Word Picker as a Vocabulary Enhancer for Weak Students in a Secondary Classroom

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Article History: Received: 10 November 2020; Revised: 12 January 2021; Accepted: 27 January 2021; Published online: 05 April 2021

Abstract: Students love to take part in classroom discussions and activities, but when English as Second Language (ESL) students with limited English vocabulary are ostracized because they cannot properly participate, this causes their confidence to suffer. The challenges usually lie in the lack of vocabulary among students which lead to the poor performances in the English language and this calls for immediate attention. This paper will discuss the use of a strategy the Word Picker to improve the vocabulary among the ESL weak students in a secondary school in Malaysia. Data collected via questionnaire, document analysis and video recordings were analysed qualitatively. The findings suggested that the Word Picker strategy has helped the weak ESL students to enhance their vocabulary skills.

Keywords: Work, picker, vocabulary, learning, strategy, communication, language, acquisition

1. Introduction

In Malaysia, English language has been accorded the status of a second language. In the field of education, the English language is actively and extensively used from the primary up to tertiary level (Khairi Izwan & Nurul Lina, 2010). Malaysia also has been very fixated towards the growth and expansion of the education system in order to ensure equal access of education is achievable for all children. In the primary and secondary school, English Language (hereafter ESL) is the second language taught to all students. The stipulated aim of the national curriculum of ESL according to Ministry of Education (2010), emphasised that all students should have good acquisition of the language to be applied to their daily lives, for study and work purposes. In other words, students are expected to use the language effectively in the future to further enhance communication process. The teaching and learning of ESL, on the other hand, comprised of the four main language skills from the aspects of listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, the problems faced by teachers and especially the weak students in an ESL classroom are acquisition of grammar and vocabulary skills.

The problem of students’ lack of vocabulary in English language was quite a challenge for researcher undergoing the phase of teaching practice. During the early stage, researcher did not get much response from the students even when they were asked simple questions regarding the topic of the lesson. Besides, when students speak, they could not construct a proper correct sentence in English language. The use of code mixing between English and their mother tongue, Malay Language was prominent due to the students’ backgrounds that did not provide them the environment to use English Language with family members or peers confidently. When activities were conducted in the classroom, some students remained passive and were reluctant to utter the words in English and some could only code mix and code switch to construct a simple sentence. From the researchers’ observations, only a few students initiated to try to speak in English with limited vocabulary in the ESL classrooms.

To arrest the problem, the researcher reached out and talked to the students regarding the problems that they faced in learning English Language. Majority of the students do not like to read English books and very few of them have low interest in watching English movies. Besides, some of them were afraid to try speaking in English because they were very conscious of their low proficiency of the language and worried that friend would ridicule them. In relation, the focus of this action research is to investigate the use of Word Picker as a vocabulary enhancer for low achieving or weak ESL Form 1 classroom.

2. Literature Review

According to McCarthy (1990), vocabulary is the biggest component of a language. Not only that a student should have good grammar, the vocabulary determines the good command of the language because a well verse speech delivered with an accurate and wide range of vocabulary use. Viera (2016) stated that the acquisition of vocabulary skill will help students in their comprehension of oral and written texts so vocabulary skill is an important tool for students to master a language. According to a research by Naginder (2013), she mentioned that students who were able to learn autonomously will be able to master the important goals in learning a language. She stressed that students could improve both the receptive and productive language skills from autonomous learning of vocabulary and this endeavour will lead to language proficiency improvement consequently.
Moreover, being highly proficient in ESL, students will be confident to contribute to the ventures of nation in terms of global social and economy knowledge. In this way, Malaysian students will have no problem in terms of graduate employ ability because having good language skills is a requirement of all organization worldwide. To be able to achieve this success, learning of vocabulary autonomously must start from the early stage of education so that at the product of learning will be fruitful. The research done by Naginder (2013) concluded that students benefit by autonomous learning where they perform independent learning. Therefore, students need to be accountable to perform independent learning in the process to achieve high attainment of vocabulary skills and be proficient use or ESL as pertained in the Malaysian National Education Philosophy.

According to Crystal (2003) and Evans (2009) in a research cited by Lara (2010), word association task was the most well-known task or strategy with students of second and foreign languages. They stated that the task required students to give respond in a certain time frame to learn a list of words. Alongside with the research, Read (2000)’s Word Picker or Word Associate proved to be a good vocabulary test where students selected the meaning-related vocabulary to its stimulus word correctly. The research conducted by Lara (2010) showed that by using these strategies on a group of advanced level language proficiency students, they performed better than the students of low and intermediate level of proficiency.

In addition, it is crucial to note that vocabulary is of great importance in an ESL classroom, especially the weak students. As cited by Alqahtani (2005) in Cameron (2002) having good vocabulary skills is a core for ESL students in acquiring a language. Moreover, Harmon et al. (2009) and Viera (2016) also stressed on the importance of students’ good vocabulary skill enhanced their language proficiency. Without proper vocabulary, especially the weak students will face difficulties to communicate such as to convey a message confidently. Therefore, the investigation on Word Association @ Word Picker as a strategy to improve the vocabulary among weak ESL students is relevant to this scope of study.

