Techniques in Teaching Vocabulary to Young Learners at LIA English Course

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Abstract

This study is attempted to investigate the specific application of techniques in teaching vocabulary to young learners at LIA English Course. More specifically, the research aims to 1) investigate the reality current techniques in teaching vocabulary to young learners 2) study difficulties that teachers at LIA encounter when teaching young learners vocabulary. The researchers have conducted a survey with the participation of 3 teachers from LIA English Course. Oral interviews, questionnaire and observation schemes were used as useful instruments for data collection. The questionnaire-based survey aims to reveal teachers’ common techniques in teaching vocabulary to young learners, general difficulties that they meet in teaching. Oral interviews and observations serve to elaborate the information gathered from questionnaires and discover teachers’ opinions on how to solve arisen problem in language classroom, especially during vocabulary section. The result of this study indicates that using flashcards in presenting, sorting tasks in practicing and sentence completion in revising vocabulary are three most preferably common techniques in teaching young learners vocabulary. Teachers also confirmed that they have adapted specific techniques with specific class; a combination of various ones is to be in consideration. In another aspect, most of the teachers reported that they encountered certain difficulties such as the use of too much LI, uncooperative students, students’ small attention. Nonetheless, most of the difficulties can be solved. The exploitation of combining different techniques remains rather limited; thus, this study provides some suggestions for teachers to realize the benefits of having available activities and games in young learners’ classroom.

Keywords: Techniques, Teaching Vocabulary, Young Learners, English Course

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is an important and essential element in language learning. Vocabulary as one of the main components should be taught since the beginning level (young learners) (Pinter, 2006). It is important because the mastery of vocabulary affects the mastery of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) (Pikulski & Temleton, 2004). By enriching vocabularies, students are able to gain comprehensive using of English.
Teaching vocabulary to children is different from teaching vocabulary to teenagers and adults. This is because different age has different needs, competencies, and cognitive skill (Harmer, 2001). Their different characteristics become the main consideration in treating them differently as the teaching subjects. Teacher has an important role to build children’s vocabularies. She should know the factors in teaching such as methods, strategies, techniques, and materials, so that the teacher can convey the material well in accordance with children’s characteristics. A good method will be useless in teacher’s hand who did not know how to use it and a good teacher could not be effective if teacher uses inappropriate method (Evan and Lang, 2006).

From researcher’s observation to several English classes at school, it is found that students who took an English course had better ability in producing and comprehending the English vocabulary. Therefore, this study is attempted to find out the teachers strategies used in teaching vocabulary in the English course. What make students who took an English course have better ability in English vocabulary.

Research Questions

The problem of this research was elaborated in the following questions:
1. What techniques are often used by teachers at LIA English Course in teaching vocabulary to young learners?
2. What are difficulties perceived by teachers in teaching vocabulary to young learners at LIA English Course?

Aims of the Research

This study is aimed to reviewing the techniques often used by teachers in teaching vocabulary at LIA Course. It is about to give a view to enhance the quality of doing so in teaching students at regular schools. Theoretically it will provide teachers at school an overview of young learners’ characteristics and their manner in language classroom. Accordingly it equips teachers with a picture of teaching vocabulary to targeted students at school. It also reveals an effective used techniques in accordance with students characteristics.

Scope of the research

This study is focusing on identifying the teaching strategies used by teachers and teachers’ difficulties at LIA Course in teaching English vocabulary to young learners. It was concerned with activities, material, and class management that can develop students’ ability in learning English vocabulary.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Vocabulary is one of the main components of a language. It has to be mastered by someone if he or she wants to be able to communicate. This is relevant with the statement of Richards and Renandya (2002) who state that vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of
the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read, and write. This idea is also emphasized by Mehta (2009) who says that vocabulary is the first and foremost important step in language acquisition. Furthermore, Wilkins in Thornbury (2002) states that without grammar very little can be talked and delivered but without vocabulary, nothing can be talked. It means that vocabulary is needed in communication. Without vocabulary, it is impossible for someone in mastering the language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

Some experts proposed various definition of vocabulary. According to Buckland (1999), vocabulary can be defined as the range (or repertoire) of values in any field of bibliographic description and, in a more extended sense, the range of types in a set at any level (word, field, collection, and library). Moreover, Thornbury (2002) also says that vocabulary is word that known and has the meaning and form. Furthermore, Hornby (2000) states that vocabulary is the word in a language, in which all the words are known by someone and used in the books, subject, and so forth. Teaching vocabulary is a way done by teachers in transferring new vocabulary to students. If one has an extensive vocabulary, it is possible to obtain meaning from spoken and written texts even though one does not know the grammatical structures in which the texts are encoded (Nunan, 1999). Learning vocabulary is a challenge for learners because of the size of the task and the variety of vocabulary types to be learned, including single words, phrases, collocations, and strategic vocabulary, as well as grammatical patterning, idioms, and fixed expressions (McCarten, 2007). Therefore, this becomes the teachers’ responsibility to teach and to help the students in mastering the vocabulary.

