EXPLORING VOCABULARY DIFFICULTY IN ENGLISH LITERATURE
CLASSROOM AND SOLUTIONS: AN ACTION RESEARCH.

by

EMAN AK SEDAU
4396

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Centre for Language Studies,
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

Exploring Vocabulary Difficulty in English Literature Classroom and Solutions.
An Action Research.

Eman ak Sedau

The research is carried out to answer the research questions pertaining to this research paper "Exploring Vocabulary Difficulty in English Literature Classroom and Solutions. An Action Research." The research is aimed to explore vocabulary difficulty faced by learners in understanding vocabulary used in literary texts in English literature classroom. It is also aimed to find out the appropriate methods and approaches to help learners understand vocabulary used in literary texts in English literature teaching. The instruments used in this research were action research, questionnaire and interview. Seventy-two students of a secondary school in Kanowit district Sibu were involved in this research. The findings of the research revealed that majority of the respondents agreed that vocabulary used in literary texts in English literature were difficult to understand. As a result, appropriate methods and approaches are required to help learners to understand difficult vocabulary used in the literary texts in literature teaching.
Abstrak

Kajian Permasalahan Memahami Perbendaharaan Kata Dalam Kelas Kesasteraan Bahasa Inggeris dan Penyelesaian-penyelesaiannya: Kajian Bertindak.

Eman ak Sedau

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>TESL</td>
<td>Teaching English as a Second Language</td>
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<td>ESL</td>
<td>English as a Second Language</td>
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<tr>
<td>SQ3R</td>
<td>Survey, Question, Read, Recite and Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>KBSM</td>
<td>Kurikulum Bersapadu Sekolah Menengah</td>
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<td>MOE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
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Chapter One

Introduction

This section discusses the overall purpose of the research, the background of the research, the statement of problem, research objectives, research questions, significance of the research, definition of key terms and summary of the research problem.

1.0 Background of the Research

The implementation of the new National Education Policy (NEP) based on the Razak Report (1956), Rahman Taib Report (1960) and Mahathir Report (1979) had brought several reforms in Malaysian education system. After undergoing the tremendous changes in those reforms the government had always placed great emphasis on the education system in the country. Every year, the allocation for the Ministry of Education (MOE) has always been given the top priority and supercedes other sectors. The education system since then has improved greatly. The rapid growth in the system and the quality of education that it provides has improved the literacy rate tremendously in the past year. Malaysian literacy rate is one of the highest among the developing countries. According to EFA 2000 – Literacy assessment, the literacy rate (15 years and above) in 1995 was 91% and it increased to 93.7% in 1998. The government has set its target to eradicate illiteracy by the year 2000. Being a developing nation, it was indeed a remarkable achievement. Rizvi (1997) mentions that, despite the fact that our country has
accomplished the desire result, our country is still facing another dilemma that is students nowadays are incompetent in English language in terms of accuracy and fluency.

Samuel & Lew (1997) mention that, the switching over of English language to Bahasa Malaysia jeopardizes the standard of English language in the country. After all subjects are taught in Bahasa Malaysia, students speak, listen, read and write less English in the class and everyday life. This means that the policy of changing the medium of instruction from English to Bahasa Malaysia is one of the factors that contribute to the decline standard of English language in the country. On the contrary, Leigh (1997) stresses that the low proficiency of English language among students extremely worries the nation as it can hinder it to achieve its aspiration to become a developed nation by the year 2020.

Rizvi (1997) also states that, the level of English proficiency among Malaysian students is declining compared to the years when English language was the medium of instruction. The Ministry of Education in the Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran Bahasa Inggeris Tingkatan 1 (2003) also states that, the job seekers are unable to write grammatically correct English and prefer one-word answers and direct questions. Our graduates prefer to speak Bahasa Malaysia and they cannot converse well and elaborate on matters pertaining to the job specifications. In addition to that, majority of our graduates do not have the ability to write official letters in English language. This inability hinders their employment opportunities, as foreign and local industries prefer graduates who converse well in English language to participate in their businesses.
Alias (1997) mentions that there is a need for competent and proficient personnel in English especially for Malaysia that is aiming at industrialization and economic progress. Realizing the importance of communication skills in the present society, Alias (1997:51) also mentions that Malaysians need to be communicatively competent in English language, which he says “mere knowledge of the language and linguistic competence was seen as being inadequate for a nation fast developing and playing a part in the international trade”. According to Alias (1997), language bestows prestige and guarantees a job and social as well as occupational mobility. In other words, Malaysians need to be competent in English not only for the benefit of socio-economic status but also to be involved in business both locally and internationally. The decline standard of English language needs to be addressed seriously and one of the ways to improve it is the introduction of the literature component in secondary schools in Malaysia.

