Using Web-Based Activities to Teach Vocabulary to Children in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Learners’ vocabulary acquisition is a crucial aspect of their language development. It is vital to communicative skill and to the attainment of a second language as lack of mastery in English vocabulary impedes a successful communication. It is on this ground that this paper explored the use of technology in teaching vocabulary items to Malaysian pupils. This paper therefore discussed the general principle and importance of vocabulary teaching. It then examined the unique benefits of using web-based activities in teaching vocabulary. This is on the conviction that teaching our present-day pupils requires more than talk and chalk. Teachers need to be creative and committed to meet the current challenges. This, the paper believes, will make learning interesting and successful.

Keywords: vocabulary, web-based activities, Malaysia.

1. Introduction

English remains one of the compulsory subjects in primary schools. As reported by the Ministry of Education [1], Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR) in Malaysia is administrated annually by the Examination department in the Ministry of Education to standard 6 pupils in public and private schools, with English as one of the compulsory subjects. In Malaysia, therefore, English is one of the major subjects the pupils have to pass in order to be considered to have passed the examination; others are Bahasa Melayu, Mathematics and Science.

It is however surprising and worrisome that success in the final year examination result for year 5 in 2016 for SK Sri Pulai Perdana decreased from 68 percent of candidates who passed the subject in 2015 to 65 percent. The following year in 2017, the percentage of passes for English subject
continued to fall to 64 percent. This statistic was taken from the final year results for year 5 in each year from the SistemAplikasiPeperiksaanSekolah (SAPS) for SK Sri Pulai Perdana. Hence, when these pupils enter year 6, they would have to put up a lot of efforts for the upcoming UPSR examination in order to pass.

The implication here is that it is crucial for pupils to acquire the language earlier. Pupils should learn and acquire the English vocabulary as it is the important key to English language. However, the lack of vocabulary acquisition among pupils in most government schools is alarming. Cameron (2001) as cited in [2] stated that vocabulary is one of the knowledge areas which plays a major role for learners to acquire English language. It is supported by [3-4] who stated that learners’ vocabulary development is an important aspect of their language development. This shows that lexical knowledge is vital to communicative skill and to the attainment of a second language. Thus, vocabulary is a critical tool for language learners because the lack of mastery in English vocabulary impedes a successful communication.

But records and observation have shown that mastery of vocabulary is still lacking even in the government school in Malaysia, and as opined by [2], research has shown that second language learners rely heavily on vocabulary knowledge and the lack of that knowledge is the main and largest obstacle for ESL learners to overcome. The pupils’ proficiency level for year four and five pupils are still lacking. Insufficient use of vocabulary is often portrayed by the pupils in their writing, thus making the allegation of having not enough vocabulary to be true among the pupils. According to [5], pupils’ vocabulary knowledge is positively correlated with their achievement.

It is on the on this ground that this paper intends to explore the use of technology in teaching vocabulary items to Malaysian pupils. This is on the conviction that teaching our present-day pupils requires more than talk and chalk. Teachers need to be creative and committed so as to ensure that the pupils acquire the necessary skills and knowledge [6]. We need to give our students the best avenue to learn and make sure no child is left behind.

Computer and Internet can be used as teaching aids in learning processes especially in learning English language vocabulary. Web-based activities are web applications used to ensure vocabulary mastery among pupils with regards to increase their performance in second language learning (Hasselbring & Glaser, 2000 cited in [7]. They provide different learning activities such as filling in the gap, matching pictures, rearranging words, completing sentences, answering multiple choice questions, and quizzes.

In addition, they provide the learners with multimedia that can help students to see and listen to the words learnt. The existence of colourful pictures and background, audio, video, and interactive media could attract students’ attention and interest (Hall & Higgins, 2005 in [7]. Therefore, these criteria of web-based activities are believed to be able to enhance students' attitudes, motivations and performance in English language vocabulary learning. The web-based activity can promote self-learning by producing the independent learning environment [8].

