

Manuscript received date: 20th November 2017Manuscript acceptance date: 26th March 2018

Using Languaging In ESL Vocabulary Acquisition: The Insights of ESL Learners and Practitioner

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Abstract

This study aims to instil a sense of awareness particularly to English practitioners to realize the importance of vocabulary teaching in assisting learners to acquire vocabulary. Their awareness is important as they are the ones who deal with learners and the curriculum. Hence, besides knowing the strategies to teach literacy skills, they should also know and use the strategies in teaching vocabulary. One of the strategies is using languaging which in a way encourages learners to work cooperatively. The main objective of this study is to find out the ESL learners' perceptions about languaging as a process of acquiring vocabulary; to find out the ESL practitioners' perceptions about using languaging in the classroom; the specific research questions explored in this study are: What are the ESL learners' perceptions about acquiring vocabulary through languaging? What are the ESL practitioners' perceptions about using languaging in the classroom?

Keywords: *Vocabulary, ESL, English Language, Teaching*

Introduction

One of the factors that contribute to the deterioration of English language is lack of vocabulary. Having lack of vocabulary will hinder one to use the target language to the fullest. In most cases that appear in the newspapers regarding graduates are unable to speak during job interviews, the reasons fall back to lack of vocabulary and poor command of English language. Sometimes, one has the ideas at the back of their mind, but it cannot be delivered due to the

number of vocabulary that is lacking and difficult for him/her to voice out what they have in mind. Acquiring vocabulary is not easy as it may take time for one to have enough number of vocabulary and use them properly. Hence, knowing the right way to acquire vocabulary may help.

Vocabulary is an important component of language proficiency that provides the basis for the ability of one in speaking, listening, reading and

writing. It is important as it comprises all the words one must know to access background knowledge, express ideas and communicate effectively, and learn about new concepts (Sedita, 2005). Nation (1990) adds that vocabulary knowledge enables language use, language use enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge, knowledge of the world enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge and language use and so on. Mehta (2009) in his article also mentions that vocabulary is the first and foremost important step in language acquisition. The importance of vocabulary has been highlighted by many researchers to show that vocabulary is essential for language learners. Smith (1969) mentioned that a structure without a vocabulary is not a language. This shows that vocabulary is vital to language and it is significant to language learners.

However, the teaching of vocabulary is often neglected in the teaching and learning of English language and it suffered significant neglect during the 1950s and 1960s (Nunan, 1991). Vocabulary was often given little priority in language programmes and received only incidental attention in textbooks and language programmes (Hedge, 2008). According to Elly & Mangubhai (1981) many language teachers think that vocabulary can be left on its own and does not need to be taught. French (1983) believes that vocabulary has been neglected in the past due to several reasons such as 1) there was a belief saying that grammar should be emphasized more than vocabulary, 2) methodology specialists believed that students would make mistakes in sentence construction if too many words were learned before basic grammar has been mastered, and 3) there was a belief saying that word meanings can be learned through experience and cannot be taught in the classroom.

It was found that there are strong reasons for vocabulary teaching and learning with systematic and principled approach. In other words, vocabulary does take place in language classrooms. Nation (1990) mentions that giving

Literature Review

The term languaging was initiated by Swain (2006) and it is defined as the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language. It is also a form of verbalization used to mediate the solutions to complex problems and tasks (Swain et al 2009). In other words, languaging is how we regulate our social, emotional and cognitive behaviour as well as that

attention to vocabulary is unavoidable, which means vocabulary is essential for language learners in order for them to be able to listen, speak, read and write. This is supported by Smith (1969) when he says, a person who knows a word, though not the best order in which to arrange them will usually succeed better in communicating than a person who knows the word order but does not know the word. Rivers (1983 in Nunan, 2000) also argued that acquiring an adequate vocabulary is essential for successful second language use because one is unable to use the structures and functions that have been learned for comprehensible communication without vast vocabulary.

This study also aims to instil a sense of awareness particularly to English practitioners to realize the importance of vocabulary teaching in assisting learners to acquire vocabulary. Their awareness is important as they are the ones who deal with learners and the curriculum. Hence, besides knowing the strategies to teach literacy skills, they should also know and use the strategies in teaching vocabulary. One of the strategies is using languaging which in a way encourages learners to work cooperatively.

