

Using Songs To Support Vocabulary Learning For Grade Four Pupils

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Abstract: Over the recent years the teaching of foreign language vocabulary has been the subject of much discussion and arguments, and a number of research and methodology books on such topic have emerged, as it is the case for example with Nation 2001 and Schmitt 2000. For a long time grammar seemed to have attracted more attention, but this renewed interest in vocabulary, reflects the belief that it is becoming a major component in knowing a language, and as some recent scholars would admit, even more important than grammar already. In addition to the various strategies used to promote vocabulary learning in the classroom environment, songs are widely being used nowadays as a powerful tool, in teaching new vocabulary to early grades pupils. Throughout our teaching of young learners, we have noticed that they are amazingly captured by songs, and they always enjoy listening to them. This might be one of the main reasons why songs have now become one of the cornerstones, in the demanding and challenging process of teaching children. The purpose of this research paper is to find out as to what extent and how the use of songs may support new vocabulary learning for grade four pupils in Oman, and how much it actually helps these young learners in developing their vocabulary learning habits.

Index Terms: Active and Passive Vocabulary, Memorization of Long Word Strings, Short Piece of Music, Songs Enhance the Learning Process.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching and consequently the learning of new vocabulary is certainly a challenging process for both pupils and teachers, which requires lots of efforts from both sides, in order to be able for teachers to transmit that knowledge, and as a result, for pupils to absorb that knowledge. As such, McCarthy (1990) argues that vocabulary is the biggest component of any language course. This is certainly the case in the new Basic Education English language curriculum in Oman, as well as in all other parts of the world, where a dominant place and great emphasis is placed onto the use of songs in order to introduce, consolidate and recycle such great bulk of vocabulary. Songs play a very important role in motivating and developing young learners' abilities in reading, writing, listening and speaking, as well as in providing them with the opportunities to develop a better understanding of the pronunciation, rhythm, grammar and vocabulary (Lo & Li 1998). Therefore it is found true, and we have also noticed during our teaching experience that songs serve as a very fine and natural language tool, to teach children by means of what they like best – singing, moving, enjoying being and doing what the age itself allows them to. Also, Orlova (1997) discusses some other benefits of songs in language learning. Firstly, they may encourage learners to use English language and this might be one of the most common challenges for a non-English speaking community, and secondly, listening to songs helps students to recognize words and meanings much more easily. Finally, songs help learners develop a very positive attitude towards language acquisition, and serve as both a smooth and natural tool.

2. HYPOTHESIS AND DEFINITION OF SPECIFIC TERMS

Using songs in the classroom actually helps and supports Grade 4 students, to learn the new vocabulary more effectively. "Song" in the context of this research article, is referred to that short piece of music with words for singing, recorded on a tape and presented in the units of the Basic Education Course Book, "English For Me", Grade 4, or any other equivalent Course Book in any other parts of the world. Grade 4 students in the context of this study paper, refers to the children in the first cycle of the Basic Education school system, within the Sultanate of Oman. They have been studying English for four years, up to this point. For children of this age, motivation and interest are of key consideration in the learning process. It is also used throughout this research

article to refer to Grade 4 pupils from the General Education School. "Vocabulary" in this context, is both the active and passive vocabulary targeted in the assigned syllabus. It must be noted that the main emphasis here will not be upon the spelling (written form), but rather, on the object or idea that the word refers to. The term "teacher" here refers to the person in charge of teaching the target groups, in a target country, or any other concerned teacher.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Hatch and Brown (1995) argue that vocabulary is the list of words that speakers of a particular language use. Words within this context does not only mean single items, like for example the word "dog", but also a string of words which altogether form one whole lexical item, as in the case of idioms, such as: "keep someone on his toe", or common expressions, such as: "once upon a time". There is much arguments and discussions in the literature as on what it means to know a word (Nation 2001, Cameron 2001, and Ur 1996). The three main aspects of forming one's vocabulary are: the written form (spelling), the spoken form (pronunciation) and word parts (e.g. prefixes and suffixes). Knowing the meaning of a word means knowing the different objects or ideas it refers to, in addition to recognizing what other words are associated with it. There are several types of meaning relationships of this type:

- Antonyms: words that have the opposite meaning, e.g. (tall and short).
- Synonyms: words with the same meaning, e.g. (tall and long).
- Subordinates: general concepts that cover specific words, e.g. (color: black, blue).
- Hyponyms: the words that represent the specific examples of general concepts, e.g. (orange and apples are hyponyms of fruit).

