

Verbal Dramatisation of Words: Incidental Vocabulary Learning via Readers' Theatre

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ABSTRACT

Although explicit teaching of vocabulary is often practised in language classrooms, it has been proven to be rather ineffective since words are not taught in context. This leads to the increasing use of incidental vocabulary learning approach, which emphasises on repeated readings as a source for vocabulary learning. By adopting this approach, this study aims to investigate students' ability in learning vocabulary incidentally via verbal dramatisation of written texts. In this case, readers' theatre (RT) is used as a way to allow learners to engage in active reading so as to promote vocabulary learning. A total of 160 diploma students participated in this case study and they were divided equally into two groups, namely classroom reading (CR) and reader's theatre (RT) groups. A proficiency test was first conducted to determine their vocabulary levels. Based on the test results, a story was selected as the reading material for the two groups. The CR group read the story through a normal reading lesson in class while the RT group was required to verbally dramatize the text through readers' theatre activity. Then, a post-test based on vocabulary levels was carried out and the results were compared. The findings revealed that incidental learning was more apparent in the RT group and their ability to learn words from the higher levels was noticeable through higher accuracy scores. Although not conclusive, this study has demonstrated the potential of using readers' theatre as a form of incidental vocabulary learning activity in ESL settings.

Keywords: Incidental vocabulary learning, Readers' Theatre, language learning

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Research in second language learning has indicated that repetitive reading is responsible for vocabulary learning. Repetitive reading would encourage the exposure of the vocabulary that would then enhance the word recognition (Elis, 1995; Schmidt 1993, 1995, 2001) of the target language for language learning. Apart from that, it also exposes the use of vocabulary in context so as to assist learners to get the meaning across. Indirectly learners pick up the vocabulary from the written text. This incidental vocabulary learning (Dowhower, 1989; Samuels, 1979) is best achieved when learners

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read aloud (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004; Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, & Vaughn, 2004; Santoro, Chard, Howar & Baker, 2008) story based text (Mason, 2004; McMaster, 1998; Rashidi & Ganbari Adivi, 2010). In short, repeated oral reading of story based text in particular is highly favourable in driving learners to learn the language via incidental vocabulary learning. It is deemed that Readers' Theatre (RT) would be the best way to achieve this as it certainly fulfils all the criteria mentioned above for language learning, particularly in terms incidental vocabulary learning.

2.0 PROBLEM STATEMENT

From past studies, RT has shown to give impacts towards the improvement of learners' fluency, reading motivation, reading attitude and reading comprehension. However, the impact of RT towards vocabulary learning in the language classroom has yet to be explored, albeit the pivotal role of vocabulary in oral reading has been recognised as lexical knowledge (Nataporn Srichamnong, 2009) and critical in language mastery (Schmidt, 2008).

Despite that, previous research has pointed to the significant impact of RT in terms of language learning, they are mainly focused on the impact of RT towards young children, elementary students and students with learning disabilities. Not many studies have dwelled into the possible students' educational level differences in explaining vocabulary learning via RT in the light of the second language classrooms among the university learners.

In addition, without a satisfactory account of the vocabulary learning in the higher learning institution, the impacts of incidental vocabulary learning among the university students is "bound to end up stranded in an explanatory void" (Cameron, 1997, p. 59). Studying the vocabulary learning of the university students offers empirically-driven explanations that would inform the status of syllabus planning and would assist in the syllabus planning in the future, apart from enhancing the teaching and learning experience in the classrooms. Eventually, incidental vocabulary acquisition via RT may also be applied across disciplines which is not merely confined in language learning.

Studies found that students who have poor academic performances, particularly in English language learning, is largely resulted by the fact that they lack the interest in reading. In addition, they are perceived to have poor reading habits and negative attitudes towards reading (Akabuike & Asika, 2012). The reason to this is perhaps due to the challenges they faced in explicating the meaning of vocabulary while reading. Although research has shown that oral reading and story based reading may assist vocabulary learning and comprehension, only few studies explore the impact of RT in offering rooms for students to achieve better learning of vocabulary and comprehension orally, especially for students who lack the confidence and have weak command of English.

Relevant studies in the field also inform that read-aloud narrative or story based text and repeat reading would be fundamental for incidental vocabulary learning and comprehension. Nevertheless, Jenkins, Stein and Wysocki (1984) found that vocabulary is not usually taught in the classroom nowadays even though learning vocabulary helps in the comprehension of the reading texts. They also found that more frequent presentation in context increased the learning of vocabulary. Therefore, it is hypothesised that RT can really help in vocabulary learning as compared

to classroom reading as the exposure to the vocabulary in context is repeated; and students in the RT group are deemed to acquire vocabulary better than the students in the classroom reading group who are only exposed to the text once, regardless of whether they have any prior knowledge of the vocabulary.

