

Strategies Used By ESL Learners To Derive Meaning Of Vocabulary In A Short Story

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Abstract : This study aims at identifying the strategies used by learners to derive meaning of vocabulary in one of the KBSM literature component, which is short story. The effectiveness of the strategies identified is also being looked at. Besides that, it is also to find out if the ESL learners use the five common strategies to derive meaning of words. A total of 70 Form Two students in Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Munshi Abdullah, Kulai, Johor participated in this study. The research instruments used for this study were questionnaires and a rated vocabulary exercise on a short story. The questionnaires were distributed to each respondent with the purpose of finding out the strategies used to derive meaning of words, in general readings as well as in a short story. In addition, the rated vocabulary exercise was given to them to see whether the strategies used in deriving meaning of vocabulary in a short story have been effective or otherwise. This was done by comparing the exercise scores and the strategies used. Result from the findings indicate the following: 1) The learners do use the five common strategies mentioned by most researchers in the field, 2) In deriving the meaning of vocabulary in a short story, most of the high, average and low achievers referred to the dictionary, 3) The effectiveness of the strategies used depended on the learners' language proficiency and their ability to fit in the meanings of the unknown words with the context in which these words occurred. Finally, the pedagogical implications of the findings and suggestions for future research are put forward.

Keywords : ESL learners, derive meaning of vocabulary, short story

Introduction

Since literature component has been introduced in English KBSM syllabus, many learners have found it difficult. Some of the literature component such as poem and short stories are not that easy to be understood especially when learners have limited vocabulary.

Vocabulary is actually one of the important aspects in English Language Learning and can be defined as words understood and applied by a person. Research shows that

"Vocabulary is the glue that holds stories, ideas, and content together and that it facilitates making comprehension accessible for children"

(Donohue, R.L: Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999, p. 5)

If vocabulary is not given much attention in English Language classroom, it can lead to learners having difficulty to master the content of what being read. Therefore, teachers should not expect learners to learn the words indirectly and independently.

Statement of the Problem

As mentioned in the literature component of Secondary Schools Integrated Curriculum (KBSM), learners' vocabulary is indeed important. This is because sufficient vocabulary is needed to aid learners' comprehension. In addition, it helps learners in answering respective questions in their English Language examination paper.

Given the situation, it is crucial that learners apply practical and effective strategies in order to gain adequate vocabulary. Learners should be able to make use ways that suit them in

getting the meaning of words that they encounter so that they will be able to understand the whole literary work.

Purpose of the study

Learners may have found that it is difficult to understand a literary work due to unfamiliar and foreign words that they come across. If left untreated, this might demotivate them to read the poems or short stories. Besides that, there is a possibility that learners' disability to comprehend the words leads to the decrease of learners' performance in English Language examination. Understanding words is very much crucial in literature reading but learners may have not applied the appropriate strategies to understand the words used.

Having said that, this study aims at finding out what are the strategies that learners use to derive meaning of words that they encounter in a literary work, specifically looking into a short story.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

1. to find out do the ESL learners use the five common strategies to derive meaning of words in general readings.
2. to identify the strategies used by ESL learners to derive meaning of vocabulary in a short story.
3. to examine the effectiveness of the strategies identified to derive meaning of vocabulary in a short story.

Significance of the Study

This study hopes to discover a range of strategies applied by ESL learners while they are deriving the meaning of vocabulary found in a short story. Their understanding of words would help teachers to plan the teaching techniques according to the appropriate strategies.

Moreover, it is hoped that this study provides evidence on how effective are the strategies that the learners used. Possible recommendations of using the effective strategies are made to motivate learners in literature reading and to assist them in comprehension of literary works.

