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Story-based Vocabulary Teaching

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the effects of stories as contexts on vocabulary recognition and retention. We hypothesize that using stories can be much more effective than using traditional techniques. In order to test our hypothesis an experimental group and a control group were formed. The experimental group was taught vocabulary items through stories while the control group was taught the same vocabulary items through traditional techniques. The post-test and retention test verify that both groups improved in terms of vocabulary recognition and retention but the experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group.

1. Introduction

The recent studies have greatly increased our understanding of the role of vocabulary in the acquisition of a second language. Coady and Huckin (1997: 5) state that in recent years, second language vocabulary acquisition has become an increasingly interesting topic of discussion for researchers, teachers, curriculum designers, theorists, and others involved in second language teaching. That is, vocabulary teaching has begun to gain the importance that it deserves in the field of language teaching.

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"Without grammar, very little can be conveyed but without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed". This is how the linguist David Wilkins (1972: 111/112) summed up the importance of vocabulary learning. Though very little can be said with grammar, almost everything can be said with words. Thus, vocabulary teaching should be a distinct area of language teaching alongside listening, speaking, writing and reading.

In the language learning and teaching process, vocabulary has an inevitable part as mentioned above. As Thornbury (2005) says, the most important thing in teaching vocabulary is to choose the appropriate technique, method or strategy. It is commonly stated that the teaching technique or method should meet the needs of the learners and also that the learners should be active in the learning process, so as to achieve permanent learning. However, traditional methods fail in providing such efficient learning for learners as they give too much importance to translation and word-lists and neglect the actual use of vocabulary. Since the importance of vocabulary was first understood, many techniques and methods for teaching and learning vocabulary have emerged and come into use. One of these is teaching vocabulary through stories.

Stories help us to make out the sense of our world. The more stories we study, the more we realize our individuality in significant ways. Through stories, people express their values, fears, hopes, and dreams. This direct expression of a literary and cultural heritage makes storytelling appreciated and keeps it alive. In ELT, language materials should be intrinsically motivating. They should engage students, draw their attention, and be within their range of proficiency, so that they are neither bored because the materials are too familiar, nor frustrated because they are loaded with many new features, such as new vocabulary items and various unfamiliar structural patterns. That is, carefully selected stories can enhance students' motivation and offer convenient contexts to facilitate learning.

Another educative impact of stories is that learners may sit around the teacher who tells or reads a story. Bafile (2003) argues that this creates a comfortable group atmosphere. Wright (1995) believes that this changes the relationship between the teacher and learners in a positive way. Reading a story together is an interaction between the teacher and the learners with a text. This interaction truly supports second language acquisition. Besides, stories' offering the opportunity of listening to the language in context facilitates learners' inferring the meaning.

As Baker & Greene (1977: 17) maintain, "Storytelling brings heightened awareness, a sense of wonder, of mystery, of reverence for life to the listeners. This nurturing of the spirit-self comes first. It is the primary purpose of storytelling, and all other uses and effects are secondary". It is confirmed that one of the main advantages of using stories is to put the students in a varied and enjoyable context. In this way, they have a chance to learn about the world and language at the same time, as it occurs in the first language acquisition. As all people used to listen to stories told by their grandparents when they were children, story-telling can be a very effective technique Bafile (2003) argues that reading stories provide learners with an opportunity to see and hear vocabulary in a meaningful and memorable context. Stories give the learners an opportunity to infer the meanings of words that they do not know. That is, stories help students develop their vocabulary by making connections between known and unknown words. So, the story context can easily encourage students to learn new words incidentally; this is, it is an excellent way to enhance their vocabulary usage and make their learning tangible. Certain patterns and vocabulary items are frequently repeated in stories, this naturally allows learners to be exposed to the language in familiar contexts. Every single word or structure takes on another dimension in a story and is much more easily accepted as new or reviewed and learnt by the students. Therefore, storytelling as a teaching tool incorporates most of the techniques used in vocabulary teaching to make learning fun and interesting (Griva, 2007). However, the study aims to answer the following questions:

1.   Is teaching vocabulary through the story-based technique more effective than teaching vocabulary through more traditional techniques?
2.   Is this technique more effective than traditional techniques in terms of vocabulary retention?