As an online learning, web-based activity can be used anywhere and at any time as long as there is device such as computer, smart phone or ipad that can connect to the Internet. The availability of the learning environment makes learning more convenient in acquiring second language vocabulary.
[9] strongly believed that immediate feedback can contribute to the enhancement of the learners' attitudes and motivation. Online learning, in particular web-based activity provides functions where it can immediately interact with learners by providing the correct answer, or just giving appraisal for the correct answers. Hence, learners learnt better when corrections take place almost instantly. In support of this, [10] added that interactivity is promoted in web-based activities as they contain forum where learners can always ask questions or seek help regarding English language learning. This function also allows learners to communicate with peer without distracting the learning process. Thus, learning using web-based activity can contribute to enhance learners' vocabulary acquisition.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Principles of Teaching Vocabulary

Vocabulary can be defined as words that we must know in order to communicate effectively [11]. To Hornby (1995) in [2], it refers to the total number of words in a language; a list of words and their meanings.

Vocabulary is a list and collection of words that an individual knows, to form a language [4]. [2] stated that vocabulary knowledge is a critical tool for second language learners for only knowing a limited number of words will prevent a successful message. It was added that the lack of vocabulary could contribute to the inability of individual to use the organization of comprehensible message [2]. There are therefore, several principles of teaching vocabulary; motivating pupils to become independent learners, implementing drilling practices, and focusing on the word, etc.

It is important for teachers to provide learners with selection of ways to learn vocabulary. According to Tomlison (1998) as cited in [12], the materials used to teach vocabulary should include extraordinary and attractive tools with eye-catching presentations. One of the ways that can be used to teach vocabulary in an exciting way is through educational websites. By using the websites, vocabulary can be accessible through pictures, sounds and different text types. Furthermore, the exercises in language learning for language learners should also diverge and can take on pupils at different proficiency level. The activities should also be made different through controlled practice to use the vocabulary in meaningful ways. The lesson should comprise different learning styles in learning and teaching vocabulary [13].

In addition, [12] stated that it is more effective for vocabulary learner to be independent learner. They can devote their time to self-learning, use variety of language learning tools and keep a good note of vocabulary they learnt. The teachers can help pupils to be better in learning second language and acquire good learning habits by introducing the use of computer and Internet as a learning tool. The Internet can provide countless resources to learn English language vocabulary. By exposing the learners to the Internet, learners can make use of these resources efficiently and lead to the independent learning in learning vocabulary.

In the behaviourist perspective, the drilling process in learning is considered a product of stimulation and reinforcement of learning tools. In this perspective, it is projected that learning is affected by the change of behaviour. By this when teaching vocabulary, as argued by [14], learners should be allowed to focus on clear goal and respond autonomously to the learning goal. Pupils could acquire the lesson automatically and effortlessly by using drilling practice. In mastering second language, it is important to focus on lexeme of the language.
Learning new words will be more effective and remembered by the pupils when they learn it many times. [15] held that repetition is important in learning. Here, technology can create opportunity to pupils to learn through repetition. Thus, in order to acquire the words, pupils need to actively recall and learn the words they learnt. This view was held by [16] by highlighting that repetition will progress the quality of semantics of words learnt in language learning.

According to [2], it is important for language teachers to focus on vocabulary in a second language classroom as they are the key source of language. Teachers should help pupils to be aware that they should learn the language not just for the sake of mastering the grammar aspect of the language. This is because, as stated by [12], without grammar, very little can be conveyed but without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. Thus, focusing on vocabulary is an important aspect in mastering a second language.

As stated by [17], a great deal of the meaning of language resides in the meanings associated with individual words and phrases. So, as teachers of English, therefore, according to [17], it is necessary to

a. Distinguish receptive and productive vocabulary needs of the learners.
b. Consider teaching new vocabulary in related set
c. Vary explanation techniques
d. Teach the grammar of vocabulary items
e. Encourage learner’s awareness of collocations
f. Spend ample time on connotative meaning
g. Consider word formation
h. Employ direct translation carefully
i. Help learners to be aware of register.

It is believed that these suggestions would enable the teacher to help the learners to work effectively with the vocabulary of the target language. Similarly, teachers have at their disposal various ways of teaching vocabulary. These include, according to [18] using dictionary; Antonym; Synonym, Pictures attachment; Games; Dictation; Direct translation; Realia; Simple definitions; Morphological strategy, etc. Language games are useful in many ways [17]. Games such as scrabble, and spell-checks can be used to teach vocabulary. They will motivate the learners to participate actively thereby learn by playing (Field, 2007) in [19].