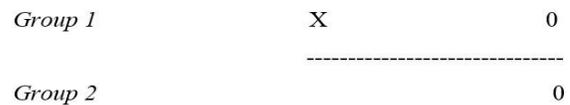
Knowing the right use of what the words means, is to know the grammatical patterns it occurs in, to know what other words it occurs with, and finally, to know which contexts the word is used in. A great bulk of the literature is also devoted to the different strategies teachers can use to help and support learners develop their vocabulary knowledge (Gairns & Redman 1986; Schmitt & McCarthy 1997). Some of the strategies used for introducing new vocabulary are: using

realia and pictures; showing the meaning of the new words in mimes or gestures; providing the learners with either the synonyms or antonyms of the word; developing guessing strategies and using songs. This article is concerned with using songs particularly with young learners, because we strongly believe that pupils excel in using this strategy as compared with other strategies, and also because this strategy supports and promotes their building and learning the vocabulary. The role of songs in learning vocabulary has widely been argued and discussed by many different writers, such as Orlova 1997, Murphey 1992 and Philips 1993. Vocabulary can be learned explicitly through different ways, such as through direct instructions, explanations, as well as incidentally, i.e. through certain contexts, without being conscious of the acquisition process itself (Schmitt2000). Songs provide the learners with such indirect and implicit opportunities for vocabulary learning. Moreover, songs expose learners to chunks of language by giving them the chance to memorize and use them repeatedly. Such repetitions, as Nation (1990) believes, contribute to the language learning, since it helps learners remember words and many of the lexical multi-word items that they need to know. Songs can thus be an effective method of helping children learn lexical patterns, which will be stored in their minds and can be naturally recalled during their oral communication (Murphey 1992). That is to say in some way, that songs support and promote the development of automaticity, which in turn means the ability to use the language naturally without much conscious effort. This as Schoepp (2001) believes, is the main cognitive reason for using songs in L2 learning process. Slattery and Willis (2001) think that using songs can encourage young learners repeat words and phrases spontaneously, even if they do not initially understand them. Anyhow, using pictures and actions by accompanying them with songs, can help children develop a better understanding of the target vocabulary, if the meaning is not immediately clear. This will increase their chances of smoothly learning the new targeted vocabulary in the best natural way possible, which is also fun for them.

4. METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

4.1 Research Method

We totally agree with Mouly (1970), when he states that "social phenomena are as subject to scientific investigation and determination as are the phenomena of the physical world", but yet we have to stress the importance of considering the human aspects and the rights of the participants as human beings. Since the variables cannot so readily be isolated, and because learners' behavior and outcomes are relatively unpredictable, it is really difficult to carry out a true experiment inside the classroom. Therefore, we shall implement a method approaching a true experimental design, named: the quasi-experimental method. It is what Campbell and Stanely (1963) refer to as the "who and to whom is the measurement" but lacks control over "the when and to whom is exposed" and also the randomization of exposures is essential, if true experimentation is to take place. We will use 'the posttest-only design' with non-equivalent groups, which can be diagrammatically depicted in the following way:



By Group1 we refer to those who stand for the "Basic Education, Grade 4" and by Group 2 we refer to those who stand for the "General Education Grade 4". 'X' refers to the experimental treatment, and specifically in this context, to the "teaching the assigned words, using songs", and '0' refers to the measurement of the dependent variable, or more specifically in this case to the "vocabulary tested to be administrated on the two groups". The dashed line separating the parallel rows in the diagram, indicates that the experimental and control groups have not been equated by randomization.

5. DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

5.1 Sampling and participants

Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) believe that the quality of a piece of research is not only affected by the appropriateness of methodology and instrumentation, but also by the suitability of the sampling strategy that has been adopted. Gay (1992) defines sampling as "The process of selecting a number of individuals for a study in such a way that the individuals represent the larger group from which they are selected ". The target population of this study is children or young learners in Grade four in two Basic Education schools, from the Al-Sharqiya Region. There will be two groups: Group 1 - a class of 30 pupils; and Group 2 - another class of 30 pupils. Group 1 will study the target vocabulary, through four songs presented already in Grade 4 Course Book: the family chants, the red robots, the circus song, and four little dinosaurs. Group 2, will study the same target vocabulary just through reading the texts without songs. The intention here is not to use random sampling, as we believe that it would be unethical and depriving pupils of the Basic Education classes from being taught through songs. Therefore, we shall use a purposive sampling, i.e. getting Group 2 from General Education class that already does not study via songs. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) argue that in purposive sampling, researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample, on the basis of their judgment of their typicality and their satisfaction of their specific needs.

6. INSTRUMENTATION

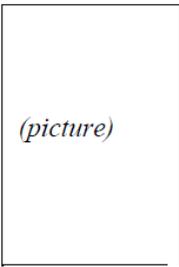
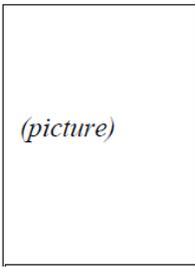
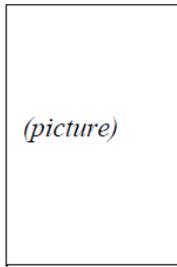
Two short tests would be administrated to test the participant vocabulary knowledge. One of the two mentioned tests would be administrated immediately after the two groups finished studying the target vocabulary, and the other one will be administrated one month later, in order to decide on the effectiveness of knowing the vocabulary in the long run. The following table shows which group studies using songs and which does not, followed by examples of the two assigned tests:

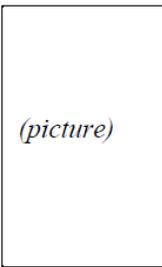
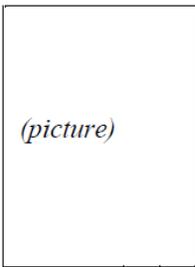
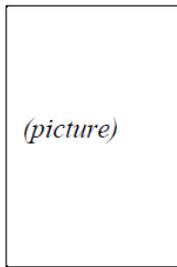
Table 1: Vocabulary activities for group1 and group 2

Text	the family chants		the red robots		the circus song		four little dinosaurs	
Group	With songs	Without songs	With songs	Without songs	With songs	Without songs	With songs	Without songs
1	/		/		/		/	
2		/		/		/		/

6.1 Short Vocabulary Test

Write words from the list under the suitable picture.

A.  B.  C. 

D.  E.  F. 

Words
1-
2-
3-
4-
5-
6-
7-

(An example of the test to be administrated onto the two groups)

It must be noted that the tests used to measure the pupil's vocabulary knowledge, are similar to the kind of activities they are familiar with in their course books. Pupils read the vocabulary and match numbers with the corresponding picture. The two tests would be marked out of ten but interpreted in percentages, and then we will depend mainly on comparing the mean score of the two groups, in order to decide on as which group performed better, whether it is gender based or hearing the song helps more to achieve better results.

7. RELIABILITY OF MEASUREMENT

Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) define reliability as "a synonym for consistency and reliability over time, over instruments and over group of respondents. It is concerned with precision and accuracy". It is clear from this definition that reliability refers to the consistency and stability of measure. A test is considered reliable if we get the same results repeatedly, e.g. if we administer a test to the same group of examinees on successive days, with no intervening

instructions in the area tested, and then each time the results or the examinee scores should be approximately the same or close to the same scores on both administrations. William (2006), claims that it is not possible to calculate reliability exactly, but instead, we have to estimate it. We tried as hard as possible to consider the reliability quality of the assigned tests: the pupils are familiar with the test items, and we think that the tests are neither too easy nor too challenging. Therefore, we hope that these tests will not be contaminated by any other unexpected reliability threat.

