Methods

Research Design

The aim of this study is to investigate and identify the preferred vocabulary teaching strategies employed by primary school ESL teachers in Sarawak, Malaysia. The findings were gathered using a quantitative research design. Quantitative research, according to Creswell (1994), collects numerical data and analyses it using mathematical methods to explain events. The data for this study was gathered via a survey questionnaire.

Research Samples

Convenience sampling was used in this study, which involved thirty primary school teachers who are currently teaching English in all over Sarawak, Malaysia. According to Bhardwaj (2019), this type of sampling involves the process of selecting participants of a sample based on their ease of access and only those who are conveniently available to the researcher are chosen.

Research Instrument

The instrument used in this study is a survey questionnaire constructed using Google Form. Questionnaires stand out among the elicitation tools accessible as a rapid instrument that is simple to create, utilise, and gather data. There are two parts of the survey. The first part consists of 13 statements and one open-ended question. This part is the demographic section primarily focuses on the general background about the teachers, the location of the schools and teachers' views about their pupils in ESL classrooms. Meanwhile, the second part consists of 16 statements that were adapted from a study by Al Ameri (2013) which focused on the vocabulary teaching strategies used by the teachers. Al Ameri (2013) categorised vocabulary teaching strategies into three: strategies for teaching vocabulary, strategies for consolidating newly learnt vocabulary and strategies to assess vocabulary. The statements were rated using a 5-point scale (1- Never, 2- Rarely, 3- Sometimes, 4- Often, 5- Always). The questionnaire for this study also utilised the same scale. The draft was then shared with a university lecturer as well as colleagues after it was constructed and following the reviewer's ideas and comments, the questionnaire was amended and refined to create a final version that was ready to be distributed.

Data Collection Procedures

The outcomes of this study were presented as quantitative data because it was conducted in a quantitative manner. The data was acquired using a Google Form questionnaire, which was distributed to respondents via various social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram applications. The data was collected and generated automatically after the respondents completed the online questionnaire. Ethical requirements had been taken into consideration where all the information that is recorded will be kept anonymous and confidential and solely used for this study. Before completing the questionnaire, the

respondents were asked to give their consents whether to agree or disagree to participate in the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Data collected from the survey questionnaire were analysed descriptively. Descriptive data analysis, according to Thompson (2009), involved figures that summarise data to describe what is happening in the sample. The analysed data in this study are displayed in frequency and percentage form.

Findings and Discussion

This study involved a total of 30 teachers who are all teaching English in Sarawak's primary schools through convenience sampling. All 12 male and 18 female teachers (aged between 20 to 55 years old) had voluntarily agreed to participate in this study. The first part of the questionnaire, is the general background of the respondents, the location of their schools and the respondents' views about their pupils in ESL classrooms. Data collected showed that 24 teachers (80%) are either English majors or English minor, while 20% or 6 teachers are not an English major or minor. Eight teachers (26.7%) have been teaching English for 1 to 5 years, 5 teachers (16.7%) for 6 to 10 years, 14 teachers (46.7%) for 11 to 15 years, 1 teacher (3.3%) for 16 to 20 years and 2 teacher (6.7%) have been teaching English for more than 20 years. 14 teachers (46.7%) are currently teaching in rural schools, 12 teachers (40%) in sub urban schools and 4 teachers (13.3%) in urban schools. The teachers have rated their English proficiency level as very high (2 teachers), high (17 teachers) and intermediate (11 teachers). 27 of the 30 teachers (90%) stated that their pupils are supportive and attentive in the teaching process. However, 3 teachers (10%) stated that their pupils are supportive but not attentive in the teaching process. Regarding pupils' vocabulary retention level, 22 teachers (73.3%) stated that their pupils' vocabulary retention is at intermediate level, while 8 teachers (26.7%) rated their pupils having low level of vocabulary retention.