Assimilating vocabulary is an essential part of language learning. This is because, as opined by [9], meaning cannot be conveyed without vocabulary. According to [20], vocabulary can be defined as single words, easily translatable from one language to another. It differs from concepts which consist of combinations of words and not directly translatable but requires an appreciation or cultural contexts and for a full understanding.

In line with this, teaching vocabulary should be guided by a set of factors. These are to guide the teachers to make decision which vocabulary and how many to be taught. Hence, the teacher should ask

a. What are the lexical items required for the particular unit?
b. What are the students expected to do at the end of the lesson?
c. What have the pupils learnt?
d. Are the items easy or hard to understand or pronounce?
e. What is the current ability and level of the learner?
f. How much time do we have?

Having decided these, the teacher carries up with which resources to be used. This involves the techniques and methods as well as the activities to be employed in teaching the vocabulary to the students.

In his view, [21] argued that vocabulary skill is a critical aspect or foreign language learning as limited vocabulary in a second language hinders successful communication. This in support of [22] who stated that lexical knowledge is central to communicative competent and to the acquisition or a second language.

According to [18], learning vocabulary items plays an important role in all language skills as acquisition of an adequate vocabulary is crucial to successful foreign language use [2].

In sum, according to [23], it is imperative to teach vocabulary because.

a. It is essential for mastery of a language; and
b. It does not have rules, unlike grammar.

It is practically impossible to learn a new language or to communicate without learning the words.

2.2 Computer and the Internet as a Teaching and Learning Tool

Computer Assisted Language Learning (or CALL) was developed to teach the language in learning process through the use of computers. Learning via computers and Internet can contribute to successful language learning [24]. The Internet is a powerful tool for teachers in teaching and for pupils in learning because it is open to the access of abundant collection of learning resources. It includes pictures, sounds, colourful settings, teaching and learning ideas, and it promotes interactivity between the computer and pupils (Bañados, 2006) in [7].

In addition, in order to increase vocabulary learning, the resources through computer and Internet can be used and adapted to suit the pupils’ proficiency level. [25] stated that the Internet is an information highway which served as a brilliant global network with millions of people and computers connected to one another. Thus, the teachers are responsible to use the powerful teaching tools in teaching and learning session to increase learning abilities among pupils.

Moreover, the increase of information and communication technology of ICT use around the world provide importance for education system to use the technology in teaching and learning. According to [26], teachers need to be familiar with technology in education as it is an important skill to teach in today's modern classrooms. This supports the idea that ICT plays important roles in teaching and learning, and teachers have to cope with the fact.

Hence, the role of computer and Internet in teaching and learning cannot be overemphasized as they help teachers in effective delivery and the students in understanding the lessons learnt [24]. Our learners at all levels now learn how to use technology with the basic knowledge in handling the usual gadgets such as computers and netbooks during computer laboratory classes. Therefore, introducing the use of technology as one of the tools to teach vocabulary is a perfect chance for teachers and pupils to expand their knowledge.
2.3 Using of Web-based Activities in Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

CALL has been around for more than four decades even though the use of technology in the classroom goes back for the than that [27]. Whatever the debate or controversy on the emergence or usefulness of the CALL and technology in general in relation to education, they have lived up to be very crucial in language classrooms. Supporting this, [27] quoting Warschauer and Healey (1998) stated that CALL seeks both integrate various skills and integrate technology more fully into the language learning process. One of the ways through which technology has brought about innovations into the classroom encounter in the use of web-based activities in teaching vocabulary to students. The use of technology in language learning has this become so useful that we can no longer ask whether CALL works.

Modern teaching tools like web-based application make teaching and learning vocabulary easier and more fascinating. Being interactive and able to produce colourful and classy displays, web-based application can easily win pupils' heart [28]. Innovative and creative teachers are required to find ways to make pupils more interested in language learning. Integrative CALL makes more demands on the student and it creates a more relaxed, diversified and motivational environment, in which to encourage the process of interaction and second language acquisition [29]. Web application is good as it promises a new, modern, visually beautiful way of learning and have attractive audio which can make pupils excited to learn. In the view of [30], web application is a good idea to be introduced for vocabulary learning.