The implementation of literature component in secondary schools exposes students to engage themselves in literary works and as a result it helps to improve the declining standard of English language in the country. Through this program, selected literary works in English are chosen by the English Curriculum Division which seeks to enrich students' knowledge of English language and at the same time develop an awareness of their own creative potential. According to Senan (2000) the director of textbooks division department Ministry of Education Malaysia, the English language curriculum or KBSM makes it compulsory to use literary texts in the language lessons to enhance the learning of the language that is described as a strong second language in Malaysia. The literature content in KBSM is delivered through two channels, which are the incorporation of literary materials in school textbooks and the class reader program.
The Ministry of Education in the Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran Bahasa Inggeris Tingkatan 4, (2003) states that, the literature component in English program aims to develop in the students’ ability to read, understand and appreciate literary works through an exploration of universal issues and concerns as depicted in the selections of prose, poetry and drama. Samuel & Lew (1997) mention that, as the standard of English among students are low, they are unable to comprehend the literary texts accorded to their forms by the curriculum division. The survey by English curriculum division of the Ministry of Education Malaysia showed that the performance of students in English literature for the year 1999 was low and many schools obtained the average percentage of below the national target.

The survey also indicates that, students face difficulty in understanding the literary text as they do not understand the vocabulary used in the text. According to Moore (1989) literature is mostly about stories of love, betrayal and friendship of human frailty. On the contrary, literature gives us sheer enjoyment and it teaches us understanding and tolerance of others. In other words, literature teaches us some morals, ethics and values of lives. If students do not understand the texts that they read, they are also not able to digest and absorb all these values. Hence, it is important for the teacher to realize that students need to be able to comprehend the texts that they read in order to be literate. Literacy can be gained and expanded through reading and understanding meanings of words. One needs to know also how the words work together in sentences. Wells (1991) mentions that, literacy is important as it involves more than engaging with written texts. According
to him, it involves the ability to reflect the text critically within the socio-cultural contexts in terms of appropriacy and adequacy of content. It also involves the cognitive and social processes of the reader whether to agree with the writer’s point of views or oppose them and the ability to evaluate how well the text has been constructed to make it effective as a text to read.

Literacy can be achieved through studying literature. Wells (1991) places the aesthetic aspect of language such as literature and poetry at the fourth level of literacy. Literacy emphasizes on the aspects of social function of reading, the social act of reading and writing for a purpose, functional reading and reading as a social process. We do this in literature when we read and interact with the literary texts of English literature. If students cannot understand what they read due to the inability to understand the vocabulary used in the literary text, the objectives of reading as set by the teacher is not achieved. Wells (1991) mentions that, in comprehending the texts for a purpose in literature, we relate what is in the written texts to our background knowledge in order to construct a meaning, which reciprocates the intention of the writer. This means that we are engaging our brains thinking about achieving all these aspects using the cognitive and social processes through reading literary texts. Consequently, this makes literature can be a tool to achieve literacy.
1.1 Statement of problem.

Understanding vocabulary used in the texts is a very important aspect in English language learning (Allen, 1983). However, for many years, little attention is given to help students learn vocabulary. According to Allen (1983), pronunciation and grammar are emphasized but vocabulary has been neglected in programs for teachers during the twentieth century. Mohammad Azam (2000) mentions that language teachers, no matter what language they teach, are all aware that literary study is a valuable supplement to language teaching. When students are offered to study literature, they are exposed to literary texts of local and foreign settings. In order to understand these literary texts, comprehensive reading is needed to make inferences and to compare the past and present when the literary texts were written. Unfortunately, our students nowadays are facing the difficulty of understanding the vocabulary used in the literary texts that they read. Therefore, this hinders students to infer, absorb and enjoy the literary works.