The second part of the questionnaire answers the research question to highlight primary school teachers' vocabulary teaching approaches used in ESL classrooms. Based on the 16 items given, the respondents were required to select from a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always). Data were collected, analysed and presented in frequency and percentage as illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Vocabulary Teaching Strategies Used by ESL Teachers in Primary Schools (n = 30)

Items	1 Never	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
I use L1 translation to clarify unfamiliar words to pupils	0 (0.0%)	5 (16.7%)	8 (26.7%)	13 (43.3%)	4 (13.3%)
I get pupils to look up unfamiliar words in dictionary	0 (0.0%)	4 (13.3%)	6 (20.0%)	12 (40.0%)	8 (26.7%)
I use real objects or pictures to teach vocabulary	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.33%)	4 (13.3%)	18 (60.0%)	7 (23.3%)
I teach pupils to guess meaning of words from context	0 (0.0%)	2 (6.7%)	7 (23.3%)	18 (60.0%)	3 (10.0%)
I teach pupils to study word parts (roots, prefixes, suffixes, etc.)	4 (13.3%)	11 (36.7%)	5 (16.7%)	7 (23.3%)	3 (10.0%)

I use word lists to teach vocabulary	0 (0.0%)	5 (16.7%)	14 (46.7%)	7 (23.3%)	4 (13.3%)
I teach pupils to use semantic relations (e.g. synonyms, antonyms)	2 (6.7%)	10 (33.3%)	10 (33.3%)	6 (20.0%)	2 (6.7%)
I use verbal repetition to teach vocabulary	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (10.0%)	15 (50.0%)	12 (40.0%)
I use written repetition to teach vocabulary	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.3%)	10 (33.3%)	14 (46.7%)	5 (16.7%)
I use language games (hangman, crossword puzzle, scrabble, etc.) in vocabulary lessons	1 (3.3%)	0 (0.0%)	10 (33.3%)	14 (46.7%)	5 (16.7%)
I teach pupils to write down new words (forms and meanings) in their vocabulary notebooks	0 (0.0%)	3 (10.0%)	5 (16.7%)	15 (50.0%)	7 (23.3%)
I use body gestures and facial expressions to teach vocabulary	0 (0.0%)	2 (6.7%)	13 (43.3%)	10 (33.3%)	5 (16.7%)
I encourage my pupils to learn vocabulary by watching English TV shows / movies	2 (6.7%)	9 (30.0%)	11 (36.7%)	7 (23.3%)	1 (3.3%)
I use songs to teach vocabulary	0 (0.0%)	2 (6.7%)	14 (46.7%)	11 (36.7%)	3 (10.0%)
I get my pupils to learn vocabulary through dramas and role-plays	1 (3.3%)	2 (6.7%)	20 (66.7%)	6 (20.0%)	1 (3.3%)
I get my pupils to learn vocabulary through group discussions or presentations	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.3%)	7 (23.3%)	20 (66.7%)	2 (6.7%)

Table 1 shows 9 strategies that are often used by ESL teachers when teaching vocabulary. It was found that 20 teachers (66.7%) often get their pupils to learn vocabulary through group discussions or presentations, and 18 teachers (60.0%) often use real objects or pictures and teach pupils to guess the meaning of words from context. Meanwhile, 15 teachers (50.0%) listed that they often use verbal repetition to teach vocabulary and teach pupils to write down new words or terms in their vocabulary notebooks, and 14 teachers (46.7%) often use written repetition to teach vocabulary and use language games in their vocabulary lessons. Besides that, Table 1 also shows that 43.3% of the teachers often use L1 translations, either Bahasa Malaysia or pupils' mother tongue, to clarify unfamiliar words to the pupils and 40.0% of the teachers often get their pupils to use the dictionary to look up unfamiliar words.

There are 6 strategies that most teachers listed as sometimes used in vocabulary lessons and two rarely used strategies. The table shows that 66.7% of the teachers sometimes get their pupils to learn vocabulary through dramas and role-plays. Meanwhile, songs and word lists are sometimes used by 14 teachers (46.7%) to teach vocabulary and 43.3% of the teachers listed that they use body gestures and facial expressions in vocabulary teaching. Teachers (36.7 %) also sometimes encourage their pupils to learn vocabulary by watching TV shows or movies in English. There are 20 teachers (66.6%) listed that they sometimes and rarely teach their pupils to use semantic relations in vocabulary lessons. Last but not least, 11 teachers (36.7%) listed that teaching pupils to study word parts like root words, prefixes and suffixes is the most rarely used strategy.