3.0 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study, thus, aims to investigate the use of RT (verbal dramatisation of written texts) in promoting incidental vocabulary learning as compared to conventional reading lessons in the ESL classrooms. The following research questions are proposed.

4.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the differences in the students' accuracy scores between the use of conventional reading lessons and readers' theatre?
2. To what extent readers' theatre can promote students' incidental vocabulary learning?

5.0 REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

In second language learning, research indicates that there is a strong bond between language learning and vocabulary learning. Vocabulary learning enhances vocabulary knowledge and thus enables language use for the performance of language skills such as reading and speaking by the learners (Nation & Waring, 1997).

On the other hand, learners' vocabulary learning starts from 'notice' the vocabulary (Elis, 1995; Schmidt 1993, 1995, 2001). The more exposure given to learners to 'notice' new words, the better vocabulary learning will occur. The importance of word repetition is two-fold. First, it is a favourable condition for vocabulary learning especially in a contextualised manner (Cain, 2007; Jenkins, Stein, & Wysocki, 1984) and second, it plays a very crucial role in promoting incidental vocabulary learning (Matsuoka & Hirsh, 2010). Thus, reading is accepted as a rich source for vocabulary learning. It is mainly because it provides learners the opportunity to 'notice' the words used in the different context repetitively in the reading text. It is also said that the learning of vocabulary is incidental when they read extensively as the learners learnt the vocabulary that appears in the text even though the main purpose of reading is not to learn the vocabulary (Swanborn & de Glopper, 2002).

Incidental vocabulary learning is essential particularly in tertiary education. Koda (1989) has shown that an increase in reading proficiency is strongly attributed to increase in vocabulary knowledge (in Matsuoka & Hirsh, 2010). Therefore, learners need to attain an adequate amount of

vocabulary in assisting reading comprehension (Hwang & Nation, 1995; Laufer 1991), in which it is one of the basic skills in academic settings for them to attain the world knowledge. Another research conducted by Rashidi and Ganbari Adivi (2010) also agrees with the notion that when the students get into the habit of learning words incidentally, a wide range of genre may be incorporated in maximising students' interest in reading. Apart from that, Cameron (1997) explains that vocabulary learning in the light of the second language classrooms among the university learners has been rudimentary. Without a satisfactory account of the vocabulary learning in the higher learning institution, the impact of incidental vocabulary learning among the university students is “bound to end up stranded in an explanatory void” (p. 59). Therefore, in short, vocabulary knowledge is strongly related with reading comprehension especially when the knowledge of vocabulary is acquired incidentally.

Studies have shown that, in many cases, oral reading is recognised to be more effective in terms of promoting reading comprehension and improving incidental vocabulary learning. Recent studies have established that effective read-aloud contributes to students' comprehension development (Fisher *et al.*, 2004; and Hickman *et al.*, 2004). Meanwhile, Beck *et al.* (1997) suggests that text-based discussions, as part of read-aloud, may increase vocabulary learning besides improving comprehension particularly for students who struggle with decoding skills or who are just learning to read fluently. It would seem reasonable that comprehension strategies be taught through oral language opportunities (e.g. read-aloud). In other studies, learners seem to have better incidental vocabulary learning and comprehension via oral reading when the genre of text is story based. Rashidi and GanbariAdivi (2010) reported from their study on the incidental vocabulary learning through reading short stories by high school students demonstrated positive vocabulary learning when they were engaged in extensive reading. Learners' interest grows greater when they are involved in various oral activities, such as storytelling (Mason, 2004) and dramatic play (McMaster, 1998). Results from the studies conducted by Santoro *et al.* (2008) strengthen the point that vocal reading enhances incidental vocabulary learning in assisting students to comprehend the text, narratives or story based texts. Their studies reveal that students who have gone through the read-aloud lessons are able to make longer retellings specifically on narrative texts as compared to those who did not. Besides, they also demonstrated a depth of text comprehension in their retellings and vocabulary knowledge, even though the main purpose of their readings are not learning the vocabulary. Thus, it would be true that Silent Reading, which is commonly practised in most of the classroom reading lessons might not be able to help students to achieve good comprehension as it leaves no space for them to express what they have read and understood orally (Young & Rasinski, 2009). With that said, when comprehension is challenging normal reading classrooms, it also means it would be difficult for learners to learn the vocabulary incidentally in this context too.

