

THE EFFECTS OF USING THE EXPLICIT METHOD OF VOCABULARY
INSTRUCTIONS ON ESL STUDENTS'
VOCABULARY LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

In the KBSM English syllabus, vocabulary learning is only incorporated implicitly based on the four main skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Often, ESL learners may miss out on the different meanings that can be accounted for a word and its spelling due to less effective method. This study aimed to investigate the effects of using the explicit method of vocabulary instructions on vocabulary learning of two groups of Form Two students (60 students) from sub-urban schools in Ipoh and Teluk Intan, Perak. The quasi-experimental research design was implemented. A new word test was administered to select 45 target words and explicit vocabulary lessons were used to help students learn these words. The scores of the pre and post-tests were analysed by using the independent sample t-test, paired sample t-test and descriptive statistics. The score comparison and total improvement score in percentage were also presented. The questionnaires in the student's feedback and evaluation forms were analysed descriptively in terms of frequency counts, percentages, mean scores and standard deviation. The qualitative data from the semi-structured students' interview was transcribed, categorised and coded by using content analysis whereas the teacher's logs were kept as a record of the classroom observation. The paired sample t-test results are ($t=-17.85$, $df=29$, $p<.05$) for the experimental group and ($t=-4.85$, $df=29$, $p<.05$) for the control group. Based on the results, both experimental and control groups improved significantly ($p=.000^*$) in the post-test with a mean difference of 15.62. Spelling lesson recorded the highest mean percentage while the lowest was the Vocabulary Anchors lesson. Learners in the experimental group also reported positive perceptions towards the teacher's instructions ($M=4.48$, $SD=0.64$) and vocabulary lessons ($M=4.34$, $SD=0.59$). The implication of this study suggested that the use of the explicit method which included different techniques is effective in learning the target words.





KESAN PENGGUNAAN KAEDAH EKSPLISIT DALAM PELAJARAN TERHADAP PEMBELAJARAN PERBENDAHARAAN KATA DI KALANGAN PELAJAR PENUTUR BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA KEDUA

ABSTRAK

Di dalam silibus Bahasa Inggeris KBSM, pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata adalah secara implisit berdasarkan kepada empat kemahiran utama iaitu membaca, menulis, mendengar dan bertutur. Sering, pelajar penutur Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua berkemungkinan tidak mengetahui akan maksud yang berbeza untuk sesuatu perkataan dan ejaannya disebabkan oleh kaedah yang kurang efektif. Kajian ini dijalankan untuk menyiasat kesan penggunaan kaedah eksplisit dalam pengajaran perbendaharaan kata di kalangan dua kumpulan pelajar Tingkatan Dua (60 orang) dari dua buah sekolah berstatus pinggir bandar di Ipoh dan Teluk Intan, Perak. Reka bentuk kajian kuasi-eksperimen telah digunakan. Ujian perkataan baharu telah digunakan untuk memilih 45 perkataan sasaran dan kaedah eksplisit pula membantu pelajar mempelajari perkataan sasaran. Skor min untuk pra-ujian dan pasca-ujian telah dianalisa menggunakan ujian t-sampel tak bersandar, ujian t-sampel berpasangan dan statistik deskriptif. Jumlah skor peningkatan dalam peratus serta perbandingan skor turut dibentangkan. Item soal selidik di dalam borang maklum balas pelajar dan borang penilaian pelajar juga dianalisis secara deskriptif daripada segi pengiraan frekuensi, peratusan, skor min dan sisihan piawai. Data temuduga separuh berstruktur bersama pelajar terpilih telah ditranskripsi, dikategori dan dikod menggunakan analisis kandungan manakala catatan guru disimpan sebagai sebagai rekod pemerhatian. Keputusan ujian t-sampel berpasangan adalah ($t=-17.85$, $df=29$, $p<.05$) untuk kumpulan eksperimen dan ($t=-4.85$, $df=29$, $p<.05$) untuk kumpulan kawalan. Hasil kajian menunjukkan markah pasca-ujian kumpulan eksperimen dan kawalan meningkat secara signifikan ($p=.000^*$) dengan perbezaan min 15.62. Pengajaran menggunakan kaedah Ejaan merekodkan min peratus tertinggi manakala min peratus terendah dicatatkan oleh Pengajaran 'Vocabulary Anchor'. Kumpulan eksperimen juga menunjukkan persepsi positif terhadap aspek pengajaran guru ($M=4.48$, $SD=0.64$) dan pelajaran perbendaharaan kata ($M=4.34$, $SD=0.59$). Implikasi kajian ini mencadangkan penggunaan kaedah eksplisit melalui pelbagai teknik adalah efektif untuk mempelajari perkataan sasaran.