There are different things that the learners need to know about a word before we can say that they have learned it. These include the meaning(s) of the word, its spoken and written forms, what “word parts” it has (e.g., any prefix, suffix, and “root” form), its grammatical behavior (e.g., its word class, typical grammatical patterns it occurs in), its collocations, what associations it has (e.g., words that are similar or opposite in meaning, what connotations it has and its frequency (Linse and Nunan, 2005; Richards and Nation in McCarten, 2007).

Young learners are children who are involved in the formal school, especially at the elementary school. Young learners are children on the age of 7-12 years old (Slattery and Willis, 2006). Teaching children and teaching adults are not the same matter, they are different. To be successful in teaching children in second and foreign language, it requires specific skills and intuitions that are different from those appropriate for teaching adults (Pinter, 2006). The children have their own characteristics, which are different from adults (Linse and Nunan, 2005). The characteristics cover their ways of thinking, their attitude, and their aptitude.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

In relation to its nature, purposes and research questions, this research employed qualitative research design, embracing characteristics of a case study. A case study was conducted to understand how ideas and abstract principles can fit together (Nisbet and Watt, cited in Cohen, 2007). Similarly, this study was
attempted to find out the teaching strategies which often used and their difficulties in teaching vocabulary. The result of this study would not be attempted to generalize beyond the case, since a case study is going to analyze the situation of such phenomena rather than develop theory. (Cohen, 2007). It is also supported by Punch (2009) who stated that a case study is undertaken in order to examine a particular case to give insight into an issue about phenomenon, population or general condition.

DATA COLLECTION

The study employed the triangulation of observation, interview and questionnaire. The triangulation of two or more methods of data collection is needed in order to make the research findings more reliable (Wallace, 2001; Holloway & Wheeler, 2002; Cohen, et al, 2007; Liamputpong, 2009). It is to find the regularities in the data in which the researcher compares different sources, situations, and methods to see whether the same pattern keeps recurring (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Either, it reduces the risk that the findings will reflect only systematic biases or limitations of a specific method, it allows to gain a better assessment of the validity (Maxwell, 1996).

DATA ANALYSIS

After gathering the data, analysing and interpreting it are another crucial term. Data in this study were gathered from triangulation of observation, interview, and questionnaire. They included observation field notes, notes of observation process, interview transcript, notes on interview context, and questionnaire analysis.

The early stage in qualitative analysis is data management, in which the raw data were reviewed, labelled, sorted and code (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Darlington & Scott, 2002; Holliday, 2005). It is familiar as coding. This coding stage is the process of defining what the data were about. In term of the instruments in the study, data from observation and interview were transcribed. As Cohen (2007) suggested, a transcription represents the translation from one set of rule systems (oral and interpersonal) to another very remote rule system (written language). The transcript can become a screen between the researcher and the original live interview situation (Kvale, cited in Cohen 2007).

Afterwards, the analysis may go to explanatory stage, in which the analysis data were built explanations about the finding, interpreting it and validating the accuracy (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Darlington & Scott, 2002; Holliday, 2005; Cohen, 2007; Liamputpong, 2009; Creswell, 2012). The data from observation, interview and questionnaire were explained to reveal the students’ response and their writing ability. Moreover, the triangulation of this data analysis was able to answer the research questions. By these steps, at the end, the study was systematically present a brief and accurate explanation related to the research questions.
FINDINGS

Common Techniques in Teaching Vocabulary to Young Learners at LIA Course

Using flashcards and pictures are two most well-known and commonly-used techniques in teaching lexical items to young learners at LIA. Most of the teachers use pictures and flashcards in presenting new vocabulary items to young learners. Most of the teachers involving in the research claimed to use this popular method. These others, due to several subjective factors have been exploited to their most advantages.

However, teachers’ preferences in using different tasks for practicing vocabulary items varied quite a lot. Based on data collected from observation, interview and questionnaire. In practicing vocabulary items to young learners, matching and sorting tasks are the two most preferable ways that teachers often use.

From the observation, the researcher noticed that even though there are some specifically recommended techniques using for each stage of teaching vocabulary, teachers often used them in an interactive way. This means they did not necessarily use each technique for each stage separately; many techniques were mingled for a certain purpose and use. Using flashcards, for example, could be seen commonly used in presenting new words; however, when it came to the stage of practicing or revising. Teacher simply used flashcards for checking learner’s memory in order to make sure they know the word. Any tasks for practicing or revising came afterwards, which created a solid assurance for the effectiveness of the activity.

In the lessons, teacher always started by getting the students into a circle. For a lesson, teacher used a set of animal flashcards, the other one was another set of sports, and then asked all the students the meaning of each card. After checking their comprehension, teacher used a ball, passed it around. Each time the person holding the ball had to ask the next person one question “What animal do/don’t you like?” or “what sports do/don’t you like?”. In such way, he accomplishedly facilitated and recycled words for the whole class.