Research Procedure

Prior to this research a letter of permission was submitted to the Education Planning and Research Department (EPRD) division of the Ministry of Education as well as the State Educational Department of Johor to apply for the consent to carry out the study in the chosen school. Then, the research was continued upon the approval of the proposal as well as the consent given. Before distributing the questionnaire and rated vocabulary exercise to the respondents of this study, a pilot study was carried out. Editing of questionnaire and exercise were done to improve them. Next, the research instruments were distributed to the respondents in the selected school and the findings were collected for further analysis.

Research Instrument

In order to collect data, two instruments were used, which were questionnaire and a rated vocabulary exercise.

Questionnaires are suitable to be used to obtain quantitative data for specific responses. They can be a method to collect data from small to large number of respondents with

simultaneous distributions. Moore (1987) confirms “Questionnaires are extremely flexible and can be used to gather information on almost any topic from large or small numbers of people.”

Using questionnaires saves time as it does not need a face-to-face interaction between the researcher and respondents. Thus,

“when constructing a questionnaire, one needs to pay careful attention to the wording of the questions.... Questions should not be complex and confusing, nor should they ask more than one thing at a time.”

(Nunan, 1992: 143)

This is to avoid ambiguity or uncertainty among the respondents when answering the questions. Moreover, the use of questionnaires gives respondents space and time on their own to respond. They can think rationally to choose the appropriate options. Last but not least, questionnaires need less expense and time compared to other instruments. Hence, questionnaires are cost effective.

A set of questionnaire was distributed to each respondent. The aim of using the questionnaire was to find out if the learners use the five common strategies to derive meaning of words that they encounter when reading. Besides that, another aim of using the questionnaire was to identify the strategies that learners employ to derive meaning of vocabulary found in a short story. The questionnaire was adapted from a research on L2 Vocabulary Learning Strategies by Yoshimitsu Kudo (1999) and it was designed based on Schmitt’s Vocabulary Learning Strategies (2000). This newly designed questionnaire contained YES/ No and close-ended questions. There were four parts in the questionnaire, namely: A-Learner’s Information; B- Learners’ English Language Background, C- Learners’ Strategies to Derive Meaning of Vocabulary in General Readings and D- Learners’ Strategies to Derive Meaning of Vocabulary in a Short Story.

Another research instrument used in this study was rated vocabulary exercise. The aim of the exercise was to examine whether the strategies that students used have been effective or not by comparing the exercise scores and the strategy (ies) used. The vocabulary exercise was verified beforehand by an experienced literature teacher, who has been teaching English as a Second Language for 16 years. This was to ensure its validity and relevance. Each section of the exercise was provided with an extract of a Form 1 short story and followed by vocabulary questions. In answering the exercise, the respondents were allowed to use any strategies according to their preferences, including the pre-determined ones. Exercise prepared by the English teacher was not used in this study purposely as it did not meet the objective of this study, which was to examine the effectiveness of the strategies used by students to derive meaning of vocabulary in a short story. The exercise made by the English teacher in school was not prepared specifically to test the students’ vocabulary in a short story.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of this study were Form Two students of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Munshi Abdullah, Kulai, Johor. Form Two students were chosen as samples for this study because they have the prior knowledge of short stories as they have learnt the literature component in Form One. Moreover, these samples were heterogeneous in terms of their levels of English Language proficiency and background.

High, average and low achievers were determined based on the students’ scores in the vocabulary exercise that was answered by them before they answered the questionnaires.

These 70 students were selected as sample as they met the criteria of this study. This was based on purposive sampling that is, the subjects were chosen based on the similarity in characteristics or criteria for this particular study. Nunan (1992) states that “Subjects are handpicked by the researcher on the basis of his or her estimate of their typicality.” (p.142)