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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APA	American Psychological Association
CASAS	Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System
EFL	English as Foreign Language
ELC	English Language Learning Centre
ELLs	English Language Learners
ELTC	English Language Teaching Centre
ESL	English as Second Language
EVL	Explicit Vocabulary Learning
IVA	Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition
IVL	Implicit Vocabulary Learning
KBSM	Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (Secondary School Integrated Curriculum)
L2	Second Language Learners
M	Mean
MBI	Memperkasakan Bahasa Inggeris (Empowering the Use of English Language)
NICHD	National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
OPS-English	Oral Proficiency in English for Secondary Schools
PET	Preliminary English Test
PREL	Pacific Resources for Education and Learning
PT3	Penilaian Tingkatan Tiga (Form Three Assessment)
SD	Standard Deviation





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SLA

Second Language Acquisition

TESL

Teaching English as Second Language

UMT

Universiti Malaysia Terengganu

UPM

Universiti Putra Malaysia

UPSI

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction



In the English as Second Language learning or English as Foreign Language learning (ESL/EFL), vocabulary learning is considered as an important element. In order to construct sentences, every learner needs to obtain sufficient vocabulary so that they will be able to construct semantically correct sentences. English words can be obtained in many ways as learners can learn new words by self-discovery or through formal education. The supportive environment and availability of resources play important role in the enrichment of learners' vocabulary knowledge. Thus, in the education field, many methods have been developed in order to support the learning of vocabulary in school. These methods include the use of visual aids, contextual inference or semantic mapping on vocabulary learning. All these methods of





vocabulary learning can be imparted extrinsically or intrinsically according to the learners' needs as well as their proficiency level.

The limited repertoire of vocabulary knowledge has greatly affected second language learners (L2) ability to convey intended meaning in communications using the target language (Read, 2004). The lack of vocabulary content causes ESL/EFL learners to face problems in communicating and writing using English. Due to this matter, they are unable to write and communicate effectively using English. This ineffective use of the language happens as a result of minimum exposure in terms of English language use in daily tasks. For example, a learner is prone of using the Malay language to buy food in a restaurant or stall as the Malay language has been the main medium used by hawkers or waiters for their daily business operation. The hawkers or waiters low proficiency in English may be the main reason for them to use the Malay language as it is easier for them to communicate with their customers by using it. Thus, this may avoid miscommunication from happening between hawkers, waiters, and customers.

The Oral Proficiency in English for Secondary Schools (OPS-English) programme is a programme under Empowering the Use of English Language, “Memperkasakan Bahasa Inggeris (MBI)” initiative developed by the English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC) which focused on speaking and listening skills among learners of Malaysian secondary schools. This programme is aimed at helping learners improve their English proficiency in terms of listening and speaking skills. There are 10 units with specific themes. For each unit, there are six stages. Although





the focus is on the listening and speaking skills, the learning of target words is included specifically in the Building Blocks stage where learners are presented with an audio recording of the word list related to each theme. This indicates that the Ministry of Education Malaysia has acknowledged the importance of the explicit method of vocabulary instructions. This programme will also be conducted for the first 6 months (January till June) of every year for students in Form One and Form Two of secondary schools (Band 3 to 6) in Malaysia.

1.2 Background to the Problem

In Malaysia, the English language is taught as a second language in all schools which is in line with the Malaysian Education Act 1966. Thus, English is seen as important as other subjects in the Malaysian education system in order to attain national and international objectives (Segawa, 2007). Even though English is the official second language in Malaysia, the students face difficulties in using the language appropriately due to low language proficiency. Reading books in English assists the learners to be proficient in the language as language can be learned through reading (Fatimah & Vishalache, 2006). However, if learners are not able to understand the books that they read, it will not be helpful to improve their English language proficiency. Inderjit (2014) mentioned that it is an alarming trend among teenagers in Malaysia where they only read to acquire knowledge as well as for academic reasons rather than for knowledge purposes. Reading as a habit is no longer practiced as the latest favourite pastime of Malaysians is to watch television and video. He added that





studies in the past have also indicated that learners hardly read books to look for information or pleasure and their main focus is only to prepare themselves for examination.