Hence, it is believed that utilising Readers Theatre (RT) in the reading classroom would encourage incidental vocabulary learning, and thus, promotes better comprehension as learners need to go through repeated readings (Dowhower, 1989; Samuels, 1979) which facilitates the recognition skills of the words in the context of a narrative and enables them to express their reading vocally. RT is an approach that has been extensively used in the language classrooms, especially in the ESL/EFL classrooms, and it successfully worked on young children, elementary students and students with learning disabilities.

Recent studies suggest that RT gives a great impact towards language learning in various areas. It contributes towards the improvement of learners' fluency, reading motivation, reading attitude and reading comprehension. For example, among the middle school students, Allinder *et al.* (2001) found that the comprehension scores for students (including students with learning disability) who were exposed to daily oral reading increased. Similarly, Chard *et al.* (2002) found that the reading fluency of the elementary students with learning disability significantly improved after repeated reading interventions. A lot more studies have proved the success of RT in improving the attitudes (Morris, 2011; Rees, 2005; Smith, 2011), confidence, word recognition (Rinehart, 1999), fluency (Rasinki, 2006) and motivation to read (Carrick, 2001; Rinehart, 1999). These studies have consistently shown that RT is a successful approach for language learning.

RT is able to link reading comprehension and vocabulary learning as it improves reading fluency, accuracy, automaticity, prosody which further leads to good comprehension (Rasinski, 2006). Through RT, students are able to recognise the words and pronounce it with minimal errors, and this is the first step of language learning. When students have the ability to read the words correctly, effortlessly and meaningfully via their finite cognitive resources (automaticity), they are able to perform a successful RT. On top of that, RT requires students not only merely to read their script but with the ability to render the text with appropriate expressions and phrasing (prosody). This allows the readers to reflect their understanding of the script semantically and syntactically (comprehension). Lastly, RT also helps students to become a more fluent speaker (fluency). Since the key step to language mastery would simply start from vocabulary learning, reading is accepted as a rich source for vocabulary learning in a contextualized manner; and RT is much encouraging, especially for students who lack the confidence and are of lower proficiency in English.

6.0 METHODOLOGY

The study involved 160 diploma students of various disciplines in a public university. They were divided equally into two groups – classroom reading (CR) group and Readers' Theatre (RT) group. Only those who have given their consent to participate in the study were selected for the study as the willingness of the participants were valued in order to elicit honest responses for the data collected.

A proficiency test was administered to both groups to determine their vocabulary level. The test items were adopted from Laufer and Nation (1999) database. Based on the results, a suitable story was selected as their reading material.

The CR group read the story through a normal reading lesson in class, while the RT group was required to verbally dramatise the text through readers' theatre activity. Then, a post-test based on vocabulary levels (Vocabulary Test) was carried out.

Data Collection Procedures

The procedures in collecting the data needed for this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

Tests /instruments Participants	Proficiency Test Laufer& Nation (1999) (to measure current vocabulary proficiency level)	Readers' Theater (RT)	Vocabulary Test Selected words from text by 30
Classroom Reading group (CR grp) (80 students)	✓ (before reading activity)	✖	✓ (To measure the effects of classroom reading in ESL incidental vocabulary learning)
Readers' Theatre Group(RT grp) (80 students)	✓ (before RT performances)	✓	✓ (To measure the effects of readers' theatre in ESL incidental vocabulary learning)

Figure 1 Data collection procedures

Proficiency Test

In general, Laufer and Nation (1999) have categorised words from frequently seen to least encountered into 5 categories (1K word level, 2K word level, 3K word level, 5K word level, 10k word level and academic words level).

Thus, this test adopted 10 question items for each category of word level making it a total of 50 question items from the database of Laufer and Nation (1999), <http://www.er.uqam.ca/nobel/r21270/levels/2kc.html>. Participants were requested to only complete the spelling of the word instead of filling in the blank as the main purpose of the test is to examine the participants' familiarity of the words of different levels instead of the proficiency of the language as a whole.

The results from the proficiency test for all 160 participants revealed the following accuracy percentage for each level (10 words for each level) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Accuracy percentage of each word level (N=160)

Levels	Accuracy
1K	92%
2K	66%
3K	56%
5K	35%
10K	27%

In general, the proficiency levels of the participants were largely between 1K to 3K word levels. Only a small number of them were able to identified words beyond 3K level and the accuracy was also very low. Based on this, it has provided a good indicator on the choice of texts to be used in this study.