The main objective of this study is:

1. To find out the ESL learners' perceptions about languaging as a process of acquiring vocabulary.
2. To find out the ESL practitioners' perceptions about using languaging in the classroom.

The specific research questions explored in this study are:

1. What are the ESL learners' perceptions about acquiring vocabulary through languaging?
2. What are the ESL practitioners' perceptions about using languaging in the classroom?

of others. It transforms our thoughts into a shareable resource, shareable with ourselves and others. Swain emphasizes that languaging is part of second language learning process and collaborative settings are most suitable, but it can also be observed in settings where individuals are alone. In undergoing the process of languaging, learners go through the use of language and

purposely organise and control their mental processes during the performance of cognitively complex tasks, discover meanings and connections that were unknown to them prior the act of languaging. Languaging is similar to private speech or collaborative dialogue, or in other words, the speech to oneself as one regulates mental functions (Knouzi, Swain, Lapkin & Brooks 2010).

Languaging emerged from Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Mind in which Vygotsky (1987) argued that language is one of the most important mediating tools of the mind that mediates our thinking or cognition. As for languaging, it is the use of language to mediate cognitively complex acts of thinking. It is the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language. In other words, languaging completes our thoughts/cognition/ideas and transforms them into artefacts that allow for further contemplation, which, in turn, transform thought (Swain et al 2009).

Swain has conducted many researches and most of them indicated that students who engage in more "languaging" learn more than those who engage in less "languaging". The research covers many knowledge domains for example biology, mathematics and language.

Many studies on languaging have been conducted in language classrooms but majority of them focus on grammar. In one of the studies, Swain examined and analysed the amount and type of languaging produced by a small group of university students learning the grammatical

concept of voice (active, passive and middle) in French. It was found out most learners understood the grammatical target

concept better through languaging. In fact the high languagers (learners who language more) performed better by achieving a higher level of accuracy in the post-tests and also a deeper level of understanding of voice demonstrated by their ability to provide detailed explanations of the test answers. It was also discovered learners who used a balance of languaging types (paraphrasing, inferencing, analysis, self-assessment and rereading) performed better than learners who depended merely on one languaging type in terms of languaging quality This finding suggests that languaging is a key component in the internalization process of second language grammatical concepts.

Another study conducted by Knouzi, Swain, Lapkin & Brooks (2010) aims to identify what good learners do that contributes to their learning of new concepts. The researchers carried out micro genetic analysis of the languaging performance of a high language and a low language. These respondents were actually two of the nine university learners learning French as a second language from the previous study conducted. The rationale of conducting such study is most literature about the positive effect of languaging has not determined why some learners benefit from languaging more than others. Based on the finding, it was suggested that languaging is a self-scaffolding tool that high languagers used efficiently to solve cognitive conflicts, mediate mental processes and construct meaning in general.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative research method which involve interviews with a lecturer and students. The selection of participants in this study was based on purposeful sampling in which the researcher intentionally selects individuals who can best help to understand the phenomenon (Creswell 2008). In order to help the researcher to gain abundant data for this study an English language instructor and a group of 49 Malaysian ESL learners in one of the higher institutions in Malaysia were selected as the subjects of this study. These learners were of the intermediate level of English proficiency. All of them were Bumiputra and they came for every part of

Malaysia. They have sat for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) and obtained Band 3. They were doing their first-year degree in this institution when this study was carried out. As for the lecturer only one is involved as she was the one who teaches the group of respondents.

The research instrument used in this study was semi-structured interviews. Open-ended questions were so that the respondents could voice out their opinions, experiences without any constraint. In the interview, the respondents were asked about their perceptions on acquiring vocabulary through languaging, what they like and dislike about languaging and would they

recommend using languaging to acquire new vocabulary to their friends. The interviews conducted, it will be recorded, transcribed,

analysed, gathered and categorized according to themes using Atlas ti (Version 7).

Results and Discussion

Figure 1 illustrates the learners' perceptions on languaging activities. Based on the results gathered, the respondents have given various responses. All the responses received have been categorized into two – improvement and positive feelings.