According to Chang, Lin, and Abdul Rashid (2014), one of the most important skills in English learning is reading and understanding written text. The findings from a study on Form 4 students in Malaysia had shown 'fair to poor' levels of writing skill performance related to vocabulary, content, organization and mechanics scores (Mukundan, Mahvelati, Mohd Amin Din & Nimehchisalem, 2013). This indicates that secondary school students are facing problems in writing where one of the reasons is due to the lack of vocabulary knowledge. Besides that, the study by Veeramuthu, Wei, and Tajularipin (2011) also shows that one of the factors which contributed to the poor performance of journal writing skills involving L2 college students is the lack of vocabulary. As a result, they are restricted from conveying their ideas clearly and effectively in their journal writing. These students are tertiary level students and are still experiencing similar problems in writing which are caused by inadequate vocabulary knowledge. These studies clearly reflect students' poor performance in writing which is mainly caused by their low language proficiency where one of the contributing factors is the lack of vocabulary knowledge.

Moreover, Gass, and Selinker (2008) mentioned that lexical errors are the most common errors committed by L2 learners based on the large corpora of errors and vocabulary learning which can determine the success in L2 acquisition. Therefore, in order to be proficient in English, a learner needs to have an extensive





vocabulary that can be learned in many ways. Based on the previous studies, it can be concluded that ESL learners need appropriate assistance in terms of vocabulary learning which can be given during formal education in school. The Ministry of Education, Malaysia realises the importance of vocabulary knowledge among learners in schools. Therefore, the learning of vocabulary is incorporated in the syllabus and also the KBSM English textbooks used in schools in Malaysia. The vocabulary exercise in English textbooks is one of the resources that can be used by teachers for vocabulary learning during English lessons. However, as stated by Hassan and Selamat (2002), the ESL teachers have to look for alternative sources mainly from the internet and newspapers because the textbook's level is either too difficult or too easy and do not meet the abilities of diverse students.



Furthermore, although vocabulary has been included in lessons as one of the elements, the four important skills; reading, writing, listening, and speaking are the main emphasis. The learning of vocabulary is only incorporated as a minor part in the teaching of the four skills. Based on several conversations with English language teachers of few secondary schools and researcher's personal experience, the current practice of vocabulary learning is one way or another superficial where students are only asked to identify unfamiliar words by referring to a reading, listening or speaking text and the teachers will explain the meaning of those words. They are not asked to construct sentences using unfamiliar words to show their understanding due to the time constraint. This may indicate a surface level understanding of the unfamiliar words among the students. Oxford and Crookall (1990) have pointed out, "Courses on reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, and culture are common in L2





programs, but very few vocabulary courses exist” (as cited in Sanaoui, 1995). It can be concluded that although vocabulary learning plays a vital role in improving learners’ proficiency, it is just a minor focus in L2 programmes. Thus, it is very crucial that especially during English lessons in school, the learner is able to grab any chance of learning new words.

1.3 Problem Statement

In the Secondary School Integrated Curriculum (KBSM) English syllabus used in Malaysia, the learning of vocabulary takes place in teaching according to the four main skills; reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The teachers teach the target words implicitly as it is outlined in the language content together with grammar and the sound system. As a result, a few issues or problems related to vocabulary have arisen among learners. One of the examples is in determining the alternative meaning that can be accounted for a word and its spelling. This has become a problem for learners as they are unable to notice the difference. Inappropriate word choice is also common among learners (Saadiah & Kaladevi, 2009). This happens due to the method used to learn target words which are by using them in sentences during English lessons and learners are expected to figure out their meaning according to the context on their own. Thus, this indicates that implicit learning of vocabulary in context can also cause problems for learners. The learners are not able to notice and learn target words effectively through the implicit method. This is clearly evident in the results of the New Word Test among selected Form Two learners which was conducted at the





beginning of the study in order to select the words to-be-learned. In acquiring a language, learners require opportunities for output or oral practice and use of new words as Swain (2000) stated that the probability of learning will increase when learners reflect upon the form and meaningful communication.

The results of the New Word Test (Refer to Appendix 4) conducted by the researcher on 60 selected Form Two learners from two different schools (30 learners each) shows that vocabulary is an alarming issue for the learners at school that needs necessary attention. Among 120 words selected from the list of to-be-learned words in the Lower Secondary Forms (Form 1 to 3) KBSM English curriculum specification document, only 30 words (36%) were ticked as familiar words among learners who sat for the New Word Test. The remaining 90 words (64%) were ticked as unfamiliar words by the majority of learners which indicated that these learners were not familiar with the words to-be-learned listed by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. Thus, appropriate vocabulary intervention programme or vocabulary instruction should be developed at school to help learners improve their vocabulary knowledge. There has been evidence of awareness and acknowledgment that vocabulary instruction is essential to language learning (Nezhad & Shokrpour, 2012). This perhaps will enhance English language learning among learners which result in high language proficiency.

