

ADDING A PERSONAL TOUCH TO THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: VOCABULARY AND AUTISM

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Abstract: The question of what makes vocabulary learning relevant to children with autism affects some important aspects of teaching and learning in the classroom setting. Teaching individuals with autism is a challenging task as these individuals have neurological and developmental impairments. These impairments have been documented to affect teaching and learning. Research on classroom practices may have dealt much on teaching strategies but none thus far looked into other elements that may affect learning. This study explored how teachers teach children with autism learn vocabulary in the ESL classroom. In this qualitative study, data were obtained through observation, interviews and document analysis of the children's writing samples. The information obtained was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings of the study highlight humanistic approaches that the teachers use to promote vocabulary learning. Implications on the teaching of vocabulary to children with autism are discussed.

Keywords: Humanistic approaches, autism, ESL, vocabulary, classroom practices

1. Introduction

Autism is a neurological disorder affecting a child's development in the areas of communication, social interactions, and imagination. The disorder affects children with varying degrees of severity. The range is commonly defined as spanning from high functioning autism to low functioning autism. Some children with autism are better able, with average or above average intelligence, while some others may have low intelligence with severe impairments in any of the three previously mentioned areas. These impairments may pose some difficulties for children with autism to learn language.

Developing a broad sight vocabulary in English seems is important for all ESL students at the beginning stage of acquiring literacy, including those with autism. For students with autism, learning vocabulary may be difficult due to cognitive limitations which can hinder the ability to learn words. Therefore, teaching vocabulary may be the primary focus to help students with autism acquire literacy. Students with autism often take more time and effort to learn and require different strategies which fit their specific learning needs. In addition, many of the reviewed studies indicate that ESL students have poor vocabulary knowledge and use, and more so for students with autism. However, at present, teachers are not equipped to teach students with autism (Toran et al. 2011). There is a growing concern for the importance of vocabulary learning for children with autism. Many studies and articles available provide overviews and findings of strategies and approaches that fill current gaps in the literature. Typically, these studies are

experimental in nature and very few has attempted to explore the experience of teachers and students in the natural classroom setting. Thus, there is a dire need to conduct a study on vocabulary instruction to help students with autism gain literacy. If their educational needs are not met, these students will lag behind their typically developing peers.

In order to achieve a better grade on the English language paper, a candidate must have the necessary skills to answer multiple-choice questions and comprehend stimuli for writing tasks. This requires the ability to recognize words automatically. This skill facilitates reading and understanding. Besides word recognition, another factor that might be lacking in these students is sight vocabulary. Vocabulary knowledge has been found in many studies, contributes to reading comprehension. Hence, these students should be given a firm foundation in vocabulary knowledge. Without a firm grounding in vocabulary knowledge, it may be impossible for students with autism to succeed.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' practices in teaching vocabulary to ESL students with autism. The present study extended previous research on teachers' practices in teaching vocabulary to ESL students with autism in the natural classroom setting. The objective of the study is as follows:

1.2 Objective of the Study

The aim of the study is to understand the phenomenon of teaching and learning vocabulary as experienced by the individuals. Thus, a specific objective is formulated.

1. explore teachers' practices in developing vocabulary learning among ESL students with autism

Research Questions

The research question addressed in the study is:

1. How do teachers' practices in teaching vocabulary help develop its learning among ESL students with autism?

2. Methodology

Case study was well suited for this study as it led the researcher to understand processes of events, and discover context characteristics that highlight an issue. Merriam (2009) asserted that qualitative research consists of learning how individuals interact with their social world and the meaning it has for them. By studying the events of teaching and learning that occurred in the natural classroom setting, insights may be gained on how the practices used by the teachers (for instance: teaching words, posing questions, giving examples, and modeling) promoted sight vocabulary development of the students. Different methods of data collection were used (i.e. classroom observations of vocabulary instructions, interviews, and document analysis) for validating data and findings through triangulation.

3. Results and Discussion

Based on fieldnotes, interviews with the teacher participants, and document analysis, the sub themes indicate the notions of humanistic language teaching. In the context of this study, the notion is referred to as 'personal touch.' The following section presents cross case analysis on the theme 'personal touch.'

