

Using Action Songs in Teaching Action Words to Young ESL Learners

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Abstract

Vocabulary acquisition is a crucial step in acquiring a language. The acquisition may require strenuous effort especially to young, low proficiency ESL learners. The purpose of this action research is to investigate an effective way in helping low proficiency primary school ESL learners in rural area to widen and master their English vocabulary. The research focuses on studying the effect of using action songs in teaching action words to young ESL learners. A total of 35 nine-year-old children from a primary school in the East Coast of Malaysia participated in this study. A mixed-method research approach was employed for almost three weeks/12 hours to find out the effect of English action songs and rhymes on the teaching and learning of action words. Three instruments were used; vocabulary test, self-assessment forms regarding the participants' feelings towards the integration of action songs and group interviews. The results revealed that using action songs help the children to learn action words. The integration of action songs is an ingenious way to facilitate the young, low proficiency ESL learners in comprehending action words.

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Keywords: Action song; English as a Second Language; Vocabulary

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary acquisition is a crucial step in acquiring a language. Since an important goal of teaching English to English as Second Language (ESL) learners is to enable them to use English as a means of communication and the fact that vocabulary is the most important vehicle of communication, ESL learners are required to grasp a large number of words (Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi, Singh, Azman, & Souriyavongsa, 2011).

Acquiring vocabulary is not easy. Vocabulary development is a lifetime undertaking in which school plays a critical role in enriching and extending students' basic lexical repertoire, particularly through the medium of written language (Monir Nazir Atta-Alla, 2012). The teaching and learning of vocabulary is therefore made an integral part in the Malaysian English Language Curriculum. One challenge faced by teachers is helping young ESL learners, especially those in rural areas, to acquire the needed vocabulary. Therefore, more research on vocabulary learning is required; added with the fact that it is a neglected area in the Malaysia English language teaching (Abidin et. al., 2011). Schmitt (2008) indicates that learners need the opportunities to acquire vocabulary incidentally. Learners acquire new words when they are paying direct attention to other tasks they are performing, not vocabulary learning. Since learning vocabulary is the primary step in language acquisition, it is pertinent for this study to delve new ideas on effective- teaching and learning of vocabulary.

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On the other hand, songs have been part of primary component of human life (Schoepp, 2001). Songs have become an essential part of our language experience and if used in coordination with a language lesson, they can be of great value (Abidin et. al., 2011). Numerous researchers have explored and acknowledged the benefits of integrating music, songs and rhymes in ESL teaching and learning. Accordingly, this research is conducted to support the effect of using action songs in teaching action words to young ESL learners.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The researcher is an English teacher who is currently teaching English as a second language to nine years old low proficiency learners. Her students come from a rural area and 95% are from low socio-economic status families. They have very limited access and exposure to English. Their first language is Malay language but in local's dialect. According to their Malay teacher's comment, the children are having difficulty even in mastering the standard Malay. Hence, it is not surprising that it is harder for them to acquire English as their second language.

Through her three months observations, it was found that the students possess very limited English language vocabulary. That is why they can hardly understand and follow any of her classrooms' instructions. The researcher also noticed that they are very reluctant to use English as a means of communication. This situation must be overcome as the ultimate goal of teaching English to ESL learners is to enable them to use English as a means of communication. The researcher believed that her young students would respond positively to songs. Therefore, she was interested to know whether songs might stimulate more effective vocabulary learning on the students.

The idea was to find out whether songs and rhymes could enhance the students' vocabulary acquisition. Based on the teacher's observations during school assemblies, the children were identified singing the national and school songs with enthusiasm and they looked very happy. Through short informal interviews, the students expressed their excitement to undergo music lessons because of their passion in music and singing.

This study therefore aims to investigate the effect of using action songs to teach action words to young, rural ESL learners. The scope of the study focuses on integrating action songs in teaching action words. This is also aligned with one of the new Malaysian primary school curriculum learning specifications which is to enable students to use verbs correctly and appropriately. In other words, the study has been conducted in line with the curriculum requirement.

2.1 Objectives and Research Questions

The objective of this study is to investigate the effect of using action songs in teaching action words to low proficiency, young ESL learners.

This study has three research questions:

- a) Is there a significant difference in the students' comprehension on the action words using traditional teaching methods and action songs?
- b) Do the students like the selected action songs?
- c) What are the students' perception towards the integration of action songs in the teaching and learning of action words?

LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

Vocabulary is the first and foremost step in language acquisition (Mehta, 2009). Wide range of vocabulary is needed for effective communication. McCarthy (1990) asserts that communication in a second language will not happen in a meaningful way if a student does not possess a wide vocabulary. This means, vocabulary is also very important for comprehension. Due to these facts, ESL students need to acquire plenty of words to enable the acquisition of the target language. This is aligned with Mukoroli (2011) who reports neither language production nor language comprehension would be visible without some knowledge of vocabulary. Cameron (2001) however, claims that learning vocabulary is a demanding task. It is a cyclical process, and it requires a long time and many exposures to word used in different situations. Therefore, ESL learners require more support as compared to average native English-speaking students of similar age and appropriate level or command of English Language (Mukoroli, 2011).

In the last few decades, numerous studies have shown the effectiveness of vocabulary acquisition through reading. The traditional vocabulary instructions for many teachers involve having students to look for words in dictionary, write definitions, and use words in sentences (Bromerly, 2007). While some ESL teachers feel that the best way to develop learners' vocabulary acquisition is to adopt direct, traditional vocabulary instruction, more recent researches emphasize on indirect/incidental vocabulary learning. Gambrell, Morrow and Presley (2007) argue that effective vocabulary instruction should entail active engagement in language learning tasks and encompass a number of hands-on language learning activities that occur in a classroom. Linse (2005) proposes the inclusion of both direct and indirect instructions in vocabulary development. In short, both direct and indirect approaches to vocabulary acquisition can be made practical. It means, by considering learners needs, learning styles and leaning abilities, ESL teachers are able to make vocabulary learning more meaningful and effectual through both direct and indirect approaches.

Moreover, a lot of ESL learners feel that learning verbs is harder as compared to nouns. Verbs are the centerpiece of the English grammar. Frawley (1992) defines verbs as event encoders or terms to describe states or conditions of existence, processes of unfolding and actions or executive process. Gentner (1982) hypothesizes that verbs pose special challenges for word learners. In fact, many past researches have shown several factors that cause verbs acquisition to be harder than the acquisition of nouns (Childers & Tomasello, 2002; Kersten & Smith, 2002; Tardif, 1996). Hence, the teaching and learning of verbs should be made easier to be understood and interesting.

3.2 Using Songs in ESL Classrooms

In ESL teaching and learning, songs have been acknowledged by numerous researchers and teachers as highly potential tool to promote language acquisition. Lo and Li (1998) identify that the development of learners' abilities in listening, speaking, reading and writing, as well as chances to learn pronunciation, rhythm, grammar and vocabulary can be supported and provided by songs. Cakir's (1999) claim that music can be a wonderful medium for language learning is supported by Orlova (2003) who states English as a Foreign Language (EFL) methodology has been actively using songs and music in class for the last two decades.

Meanwhile, studies have found the relation of songs to increase students' motivation in learning a foreign language. Brewster, Ellis and Girard (2002) mention songs help to develop concentration, memory and coordination. Schmitt (2008) identifies that one of the best principles for students in learning a foreign language is to be motivated to do things that are interesting, relevant to their goals and enjoyable. Hence, using songs in ESL classroom could create such opportunities. By nature, children love to play, sing and have fun. Young ESL students are happy to listen to and sing along with a song since it is fun and catchy. Songs can help to boost their motivation and attention, resulting to a more lively and student-centred

learning. Songs allow students to concentrate on lessons and become active learners.

Saricoban and Metin (2000) state that songs offer a change from routine classroom activities. Using songs in EFL classroom change the classroom atmosphere from monotonous to joyful and increase the students' motivation. Songs too, have been argued to reduce tense in classroom. Schoepp (2001) indicates that using songs is one useful method to achieve a weak affective filter and promotes language learning, based on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. Krashen (1987) argues affective filter is a sort of mental barrier and language students achieve optimal language learning when their affective filter is weak. High affective filter encumbers language learning and causes students to be inefficient. This means language students need to have positive attitudes towards learning and using songs is one way to achieve it. Realizing the power of integrating and exploiting songs into the teaching and learning of ESL, Malaysian government has recently designed a new English language curricular for primary school that emphasises on the use of songs. The English textbooks have a number of songs included and are encouraged to be used during the teaching and learning process.

3.3 Why Use Action Songs to Teach Verbs?

There are plenty types of available songs that can be used by ESL teachers in their classrooms. One of them is action song. Action songs can be defined as songs with movements for miming and role-playing of words and language structures (Lusi Nurhayati, 2012). In Piaget's theory of cognitive development (1920), children in the age of seven to 12 years old are positioned in a concrete operational stage. In this stage, the children are able to understand concrete aspects and topics rather than abstract ones. Therefore, Llach and Gomez (2007) suggest introducing children within the mentioned age range to words whose meanings can be surmised with an action, body language, flashcards, photographs, drawings and other objects. Brewster et. al. (2002) argues that using songs is considered beneficial as the accompanying actions or gestures help to strengthen meaning and at the same time channel high levels of positive energy.

