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The Effectiveness of Using Language Arts in the English Language Curriculum to Teach Pronunciation and Vocabulary among Year One Students in One Semi Urban School in Malaysia

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Abstract

The English Language curriculum in Malaysia is using Language Arts to teach English. Language arts is a new component designed to create appreciation and enjoyment amongst pupils as they learn the language. This fun-filled and innovative section in the new English Curriculum is a great experience and used as well as a means to create confidence in pupils to use the language without inhibitions. The focus here is the use of language arts to teach pronunciation of words and understanding the meaning of the words better among the Year One students in a semi-urban school. Therefore the research has attempted to study the effectiveness of using songs to teach pronunciation and vocabulary among these students, as compared to using the traditional method, drilling, to teach pronunciation and vocabulary.

Keywords: Language Arts, Curriculum, Teaching, Pronunciation, Vocabulary and Songs

Introduction

English is being taught as a second language in Malaysian primary and secondary schools. The mastery of English is necessary for students to gain information and knowledge written in English. The government's policy is to strengthen English among pupils in the primary schools and students in secondary schools. Therefore, the English language curriculum has been designed in such a way that it will be able to produce students who will be proficient in the language. The goal of the Malaysian English language curriculum is to help pupils acquire the language to help them use it in daily lives, to further their studies in their fields of interest and future work purposes. The English Language Curriculum for Primary Schools aims to equip pupils with basic language skills to allow them to communicate very effectively in various contexts that are suitable to the pupils' level of development. By the end of Year 6, pupils are hoped to be able to communicate confidently and correctly in formal and informal situations; read and understand a range of English texts to get information and joy; write a range of texts using suitable and correct language, style and form through media; appreciate and show understanding of English language literary or creative works for enjoyment, and use correct and suitable grammar in speech and writing.

The strategy of phonics has been introduced to help pupils start reading and a good foundation in penmanship, which will help pupils do good handwriting. The second principle is learning is fun, very meaningful, and useful. Lessons, which emphasize meaningful contexts and the integration of language skills, will allow pupils to learn by taking part in fun-filled activities. Contextualized and these useful activities will promote the concept of fun in language learning. The third principle in teaching is learner-centered. Teaching approaches, lessons, teaching resources, and materials must suit the different needs and abilities of pupils. It is very important that suitable activities, teaching aids, and materials are used with pupils of different learning abilities so that their full potential can be realized.

The standards for language arts in Year 1 and 2 explore stories, rhymes, and songs to encourage the active imagination and interest of pupils, thus encouraging them to use the English language widely (Ali Bin Ab. Ghani, 2010). This component will make sure that they benefit from listening and occupying language from fictional as well as non-fictional sources. Through exciting and meaningful activities in this component, pupils will gain a very rich and invaluable experience when using the English language. When taught well, pupils will have the confidence to achieve success in the language. They will also benefit much from continuous praise for their effort and classroom success by the teachers to make their learning as rewarding as possible (Abeles, H., Hoffer, C. and Klotman, R., 1994). Pupils will also be encouraged to draft, prepare, and write simple creative works. Besides, the Language Arts module will provide pupils the opportunity to integrate, try out, and apply what they have learned in other modules.

The Problem

Teaching English to Year 1 students is not easy and needs much patience. The process of teaching children or young learners is very different from the process of older students. It needs some kind of method to make it easy when delivering the material. For Year 1 students, English is the first foreign language to learn, and the students just learn simple patterns of English. As beginners, the pupils have

very shallow knowledge of English. Sometimes it creates problems in the learning process; most of the time, pronunciation, the first is a genuine pronunciation problem, which happens when the learners have difficulty in providing the required sound to imitate.

The researcher found that they have problems in pronouncing the sound [S] as in “sleep,” “teacher,” [á] as in “three,” in which these do not exist in Bahasa Malaysia. Secondly, the pronunciation problem occurs when the sound is not difficult as such, but the learner is misled by the spelling. For example, the words “up” [ʌ], “[wool]” [v], “there [i], “black” [æ], “sky” [ði], and “how” [ð] are not pronounced as they are written, so learning how to pronounce is not easy for students.

