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REWARDS IN ESL CLASSROOM: IMPACT ON THE LEARNERS' PERFORMANCE IN VOCABULARY

HEMA KUMARY A/P VALASAMY

A PROJECT PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE



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REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF EDUCATION

LANGUAGE FACULTY

UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

2010



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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this project paper is my own except for the quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged and documented.

Date: 21st February 2010

Hema Kumary A/P Valasamy



M20081000101



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First of all, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Almighty for giving me the patience and capability to accomplish this research. Without His blessings, I would never have completed this project paper.

I am especially most grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Goh Hock Seng, who has been a central figure in my academic development. I am indebted to his valuable guidance and tremendous support throughout my journey in completing this project paper. I most appreciate those long hours of insightful discussions that crystallized into my research methodology. Dr. Goh's dedication to his students and commitment to scholarship serve as an inspiring model to emulate.

This project paper would not have been possible without the participation of all my participants. I greatly appreciate their contribution to this research. A special word of thanks also goes to Miss Afizah, the teacher who conducted the lessons involved in this research with full commitment and patience.

My husband deserves my most respect and appreciation for his constant support and encouragement. Thanks for always being there for me as my motivation and inspiration. A special note of love and gratitude goes to my parents for giving me so much support. Thanks for giving me your endless love and guidance.

Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to friends who have helped and offered guidance in completing this research.



ABSTRACT

The study attempted to determine the impacts of rewards on learners' performance in vocabulary in ESL classroom. Two groups comprising twenty-four subjects each were formed denoting the experimental and control group. Four stages (ABAB) were involved in which ten lessons were conducted based on Unit 8 of English Language Textbook for Year 3 pupils. At the end of each lesson, the subjects sat for a vocabulary test. The initial stage A served the purpose of obtaining baseline scores. Rewards were introduced during initial stage B. Subsequent stage A was carried out without rewards. Rewards were reintroduced during final stage B. Findings revealed that the use of rewards increased subjects' performance in the tests. However, their performance declined in the absence of rewards and increased subsequently with the reintroduction of rewards. The impacts of rewards were also found to be distinctive according to the subjects' gender and level of proficiency. Findings of this study offer implications that language teachers could use a scheduled rewarding system to increase learners' performance in the language depending on the gender and level of proficiency of the learners.





ABSTRAK

Tujuan kajian ini dijalankan adalah untuk menyiasat kesan penggunaan ganjaran ke atas pencapaian murid di dalam penguasaan kosa kata di kelas Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua. Dua kumpulan yang terdiri daripada dua puluh empat subjek dalam setiap satu telah dilibatkan dalam kajian sebagai kumpulan eksperimetral dan kawalan. Kajian ini merangkumi empat tahap (ABAB) yang melibatkan sepuluh sesi pengajaran dan pembelajaran berasaskan Unit 8 dalam buku teks Bahasa Inggeris untuk murid Tahun 3. Di akhir setiap sesi, subjek menduduki satu ujian kosa kota. Tahap A yang pertama dijalankan tanpa ganjaran untuk memperolehi skor pencapaian asas. Ganjaran diperkenalkan pada tahap B yang pertama. Tahap A kedua berlangsung tanpa ganjaran. Manakala, di tahap B yang terakhir, ganjaran diperkenalkan semula. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa ganjaran berpotensi meningkatkan pencapaian subjek dalam pembelajaran kosa kata. Namun, pencapaian mereka menurun apabila ganjaran tidak lagi diberikan pada tahap berikutnya. Pemberian semula ganjaran berjaya meningkatkan dan mengukuhkan pencapaian mereka. Dapatan kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa kesan penggunaan ganjaran berbeza mengikut jantina dan tahap penguasaan bahasa Inggeris subjek. Dapatan kajian ini menawarkan implikasi bahawa penggunaan sistem ganjaran berkala dapat membantu guru Bahasa Inggeris dalam usaha mereka untuk menarik minat murid kearah mempelajari bahasa ini bergantung kepada jantina dan tahap penguasaan bahasa murid.





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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESL **English as a Second Language**

L2 **Second Language**

SES **Socioeconomic Status**



CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

“English, English everywhere.” It is difficult not to agree with this claim. English is given the uppermost priority due to its dominance in literacy, science, medicine and nearly all the fields in the world. Thus, it is learned as a second language in many countries of the world. Malaysia too is not exempted in this context. The field of teaching and learning of English as a second language has gone through many revolutionary theories and techniques to best enable the learners to become competent users of English. Teachers are construed as the crux in facilitating second language learning among learners. This is due to the fact that second language learning is highly dependent on the target language input (Pearson, 2007). Under many circumstances, English Language teachers are regarded as the most reliable source of knowledge. As this consensus roots deeply in the teachers’ perception, they try out many approaches to enhance learners’ performance in English as a second language (ESL) classroom. The use of rewards is the most eminent approach embraced by ESL teachers worldwide. Whatever term is used whether reward, positive reinforcement, incentive, or under some instances also known by the connotation “bribe”, they all refer to one single intention that is to motivate learners to accomplish a given task efficiently in order to learn.