Singing an action song is like amalgamating song and total physical response theory (TPR). TPR is a teaching approach that enables concepts to be taught using body. ESL students will eventually realize that they can make connection between new language and meaning without any translation or explanation by the teacher (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004). In her article, Thain (2009) states that action songs take learning to a new level and move learning into the physical ambit because students can feel, see and hear the input. Thus, classroom activities such as action songs give students the chance to move their bodies while singing. Linse (2005) suggests recently taught vocabulary to be revisited and reappeared several times and in different situations and activities. This is to help young ESL students to acquire new words. Action songs contain high frequency words and expressions, offer repetition (Brown, 2006) and can facilitate memorizing when they are associated with linguistic items (Cakir, 1999).

Songs are also connected to fun and leisure. Songs can stimulate learners and improve ESL classrooms' atmosphere as it can remove the dreariness of the typical ESL teaching and learning situation (Lusi Nurhayati, 2012). Many songs involve repetition. Learners have to be very attentive because they need to listen to the rhythm and remember the lyrics to sing them. Learners can use their kinesthetic sensory system to acquire new words. Sacks (2007) explains that mnemonic devices or patterns such as rhyme, meter and song can help us to hold a lot of information in our mind. Hence, Thain (2009) suggests incorporating action songs to enable ESL teachers garner the advantages of repetition in songs with the bonus of involving other parts of brain in storing information. In returns, students can have long-term recall of verbs and its meaning.

METHODOLOGY

This study is an action research. It adopts mixed-method research approach to explore the effect of teaching and students' comprehension of action words using action songs.

4.1 Participants

A class of 35 ESL learners of a rural primary school in the East Coast of Malaysia participated in this study. 25 of them were male learners and the other 10 participants were female. The participants were about nine years old and attended Year 3 of primary education in Malaysia. They have been exposed to English as second language learning for almost two and half years. They come from low socio-economic status families which normally indicate minimal exposure and usage of English language as daily communication tool. 18 of the students possess basic level of proficiency as they have very limited or no understanding of English and the other 17 can be categorized as low intermediate level students.

4.2 Research Materials

In this study, the researcher simplified the songs and rhymes by creating new lyrics using simpler words to match with the students' proficiency level. Krashen (1987) claims high frequency words, simple structures, and short sentences are required to promote comprehension. The chosen song must be at appropriate level to serve as an effective comprehensible input. After considering the students' proficiency, teaching and learning objective and what is required by the curriculum, two songs were developed, entitled 'I Can' and 'I Sing, You Sing'. The songs were downloaded from the Internet and assessed by three senior ESL teachers. Several amendments were made based on the senior teachers' comments and suggestions. The researcher then thought about the body movements that would accompany the songs since Lusi Nurhayati (2012) emphasises on the compatibility of actions or movements with learners' needs and characteristics.

4.3 Research Instruments

Vocabulary Test

The test utilised in this study was developed by the researcher to suit the students' level of proficiency. The researcher designed the test into a form of worksheet, and the students need to complete the sentences using the correct action words.

Three experienced ESL teachers who have at least 10 years of experience teaching the language evaluated the worksheet. Some modifications were made based on the teachers' comments and recommendations. There were 10 questions and the time to answer the questions was 30 minutes. The students have to complete the given sentences by underlining the correct action words. The test was administrated twice; before and after integrating action songs. The aim was to find out the difference in the students' comprehension of action words using traditional teaching methods and with the integration of action songs.

Self-Assessment Forms

The self-assessment forms were distributed to each students after they have sung the action songs. The forms were intended to discover the students' feelings towards the used action songs. Smileys are used in the forms to help the students to understand the meanings of the stated feelings.

Group Interviews

Group interviews using open-ended questions were conducted during the last class at end of the third week. The participants were randomly divided into small groups of five. The interviews were conducted informally because the researcher wanted to alleviate the students' nervousness and reticent attitude. Each group were encouraged to response in English in sharing their views, thoughts and feelings about the past classroom activities and they were. Their responses were recorded and analysed to find out the students' responses.