Vocabulary Test

The most frequently encountered words in the story are to be chosen from the texts upon the majority agreement of the researchers as to enhance the common agreement of the most frequently encountered words in the story. The word form of the selected words from the story was ensured to be the same in the Vocabulary Test as a means to fulfil the criteria of contextualisation. For instance, the chosen word “pursue” is a verb in the written text, thus, its word form remained in the Vocabulary Test while constructing the question items. The amount of words or test items for the test is unlimited, majority agreed words chosen were to be taken into the Test.

Data Analysis Procedures

A frequency count on the correct items for the Vocabulary Test was conducted for both CR and RT groups. During the marking, minor spelling and grammatical mistakes are ignored as the main purpose of both tests is to gauge their familiarity of the words instead of the proficiency of their language as a whole. The total scores of the Vocabulary Test of both CR and RT groups were then compared.

Results and Discussions

Table 2 Overall performance of the two groups

Scores	CR Group (n=80)	RT Group (n=80)
Total	933	1544
Average	12.4	19.3

Table 2 shows the scores obtained by the two groups of students. For the CR group, the total score obtained is 933 with an average of 12.4 for each student. As for the RT group, the total score obtained is higher with 1544 and an average of 19.3 per student. It means that out of 30 words in the

vocabulary test, the CR group only managed to correctly use 12 words (40% accuracy) while the RT group managed to get 19 words (63% accuracy). The difference in the scores obtained by the two groups provides an initial positive outcome on the use of RT as a technique to increase vocabulary learning.

Table 3 Students' performance by Word levels

1000 word family lists	Categories	No. of words used in the test	No. of words CR group scored higher than RT group
1k-3k	High-frequency	16 words	0
4k-10k	Low-frequency	14 words	1

The 5 word levels were grouped into two main categories: high-frequency and low-frequency to allow clearer comparisons since only 30 words are used in the vocabulary test. For the high-frequency level (1k-3k words), the RT group outperformed the non-RT group in all 16 words while they only scored lower for 1 word in the low-frequency level (3k-10k).

A clearer breakdown of the scores obtained by the two groups is shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Total scores obtained by the participants for each word

Words	Scores		Differences
	CR Group	RT Group	
Shake	9	48	39
Shadows	25	42	17
Blood	57	79	22
Pointy	10	21	11
Dark	75	78	3
Midnight	53	67	14
Died	70	77	7
Frightened	44	55	11
Roared	55	77	22
Fright	12	23	11
Thundered	11	31	20
Spell	55	76	21
Tombstones	26	57	31
Graveyard	24	60	36
Haunted	71	80	9
Willies	57	70	13
Giant	12	20	8
Creaked	30	53	23
Groaned	28	63	35
Howled	9	36	27
Scared	38	27	-11
Skull	17	34	17
Shiver	42	65	23

Piercing	3	22	19
Eerie	16	66	50
Snarled	9	52	43
Skeleton	53	63	10
Quiver	13	49	36
Quake	0	33	33
Gripped	2	16	14

* Negative sign indicates CR group did better.

The RT group managed to score significantly higher for low-frequency words such as eerie, snarled and quiver. Clearly, verbal dramatisation of the words during reader's theatre actually promotes learning of words in context since most of the low-frequency words related to the similar "family" seemed to be retained by the participants in the RT group more than those in the CR group. This findings echoed the outcomes reported Schmidt (2001) and Rashidi and GanbariAdivi (2010) in which repetitive readings allow better attainments of vocabulary and reader's theatre allows a greater active reading process since the learners need to learn to verbally dramatise it as well (Rinehart, 1999). However, the word that the RT group scored lower than non-RT group is the word "scared". Thirty-eight students from CR group managed to answer the word correctly as compared to 27 students from the RT group. Interestingly, both groups scored lower than expected for the word. Upon close checking, the participants used mostly "scary" which gives a different meaning. This somehow indicates the common confusion that students have in relation to the use of the word "scary" and "scared".

7.0 CONCLUSION

Thus far, vocabulary learning has been explored using different methods. However, little research has been done on using reader's theatre for vocabulary learning in the ESL context. The findings revealed that incidental learning was more apparent in the RT group and their ability to learn words from the higher levels was noticeable through higher accuracy scores. This study has highlighted the potentials of reader's theatre to be included as part of the teaching pedagogy in order to enhance incidental vocabulary learning for beginning level students, comprehension for intermediate students and promoting language mastery for intermediate and advance level students. The results may not be conclusive since it only involved the use of a small set of words, but it provides an apparent glimpse on the usefulness of verbal dramatisation in the form of reader's theatre. It not only enables students to engage in active reading and learn new words, but also increases their motivation in learning the English language. Further research can be done by including more reading texts of different genres to check on the significance of reader's theatre in promoting incidental vocabulary learning in a contextualised manner.

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