“Good job!”

“Finally, your hard work pays off.”

“I’ll give you a sweet if you give me the correct answer.”

The utterances stated above are not new to those who acquired English in ESL classrooms. Those utterances are typical examples of rewards that have had an impact on ESL



learning for decades. Many students yearn to hear these words from their teachers. They work their level best to attain such recognitions from their teachers. Rewards serve as an external motivation that develops a desire to learn (Ormrod, 2004: 79). Teachers find it useful in eliciting learners' attention and effort in situations whereby young learners lack of goal and desire to learn English. ESL teachers believe that rewards will enable learners to improve their performance and competency in English as a second language. Thus, many try to reward their students with gifts, money, or at least by pasting a happy-face sticker in the students' book upon accomplishing an exercise perfectly. Studies show that rewards have the potential to improve learners' performance in classroom.

A research conducted by Kim (2007) showed that a promise of reward served as a supportive move in increasing Korean ESL learners' performance in pragmatics transfer for conveying requests in English language. Similarly, Haynes (2001) asserted that reward is a form of encouragement that has a positive impact on learners' language use in ESL classrooms.

The application of rewards is becoming increasingly apparent in Malaysia. Teachers are now provided with stamps comprising English words and icons of praise such as "thumbs up" and "smiley" by the Ministry of Education. The ministry is encouraging teachers to use these stamps in students' exercises books as a token of appreciation upon accomplishing tasks successfully. The current situation depicts the increasing awareness about the use of rewards in language classes.

1.2 Need for the Study

This study is important to provide productive insights and a clearer picture to the teachers on the impact of the application of rewards on learners' performance in vocabulary in ESL





classroom. Vocabulary was chosen as the trajectory of this study as it is accorded as high priority in primary schools. Malaysian Curriculum Development Centre (2007) asserted that the central focus of ESL classrooms consisting of children from 7 to 12 years old should be on the vocabulary acquisition in the target language. Teachers who are often baffled with the significance of the use of rewards will be able to unfold its actual impact on learners' performance and competency in mastering English vocabulary. The study also provides some fruitful insights about the claim that rewards decrease the intrinsic motivation which leads to deteriorating performance in the absence of the rewards. All in all, the study lends a helping hand to the teachers in determining whether to use or not to use rewards in ESL classrooms to motivate learners.

1.3 Statement of the problem

Teachers often find it difficult to make students learn English. Rewards are handy in triggering a spark of interest in those who are lagging behind. It is important to note that plausible argument about the actual impacts of rewards on the learners' performance is an evergreen issue in the field of teaching and learning. Despite the scenario whereby most scholars assert that the use of rewards has the tendency to enhance learners' performance, many still claim that it has a negative impact. Cameron & Pierce (1994) carried out a meta-analysis of literature pertaining to the effects of rewards and reported that rewards do not exert any negative impact on the learners. Instead, rewards promote learning and better achievement among learners. However, Deci, Koestner & Ryan (1999) claimed that rewards have pervasive negative effects on learners' intrinsic motivation. Deci (1975) defines intrinsic motivation as interest. As a





matter of fact, there has been a huge dispute and counterattacks about the effects of rewards among these two teams of scholars which is discussed thoroughly in Chapter II.

Apart from this, some scholars tend to be on the midway by stating that the impacts may vary with the learners depending on several factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, age and level of proficiency. An example would be the study carried out by Shreeve & Boddington (2002) which denoted that rewards work well with the boys rather than girls.

Although the teachers are generous in giving rewards and the learners anticipate these elements most of the time, the actual impact of this approach is still a question mark. Questions such as “If I reward my students upon correct usage of English, will it make them improve their performance further or contrarily rob their independence in using the language?” and “ Will rewards work out in the same manner for all my students?” are often mind boggling to teachers. The dispute between two teams of scholars, Cameron & Pierce (1994) and Deci & Ryan (1999), exacerbate the process of coming into a conclusion on the effects that rewards exert on the learners in their absence. With one team arguing that rewards leave no pervasive negative impact on learners, the other stresses that rewards do lay detrimental effects on learners. Meanwhile, some scholars assert that the impacts of rewards vary with learners’ gender and level of proficiency. Hence, this research will help to ameliorate these controversies as it seeks to find out the impacts of rewards on the ESL learners’ performance according to their gender and level of proficiency under both circumstances: with the introduction of rewards and when the rewards are no longer available.