Personal touch

Several themes were gathered on how the teachers' facilitation helped develop the student participants' sight vocabulary development. The themes are: 'having high expectation,' 'acknowledging students' effort,' 'inviting participation,' and 'maintaining positive relationship.' Based on fieldnotes, interviews with the teacher participants, and document analysis, these themes indicate the notions of humanistic language teaching. In the context of this study, the notion is referred to as 'personal touch.'

i) Having high expectation

Based on observations, all the teacher participants showed that they have high expectations for the student participants. This practice appears to reflect the intrinsic value of the teacher participants. Having high hopes for the student participants' ability seems to be the practice that traversed across all the teacher participants' data. The teachers' practices were supported by their views of the students. The excerpts in Table 1 illustrate the practices that reflect this intrinsic value.

Table 1: Excerpts from field notes on 'having high expectation'

Theme: Having high expectation

Mr Aiman: Teacher writes the next question on the blackboard: "What day is tomorrow?" A student volunteers. Teacher asks him to write the answer on the blackboard. The boy however, spells 'Saturby' instead of 'Saturday.' Mr Aiman asks Afy to correct the spelling. Afy comes forward and writes the word 'Saturday' correctly. (Observation note8).

Mr Maher: Now, teacher asks Imran to read. Imran stood up and read. He looks a bit anxious. He faces the class and read. He does not seem to have so much problems reading the story. Imran is moving his body slowly from left to right while reading. Teacher corrects Imran's pronunciation of the word beard which he pronounced as bear. Teacher praised Imran and asks him to sit down. (Observation note1)

Ms Anna: Next, teacher asks Aida to write the word Monday on the white board. Aida comes forward and she writes the word Monday correctly. (Observation note16).

Ms Dewi: Teacher explains the next task to Danyal. Then, teacher checks other students work. Teacher comes back to check Danyal's work. Teacher asks him, "Which direction is next?" Danyal says, "Right." Teacher praises him, "*Dah pandai (You are excellent).*" Danyal has completed his work. Teacher asks him whether it is a difficult task. Danyal says, "*Susah (It's difficult).*" Teacher responds, "*Tak apa, lama-lama pandai lah (That's alright. You can do it).*" Teacher explains the task to other students and Danyal looks on. (Observation note9).

Data from observation notes reveal that the teacher participants had high expectation of the student participants' ability in learning words. Instances from classroom observations reflect how each teacher participant reacted positively towards his or her student during the lesson. Mr Aiman had high expectation for Afy as he knew that the child was a capable student. He pointed out the positive things about Afy

during the interview. He said, *"I notice that he's good..good in everything...his vocab is good..pronunciation is quite good...better than ordinary pupil."* (Interview data Mr Aiman). The teacher's positive attitude towards the student was observed throughout the course of the study. Afy was included in the activities and his capability to perform was at a par with the other typical students in the classroom. In this instance, Mr Aiman called on Afy to correct the spelling of the word 'Saturday' on the blackboard. The student willingly got up and wrote the word 'Saturday' correctly.

Likewise, Mr Maher had high expectation for Imran. Mr Maher called on Imran to read out a story to the class and praised him after he had finished reading. He had high hopes for the student participant and believed that the student could do better in his academics. He said, *"I think, Imran...as long as he did his work..he shows a lot of improvement..he can be much better than the others..everything, academics..then..his behaviour."* (Interview data Mr Maher).

Ms. Anna called on Aida to write the word 'Monday.' The teacher was observed to provide Aida with many opportunities to interact with words. The student came forward willingly and wrote the word on the whiteboard with confidence. The word 'Monday' was written correctly. Ms. Anna's high expectation for the student is reflected in the interview. She said, *"I hope..she can read without my guidance.. but now..I can see she has the ability to memorize the words..so..if I teach her more vocab..so I hope when she open[s] the book..she can read it without my guidance."* (Interview data Ms. Anna).