In the other class that the researcher observed, teacher also used animal flashcards as a warm up activity. However, instead of checking comprehension by using a ball with question to go around the class, the teacher divided the class into two teams. In a manner of a game, one student from each team had to go up to the board, looked at the card that was shown to, and then mimed the animal’s action to the rest of the team. By combining the two most commonly-used techniques, teacher successfully involved all the students and checked their understanding of all the flashcards. As the class was at lower level than the first observed, the students were not required to write as a process of producing stage.

Difficulties in Teaching Vocabulary to Young Learners at LIA

First of all, it is essential to present the expected result that presenting vocabulary is the most difficult stage to teach as perceived by most of the teachers in the observation, interview and questionnaire. Teacher said that
whether to introduce meaning or form first depended largely on the level of learners. Examples were also given to elaborate to the point.

Teaching children aged six, for example, as they are in their early year learning a new language, they hardly know how to write a word, the solution can only be teaching meaning first. Gradually, when they are at higher level, when they are able to comprehend and write down the word, spelling will be implemented.

As observed in the class, pronunciation was among the very first element that they would like to teach their students in the early stage. It is due to the reason that pronunciation is as a part of form in teaching vocabulary in which regarded as a difficult part to teach. Young learners often have difficulties in pronouncing new words correctly. Consequently, getting them to work with accuracy in pronouncing words is their preference.

Another difficulties are the fact that young learners could hardly use English in every sentence; however, the thing that mattered most was that even when they were capable of using English, they didn’t do so. Asking for permission to go out, for example, or asking friends to lend a pencil are the two easy-to-use-English sentence that he supposed his students should have acquired. Students’ speaking too much in their first language in class is the problem in teaching young learner in EFL context.

The other difficulty was the fact that many of the students did not focus when teacher was presenting task on board. The problem of unfocused students may arise in some classes. Thus this unfocused students create one unavoidable difficulty in teaching vocabulary to young learners. It was the fact that some of the students are often uncooperative. As the teacher said that students were often too energetic to stay still, and too busy doing other things with their friends to pay attention. As observed by the researcher, common difficulties are not only comprised of students’ small attention span, their using of first language, their uncooperative attitude but also involved their misunderstanding of teacher’s instruction.

CONCLUSION

As the aim of the paper suggests, this study has its point in investigating the current implementation of techniques used in teaching vocabulary to young learners at LIA Course, accompanied by difficulties and solutions as perceived by teachers. After conducting a questionnaire-based survey, interviews and observation, the researcher has found several major points as follows: The first major finding that the researcher got is the answer to the first research question. Common techniques in teaching vocabulary to young learners can be divided into three groups. For presenting new words, using flashcards and miming are preferred by most of teachers in the study. In getting students to practice the words they have learnt, grouping words into certain categories preferably outnumbers the other techniques. For the final stage in teaching vocabulary – revising, most of the teachers responded to the study to have been familiarized with sentence and text completion rather than that of creation. Regarding difficulties in teaching vocabulary to young learners at LIA, it is necessary to
state the difficulty in the first stage of presenting. Additionally, for presenting new words, making choice to teach form or meaning is another consideration that teacher may sometimes feel hesitated. Students’ small attention span, students’ using too much their first language and uncooperative students are also major problems that often cause tension for teachers in classroom when teaching vocabulary.

It is important to propose resolutions and solutions to any of the problems encountered by teachers, which plays an essential role in the researcher’s findings. Using a combination of various techniques along with being flexible in changing class’ activities is one best solution to minimize the difficulty in the first stage of teaching vocabulary. So as to attract students’ attention at the longest time, teachers are recommended to vary their tasks, activities and not to allow students play as long as they like the game should be. Interestingly, some teachers suggest using special point system or a set of rules at the beginning of every course to notify students about their using first language in classroom, which reduces effectively this popular problem in language classroom. Furthermore, recommendations to motivate uncooperative students are skillfully made to maintain the community feature of the classroom. Finally, this research proposes some compiled games and activities that might be helpful for teachers’ repertoire. With a view to broaden teachers’ resources, available games and activities are of precious assistance and help so as that every vocabulary lesson with teachers is a lesson in which students can play with words.

SUGGESTIONS

Teaching vocabulary is a time and energy-consuming part in the body of teaching English. Teaching vocabulary is a large field to do research on and working on techniques in teaching vocabulary can worth researcher’s effort. Firstly, when doing a research on techniques in teaching vocabulary to young learners, further aspects could be deep into such as how to utilize the most from multi-techniques and how to adapt that combination into classroom where students’ levels are different. An alternative is to further into the current study, improving its limitations and utilizing the implications suggested by the researcher. Secondly, further studies can be conducted on the same issue, yet on a larger scale and longer span of time for more reliable results in order to examine the appropriate techniques in teaching vocabulary to young learner in EFL context.
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