

Using storytelling to teach vocabulary for young learners

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Abstract: *Storytelling is often promoted as a suitable methodological approach in teaching vocabulary to young learners. The writer conducted a classroom observation where storytelling is used to teach vocabulary. This article looks into the characteristics of young learners, teaching and learning of vocabulary among young learners and how storytelling, with its characteristics, facilitates that. With evidence from the observation, the strengths and weaknesses of storytelling in vocabulary learning and teaching are also discussed. Suggesting classroom implication of storytelling is mentioned.*

Keywords: *Storytelling, vocabulary learning, vocabulary teaching, young learners,*

1. Introduction

Teaching a foreign language to children is different from teaching adults or adolescents because children have distinctive ways of thinking, attitude and aptitude (Moon 2005). Therefore, it is important that teachers use appropriate teaching methods that suit these characteristics. According to Ur (1996), teachers can arouse interest in learning for children with the use of stories and pictures. Among the learning of linguistic levels, vocabulary built-up is considered as central to foreign language learning at primary level (Cameron 2001). As Harmer (1991, p.153) stated, “If language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and flesh.” Many studies have proved the effectiveness of storytelling in vocabulary teaching for young learners

The writer conducted an observation where primary-level students learn vocabulary from storytelling. This article is to critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of this approach in teaching vocabulary to young learners from the writer’s observation. Remarks on the appropriateness of the methods in the Vietnamese teaching context will also be made.

2. Content

2.1 Vocabulary development of young learners

Vocabulary development is a dynamic and continuous process of building up word knowledge that children partially know (Cameron 2001). This brings up the question of what constitutes word knowledge. Nation (1990) proposes a list of different aspects of word knowledge including word meaning, written and spoken form, grammatical feature,

collocation, register, association and word frequency. It is impossible and unnecessary to learn all the types of word knowledge at the same time, and some word knowledge type may acquire later than others.

As for children around four or five years old, the mastery of vocabulary develops, also during this period, young learners develop a vocabulary that is interesting to them. During this time, the spoken output precedes the acquisition of meaning and young learners have many ways of learning such as understanding a meaning based on experience and try using it because the word possesses great curiosity (Moon 2005). From this perspective, words are incrementally acquired over a period of time and children should be exposed to the lexical item multiple times in new contexts to expand their word knowledge (Cameron 2001). In regard to how children learn words, younger children learn better with concrete words that they can see or touch while older children can grasp words that are more abstract. As children grow up, their vocabulary learning ability shifts from thematic-related to paradigmatic-related words and they are increasingly able to handle words with less concrete meaning (Cameron 2001).

Children still have a problem in learning English vocabulary due to their short attention span and lack of language. One of the prominent ones is that they can lose interest in learning (Cameron 2001). Therefore, teachers should understand the characteristics of young learners and apply the appropriate methods and materials to facilitate their vocabulary learning.

2.2. Vocabulary learning and teaching

With the mentioned dynamic nature of vocabulary learning, the suggested five steps in the learning

process are:

Having sources for encountering new words;
Getting a clear image (visual or auditory or both);
Learning the meaning of new words; Making strong memory connections between the forms and meanings of words; Using the words.

Every step needs to be repeated so that children can deepen their word knowledge. For example, if learners are first exposed to the written form of a word, they may remember the first few letters of that word and its single meaning in the context. As more exposure occurs, other meanings and word forms will be encountered and learned later. Cameron's suggestions (2001) can be of great help for children in this learning process: learning meaning of new word, attending to form and making strong memory connections.

2.3. Definition of storytelling

Human beings are storytellers by nature and storytelling is one of the oldest forms of communicating ideas through speech or images. Storytelling consists of three elements – the story, the narrative and the narrating. To be specific, stories are memories we form together into a string of sequence that makes sense, narrative involves a speaker conveying the story, and narrating is the way the story (i.e. the use of gestures, expressions, tone of voice). Storytelling would meet each of the key components of successful language learning, which are: the student's accessibility and exposure to a language, how often he can use it, and the drive to learn.