Among the responses are languaging has helped them to improve their vocabulary in which they can see that they have improved their amount of vocabulary as they have learned many new words throughout the languaging sessions. The respondents also claimed that they have improved their grammar. This is possible as they were exposed to a lot of English use throughout the sessions. In terms of writing skills, speaking skills, listening skills, reading skills, the respondents also claimed that they have improved these skills as they have done the languaging sessions. Again, this probably due to the effect of learning new vocabulary as they were able to use the words in their essay writing, listening and speaking and understanding the text they read. In terms of improvement in pronunciation, this is due to the collaborative work that they have done throughout the sessions with their partner. During the discussions they have learned to pronounce words correctly and thus, helped them to improve their pronunciation. The respondents claimed that overall their level of English has improved compared to before they went through languaging.

Their responses have been categorized into another category – positive feeling towards languaging. Many of them labelled languaging activities as fun in which they have stress-free time with their partner to complete the languaging task. Stress-free as they do not have to worry of making mistakes because what matters was how they get to the answers. Interesting is another positive feeling towards languaging. Many of them claimed it interesting due to the reason that learning vocabulary via languaging is different from the conventional way. During languaging activities, they were able to discuss unlike the conventional way where they are supposed to complete the vocabulary activities individually. In a way languaging activities also make them feel comfortable as they claimed. This is due to the

reason that since they are stress-free, they are able to work comfortably. Being able to work in pairs enables them to collaborate with their partner. Two heads work better than one seems true in context and indirectly they perform better than working individually. Lastly, languaging makes them confident language learners. After all the improvement that they have obtained, they become more confident to use the target language.

Figure 2 illustrates the instructor's perceptions on languaging activities. Based on the results gained, they can be categorised into three – positive feelings, improvement and benefits.

According to the instructor who conducted the languaging activities from the beginning to the end and witnessed the students' progress, the whole languaging were able to make the vocabulary acquisition process enjoyable. Learners were never bored in class and they always look forward for the languaging activities. Through this kind of learning environment, it can create positive vibes and thus bring a lot of benefits.

Besides that, the instructor also saw the learners' improvement in vocabulary acquisition as they have gone through the languaging activities. They have learned many new words. Some are words that they might have not known before but after they have done the languaging activities, they learn and acquire the new words and hopefully they can use those words in the future. Not only that. The learners have also improved their communication skills. This can be seen during the languaging activities where they worked in pairs and they had to communicate with each other. Throughout the activities, it can be seen the way they communicate gets better and it was a bonus that most of the learners used full English language all the way.

Another perceptions of the instructor is in terms of benefits. Based on the data, the instructor believed that the languaging activities have given many benefits for example, they are useful to the learners. It helps to not only improve their vocabulary but also their level of English as a whole. In terms of cooperation, the languaging activities have helped in promoting this and the

learners cooperated well with their partners. Lastly, through the languaging activities, learners can also relate to other things in their life. The

activities helped them to discover many other things unrelated to language learning. This in a way, widen their knowledge in many areas.

Conclusion

From the responses, it can be said that languaging has received positive responses from the respondents as well as the instructor. Languaging is different from the conventional way of vocabulary teaching in which it promotes stress-

free learning environment and able to provide many advantages to the learners. Based on the benefits mentioned by both learners and instructor, languaging should be employed in the ESL classrooms.