1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to find out the impact of reward on learners' performance in vocabulary in ESL classroom. It attempted to clarify whether the use of rewards has the tendency to increase learners' performance or vice versa. The impact that rewards exert on learners when they are no longer available was also addressed in this study. Apart from these, the study unfolded the different impacts of rewards that vary with the learners' gender and level of proficiency.

1.5 Research Questions

1.5.1 Do rewards have an impact on learners' vocabulary performance in ESL classroom?

1.5.2 Does the use of rewards result in learners becoming heavily dependent on them in that their performance deteriorates in the absence of those rewards?

1.5.3 Does the impact of rewards on learners' vocabulary performance vary with their gender?

1.5.4 Does the impact of rewards on learners' vocabulary performance vary with their level of proficiency?

1.6 Hypotheses

1.6.1 Directional Hypotheses

- The use of rewards increases learners' performance in vocabulary tests.
- The performance of the experimental group remains better than the performance of the control group in the absence of the rewards.
- The impact of rewards on learners' performance in vocabulary tests varies with their gender.



- The impact of rewards on learners' performance in vocabulary tests varies with their level of proficiency.

1.6.2 Null Hypotheses

- The use of rewards does not have any significance on learners' performance in vocabulary tests.
- There is no difference between the performance of the subjects in the experimental and control group in the absence of the rewards.
- The impact of rewards on learners' performance in vocabulary tests does not vary with their gender.
- The impact of rewards on learners' performance in vocabulary tests does not vary with their level of proficiency.



1.7 Definition of Terms

1.7.1 Rewards

Eggen & Kauchak (2004: 352) define *rewards* in the context of teaching and learning as intended reinforcers. The word “intended” denotes the notion that we do not know if the rewards actually reinforce behavior until we see if the behavior increases. Some examples of rewards used in classrooms include consumable items (sweets or candy), entertainment (allowing playing a computer game), success in competition (being the first to finish a game or drill) and high test scores. Witzel & Mercer (2003) claimed rewards can be segregated into two categories; tangible and verbal. Tangible rewards refer to the examples stated above. Verbal rewards, on the other





hand, refer to positive feedbacks given upon accomplishing a task successfully. In this study, the rewards given were stationary items, story books and positive feedbacks from the teacher.

1.7.2 ESL classrooms

Beam (2008) asserts that *ESL* is an abbreviation that is used primarily in educational settings and stands for *English as a Second Language*. *ESL classroom* refers to a room consists of a group of pupils or students whose native or primary language is one other than English and they are taught English by a teacher via fully English mediated instruction.

1.7.4 Learners' performance

Bohannon in Gleason (1993: 242) refers to *learners' performance* in the context of language teaching and learning as the actual instances of language use among students learning the target language. In this study, learners' performance was measured via the vocabulary tests which are discussed in Chapter III.

1.8 Significance of the Study

The results provided by this study helps to ameliorate the controversies that arise in the use of rewards in ESL classrooms. Some scholars claim that rewards have the potential to enhance learners' performance while the others assert that rewards will rob the learners' independence in using the language. In other words, the learners tend to negate the language use when the rewards are no longer present. Over the past 30 years, more than 100 experimental studies have been carried out pertaining to the effects of reward (Cameron & Pierce, 2001). But, nearly all focused on other fields such as the teaching and learning of mathematics, business





management and entrepreneurships. Only a few were based on language learning, namely ESL. Actual impacts of rewards on the learners' performance in ESL context were obtained via this present study. Furthermore, performance in vocabulary is yet to be highlighted in regard with the use of rewards among children. This study serves as an initial effort in finding out the impacts of rewards on vocabulary performance among children learning ESL. Essentially, this study helps to verify the degree of impact that rewards may lay on learners in accordance with their gender and level of proficiency. Thus, it provides insights for educators to make decision on the extent to which they should use rewards in ESL classrooms with young learners. Indirectly, it serves as a catalyst that will boost students' interest in learning English as a second language.

1.9 Summary

While there is a growing consensus about the use of rewards in ESL classrooms, disagreement exists regarding the impacts of these tools in teaching and learning. Rewards may have different impacts depending on the background of the learners. This research yielded fruitful information regarding the impacts of the use of rewards in ESL classroom on learners' performance in vocabulary. This report comprises of five chapters. In the first chapter the purpose and need for the study are stated besides the research questions that were investigated. The second chapter provides the history of the study and the theoretical framework that underlies the investigation. It also reviews literatures pertaining to impacts of rewards. Chapter III describes the methodology used in this study including the information about participants, instruments, data collection procedures, and data analysis. Chapter IV presents the results and finally, Chapter V offers a discussion of the main findings as well as theoretical and educational implications of the study.