3. Methodology

The focus of this action research is on a class of twenty-five students of low achievement in an ESL Form 1 classroom. The objectives of this research are to note the causes that affect the students’ vocabulary skill and to investigate the use of Word Picker as a strategy to enhance students’ vocabulary skill. The targeted group of this research is a class of ESL low proficiency secondary school students in Malaysia, and the Word Picker strategy is believed to be effective to help improve the use of vocabulary during English lessons.

The participants of this research consisted of 30 students (12 boys, 18 girls) Form 1 students from a secondary school in Malaysia. The participants were briefed of the Word Picker strategy. To make this strategy suitable for the needs of the students, a set of only 3 words was given to the students. This Word Picker strategy is carried out for four weeks with three different tasks. At the end of each week, students will be tested on the meaning, pronunciation, and spelling of the words. At the end of the fourth week, students will have four sets of 3 words making it a new list of vocabulary of 12 words weekly. This increment of 12 words to a class of low achievement students is quite a big achievement in terms of new ESL words or vocabulary learnt for a month. Thus, at the end of week four, the test gets slightly tougher where the students will be tested on spelling skill as well as sentence constructing skill based on the total amount of 12 words.

To investigate the improvement of vocabulary among low proficiency students by using Word Picker as a vocabulary enhancer, the data will be collected and analysed qualitatively by adopting three instruments: questionnaire, document analysis and video recording. The questionnaire was designed to study the first research questions which is to find out the factors causing student’s lack of vocabularies. This questionnaire consists of two sections. Section A was to collect the demographic data of the students and section B was on the possible factors that inhibited vocabulary acquisition. The students responded to the questionnaire and was collected and analysed using data statistics (Section A and B). The last question of Section B was an open-ended item and the data was analysed using content analysis.

In answering the second research question of this study, document analysis was performed on: firstly, word association task (list other words in synonyms or meanings), secondly, spelling task (in written) and thirdly, sentence construction task (identify and write the words dictated by teacher and construct simple or compound sentences) based on all the 12 words. The video recording was performed when the students were required to pronounce the words during the second task, spelling test. A checklist was used by the teacher during video recording transcription process. All the three tasks were performed by students individually and the scores were given by teacher and the scores were analysed statistically.
4. Results and Findings

From this action research of applying the Word Picker strategy, it is interesting to share the findings from the document analysis on word association task (to list other words in synonyms or meanings) and the sentence construction task (to identify and write the words dictated by teacher and construct simple or compound sentences) based on all the 12 words. From the document analysis of word association task, it indicated only 3 students, 10% of the total enrolment of the class, managed to obtain full score to all the meanings of the 12 words. 21 students, 70% of the students managed to obtain between 6-7 score for getting the word associated correctly. Only 2 students, 6.7% were in the score range between 2-3 marks obtained. However only 4 students, 13.3% with zero score in the task. Therefore, we can conclude that with a simple strategy of Word Picker which only introduces 12 words per week for weak students in an ESL Form 1 classroom, 70% of the class enrolment manage to associate the words with its meanings correctly with another 10% who obtained full score for the task.

Next, from the document analysis of the sentence construction tasks, the result was quite unsatisfactory. None of the students managed to construct 12 simple or compound sentences correctly. Unfortunately, there were 8 students, 26.7%, who did not construct any sentences at all. Only 5 students, 16.7%, managed to construct 4 sentences correctly and obtained 4 marks. The rest, 17 students, 56.6% were able to construct 6 sentences correctly. The result from this action research suggested that weak or low language proficiency students can be encouraged to learn vocabulary with a simple strategy.

As for the video recording and checklist of students pronouncing the words during the second task, spelling test, the limitation was the time factor. The duration set for this session of saying out loud the word or pronouncing the word was only 10 minutes after the spelling test session. Thus, not all the students were being tested. In the first recording there were only 4 students who were tested at the end of the second week. Thus, 3 students managed to get the words pronounced and spelt correctly. As for the second recording, 10 students were being tested at the end of the third week and 7 students managed to get the words pronounced correctly alongside with the spelling and meaning. Therefore, it was quite an achievement for this class of lowachievers. With weak students, simple tasks appropriately created to suit and match their level of proficiency and needs are suitable and are more rewarding for students in terms of learning the second language.

5. Conclusion

The implementation of Word Picker Strategy as a vocabulary enhancer with this group of students is quite interesting. However, there were few limitations to this action research, the task of only 3(three) words per week was quite an easy task as compared to the students’ level of study. It will be more challenging and rewarding for the allocation of minimum 5 words per week. In terms of students’ attitude, to discipline the students and to engage them into the strategy, some reward system could be implemented. Students will be more motivated to learn knowing that if they manage to get the pronunciation, spelling and the meaning of the words right, they will be rewarded. This encourages students to learn and memorise the new words given to them in a joyful manner.

References

Appendices

List of Words Used as Word Picker:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Number of Words</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Castle</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapid</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tame</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Obey</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shallow</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Obey</td>
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<td>Shallow</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Word Association

Second week

Students' Score
Sentence Construction

Scores: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

Number of Students

- Spelling
- Meaning
- Sentence Constructing

Fourth week