The same positive attitude applies to Ms. Dewi. She praised Danyal's effort in completing the vocabulary task. The task was slightly difficult but he managed to do it successfully on his own. Ms. Dewi was aware that Danyal was a capable student and this was reflected in her comments: *"In my opinion..if he can understand 75% of the lesson..he is quite good..knowing his limitation...his..umm..not the disease..his disability..I think if he could understand some or most of the lesson..is quite good."* (Interview data Ms. Dewi). In this study, the teachers' high expectation of the students' ability may have facilitated the students' learning in that they were willing to take risks and participate in the language activities. The teachers placed high expectations on the students with autism to perform as did their friends. The teachers supported their expectations by inviting them to participate in the language activities. The students with autism were engaged in similar activities as the other typical students. The teachers' high expectations reflect the elements of humanistic language teaching in that the students' affect was taken into account. Arnold (1988) contends that paying attention to feelings and emotional well-being of the students could facilitate language learning. In the present study, the need for affective teaching is necessary since the student participants have impairments that hold them back from getting involved in the language activities out of their own free will. A teacher's understanding and care are essential in making the students' success in learning vocabulary possible. The following section presents cross case analysis of the teachers on the theme 'acknowledging students' effort.'

Acknowledging students' effort

Review of field notes and teachers' interviews show that acknowledging student's effort is the act of praising and showing appreciation towards the student participants' ability to perform vocabulary task correctly. Teachers in the study were found to acknowledge the student participants for their effort. They

did this openly and at the same time influenced the rest of the class to show support for the particular students. Table 2 provides the excerpts from observational field notes on the related theme.

Table 2: Excerpts from field notes on ‘acknowledging student’s effort’

Theme: Acknowledging students’ effort
Mr Aiman: Teacher asks the class, “What do you do with a burger?” Afy comes to the front and write in the blank the word ‘eat.’ Teacher praises Afy, “Good.”Afy returns to his desk smiling (Observation note15).
Mr Maher: Teacher corrects Imran’s pronunciation of the word ‘beard’ which he pronounced as bear. Teacher praises Imran after he has finished reading and asks him to sit down. (Observation note2)
Ms. Anna: Aida reads the sentence incorrectly. Teacher prompts her and points to each word as Aida reads. She praises Aida. Aida smiles and claps her hands. (Observation note5)
Ms. Dewi: Teacher checks Danyal’s work. Teacher says, “ <i>Bagus lah...Macam ni lah (Good job!).</i> ” (Observation note7)

Mr Aiman acknowledged Afy’s effort by praising him. He said, “Good” in a loud voice to show that he meant it. The other students in the classroom clapped their hands to show support for Afy. The student participant was observed to smile while returning to his place indicating that he felt appreciated.

Similarly, Mr Maher was noted to correct Imran’s pronunciation of the word ‘beard’ while he was reading a story and praised him when he had finished reading. Unlike Afy, Imran did not show any response to the teacher’s positive remark. However, observations showed that he was willing to participate whenever the teacher called on him.

Ms. Anna showed her support towards Aida’s learning by being beside her and prompted her whenever she had difficulty reading or completing her task. In this example (Observation note5), Ms. Anna stood beside the student and pointed to each word as the student read. Teacher praised the student participant when she read the sentence correctly for the second time. Aida enjoyed being appreciated as indicated from her smile and clapping of hands.

Similarly, Ms. Dewi supported the student participant’s learning by praising him for being able to do the language tasks correctly. She was observed to acknowledge Danyal’s effort openly. The teacher said, “*Baguslah...Macam ni lah (Good job!).*” (Observation note7: Ms. Dewi). The positive comment was expressed with such sincerity. The student did not react immediately to the positive comments. However, he was observed to be comfortable in the classroom and willing to participate in the activities.

In the present study, the teachers’ practice could perhaps influence the student participants to remember the lexical input better. The environment in which the student participants learn appears to promote learning as it is not threatening. There was no indication of teachers being hostile towards the students throughout the observations. This finding is congruent to the humanistic language teaching approach in that teachers are responsible for promoting learning through positive practices. The affective

environment that the teachers created might have helped the student participants to have confidence in their own learning ability (Mehrgan 2011). According to the humanistic approach, the child's self-concept is based on how he is perceived. In the present study, the relationship between teachers and students plays an important role in developing the students' sight vocabulary learning. The act of valuing each student as being unique and showing a positive regard for each student may have promoted a sense of security being in the language classroom.

Inviting participation

Inviting participation is an act of accepting the student participant as part of the classroom community. Teachers were observed to invite the students with autism to participate in the language activities. Table 3 presents data on each teacher participant.