Data Analysis

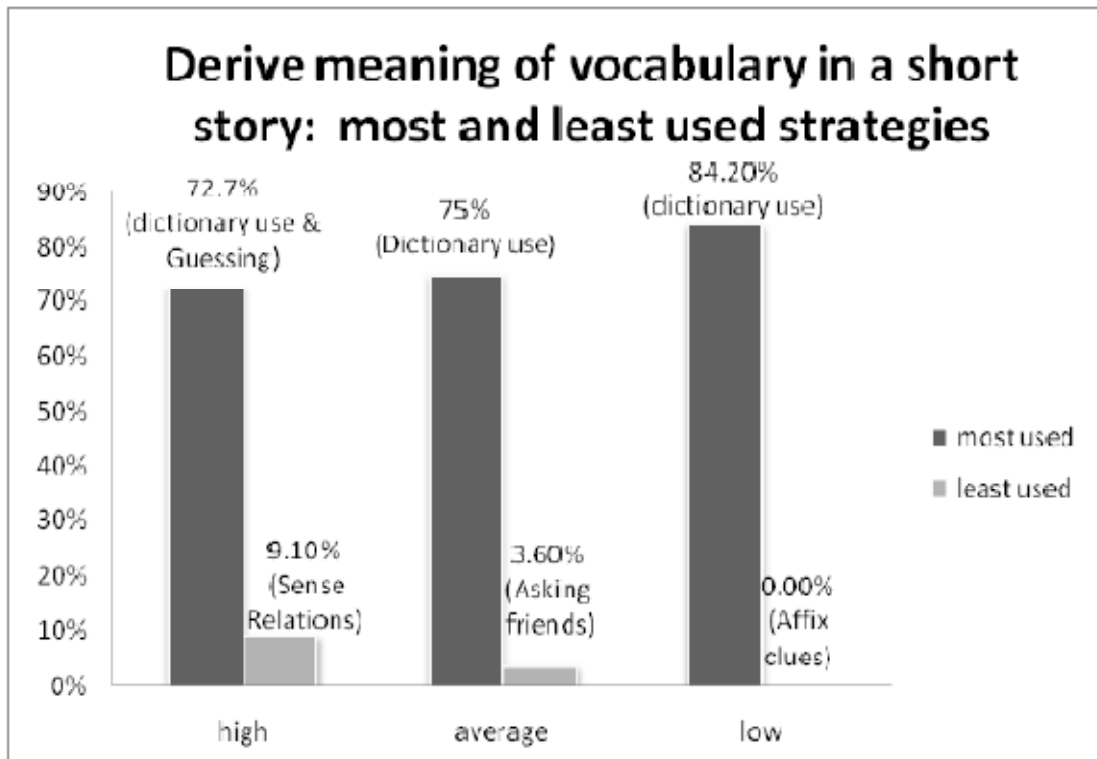


Figure 4.8: The most and least used strategies among the high, average and low achievers to derive meaning of vocabulary in short story

Overall, the research findings suggest that dictionary use was the most used strategy among the ESL learners to derive meaning of vocabulary that they came across in answering the rated vocabulary exercise, which was on a short story. Other than dictionary use, guessing strategy was also used mostly by the high achievers of the rated vocabulary exercise. In contrast, the least used strategies among the respondents were affix clues, asking friends and sense relations.

However, from the comparison made between the strategies used and the scores obtained by the respondents, it could be concluded that the effectiveness of the strategies was different for the three categories of achievers. Whether the strategies used have been effective or otherwise, it depended on the respondents’ English Language proficiency and their ability to fit in the meanings of the unknown words accurately with the context in which the unknown words occur. These two factors were drawn from the findings of this research, taking into account the respondents’ English Language background.

The findings indicate that although the most used strategy among the respondents was similar, which was dictionary use, their scores for the rated vocabulary exercise were different.

This is because the respondents' English language proficiency seemed to influence their performance in the rated vocabulary exercise. In aiding the achievers to derive meaning of vocabulary in the short story, being proficient in English Language could be an advantage. It was found that majority of the high achievers for the rated vocabulary exercise, were those who have good command of the language and scored A for their UPSR English paper. Therefore, unlike the average and low achievers, the high achievers were able to make use of the dictionary and the meanings given appropriately as they were proficient in English Language.