Abu Bakar (1997) mentions that, as their proficiency levels are beyond the standard of these learning materials, the input they get from the teaching and learning process is very minimal. In other words, there is not much learning and teaching takes place, as students do not understand the density of the words used in the textbooks or literary texts. In literature classes, many students do not understand the words or vocabulary used in the texts, so they are unable to understand the theme, plot and the characters of the people in the literary texts. All these problems become the obstacles for them to understand the beginning, middle and ending of the literary texts such as short stories and poems. As a
result, the researcher is interested to explore vocabulary difficulty faced by learners in understanding literary texts and to explore the appropriate methods and approaches to help learners to understand difficult vocabulary in English literature teaching.

1.2 Research objectives

There are two objectives of this research. They are:

- To explore vocabulary difficulty faced by learners in understanding vocabulary used in literary texts in English literature classroom.
- To explore the appropriate methods and approaches to help learners understand vocabulary used in literary texts in English literature teaching.

1.3 Research questions

This research aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the problems faced by learners in understanding vocabulary used in literary texts in English literature classroom?
- What are the appropriate methods and approaches to help learners understand vocabulary used in literary texts in English literature teaching?
1.4 **Significance of the research.**

- To find out the appropriate methods and approaches to help learners understand vocabulary used in literary texts in English literature classroom.
- The findings or results of the research are expected to provide useful feedbacks for English literature teachers and improve ways or practice in English literature teaching.

1.5 **Definition of terms**

The definition of important terms used in this research are given below:

A. **Action research**

Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) define action research as a family of methodologies that pursue action and research outcomes at the same time. It therefore has some components that resemble consultancy and some that resemble field research. It is cyclic whereby similar steps tend to reoccur, in similar sequence. The clients and informants are involved as partners in the research processes. It deals more often with language than with numbers and the reflection upon the process and outcomes are important parts of each cycle.
B. Practical-deliberative

According to Holter and Schwartz (1993) the practical-deliberative type of action research involves the participation of the researchers and practitioners to come together to identify potential problems. They find out the causes of the problems and find possible ways of intervention. The problem is defined in dialogue and mutual understanding between researchers and the practitioners. According to McKernan (1991) the goal of practical action researchers is to understand practice and solve the immediate problems. Practical-deliberative action research improves professional practices by increasing the resources of knowledge and skill of practitioners. The practitioners involved gain a new understanding of their practice thus, making a more compressive planning in the next cycle of action research.

C. Praxis

Holter and Schwartz (1993) define the term Praxis as the combination of theory and practice in a single process. The combination of theory and practice in a single process ('praxis') has potential to overcome the problems in action research. The outcomes of the findings are tackled by the theory and practice in the later cycle of action research in order to improve the practice.
D. Communicative approach

According to Mohammad Azam (2000), communicative approach is also called communicative language teaching. It is an approach to foreign language or second language teaching, which emphasizes on the goal of language learning, that is communicative competence. British applied linguists developed the communicative approach as a reaction to the grammar-based approaches such as the-aural-oral approach. The teaching materials use with communicative approach often teaches the language needed to express and understand different kinds of functions, such as requesting, describing and expressing. It is also emphasized the processes of communication, such as using language appropriately in different types of situations and using language to perform different kinds of tasks for examples, to solve puzzles, to get information and using language for social interaction with other people.

E. Reader-text

Vaughan (1982) defines the term reader-text as the interaction of the reader and the text that the students read. The students need to focus their attention on the text that they read very tentatively. In this way students are in full concentration and relate the points that they had encounter earlier to the points that they come across at that very moment. In relation to that the students need to define the vocabulary based on the context of the text they read.
F. Curriculum

Mohammad Azam (2000) defines the term curriculum as an educational program, which states the educational purpose of the program, its content, the teaching procedures and the learning experiences that need to be achieved. Curriculum also contains some means for assessing whether or not the educational ends have been achieved. Nunan (1991) states that curriculum is a description of the contents of a course of instruction and the order in which they are to be taught. Language-teaching curriculum can be based on grammatical items, vocabulary, the language needed for different types of situations and communicative functions that the learner needs to express in the target language.