Many learners learn language at their own pace. Web application motivate these students by providing the chance to learn according to one's pace. Learners can discover diverse English language vocabulary, learn and increase their ideas in learning environment [31]. This will improve their attention in learning English language vocabulary. The web application also adds stimulation specially in web-games learning activities, which will expand pupils' interest in learning. In support of this, [31] in their study found that learners who learn through the assist of computer scored significantly higher on a test.

Similarly, web applications give the right for learners to take part in a number of important activities with diverse tasks. This is to develop learners' communicative ability by encouraging them to take a part of the lessons themselves. Newton (2001) cited in [7] referred to this approach as a method that can allow learners to handle their vocabulary learning and expand their communicative skills simultaneously. Experts of language teaching agreed that playing computer games is one of the good ways to learn vocabulary [29]. [29] concluded that teachers can create plenty of lesson tasks in which pupils have to employ the language to communicate, exchange information and express their own opinion.

There is no denying that in a normal classroom, pupils have fewer chance to learn at their own pace as teachers have to follow the pace of the majority of the class. This is a hitch particularly to the low proficiency learners. These pupils have to listen to the advanced lessons even though they do not understand about the previous lesson [32]. In contrary, learning using computers expose the pupils to a lot of English language vocabulary. Pupils can learn on their own pace, whether independently or in group work. Pupils can move to the next lesson when they are ready to do so. This condition will maintain their enjoyment in the classroom environment [32].
Finally, web-based applications are also very flexible in a way that they may be adapted to any level of pupils [33]. Different types of activities are provided for different levels of proficiency. As a result, the activities are suitable with the pupils' levels.

2.4 Rationale to Learn English Language Vocabulary through Web-based Activities

Vocabulary is significant in any language and in order to communicate effectively, we learn as many words as possible. [2] stated that the need to have knowledge in vocabulary is a necessary part of language as it encourages the success of other language skills. By learning vocabulary, it assists pupils in verbal communication, listening, reading and writing. Teachers are accountable to allow pupils to learn correctly, precisely and generate a wide range of words by the implementation of web-based activities. [34] stated that web-based applications provide a variety of programmes that can help learners to improve their English language vocabulary.

Studies on vocabulary and vocabulary acquisition through computer showed that learners are not clearly being taught the majority of words that we know in a language (Carter, 2001) cited in [7]. In order for the learners to be exposed to the vocabulary, new innovations in learning technologies have given the teachers opportunities to help efficiently help the learners. The web-based activities provide exercises and tasks so that learners can move toward learning English language vocabulary learning from a wide variety of perspectives.

A large amount of English language vocabulary gained from using the web-based application can help pupils in reading, listening, and writing. [35] in their study stated that 70 percent of their respondents agreed that vocabulary is the most important aspect of language learning while [36] in their study revealed that the participants had strong positive attitudes towards technology-enhanced application of foreign language.

The use of web-based activity can provide opportunity to educators to include several techniques in teaching which will trigger a more effective learning environment. Web-based activity can provide variety of teaching sources. As mentioned by Tomlison (1998) in [12], vast number of teaching resources will help in maintaining the learners' attention. [19] believed that it is important to continuously motivate pupils to become independent learners. Drilling or repetition learning process can be promoted through online learning. Learners can continuously interact with the websites and learn as it will not be exhausted due to fatigue unlike educators as human beings. The design of the web-based activity can be flexible permitting educators to alter, add, remove or select any material from the Internet or any media and put them into the web-based activity while maintaining the focus of the vocabulary.

[25] acknowledged that web-based learning environment is an online learning tool that can make learning to be easier. Applying web-based activities from websites for language learning can be one of the ways to boost learners’ motivations and positive attitudes towards English language learning [37]. [38] stated that some learners will be motivated to learn language using external factors other than normal learning session. Consequently, building self-belief towards language learning through web-based activities is believed to have its benefit.

3. Conclusion

Teachers of English should be made to know that teaching today demands being innovative. They have to explore all available avenue to make learning efficient and interesting to the pupils. This is particularly true of the Malaysian teachers considering the current pace of technological
advancement among the learners. The teachers must be creative and committed so as to ensure that the pupils acquire the necessary skills and knowledge. We need to give our students the best avenue to learn and make sure no child is left behind. There is no controversy that computer and Internet can be used as teaching aids in learning processes especially in learning English language vocabulary. We thus need to buy this idea and bring its use to the language classroom.

References