The seven-year-old children still enjoy playing, so the teacher is expected to be imaginative and creative when developing their teaching techniques to make English lessons more exiting (Fauziati, 2002). Teaching English to the beginners should need techniques (Fauziati, 2002). There are many ways when teaching English to young learners, but the most important aspect of teaching English is to motivate pupils to learn the language”. This is to make them feel that they need English and make them feel and accept that English is a very interesting subject to learn. One way to build their self enthusiasm is by using songs, which will encourage them to show more reaction when learning English (Cormier, A, 1985). The songs can also be used by the children outside the classroom for fun singing.

As an attractive technique, taken from the student’s daily activities, the students will feel engaged in English tutoring (Dominguez D, 1991). Besides, the songs are part of the authentic materials needed for studying foreign language directly from native speakers. There are lots of English expressions and cultures in the songs that students can learn and expand their knowledge. Students will also learn how to pronounce them, especially after listening to the songs. Moreover, learning English through songs can be effective for proper pronunciation and understanding the meaning of the words in context, since the students can directly obtain the knowledge on how to pronounce the words from the songs they hear when students learn in an enjoyable situation,

they will receive the content of the lesson easily.

The samples in this research are Year 1 students from a semi-urban school in Sungai Petani, Kedah. The students of this school are very big in number. The teaching-learning process is maximized for students for the transfer of knowledge and build their creativity. However, English becomes one of the main subjects taught every day at school. In the opening and closing of the everyday meeting, the students sing English songs together. Based on the observation of the students' scores in the English subject, it seems that they have had a lower level of pronunciation; for example, they say [bok] for the book, and it is the wrong pronunciation. The result of the observation shows that the teacher has never given the practice of pronouncing some words, and no attempt has been made for the students to understand the meaning of the word. The teacher gives emphasis on the vocabulary and grammar used in the conversation. The pupils, sometimes, are asked to pronounce some words once or twice to make the students familiar with the words. In other words, there is no emphasis on pronouncing words or understanding the meaning of the word.

Objectives of the Research

Generally, this research describes the process of using English songs for teaching pronunciation to young learners. Specifically,

1. It describes the implementation of English songs as a technique to help students improve their pronunciation and vocabulary.
2. Whether the use of songs to teach pronunciation and vocabulary is a problem and a great challenge to English teachers.
3. Whether sustaining Language Arts as a main component in the English Syllabus is a great challenge.

Literature Review

Literature Review Related to Music

There is numerous evidence that people believe in music, as seen by the increase in methodologies that now use songs to teach a foreign language. This first segment is an overview of methods that use songs as a pedagogical tool for teaching and learning the language. These methods are often not

based on any particular research. However, they are presented here to inform the reader that many believe in the pedagogical benefits of music without citing research. Many of these programs were typically designed to teach children through songs, but recently programs have been geared with the older learner in mind. Suggestopedia and the Contemporary Music Approach will be used here.

A language methodology for the classroom was introduced in 1978 by a Bulgarian psychotherapist and physician by the name of Georgi Lozanov. His method, Suggestopedie (Suggestopedia), is used in many research reports on the use of music in the foreign language classroom. This method uses classical music (is an essential element for learning to take place) to relax the students. The importance of whole-brain stimulation for optimal acquisition to take place and suggests that the relaxation techniques help learners tap into subconscious resources to help in the acquisition and greater retention of vocabulary and language structures (Lozanov, 1978). "Lozanov found that using the power of suggestion in a waking state as one way of teaching that goes well with the human brain processing" (Botha and Puhl, 1988). This optimal condition for the acquisition was in tune with later second language acquisition theories by (Stephen Krashen, 1985), who believes that Lozanov's method creates a type of super learning very identical to the subconscious acquisition; that was the result of providing comprehensible input in a low-anxiety situation.