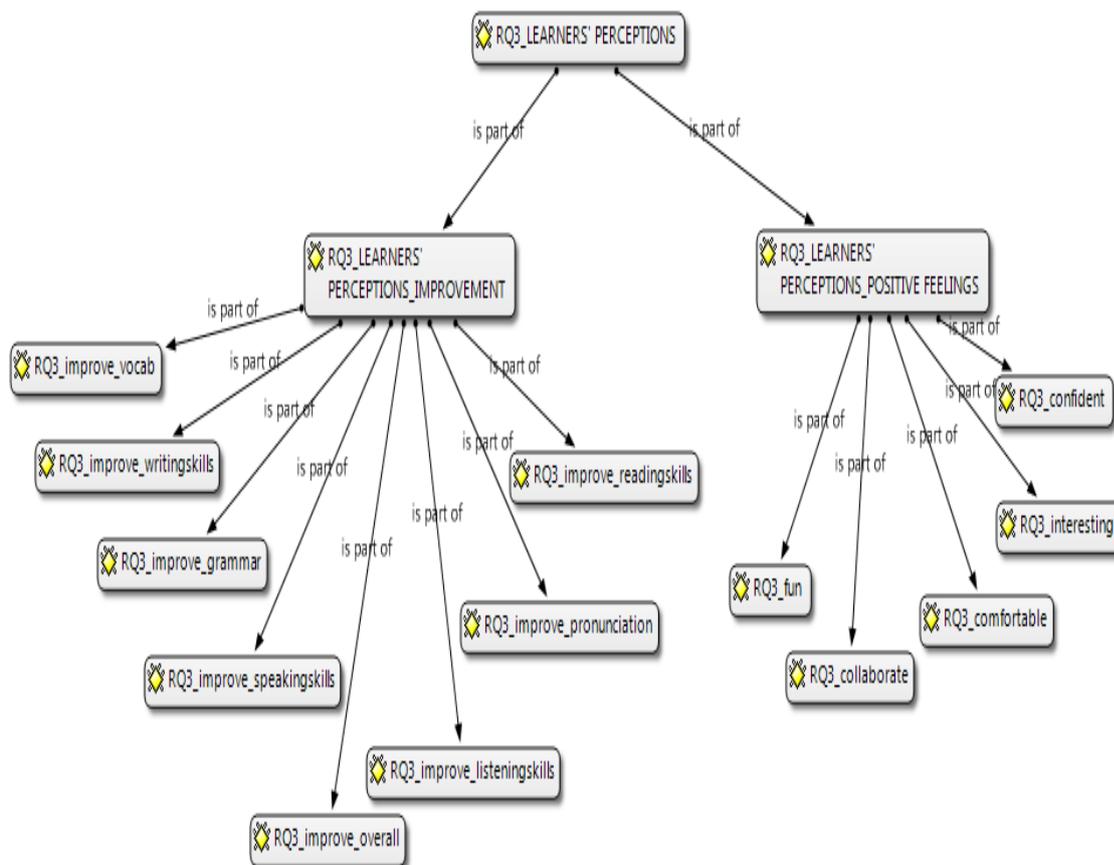


Figure 1: Learner’s Perceptions on Languaging

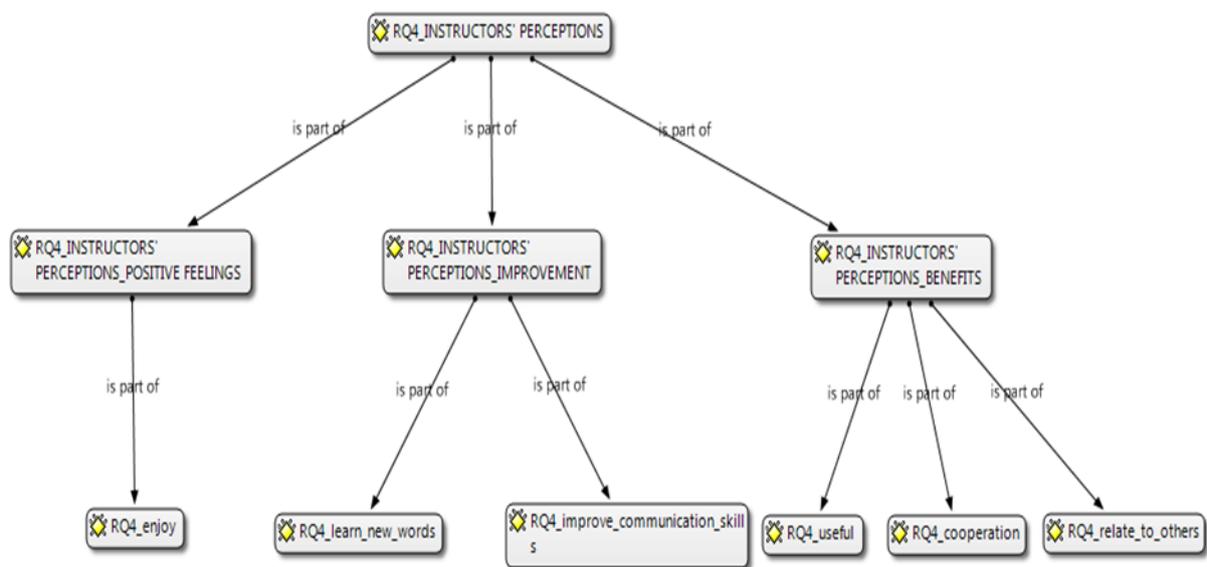


Figure 2 : Instructor’s Perceptions on Languageing

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