In Malaysia, the issue related to vocabulary instruction has not been discussed widely as local research tends to focus more on the area of grammar (Hazita, Normazidah & Koo, 2012). Alternating back and forth over the past few years, the





interest in vocabulary has been high and intense, and at other times low and neglected (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008). According to the research review by Hazita, Normazidah and Koo (2012), the limited availability of English reading materials is one of the reasons why Malaysian learners have limited vocabulary which lead to limited English proficiency among them. Without a doubt, the approaches used to teach English literacy in this country has to be reassessed based on this review.

Besides that, more than 50% of the teachers are not confident about the best practice in vocabulary instructions and at times do not know where to begin to form an instructional emphasis on word learning as this also indicates that vocabulary instruction may be problematic (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008). Thus, it is crucial to find vocabulary instruction that is suitable and appropriate for learners in Malaysia as vocabulary knowledge is one of the most important elements in language learning.

Without adequate vocabulary knowledge, the learners will not be able to read, write, listen, and speak using the English language which will result in low proficiency. This is due to the fact that mastering vocabulary is the most difficult task that learners experience while acquiring a second language (Mizumoto & Takeuchi, 2009).

Furthermore, a casual conversation before conducting the experimental study between the researcher and eight English language teachers from 'Kinta Utara', 'Perak Tengah', and 'Kinta Selatan' district, further supports the statement above. All of them agreed that vocabulary learning is an issue to be focused on at school in order to improve learners English language proficiency. This is especially with regards to the learners with a low level of language proficiency. Often, low proficient learners





lack the opportunity to practice new vocabulary in the classroom (Nam, 2010). According to these English teachers, learners should learn and master an adequate number of high-frequency words before other components such as grammar and sentence construction so that they can actively participate in the English language lessons conducted at the school. Lesson plans created by English language teachers usually cater the learners of various levels or abilities in the formal English language classroom setting. As mentioned by the majority of English teachers, only if the learners are able to participate in English lessons, they can improve on their language proficiency. Thus, it is important to learn vocabulary explicitly in context especially for low proficiency learners in Malaysian classrooms as vocabulary knowledge is crucial for successful language learning and in enhancing language competencies (Milton, 2008).



Studies by Yip and Kwan (2006), Luu (2012), Dimas (2011), Ketabi and Shahraki (2011), Hashemzadeh (2012), Mirzaii (2012) as well as Madrigal-Hopes, Villavicencio, Foote and Green (2014), have shown that the explicit method of vocabulary learning is effective across age groups, language background and proficiency level as it helps to improve vocabulary knowledge in the context of learners in respected countries. The researcher is keen and interested to know whether, in the context of the Malaysian classroom, the explicit method of vocabulary instructions can assist Malaysian learners in improving their vocabulary knowledge or not. Generalizing findings of past studies to the Malaysian classroom context is inaccurate. Due to this matter, the researcher has proposed a study on vocabulary learning to fill in the gap in terms of the Malaysian classroom context and the effects





of using the explicit method of vocabulary instructions on Malaysian learners' vocabulary knowledge. It is hoped that the findings from this study can contribute significantly to this research area. As mentioned by Hinkel (2006), the studies on effective strategies, programs, techniques, and approaches to vocabulary instruction in the ESL/EFL classroom have been conducted continuously in recent years.

Moreover, this study intends to examine the use of the explicit method of vocabulary instructions for vocabulary learning among English as a Second Language or English as a Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) learners in the Malaysian classroom as the focus is on observing the achievement in terms of vocabulary knowledge that occurs among learners. If their learning progress shows a significant improvement of the target words, the stakeholders or English curriculum developer should consider conducting a more apprehensive and detail research in order to include vocabulary learning during English language lesson in class by using the explicit method to help the learners improve their vocabulary knowledge rather than just incorporating it implicitly in the teaching of the four main skills.

1.4 Research Aims and Objectives

This research aims to highlight the importance of considering the explicit method of vocabulary instructions for vocabulary learning among Form Two learners in the classroom. While investigating the effects of utilising the explicit method, it is also posited to know the students' preferences among the techniques available to learn





vocabulary at school. Moreover, it is essential to understand how students' perceptions of learning the target words by using the explicit method influence them in improving their vocabulary knowledge. Based on the aims, these research objectives are presented:

1. To investigate the effectiveness of using the explicit method to learn vocabulary for Form Two learners.
2. To discover Form Two learners' preferences among the techniques used to learn vocabulary.
3. To find out whether the use of the explicit method to learn the target words are helpful according to Form Two learners' perceptions.



1.5 Research Questions

In line with the objectives, three research questions are presented:

1. How effective is the use of the explicit method to learn vocabulary for Form Two learners?
2. Which techniques of the explicit method to learn vocabulary are preferred by Form Two learners?
3. What are Form Two learners' perceptions of the explicit method used to learn the target words?