4.4 Research Procedures

In a week, the researcher spent five contact hours with the participants - an hour for each class was an hour every day. The study was carried out for almost three weeks in which the researcher had approximately 12 contact hours with the students. The study started by introducing action words using traditional teaching methods for the first six contact hours. Then, the researcher implemented her idea - teaching action words using action songs for the remaining six contact hours. This was purposely done to observe any significant difference in the students' comprehension of action words between the two teaching approaches.

During the first six hours, action words were introduced to the participants by using 'chalk and talk' and demonstrations. The researcher had to use Malay language to help the students to comprehend the lessons. Few of the students shared some action words that they can identify. However, they responded in Malay. The rest were very passive and hesitant to respond. The participants can hardly recall what they have learned. The researcher drew a mind map about verbs on the board and got the pupils to copy it in their exercise books. An exercise was given where the participants were required to identify and circle the action words. The researcher then introduced regular verbs and provided the participants with a simple note. The lesson continued with a number of sentences using action words as examples. The researcher then gave the students some exercises on action words. None of them managed to answer all the questions correctly. The highest was three over ten. On the sixth lesson, the first vocabulary test was administrated and collected.

On the seventh to ninth lesson, the participants were very excited because the researcher played the music and sang 'I Can' and 'I Sing, You Sing'. While singing, the researcher did the actions. Many of the students were less intimidated and joined in fearlessly. The researcher put up written lyric of the songs on the board and helped the students to sing the songs. The action words were circled on the board and the students were asked to do the actions. When asked to sing the songs again, some students who remembered guided those who had forgotten the lyrics and actions. On the eighth lesson, the students were asked to identify and circle the action words and seven volunteered participants were able to identify seven action words correctly. A group singing competition was also carried out. Among five groups, only one group exhibited low motivation to sing and compete. Almost half of the students managed to complete the song's lyric correctly. After every lesson, the researcher distributed and collected the self-assessment form. In the last lesson, another vocabulary test and group interviews were administrated.

4.5 Data Analysis Procedure

The collected data was analysed according to the type of data. Quantitative data were analysed and converted into percentages. Qualitative data were interpreted based on the responses gathered from the group interviews. Pseudonyms are used to retain anonymity and participants' confidentiality.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Traditional Teaching Method versus Integration of Action Songs

The results of the vocabulary tests were used to measure the students' comprehension on action words using traditional teaching methods and action songs. The results are as recorded in Table 1.

Table 1. Vocabulary tests results.

| Number of correct answer | The first test using traditional teaching methods (%) | The second test using action songs (%) |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| 10/10 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| 9/10 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| 8/10 | 0.00 | 2.86 |
| 7/10 | 0.00 | 2.86 |
| 6/10 | 0.00 | 2.86 |
| 5/10 | 2.86 | 8.57 |
| 4/10 | 8.57 | 28.57 |
| 3/10 | 14.29 | 17.14 |
| 2/10 | 22.86 | 14.29 |
| 1/10 | 25.71 | 11.43 |

Even though none of the participants managed to get all the answers correctly in both tests, there were some differences identified in the scores of the two tests. In the first test, which was conducted after using the traditional teaching methods, none of the students scored eight correct answers. But in second test (i.e. after using action songs), most of the students demonstrated significantly greater performance as compared to the first test with 17.15% of the participants managed to get at least five correct answers. In the first test, 25.71% of the students scored one correct answer. However, in the second test, the number reduced to 11.43%. The results suggest that the use of action songs support the acquisition of action words more effectively. This concurs with the findings of other studies that indicate that rhymes and songs are very effective in teaching vocabulary (Abidin et. al., 2011; Brown, 2006; Lusi Nurhayati, 2012; Monir Nazir Atta-Alla, 2012; Thain, 2009). The results imply that it is easier for the participants to acquire the vocabulary (action words) when action songs are integrated into the lessons. This is based on the students' improved scores in the second vocabulary tests. This also indicates that the students' comprehension and skill of using the correct action words have been enhanced through the integration of action songs.

5.2 Students' Response towards the Action Songs

The students were asked to assess themselves regarding the action songs used in the study. The results of the responses gathered from the self-assessment forms are as recorded in Table 2.

Table 2. Self-assessment form responses.

| Song | Responses (in %) | | | |
|------------------|---------------------|-----------|--------------|------------------------|
| | I like it very much | I like it | I dislike it | I dislike it very much |
| I Can | 82.86 | 17.14 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| I Sing, You Sing | 88.57 | 11.43 | 0.00 | 0.00 |

From the responses, it is clear that all of the students love the action songs. 82.86% love the song ‘I can’ very much while 17.14% like it. None of the students dislike the song. On the other hand, 88.57% students like ‘I Sing, You Sing’ very much while 11.43% like it. None of them dislike the song too. In short, all of the students liked and enjoyed both action songs. This result reveals that the students enjoy the integration of songs in the teaching of action words. Schoepp’s (2001) presumption that almost everyone, especially kids, love songs concur with this findings.