Methodology

This research is approached using the qualitative method. The qualitative data is collected through an interview and heavily weighted. In the study, the researcher formulates a list of ten questions for an individual interview, does the interview, collects results, analysis, and does a narrative report. The samples are 10 Year 1 English teachers who come from five different schools. They teach English using the Standard Based Curriculum For Primary School English Syllabus. An interview is conducted on the ten teachers to get information about the implementation of Language Arts among Year One students in the English lessons. Ten questions would be asked to every individual teacher, and the results

will be recorded in a table. The results in the table will be used to do a narrative report.

Results and Discussions

What is the new component introduced in the Standard Based Curriculum For Primary School English Syllabus?

All of them were able to name Language Arts because it is some kind of innovation in teaching the English Language to primary students, and there has been a lot of talk at the national level about it. Language Arts was a very important component during those days in the old curriculum, and it was left to be forgotten since the implementation of the new curriculum in the 80s. It is all over the net about this thing called Language Arts in the English Syllabus of the new curriculum.

Have you tried Language Arts in the Classroom?

All the teachers or samples have already tried using Language Arts during their English lessons for Year One. They taught pronunciation and vocabulary using songs and rhymes. They had to find their songs and rhymes, which took much of their time, preparing their lessons.

Did you enjoy trying to teach English using Language Arts?

The ones with the certificate said that they enjoyed using Language Arts to teach English. They said that it is not too bad, except for the preparation. The one with the remedial teaching certificate also says it is not too bad.

Those with a diploma in English said that they did not enjoy using language Arts to teach English because they did not know the technical part of it or the procedure of using songs and rhymes to teach English.

The degree holders said that they did not enjoy using Language Arts to teach English pronunciation and vocabulary. They prefer to teach vocabulary during the reading lessons and pronunciation through drilling. The one with a degree in Mathematics did not enjoy at all using language Arts to teach pronunciation and vocabulary.

Why did you or did not enjoy using Language Arts to teach English Vocabulary and Pronunciation? Can you elaborate on the problems you faced during classes?

The ones with certificate said that they enjoyed using Language arts because it is history repeating for them as they fall into the veteran category that had taught English those days using Language Arts, especially using rhymes, poems, and songs to make English lessons full of fun. The only thing that they did not enjoy this time is they had to do a lot of extra hard work to look for the right songs, create teaching procedures, invent new exercises, and sing along.

The ones with the diploma and degree find using Language Arts taxing because a lot of preparation needs to be done before teaching. They do not enjoy all the hard work and singing along.

The one with a Mathematics background does not enjoy teaching English using Language Arts because she has no exposure to doing it. Singing is no problem for her, but using the songs to teach the English Language is ridiculous for her because she prefers drilling when teaching pronunciation and vocabulary. The teaching procedure is hell to her, being the typical Mathematics trained teacher.

Do you think this will be a great challenge to all English teachers?/ Will it be a continuous challenge?

All set their answers on YES! They say that it will be rather challenging to teach English using Language arts because lots and lots of preparation needs to be done before the actual lesson. Getting the right songs for the right topics will be taxing. Lesson procedures must be well prepared. Worst, students will get bored with language Arts if they have to use it most of the time.

Challenges while trying to allow the Continuity of using Language Arts as an Innovation to teach English

Teachers in-service

Teachers in service need to be retrained with the needs of the new curriculum, especially with the needs of the English syllabus. Those with certificates in teaching English have experience in teaching English using language Arts, and they can be made into trainers. The Education department must

retrace those with certificates to make them become trainers. Those with Diploma in teaching must be given full training in Language Arts. They cannot digest the lesson procedures of using language Arts because they were trained in college using the old curriculum. Some of these Diploma holders are not keen on new methods because they are so used to the old curriculum and the rigidity of it. Changing their mental attitude is another great problem because they are not flexible to innovations. Those with certificates are from the actual English background, and bringing Language Arts back into the teaching line will be not burdening them. They enjoy using Language Arts.

Those with degrees must be given full training in Language arts as they have very little exposure to language Arts. They have been trained only to use Language Arts during their Arts In Education Class when in college. In house training is merely not enough, as Language Arts will be taught throughout the primary level until year six. These degree holders only used songs in their lessons when they did their practicum during their training.

