REVOLUTIONIZING ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING THROUGH AUTHENTIC MATERIALS FOR VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

The paper studied the impact of authentic materials on the achievement of junior secondary school students in English language vocabulary. The importance of a rich vocabulary base in reading proficiency was established. Authentic materials were defined in the study as materials which were not originally created for language teaching and learning purpose but for use by speakers of the language in real life contexts. One research question and one hypothesis guided the study. The study employed a pre-test posttest quasi-experimental design. A sample of 82 JSSII students, drawn by simple random sampling technique from a school in Awka Education Zone was used for the study. Two arms of the JS II class were used and the two classes were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups respectively. The experimental group was taught three vocabulary topics which were 'advertisement', ' A visit to the doctor' and 'A journey by air' using authentic materials and the control group was taught the same topics using the class text. A teacher made Vocabulary Achievement Test (VAT) was developed by the researcher, validated by experts and used for data collection. Using the Kuder- Richardson formula (K-R 21) the reliability of the VAT was established as 0.67. The VAT was used both for pretest and posttest. Mean and standard deviation were used to analyse the data and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the hypothesis. The result showed that students taught with authentic materials performed significantly better than students taught without using the class text. Some recommendations were made.

Key Words: Authentic materials, Vocabulary, Reading Proficiency, Achievement

Introduction

Learning a language entails gaining a mastery of the four basic skills of language, which are listening, speaking, reading and writing. Reading is at the heart of the mastery of these skills because it marks the beginning of literacy. Reading is simply defined as a process of making meaning from text and because reading is a process, it involves some activities before it begins, while it is going on and after it has been done. These are referred to as pre reading, reading and post reading activities. Researchers agree that a central pre reading activity is the activation of background knowledge. A large proportion of the stored up information consists of vocabulary contained in the text at hand which the 'would-be' reader already knows. The central role of vocabulary knowledge in the activation of background knowledge has been established by several researchers like Coppola (2014), Neuman and Wright (2013). These researchers have concluded that knowledge of specific words and terms (which relate to the text at hand) is synonymous with activation of background knowledge

and so for them knowledge of words contained in the text to be read is key to comprehension.

Vocabulary is the amount of words a person can actually understand and use in a language, broadly vocabulary may be defined as knowledge of words and word meanings. In learning a language, vocabulary plays an important role. In the areas of reading and the language arts, vocabulary instruction is critical to the improvement of comprehension and written expression. It is an element that links the four skills of language; that is listening, speaking, reading and writing together. Without a sizable vocabulary, one cannot communicate effectively. This is well captured in the words of Hunt and Beglar (2005), who opine that, "The heart of language comprehension and use is the lexicon" (p. 2). So, a vital step in learning English is learning its vocabulary. This is because of the close relationship that exists between vocabulary development and the other aspects of language.

The symbiotic relationship between reading comprehension in particular and vocabulary development has however long been recognized. Stoller (2015) opines that the more extensive a reader's vocabulary is, the easier it is to acquire information offered by a text. A study of reading comprehension by Nakanishi (2014) found that background knowledge and vocabulary were the strongest predictors of comprehension and indirectly influenced whether a students would apply comprehension repair strategies when meaning breaks down. Vocabulary is also referred to as a necessary sub skill of language. Vocabulary is much more associated with reading than any other language skill. This is mainly because while words are regarded as tools for comprehending text, it is equally clear that reading with comprehension also assists in developing one's vocabulary.

With these established roles of vocabulary and empirical evidence attached to it, one might think that close attention would have been given to vocabulary instruction but vocabulary instruction still continues to be taught using the direct/explicit method. Researchers such as Nakanishi (2014) has also found out through systematic classroom observation that one feature of the direct/ explicit instruction is the over reliance on the textbook and lack of flexibility and creativity in the vocabulary lessons. Several studies have shown how textbook language differs from authentic speech and writing. For example, Antonio (2014) found that the range of language used in Spanish textbooks regarding giving advice was quite limited in comparison to what Spanish speakers actually use. Simpson-Vlach and Ellis (2015) compiled an academic phrase list from academic lectures in English and found out a wide margin between English language used in the classroom and English used in real day to day communication. Guo (2012) states that while textbooks provide valuable information to learners, students seem to have little or no interest in their text books and most language teachers are glued to their textbooks and seldom look out for other language teaching materials beside the textbooks. The continuous neglect of vocabulary instruction or the use of the explicit method when it is taught at all, have led to the continuous poor performance in English language in general and vocabulary in particular. Olunloye (2010) explains that performance in reading tests and English language examinations only continue to worsen, graduates have difficulty in reading and comprehending instructions and tasks and so illiteracy thrives among the so called literates, thus giving birth to the array of political, economic, moral and even religious backwardness of the nation and the world.