8. VALIDITY OF MEASUREMENT

Anastasi and Urbina (1997) define validity as "the degree to which the test actually measures what it supports to measure." An effective test will ensure adequate face, content and construct validity. I think that the major threat to my measure validity is the selection of the groups. Because the two groups are not randomly constructed, there may be differences between the groups, which could influence the final results, i.e. the first group which belongs to the Basic education system,

may excel the second group belonging to the General education system in their vocabulary power, due to the fact that the Basic education curriculums are more challenging and demanding than the General education ones. Anyhow, this is just an expectation that could be confirmed or denied only after administering the tests and analyzing the final results and outcomes, which may always be surprising for various reasons.

9. DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

This research article was carried out by the end of the first semester. We first started by submitting the permission application letter to the two target schools' administrations and by informing the participants' parents of the nature of this research paper, in order to obtain somehow ethics clearance. This step took us the first two weeks of September. Then we got the list of all the participants from both the Basic Education School and the General one, by the end of the same month. During the next two months: October and November, the children with the help of their teachers, who were informed and consulted in advance about this research paper, started studying the target vocabulary either in isolated contexts as the second group, or by using songs as it is the case with the first group. Immediately after finishing the course on 15th December, the first assigned test was administrated, and then on 15th of January the second test was taken. On comparing the mean of the scores on both tests for the two groups, we could get a good indicator of their vocabulary learning and the respective percentages.

10. LIMITATIONS

We think that this paper may lack the controls required to make claims about the causes of its final results and findings. Songs might not be the only reasons affecting the participant performance on the tests. In the four weeks between the first and second test, learners may have had many experiences that may have affected their performance on the second test. Also the fact that the immediate tests and the test to be taken within four weeks do not have the same effects on the final results in some way or another. However, we would carry on conducting this research, by simply keeping these fears in mind, when analyzing the final results.

11. ETHICAL ISSUES

Cavan (1977) defines ethics as "a matter of principled sensitivity to the rights of others ". He argues that the respect of human dignity and nature is more important than the pursuit of truth, even if, in the extreme case, such respect leaves one ignorant of human nature. Crotty and Michael (1995) indicate that there are two definitions of ethics, one of which relates to the morality, the right and wrong of certain behaviors, and the other one refers to 'the rules of conduct', recognized in respect of a particular class of human actions, or better say to the 'proper' ways of behaving among members of a profession or other group-glorified etiquettes. We really agree with both Fraenkel and Wallen (1990), who summarize the whole issue in one whole question when they claim that the basic ethical question for all researchers to take into consideration is: "Will any physical or psychological harm come to anyone as a result of my research?" Such an example is when such harm could be embodied in the betrayal of confidentiality, by making secret information available to others. While dealing with children, there are certain ethical aspects to be considered

with our educational research. We should take into account the effects this paper has on the participants, by ensuring that it would not cause them or their families any harm. That is why this whole process of this research would have not started unless we received a letter of approval from both the administration of the school and the participants' parents. Moreover, we intend to discuss this issue with the target children themselves. The main reason standing beyond choosing the second group of pupils from a General school is also an ethical one. If we chose pupils from the basic school only, it would have deprived them from being taught through songs, even though as a matter of fact, as stated in the Basic education curriculum, pupils should be exposed to songs.

12. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH PAPER

This research paper is an attempt to find out to what extent using songs could support and promote learning new vocabulary for children. It depended mainly on two Grade 4 classes of 30 pupils, in basic and general schools in Oman. If the research paper hypothesis related to using songs, in helping children to learn vocabulary more effectively proves to be true, then that in turn would encourage teachers to pay much more attention to their teaching, by incorporating songs with the proper methodology. This may also draw the attention of those stakeholders who are concerned with enclosing songs within the general education curriculums, in order to help young learners learn new vocabulary, instead of simply exposing them to such vocabulary in some kind of isolated contexts.