Table 3: Excerpts from field notes on the theme 'inviting participation'

Theme: Inviting participation
Mr Aiman: Teacher asks Afy to read the next sentence of the story. Afy seems perplexed. Teacher comes to him and asks him to read. Afy stands up and reads the next line. (Observation note1)
Mr Maher: Now, teacher asks Imran to read. Imran stands up and reads. He looks a bit anxious. He turns to face the class and reads. He does not seem to have so much problem reading the story. He only has the word beard wrongly pronounced. (Observation note 5)
Ms. Anna: Teacher reads the story and Aida acts out accordingly. When teacher says, "Give the duck some water." Aida stands still and does not know what to do. Teacher points to the 'duck' and instructs Aida to pretend giving it some water. (Observation note16)
Ms. Dewi: Danyal stands up and touches his trousers. Danyal says, "This is a short." Teacher says that is not shorts. She asks him to choose another object. She wants Danyal to choose things in the classroom that they had just learnt. Danyal says, "This is a table." (Observation note3)

In the present study, inviting students to participate in the language activity could be a way of giving them the experience of interacting with words. The students were called on to read out a story as seen in the classrooms of Mr Aiman and Mr Maher. Ms. Anna involved Aida in word learning activity by asking her to act out the sentence. Meanwhile, Ms. Dewi called on Danyal to get him to name the things in the classroom. The student participants in the study were included in the language activities frequently. The frequent participation may have positive outcome for the students as they were observed to be comfortable to take risks in learning language.

The teachers in the present study had shown that students with autism needed to be accepted in the classroom community. Although the students with autism were mostly passive, the teachers took the initiative to involve them in the language activities as their nondisabled peers. In a way, the teachers allowed the students with autism membership in the literacy community. In this respect, the students in the

study are given the same opportunity to experience learning as their nondisabled peers. This experience may be necessary in developing interest in learning a second language.

Including students with autism in the language activities has another positive effect. The other students in the classroom benefit from being taught how to accept students with autism. The teachers in the study had not only provided the students with autism language experience, but also good values for the rest of the typical students. Acceptance of others with disability is perhaps an important element that needs to be inculcated amongst typical students.

The next part describes the cross-case analysis of the teachers on the theme ‘giving extra attention.’

Giving extra attention

Based on fieldnotes, giving extra attention refers to the act of providing care and supervision to the student participants. All the teacher participants in the present study were observed to give extra attention to the respective student participants. This practice could be observed across all the teacher participants’ data. Table 4 shows the evidence from field notes.

Table 4 Excerpts from field notes on ‘giving extra attention’

Theme: Giving extra attention

Mr. Aiman: Teacher asks the class to check their answers. He goes through the answers with the class. Suddenly, Afy gets up and tugs at the teacher’s sleeve. He has his thumb up and asks the teacher to touch his. Teacher seems surprised but he smiles and touches Afy’s tumb. (Observation note4)

Mr Maher: Teacher gives Imran his workbook and explains to him the task that he has missed. Imran is doing the task that he has on his own. (Observation note10)

Ms. Anna: Teacher asks Aida to write the day and date. She stands up and happily writes the day and date on the whiteboard. Teacher says: “Okay, now, number 1, write, ‘Good morning.’ Aida sighs and says, “*Macam ni? (Is this correct?)*” Teacher checks her spelling. (Observation note13)

Ms. Dewi: Danyal has completed his work. Teacher asks him whether it is a difficult task. Danyal says, “*Susah. (This is hard)*” Teacher consoles him, “*Tak apa, lama-lama pandai lah. (It’s alright)*” Teacher explains the task to other students and Danyal looks on. (Observation note9)

Mr Aiman was observed to frequently monitor Afy’s progress during the lesson. He would go to the student and check his work from time to time. He was also seen to praise Afy and at the same time, encourage other students in the classroom to show support for him (Observation note4).

Mr Maher, in particular, stressed that extra attention was necessary to help the student participant cope. He was seen to speak to Imran and the students as if they were his friends. The students in return laughed with the teacher. Mr Maher shared his view on the benefit of giving extra attention to Imran. He said, “*I approach him, ..give more attention to him and he shows a lot of improvement.*” (Interview data1).