This poor performance in English Language and lack of socio economic progress all point to the need to check the methods and strategies of presenting vocabulary to students in order to curb failure in school. Very little research has been done on how achievement in English language can be improved by extending the students' exposure to English language beyond the textbooks and the teacher to English language as it is used in natural communication. Thus there exists a gap between what is taught in the classroom, real life experiences and real language use outside the classroom. In spite of the established inadequacy of the textbooks, language teachers are yet to diversify their choice of instructional materials to include authentic materials or what many authors refer to as realia.

Various definitions exist for authentic materials in language teaching. Authentic materials in the context of language teaching may be defined as materials that were not created for language learning purposes. Instead, they were created with some real-life goal for, generally, normal communication. They include both spoken and written language samples. Some obvious examples include magazine ads, movie reviews, television shows, brochures, menu, interview extract, maps, conversations between native speakers, train schedules, nutrition labels, and so on. Al Azri and Al Rashid (2014) define authentic materials in language teaching and learning as objects which contain real language produced by real speakers for a real audience and designed to convey a sort of real message.

Authentic materials can be very useful in the classroom. Zoghi, Moradiyan and Kazemi, (2014) explain that authentic materials create cultural awareness, make teaching and learning creative and interactive and create variety in the classroom. He also explains that authentic materials are up to date and demonstrate situations which learners are likely to encounter in their day to day socio cultural interaction in the language. Coppolo (2014) also in support of authenticity/realness of instructional materials argues that 'authenticity is felt to be significant because it offers learners a sense of the real world, a chance to 'rehearse' in a protected situation, hence the less authentic the materials we use, the less preparation learners will make for that real world"(p. 19). It can be implied that students exposed to authentic materials in the English language classroom will be more able to process language input in real-life situations and have a more positive attitude towards learning the language's culture. Researchers like Norafkhan (2013), and Coppolo (2014) believe that exposing learners to authentic materials is indispensable, because of the rich language input they provide. Exposing students to such language forms will enable them to cope with genuine interaction, whether it is inside or outside the classroom. Researchers claim that when authentic materials are used with the purpose of students' learning, students will have a sense that the real language for communication is being learnt, as opposed to classroom language itself. In contrast to the design of the text books, authentic materials are intrinsically more active, interesting and stimulating and really real. These authentic materials are used in place of the class text and instead of limiting the exposure of students to passages in the class text, the teacher brings in copies of newspapers, brochures, menus, schedules on the vocabulary topic to be taught. The students are thus provided with the opportunity to encounter language in actual use as well as have a variety of topics and items different from the usual class text.

The purpose of learning English language is to be able to benefit from using it in the real world, in real situations. Authentic materials have strong theoretical backing in Communicative Language Teaching method. According to Al Azri and Al Rashid

(2014) Communicative language teaching approach and its theory change the view of syllabus designers toward English subjects, from just a language to be learned like other subjects in the school, to a very important tool of communication inside and outside the classroom. Communicative language teaching takes into consideration the different functions language will be used for, situations the learner will find himself and roles the learner will be expected to perform in the real world. Al Azri and Al Rashid (2014) posit that one of the characteristics of communicative language teaching is using authentic materials to relate what happens in the classrooms to actual language use.

This study is therefore necessary to investigate ways of bringing the modern, every day society and its interaction into the classroom through the use of authentic materials in the classroom, to bridge the gap between the classroom and the society and to prepare learners to properly and effortlessly fit into the ever changing demands of English language use in the Nigerian society.

The purpose of this study therefore is to investigate the impact of authentic materials on the performance of junior secondary school students in English language vocabulary.

Research Question

What are the mean achievement scores of students taught English language vocabulary using authentic materials and those taught with the class text?

Research Hypothesis

HO: There is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of students taught vocabulary using authentic materials and those taught with the class text.

Method

The design of the study was quasi-experimental design of the pretest posttest Design. The study was conducted in Awka Education zone of Anambra State. The population consisted of all the JS2 students in the Zone. Two secondary schools from this education zone were randomly selected. Through balloting, two intact classes in the two selected schools, consisting of 82 students were used as sample. One intact JSS1 class from the two selected schools was assigned to the experimental group and the other to the control group.

The instrument for data collection was a Vocabulary Achievement Test (VAT) developed by the researcher guided by teachers of English language in the secondary schools. VAT was an objective test with 15 items. The VAT was used for the pre-test and the post test. The study lasted for one week and three lessons were taught on the topics 'advertisement', 'A visit to the doctor', 'A journey by air'. The treatment group was taught these topics using authentic materials which included travel brochures, doctors' prescriptions, drug labels, taped conversations, flight tickets, newspaper and magazine advertisements as well as radio jingles. The control group was taught the same topics using passages on the same topics in the class text.

Data was collected using the VAT as pre-test and post-test. The research question was answered using mean and standard deviation while hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance using ANCOVA.