Changing the Mental Attitude of In-service Teachers

Changing the mental attitude of the in-service teachers is another challenge while allowing the continuity of Language Arts. It is not easy to change the mental attitude of in-service teachers, especially to accept language Arts, because these teachers are not prone to innovations and challenges in teaching. They always want to stick to what they have been practicing all the while. We can call them stereotypes; worst, I would call them hard cores. They always say that new trainers with innovative ideas are the “New Brooms.” Even after training is given to them, they still want to stick to their traditional way of teaching Vocabulary and Pronunciation.

Everywhere we go, we always hear that English teacher’s attitudes will never change because they believe what they do is always right. So, introducing Language Arts to this kind of teacher will be rather taxing for the Education Department and the superiors at school. The Head of the English Panitia will have problems in changing the mental attitude of these English teachers.

Getting enough Financial support to prepare teaching aids

Getting financial support for schools is truly difficult these days, especially when the very little fund is given to the schools. Small funds are given to schools by the Education Ministry, and the schools have to manage everything with such little funds. The English teachers find it difficult to look for songs and rhymes that are suitable for the topics. If the school wants to accommodate such teachers, then they have to purchase CDs, CD players, or more laptops for classroom purposes, and this will burden the school when it comes to getting enough money to buy such aids. The teachers claim that they need to download rhymes and songs from the net, and they have to use their finance to do it. They do not like doing all these because they feel burdened financially. The teachers claimed that they do not enjoy teaching English using Language Arts because they have to do the searching for rhymes and songs. If at all the schools or the education departments want to create modules and teaching aids for such schools, then again, financial problems come in. How much can a school just spend on the English Language only?

The Prevalence of the Traditional Method in Many Schools

As mentioned earlier, the in-service teachers sometimes refuse to accept innovative methods or techniques. They always want to occupy the traditional method of teaching, such as drilling. This drilling method is famous among English teachers because it is rather easy to be practiced. The teachers feel that using Language arts is a great challenge to them, and they prefer to keep running away from the challenge by just opting for the traditional method. They claimed in the interview that using language Arts is a challenge to them, but they do not want to face the challenge but take the easy way out by using drilling to teach vocabulary and pronunciation. They may use once in a while the Language Arts to teach English but not in the right procedure, as mentioned in the modules. The Education Department needs to monitor from schools to schools, and this is a great burden to the Education Officers. Not enough, they are already burdened with their unfinished work, and they have to do all these visits to make sure of

the implementation. Here again, the financial issue comes in because these officers have to travel a lot to do such monitoring.

Problems when using songs as Language Arts

It is interesting to use songs to teach vocabulary and pronunciation. The veteran teachers have made the claims in the interview that they do enjoy teaching English using songs but based on the training of those days. Their training of those days may have been during English courses but not the true appreciation of music. Worst is for trainees that have just graduated from the Teachers Training colleges because those who do TESL training have no exposure to music lessons as their major is English and minor could be in other subjects except music. So, when these English teachers teach English using songs, they do not sing the song with appreciation and body actions. They may teach the song just as a song to sing but with no body expressions. Without bodily expressions, students do not understand the meaning of the words and the use of the words in context. Again this will be a failure because we are stressing of learning a language in context, but we would fail because song is sung with no expression.

Conclusion

The researchers would like to suggest an idea for future research. First of all, it would be quite interesting to conduct similar research, but with an increased duration of study from three months to one year. The samples could be made bigger so that more teachers could be interviewed and more views could be found. Teachers should be from national schools and Chinese and Tamil Schools. The researchers suggest that besides using the suggested songs and rhymes in the module prepared by the Education Ministry, songs of famous singers could be used to teach pronunciation and vocabulary among primary school students. Researchers believe these students know more songs than the teachers at schools. They tend to sing the songs without even understanding the meaning of the songs. The teachers can get the students to get songs from the internet, sung by famous singers, and show the teachers before the students even try to sing and learn the meaning of the words.

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