2.4. The importance of storytelling in teaching vocabulary to young learners

Storytelling gives children a world full of imagination that they can enjoy and learn language unconsciously and almost effortlessly (Cameron 2001). She also states that storytelling provides meaningful context and encourages authentic language use among children. Storytelling would meet each of the key components of successful language learning, which are: the student's exposure to language, opportunity for language use and the drive to learn. In specific, language exposure occurs when teachers provide comprehensible input through gestures and oral demonstration. Young learners are encouraged to produce language before, during and after the story is told and storytelling can

be motivating itself because children naturally get engaged in the activity

The language in storytelling facilitates vocabulary learning with its parallelism (repetitive pattern) and rich vocabulary in meaningful context. According to Nation (1990), conditions for vocabulary learning can be underpinned by two factors: repetition and quality of attention (i.e. noticing, retrieval, elaboration). In my opinion, storytelling satisfies this learning condition. The repetitive story frames are commonly seen in storybooks, meaning that students would encounter the same words or multi-words multiple times. This is beneficial for vocabulary uptake as learners are less likely to remember the words in their initial encounter(s) and a word needs to be repeated at least five to six times before learning takes place (Nation 1990). As for attention, by giving explanation through pictures, gestures and facial expressions, teachers can help children attend to the words' meaning and form as well as facilitate initial comprehension input. In fact, studies on the effect of listening to stories on vocabulary acquisition finds that with teachers' visual and verbal explanations of new words, vocabulary gain doubled and words were retained after three months.

Storytelling can be the appropriate method to teach children vocabulary as long as teachers give out sufficient scaffolding and comprehensible input. However, in my opinion, the method poses a much more potent effect on receptive learning than productive learning, as children mostly encounter new words from reading or listening to stories. Following the suggested steps mentioned, children should be encouraged to use new words either in spoken or written form to enhance their learning. Storytelling alone provides little opportunity for output; therefore, teachers should get students to do follow-up activities suggested by Cameron (2001) such as acting out or retelling the story.

From my observation, when students act out a story, they demonstrate their understanding of the words and get involved in the story. Retelling activities, on the other hand, facilitate retrieval and vocabulary recycle (Cameron 2001), hence, forming a strong connection between word form and meaning. However, demanding as the task can be to young learners, it is essential to give them support (i.e. pictures with keywords) to motivate

them. During the time students performed the task, I observed that the teacher gave support the weak students and encouraged to the retell the story as detailed as possible.

Another advantage of storytelling is its rich vocabulary. As holistic learners by nature, children's focus tends to shift between a variety of topics rather than focusing on the one they are being taught (Harmer 2007). As mentioned above, younger learners learn better with thematic clusters - that is groups of words that are related in sequences of events because they tend to link idea in a word from a different part of speech in a theme. Arguably their learning would benefit most from storytelling as the plots and characters in stories usually organize vocabulary in thematically related sets (Cameron 2001). In addition, research has proved that learning words in thematic clusters yielded significantly better retention while semantic-related words (e.g sweater, shirt, skirt) were those that the subjects had the least success in memorizing. However, vocabulary richness in stories can impede learning if children cannot make sense of too many words. Nation (1990) suggests that in order to understand a text, learners must know 95% of the words. Teachers should choose stories wisely because children would be demotivated to learn if the number of unknown words makes up over 5% of the storybook. During my observation, the teacher would pre-teach and revise lexical items before telling the story.

2.5. The suitability of using storytelling to teach vocabulary in Vietnamese context.

In Vietnam, storytelling is not a popular method to teach vocabulary. One possible reason is that there is a shortage of appropriate English storybooks for language learning and the majority of storybooks are translated into Vietnamese. Children would normally learn vocabulary from textbooks. To integrate storytelling into the lessons of textbooks, teachers can adapt the materials by changing the format and presentation of the story. Short sentences, pictures and characters can be added to make the story more engaging. Teachers can apply storytelling as suggested below. A warm-up activity can be used to get students ready for the lesson. This can be simple games such as Kim's game or Stop the bus. In the first activity, teacher can pre-teach some new words that are appeared multiple times in the story. In the second

activity, instead of following the textbook, teacher can tell the story, using pictures without showing the words. Then the teacher retell the story and show some short sentences as the characters' lines.

After that, the teacher can encourage students to retell the story as whole class. This allows them to build up confidence for the following activity which is retelling the story in pairs. The teacher can give out prompts such as the pictures and the characters' lines, and let the students work with their peers. During this time, the teacher walks around and gives support if needed.

As for the final activity, the students can perform a post activity by creating another ending for the story or acting out the story in groups. This gives students opportunities to practice their speaking skill in meaningful context.

3. Conclusion

With their distinctive characteristics in language learning, young learners need to be engaged in distinctive teaching approach. Storytelling is one of the effective ways in language teaching for young learners, especially for vocabulary uptake as it possesses the two factors that lead to vocabulary learning: attention and repetition. Storytelling involves ample visuals to get students' attention and it also provides repeated lexical phrases, both of which facilitate vocabulary learning and retention. The writer's observation coincides with the mentioned findings. Despite its potential classroom implications, storytelling is still underused. Teachers can apply storytelling by adapting stories in the textbooks and provide activities for language practice in meaning context.

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