On the other hand, those who scored average and low marks for the exercise were mostly those who have average and low command of the language and obtained B and C for their UPSR English results. Considering the satisfactory marks obtained by the average achievers, their English Language proficiency might be one of the factors. These achievers might have the ability to make sense of the words encountered but due to less English vocabulary knowledge possessed, there might be some words that they did not know or confused with. So, they could not make the connection between the dictionary definition for the particular words and the short story context. Thus, they just accepted the literal meaning of those unknown words and this caused some inaccuracies in their answers. As for the low achievers, dictionary use strategy could be considered as ineffective for them as their level of proficiency in the language played a role here. Lack of vocabulary knowledge and understanding of the short story read disabled them to make sense of the meanings given in the dictionary. Thus, they just accepted the meaning verbatim, contrasting with the high and average achievers.

Moreover, the influence of English language proficiency on the effectiveness of the strategy could be seen in the use of guessing strategy, which was also the most employed strategy among the high achievers. Comparing their scores in the rated vocabulary exercise with guessing strategy that they employed, it could be said that this strategy was effective in aiding them to choose the correct meaning of words that fit in the sentences of the short story. This was probably because these learners have adequate schema of background knowledge in guessing the meaning of the unknown words. Being proficient learners of English Language, they were able to use the contextual clues like examples, key words, familiar words and so forth to get the suitable meaning of words. On the contrary, guessing strategy might not be effective for the average and low achievers unlike the high achievers as they lack of English Language skills. These findings agree with the statement by Gu (2003) that studies concluded that second language learners with inadequate target language skills in general, are less effective guessers and incidental English vocabulary learners and beginner in second language learning would face much trouble learning vocabulary incidentally as they do not know how to make sense of new words and their contexts.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the least used strategy should not be put aside. Based on the findings, even though sense relations strategy was among the least used strategies, it was proven to be effective in aiding the respondents to derive meaning of words in the short story. Employing this strategy enabled the respondents to get high scores for the rated vocabulary exercise. These respondents might possess a wide range of vocabulary knowledge as they were proficient in English. So that was why they were able to get the meaning of the unknown words through synonyms and antonyms. This validates the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language proficiency as mentioned by Laufer (1998) in Golkar and Yamini (2007). Vocabulary is said as correlates with holistic assessments of writing and general proficiency, and is the best single predictor of reading comprehension. Thus, having adequate knowledge of

synonyms and antonyms aided these high achievers in substituting the unknown words with suitable ones and understand the meanings.

This can be supported by the findings that majority of the average and low achievers stated that they do not like to read English stories or books. Their disinterests to read English materials might have caused them to have lack of exposures to vocabulary usage. Therefore, they were most likely to choose inaccurate meanings of vocabulary that did not fit in the context of the short story. As a result, these respondents did not score high for the rated vocabulary exercise even though most of them referred to the dictionary, similarly to the high achievers. Besides, taking into account that this research was about the vocabulary in a short story, it could be inferred that the learners tend to use the dictionary the same way as they use it to derive meaning of vocabulary in general readings. They just accepted the definitions found in the dictionary without considering the short story context. Therefore, dictionary use was ineffective for the low and average achievers unlike the high achievers.

Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the study.

First, in general readings, the learners employ the five common strategies to derive meaning of vocabulary that they encounter when reading. The strategies are affix clues, guessing, sense relation, dictionary use and translation.

Second, the most used strategy among the learners in deriving the meanings of vocabulary in a short story was referring to the dictionary. Besides, guessing strategy was also the most used strategy by the high achievers. On the contrary, the least used strategy among the learners were asking friends that falls under other strategies, sense relations and affix clues. In addition, translation strategy was also common among the learners but it was not as salient as the dictionary use and guessing.

Finally, the effectiveness of the strategies used differed among the learners with regards to their level of achievement in the rated vocabulary exercise answered.

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