Results

The results obtained are presented in tables 1 and 2 below

Research Question:

What are the mean achievement scores of students taught English language vocabulary using authentic materials and those taught with the class text?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Students Achievement Scores in Vocabulary Achievement Test (VAT).

Group		Pre-test		Post test		
	No	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Gain
Experimental	39	9.10	3.61	26.56	6.31	17.46
Control	43	11.86	3.82	19.01	5.73	7.15
Difference in Mean		2.76		4.73	1.42	

From Table 1, the mean in pre-test for experimental group is 9.10 while the mean in the pretest for control group is 11.86 giving the pretest mean difference of 2.76. For posttest, the mean for the experimental group is 26.56 while that of the control group is 19.01 giving a posttest mean difference of 4.73.

The gain score for the experimental and control groups are 17.46 and 7.15 respectively. This means that the students taught using authentic materials performed better than those taught with the class text.

Hypothesis 1:

There is no significant difference between the mean achievement scores of students taught vocabulary using authentic materials and those taught with the class text.

Table 2: Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) for Students' Overall Achievement Scores as Measured by Vocabulary Achievement Test (VAT).

Source	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig	Decision
Corrected Model	1023.021	2	5127.931	18.341	.000	S*
Intercept	6223.134	1	7563.084	253.328	.000	S*
Pretest	15.844	1	15.844	.610	.452	NS
Group	1003.023	1	1023.210	38.700	.000	S*
Error	5523.337	171	31.341			
Total	7988.000	82				
Corrected Total	7200.488	80				

($P < 0.05$)

The result in Table 2 shows that the calculated value of F(38.700) for the impact of real object on the achievement of junior secondary school students in English language vocabulary had an associated probability value of 0.000. since the probability value of 0.000 is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is rejected. There is a significant difference between the mean achievement scores of students taught vocabulary using authentic materials and those taught with the class text ($P < 0.05$). This means that students taught using authentic materials achieved higher than the students taught with the class text.

Discussion of Findings:

The result of this study showed that students taught vocabulary using real object performed significantly better than those taught with the class text. Authentic

materials were found to be more effective than the direct/explicit technique on students' achievement in English language vocabulary. This finding is similar to that of Norafkan (2013), Wu, et al., (2011) and Erbaggio, et al., (2010) who tested the efficacy of authentic materials in teaching other aspects of language teaching and discovered that the use of authentic materials significantly improved students' achievement in English language. This finding(s) restate the criticism against the direct/ explicit technique of vocabulary teaching which is usually teacher- centred boring, shallow and haphazardly done and more importantly, making little or no efforts to teach the students language as it is actually used in natural communicative contexts. The efficacy of authentic materials (as shown by this study) has shown that just as researchers like Guo (2012) have earlier discovered that there is an over reliance on textbooks in language classrooms and such textbooks often contain pieces of artificial dialogue and therefore the optimum performance of students in English language is not reached.

Conclusion

The study showed that authentic materials had significant impact on students' performance in English vocabulary. This implies that the strategies employed by teachers in teaching have a very significant impact on the performance of students. Authentic materials have been found to be beneficial in teaching English Language. In other words the learners who were exposed to authentic materials learned better than those who were taught with the class text. Moreover, the result of this study supports the idea of using authentic materials in order to enhance vocabulary learning. Supporters of the idea of using authentic materials regard these kinds of materials as helpful to encourage and motivate learners, arouse their interest and expose them to real language they will face in the real world. Since language learners are ambitious for native like language proficiency, it is a good idea to add authentic materials to their text books in different educational places. Based on the positive effects of authentic materials which have been confirmed by this study, it is believed that even simplified texts should be judged in terms of whether they have the natural qualities of authenticity or not.

This study showed that using authentic materials in vocabulary teaching can be an effective technique for increasing the vocabulary knowledge of the students. The most suitable authentic texts for the students should be selected. In this selection, students' level, age, gender, interests, and needs should primarily be considered. Authentic materials are used to fill the gap between the unreal situations of classes and the real world situations. So, the activities which are designed with these materials and classes should be related to real life. They should also include some communicative tasks which can be achieved by the mixture of authentic materials with communicative activities.

Recommendations

From the results of the study discussed above, the following recommendations were made

i. Teachers should be encouraged to be conscious of their teaching techniques and strategies and make deliberate efforts to vary classroom experiences presented to students. The teachers should constantly have their eyes and minds open to find items outside the classroom and beside the usual textbooks which may be useful in teaching English language.

ii. The teachers cannot give what they do not have so, frequent workshops, seminars, conferences and training should be organised for teachers on how to incorporate the communicative language teaching approach into the classroom especially the use of authentic materials .

iii. Teacher training institutions and faculties should review and update their teacher training curriculums to include the use of authentic materials in teaching not just English language but all other school subjects.

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