5.3 Students’ Perception towards the Integration of Action Songs in Teaching and Learning Action Words

Open ended interviews were carried out to collect the students’ perception on the idea of using action songs as a tool to teach and learn action words. For this particular instrument, the responses gathered from the participants were sorted into several categories and later summarized. The results are as presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Summarised responses from group interviews.

| Responses | Number of Respondents | Percentage (%) |
|---|-----------------------|----------------|
| Like The Songs | 35 | 100 |
| Enjoy Singing The Songs | 35 | 100 |
| Had Fun | 30 | 85.71 |
| Feel Happy/ Relax | 30 | 85.71 |
| Prefer English Class With Songs that is fun and I can sing and move | 34 | 97.14 |
| The Songs Helped To Learn Action Words | 20 | 57.14 |
| The Songs Helped To Complete The Second Test | 27 | 77.12 |
| Do Not Like English Class | 6 | 17.14 |

All of the students stated that they like the songs that have been used during the study. All of them also claimed that they enjoyed singing the two songs, even though at first they had some difficulties to sing. 85.71% of the students had a positive perception on the idea of using action songs to teach verbs. They enjoyed this type of instruction. They said they had fun and felt more relax and happy while singing and doing the actions. One of the students asserted that “I felt very happy while singing the songs. It was very fun. I can sing and at the same time move my body” (student 1). This supports the notion that songs help to develop concentration, memory and coordination (Brewster et. al., 2002).

97.14% of the students considered this teaching approach helpful because it made the class fun and less dry. “I like it when I can sing and move. I feel it is more enjoyable. I dislike sitting down and listen to what the teacher is teaching. It is very tiring” student 2 conceded. Student 3 claimed “English class is better when we can sing”. The responses are in accordance with Saricoban and Metin’s (2000) that songs can change classroom’s routine activities.

57.14% of the students mentioned that the action songs have helped them to comprehend the action words easier. A student claimed that by doing the actions, she was able to remember the verbs better as she could instantly recall the meaning of a verb by remembering the action. In fact, 77.12% admitted that the actions helped them to answer the second vocabulary test much better. These support Brewster et. al. (2002) who claim actions or gestures done while singing can strengthen meaning of words. However, six students admitted they disliked English Class because learning English was very difficult. They could not understand English lessons, especially when the teacher did not translate any English words. Sometimes they feel bored and less motivated to learn English. A students admitted that since he could understand

English, he felt bored during English lessons and disliked English, This can be linked to Schmitt (2008) who states that ESL/EFL students need to do things that are interesting, relevant to their goals, and enjoyable to get them motivated to learn the target language.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

From the results gathered in this study, it can be implied that using action songs is a helpful alternative to teach action words to young, low proficiency ESL learners. It is a teaching and learning strategy that may help ESL learners to enhance their vocabulary knowledge. It can also be implied that traditional teaching methods are no longer suitable to be used in today's ESL classrooms. In today's globalised world, our younger ESL learners need to be taught by using more interesting teaching approaches and styles. Since we know that younger ESL learners love songs and moving their bodies, integrating action songs into English lessons to teach vocabulary is an interesting alternative approach. Furthermore, in using songs in classroom, the study underscores the importance of musical material selections. The process is time consuming and tedious but the benefits of getting it right are worth the effort. For instance, for low proficiency students, the most suitable song is a song with simple tune and contains repeating words that can aid them to sing and acquire the language. The results of this study also suggested that further studies may need to look into the effectiveness of using other classroom activities such as stories and language games to enhance young ESL students' verbs' acquisition and using action songs to teach other parts of speech, for examples, nouns and adjectives.

In a nutshell, using action songs is indeed an ingenious approach to facilitate the young, low proficiency ESL learners in comprehending action words. The findings of this action research have supported the notion that young ESL learners respond positively to songs (Brewster et. al., 2002; Lusi Nurhayati, 2012; Schoepp, 2001; Thain, 2009). This study also supports the belief that songs are very useful devices in helping young ESL learners to learn vocabulary more effectively (Abidin et. al., 2011; Brown, 2006; Lusi Nurhayati, 2012; Monir Nazir Atta-Alla, 2012; Saricoban & Metin, 2000; Thain, 2009). A more controlled research and detailed analyses are required to further strengthen the discussed claims.

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