The findings demonstrate that teachers prefer some strategies over the others in vocabulary teaching. The top three most used vocabulary teaching strategies by ESL teachers in Sarawak's primary schools are getting pupils to learn vocabulary through group discussions or presentations, use real objects or pictures and teach pupils to guess meaning of words from context. It may be quite gratifying to include students in lively conversations regarding word meanings where students can gain a lot of knowledge from their peers during class discussion or presentation and add to their "experiences" with the target vocabulary (Stahl, 2005). The findings also corroborate a study by Al Ameri (2013) which found that using photos, real items, and drawing were one of the most often utilised strategies to teach new vocabulary. Al Ameri (2013) cited Lombardi (2008), who discovered that students are more receptive when employing images to learn new words in writing or presentations. Realias and objects can also be used to help students understand concepts better (Al Ameri, 2013). Young learners can benefit from teaching and learning strategies that utilise visuals and pictures (Ngarofah & Sumarni, 2018), which have been shown to be the most effective at capturing their attention (Al-Rahmi et al., 2018). Another strategy is to determine a word's meaning based on its context, which requires pupils to understand both the word's general meaning and the context in which it is used (Pan & Xu, 2011). Past researches showed that when words and simple explanations are introduced to primary students in context, that word knowledge increases (Biemiller & Boote, 2006) and meaning of words are better learned (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Students are more assisted in deducing the meaning of new terms that are embedded in reading passages or sentences from context clues in vocabulary instruction. Hence, students will recall the meaning of the word which fosters critical thinking abilities and helps them connect the word to other concepts (Alqahtani, 2015).

Conclusion

This study was conducted to identify the methods utilised by ESL teachers in Sarawak to teach vocabulary to pupils in primary schools. The questionnaire listed 16 strategies, and teachers each have their own preferences on which strategies to utilise while teaching vocabulary. Teaching vocabulary is a crucial component of teaching English and it is the teachers' responsibility to give their students the chance to learn and master English in a way that is enjoyable, significant, and consistent with the curriculum (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2022). Therefore, in order to increase the effectiveness and efficiency in vocabulary teaching and learning, teachers should be aware of their students' vocabulary learning challenges and employ a variety of helpful ideas and approaches that can advance their students' English language proficiency in the four skills. Utilising effective vocabulary teaching techniques in the classroom not only assist both teachers and students understand the many advantages of good teaching practises but also support teachers in incorporating strategies into their instruction. While still meeting the needs of primary school students, adding vocabulary-teaching strategies into the classrooms might also pave the way for additional effective language-teaching techniques.

In a nutshell, teachers must be mindful that imparting new terminology to young learners in English differs from imparting it to them in their mother tongue. They must also think about the differences between teaching English to young learners and grown-ups. To successfully teach the language, teachers must be heedful of the characteristics of their learners and offer appropriate methods and materials in order to accomplish the purpose of language education and help them improve their vocabulary knowledge across all areas (Elhamdi & Hezam, 2020). Teachers must also have a solid awareness of their students, their

interests, and their motivations for learning a language in order to choose the best strategy and adjust their education to the variety of needs of their students. The process of developing a vocabulary is not “one size fits all”. Teachers should not stick on a single approach or narrow their attention to a single vocabulary approach. Both students and teachers will benefit from the mixed application of both accidental and incidental teaching-learning approaches by being able to concentrate on different vocabulary-related topics like form, meaning, collocation, and so forth.

In order to contribute and raise the standard of English education, it is intended that more research would be done on vocabulary teaching, particularly in the rural Malaysian setting, using other types of research design and instruments where it offers a conclusion or recommendations with stronger, more convincing evidence. A comparison study between rural and urban primary schools can also be conducted. Future studies might use different criteria, including expanding their scope to cover a larger sample of participants, that include students.

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