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Instructional practices in enhancing sight vocabulary acquisition of ESL students with autism

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Abstract

Teaching sight vocabulary to students with autism is a challenge as these students have different needs from their nondisabled peers. This study explored teachers' instructional practices in teaching sight vocabulary to ESL students with autism in the natural classroom setting. Data collection included field notes on classroom observation and interviews of teachers. The findings of this study suggested that teachers provided support through bridging second language instructions with the students' L1 (Malay) to ease learning. Findings also indicated that teachers adjusted their level of vocabulary during instruction to promote sight vocabulary acquisition. Further, results suggested that giving the students frequent opportunities for using words as their nondisabled peers promotes sight vocabulary acquisition.

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1. Introduction

Autism is a neurological disorder marked by social, communication and language deficits (Tager Flusberg, 2004). These deficits particularly impair the cognitive ability to make sense of the world. ESL students with autism have challenges with learning language due to the impairments. In addition, ESL students are those who come from homes in which English is not the dominant language. This poses an additional barrier to these students as they have less opportunity to speak and read in the target language. This results in limited sight vocabulary. Not only do these students enter school knowing limited number of sight words than their typically developing peers; students with autism have been shown to have difficulty in following classroom discussions (O'Connor & Klein, 2005) and making inferences from text (Martin & McDonald, 2004). To promote literacy, teachers should differentiate instruction for these students to ease learning.

1.1. The learning characteristics of students with autism

Researchers have found that children with autism are generally unable to use language to communicate due to cognitive difficulties. Those with low cognitive functioning may be nonverbal or have limited speech. Some

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children with high cognitive functioning may have a wide range of vocabulary. However, they may not be able to use their knowledge of words in articulating speech. Children with cognitive and developmental disorder such as autism need explicit and systematic language instruction in order to learn language (Lerner, 2003). Instructional practices that have been found to be promising are the ones that are highly structured (Arick, Loos, Falco & Krug, 2004).

Besides having difficulties using their knowledge of words, children with autism have been found to have difficulty processing auditory stimuli. Having auditory information processing disorder may contribute to difficulty in understanding verbal commands. Too much verbal commands for instance, can be confusing to a child with autism. Therefore, it is suggested that verbal instruction be kept short to help them digest information (Scheuermann & Webber 2002).

1.1.2 The importance of sight vocabulary to students with autism

Sight vocabulary or sight words are words that are recognized at an instant (Ehri, 2005). There are a number of reasons why sight vocabulary should be emphasized at the primary level. A growing body of research suggests that sight word is beneficial in supporting different aspects of reading skills, including word recognition, phonological awareness, fluency, and reading comprehension (Riviera, Koorland & Fueyo 2002; Joshi 2006; Parette, Blum, Boeckmann & Watts 2009).

Sight vocabulary is an important component skill in reading especially to students with disabilities. Browder & Xin (1998) stated that through sight word or sight vocabulary, students with disabilities could learn functional academics such as reading a list of grocery items or identifying the time or venue in a train schedule. These are the skills that they need in order to function well in society.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted in three primary schools in Malaysia. This was a qualitative research that used case study design. The study explored teachers' instructional practices that enhanced sight vocabulary for students with autism. The research question of the study was: What do teachers in the mainstream and special education value as effective practices for enhancing sight vocabulary to ESL students with autism? Two mainstream teachers and two special education teachers were selected as participants. The selected teachers worked with students with autism. Data collection included field notes taken by the researcher during a six month period when observing the teachers and students in the classrooms. Interviews of teachers on their instructional practices during the English language lessons and document analysis were completed to provide greater depth to the main data. Data were transcribed and analyzed through constant comparison to build understanding of the subjects. Excerpts of the interview, classroom observation and document were crosschecked by three raters. The numbers of items from each of the rater were gathered and calculated to obtain the Kappa value for each rater. The mean obtained for the present study was 0.95.

3. Findings and discussion

The findings of this study suggested that teachers' use of L1 (Malay) in bridging second language (L2) instructions is effective in teaching new sight vocabulary and concepts. For example, the second teacher participant explained the benefit of this practice: "I explain and translate the meaning of the words...he can easily understand." (Interview data: 21.10.2011). This was echoed by the fourth teacher participant. She shared her thoughts regarding how she used L1 in her class to facilitate sight vocabulary acquisition: "Well, he knows lots of words in his mother tongue. I translate the words so that he can understand." (Interview data: 18.10.2011).

A related practice was described by the third teacher participant. She too, confirmed that the use of L1 helped the lesson to go on smoothly. She reasoned that if the instruction given in the target language (L2) was difficult for the student to understand, she would translate the instruction so that students knew what to do. However, she stated that she seldom use L1 in her class. She would use L1 under certain circumstances as she said:

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