G. Contextual meaning

Nesamalar et al., (1995) state that contextual meaning is the meaning in context based on the text. The context often helps in understanding the particular meaning of the word and phrase, for example, the meaning of a word has within a particular sentence or a sentence has in a particular paragraph. The question “Do you know the meaning of war?” for example, could have two different contextual meanings. It can be “Do you know the meaning of the word war?” when said by a language teacher to a class of students. The meanings also can be “War produces death, injury and suffering”, when said by an injured soldier to a politician who favors war.
H. Literacy

Grant (1986) mentions that, literacy is the ability to read, write and spell correctly. Based on the definition given by Grant literacy is a way of interacting with information that goes beyond the decoding of letters and words. Wells (1991) defines literacy as the ability to read and write at some levels of proficiency and more precisely defined it as a technical capability to decode written or printed signs, symbols or letters combined into words. According to Wells, literacy is not innate human characteristic but rather an ability that is learned and often in a formal educational setting. Literacy in the context of this research is referred to learners’ ability to manipulate the information that they read and transform it to knowledge by cognitive and social processes.

I. Reading

Ripley (1990) defines reading as the process of constructing meaning from written text in relation to the experiences and knowledge of the reader. Crowder (1982) has similar definition to reading. He states reading is not just a matter of transferring information from the print to the reader’s mind, there is also an active contribution from the reader’s store of knowledge. According to Glazer & Searfoss (1988) as cited in Searfoss & Readence (1989) explain that, reading is receiving ideas and experiences, feelings, motions and concepts. It is an activity that permits one to gain vast knowledge. When reading, we can live and travel vicariously and become acquainted with people and events of the past that have shaped our worlds. Reading creates for us mental maps of
events so that ideas can be transmitted from the mind of one, author, to the mind of another the receiver/reader.

1.7 Summary of the research problem

The difficulty in understanding literary texts as learners do not understand the vocabulary used in the text, aroused the interest of the researcher to explore the vocabulary difficulty faced by learners in English literature classroom. It is also to explore the appropriate methods and approaches to help learners understand vocabulary used in literary text in English literature teaching.

The following chapter will present the literature review related to the field of this research. The third chapter describes the research methodology used in this research and also provides the descriptions of the sample, instruments used, procedures of data collection and analysis. The fourth chapter presents the analysis and discussions of the findings. The final chapter provides the summary, conclusions of the findings and recommendations.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

This chapter reviews the related literature on the topic of the research “Exploring Vocabulary Difficulty in English Literature classroom and Solutions: An Action Research.” The literature review touches on the issues such as, the place of vocabulary in English language teaching, vocabulary difficulty in English literature classroom, English literature in Malaysian schools, vocabulary and reading in English literature teaching, principles of presenting vocabulary Lesson, vocabulary teaching methods and approaches, vocabulary lesson with weak students, vocabulary classes with able students, simplification of literature materials and summary of literature review.

2.1 The place of vocabulary in English language teaching

Nation (1990) states that teachers who have vast teaching experience know very well the important of vocabulary in learning a second language. They know students need to learn certain amount of words that speakers and writers of English use. At present, research on teaching and learning vocabulary is focusing on several areas, some of which continue previous research and some break new grounds. According to Allen (1983), a number of research studies have recently dealt with lexical problem or problem with words. Through researches the scholars found that lexical problems frequently interfere with reading, such as unable to understand words used in the texts, communication, such as communication breaks down and writing when people do not use the right words.
These discoveries by scholars do not surprise classroom teachers. Teachers have never doubted the value of learning vocabulary. Teachers know how reading, communication and writing stop when learners lack the necessary words. Teachers do not believe that the teaching of vocabulary needs to be delayed until for example, when grammar is mastered. Allen (1983) mentions that it is best if both grammar and vocabulary are emphasized equally. There is thus, no conflict between developing a firm command of grammar and learning the most essential words. Whether or not we teachers have had much teaching experience, we know a great deal about vocabulary learning and its importance to students and ourselves.

Cowan (1998) defines vocabulary as the words we use when we speak, listen and write. Gower, Philips & Walters (1995) stress that vocabulary is important to students. According to them vocabulary is more important than grammar for communication purposes, particularly in the early stages when students are motivated to learn the basic words they need to learn in the language. This means that, when we utter a single word to another person he or she can understand what we mean. We do not have to use many words in our utterances. For example, when we just say the word ‘eat’ to another person he or she understands what we mean.

Nesamalar et al., (1995) mention that, the introduction of communicative language teaching in the 1970’s, stressed the importance of vocabulary in language teaching. This means that, now vocabulary is considered as an important aspect to learn like other skills, such as writing, listening, speaking, reading and grammar. Allen (1983) stresses that an adequate vocabulary is essential for successful second language use. Without vocabulary,