12.1 Relevance of Research Paper to Education

This research paper discusses the effectiveness of using songs with children, which seems to be so very important and a relevant issue in the contemporary teaching field. To a great extent, teaching children is different from teaching adults, because they are in desperate need for fun, interest and motivation. Songs are one of those ways that could fulfill the world of children needs and requirements. This paper is just a very simple exploration of a certain aspect within the pupils' teaching area, attempting to enhance and reinforce the learning power of young learners with new vocabulary.

13. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The tests carried out in class showed results that revealed some slight gender-based differences among its participants, even though it must be said that overall, they were not too different from each-other, especially after completing the whole procedure as specified earlier on the second test. Anyway, more specifically the findings were as follows: the language vocabulary accuracy from the baseline averages for both girls and boys, revealed slightly higher language vocabulary accuracy among girls. Subsequent test results from both groups 1 and 2 revealed that the vocabulary of language items listed was more accurate, generally, for those learners who heard the song. However, more specifically speaking, girls overall recalled language vocabulary slightly more accurately at about 65%, than boys at about 60%, on both types of the activities chosen for them. In both Test 1 and 2, boys scored overall lower than girls on remembering the vocabulary item order. Group 2 remembered the vocabulary of language items more accurately overall, in both Test 1 at about 71%, and Test 2 at about 75%. Group 1 accuracy averages were moderately lower than Groups 2 in Test 1,

which was at about 60% and even lower in Test 2, which was at about 50%. A closer examination revealed that Group 2 girls generally recalled language vocabulary more frequently and accurately, than Group 1 and 2 boys, and the Group 1 of girls, although Group 2 boys outshone them on the next test with about 80 %. In light of all the above findings on both groups and schools administered, on both tests, we may say that songs do help Grade 4 pupils significantly in developing their vocabulary. For such young learners learning a new language may be rather an intimidating process. Therefore, music being so enriching for many cultures in most countries, can be something that the pupils learn and can relate to. Songs can appeal to their creative minds and pupils who are shy or might have learning problems. These kinds of pupils may find some relation to songs, and therefore make songs a great way to get all the pupils in class involved. Songs may be considered also a source of authentic materials, and by using authentic materials the teacher relates to the pupils' interests. Another very important aspect of using songs in class is the establishment of important language components, like that of vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, which may be easily introduced through the use of song. Another valuable reason for using songs in class is that they provide security for the youngest learners, when they are in unfamiliar situations, as well as while learning the vocabulary of a new language. When the teacher also helps the pupils to make up their own lyrics and songs, that same teacher has the ability to control the language component that he or she is focusing on developing. Grade 4 learners need a lot of action, which in turn means, it is effective to include movement while making teaching materials for that same age group. Repetition is also another important element involved in this process, in order for the teacher to 'manipulate' the chorus of the songs, and make it focus on the specific topic or language vocabulary component he/she wishes. Also by dealing in that way, the teacher makes sure to repeat the same specific vocabulary throughout the song, in order to help the students remember that specific new vocabulary or any other language aspect he needs to teach. By using songs in classroom, children will remarkably increase their vocabulary knowledge of lexical items and other multi-word structures. Such multi-word structures may as well include a range of sociolinguistic situations, appropriate to their age and needs of the pupils, like for example: greetings, leave-takings, requests and any language items necessary for basic classroom functions, and routines. Other final relevant reasons for using songs, are that they represent an improvement in the pupils' English speech rhythms, intonation and pronunciation; help in pupils' memorization of longer word strings to be facilitated; more specifically, songs and rhythm may also work for grammar and other language activities, as well as allow for fun and creative uses of classroom time outside the specific time allotted for "English". Thus, using songs with young learners gives teachers more opportunity and time for realistic classroom teaching, and allows better and much varied opportunities for the pupils, to practice the new vocabulary or learn any other relevant new language skills.

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