Data from interview indicate that Mr Maher believed that giving extra attention is an important practice as he had noted that the student showed a lot of progress in his academic when attention was given.

Ms. Anna showed her concern towards the student participant by attending to her demands. The teacher was observed to pay extra attention to Aida especially when she had difficulty with her work (Observation note13). Ms. Anna was aware of Aida's hyperactivity disorder, indicating that the student participant needed close monitoring and supervision. Aida had non-compliant behaviour and this might perhaps be another reason why the teacher had to focus on her most of the time.

In Ms. Dewi's classroom, the student participant's work was monitored closely. She checked on him from time to time and asked him about the tasks. She consoled the student when he complained of having difficulty doing the work (Observation note9). She related of how the extra attention helped Danyal to stay focused on the lesson: "*He is in the classroom from morning until afternoon, he will feel restless. I switch on the laptop and he watches the presentation..he will not move around or look at his friend.*" (Interview data: Ms. Dewi). In the context of this study, giving extra attention is probably helpful in ensuring learning takes place for the student participants. Evidence from data showed that the students needed more attention from the teachers. The elements that teachers use are in tandem with the humanistic language teaching where the focus is on creating an affective climate necessary for learning to occur (Mehgran 2011). In the present study, it appears that affective elements reduce anxiety and facilitate language learning for the student participants. When the learning environment is conducive and teachers take into consideration the student participants' learning differences, vocabulary learning may become a successful experience. The following section presents how the teacher participants provide support to the students with autism.

In the context of this study, the combination of humanistic language teaching and behaviourist principles of learning may be a promising teaching approach for students with autism. Humanistic teaching focuses on affective elements necessary for the students to be comfortable taking risks in the language classroom (Mehrgan 2011) whereas the behaviourist principles of teaching emphasizes on structure, concreteness, teacher control and explicit teaching of skills (Bursuck & Damer 2007). Embedding these elements in vocabulary instructions may perhaps help in promoting students with autism sight vocabulary development.

The teachers were noted to scaffold the student participants in many ways. The prominent elements identified in the data are the aspects on 'personal touch.' The teachers' high expectation of the students' ability in learning, the acknowledgement of the students' effort, the extra attention, and the invitation to participate in the language activities reflect a climate of acceptance and support. In the context of the present study, these elements are needed to meet the instructional needs of the student participants. These elements are less discussed in the literature on vocabulary instructions for students with autism.

The teachers used practices that they valued to be practical in assisting the student participants learn sight words. The practices that the teachers used are in line with the characteristics of successful teachers for students with autism. Although these characteristics may not predict or prohibit student's success, the attributes of the teacher will somehow determine whether learning takes place for the particular student. Besides the teacher's affective attributes, the use of L1 seems to produce favourable results in making the students understand word concept and grammar rules of the target language. The use of L1 may help ease

the learning of L2 as it provides the resource from which the student could fall back on when he is in doubt about a certain concept in L2.

In sum, cross-case analysis reveals a variety of practices used by all the teacher participants to facilitate students' sight vocabulary development. Teachers were observed to use humanistic-based teaching practices namely, showing high expectation of the student's ability, maintaining positive relationship, inviting participation, and acknowledging students' effort. The themes that reflect the humanistic-based practices might help foster a sense of belonging and personal empowerment in the student participants. The teachers accepted the student participants for whom they are and tried to accommodate their learning needs where possible as evidenced from the field notes and review of the interviews.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows that providing emotional support is a way of creating an affective learning environment necessary for learning to take place. This is in line with the humanistic approach to learning. Learning in an affective environment may help students to have a positive self-concept and confidence in their own learning ability (Mehrgan 2011).

According to the humanistic approach, the child's self-concept is based on how he is perceived. In the present study, the relationship between teachers and students plays an important role in developing the students' sight vocabulary learning. The act of valuing each student as being unique and showing a positive regard for each student may have promoted a sense of security being in the language classroom.

Learning a second or foreign language may be an anxiety evoking experience for many students. Therefore, the use of humanistic approach can perhaps lessen the burden and promote learning in an ESL classroom for students with autism. The students' challenges in processing information and understanding verbal input can be reduced through a humanistic teaching approach. For such students, an understanding of how to teach them and how they learn may help to engage them in meaningful literacy activities.

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