Incidental Vocabulary Learning via Verbal Dramatization of Words in Readers' Theatre

Ch'ng Looi Chin
looichinchng@gmail.com
Academy of Language Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak
Kota Samarahan

ABSTRACT

Explicit teaching of vocabulary is a favourable practice in English as Second Language (ESL) classrooms. However, such practice would be a hinder for the students to learn words effectively since they are not taught in context. Thus, it leads to the idea of incidental vocabulary learning approach in repetitive reading. Such approach used in this study aims to examine the capability of students to learn vocabulary incidentally via the dramatization of written text. In this case, readers' theatre (RT) is used as the platform of measurement. A total of 160 diploma students participated in this case study were equally divided into two different group – classroom reading (CR) and RT group. Both groups took a proficiency test to determine their vocabulary levels. The results were used to choose suitable level of reading materials for both groups. CR group read the story through normal reading lesson in classroom while RT group dramatized the story verbally via readers' theatre activity. A post-test was carried out to compare the results. The findings revealed that with RT, students performed better in learning the vocabulary incidentally. Besides, based on the accuracy scores, it is also promising that students learn higher level words with the use of RT. Although the results were not conclusive, the study has proven the potential of RT in incidental vocabulary learning in ESL settings.

Keywords: Incidental vocabulary learning, Readers' Theatre, language learning

INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that word recognition (Elis, 1995; Schmidt 1993, 1995, 2001) is one of the initial steps for second language learning. It is only achievable when an enough amount of exposure is given to the leaners in order to recognise the vocabulary. With repetitive reading, the exposure of learners to the vocabulary is widening. Not only that, learners may also able to learn the vocabulary when they are trying to get the meaning across. As they are constantly back tract to get the meaning across while reading, they are picking up words unconsciously, which is also better known as incidental vocabulary learning (Dowhower, 1989; Samuels, 1979). Incidental vocabulary is said to be best achieved when a story based text (Mason, 2004; McMaster, 1998; Rashidi & Ganbari Adivi, 2010) is read aloud (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004; Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, & Vaughn, 2004; Santoro, Chard, Howar & Baker, 2008) through repetitive

reading. In another words, repetitive oral story reading aloud is highly favourable in driving learners to learn the language via incidental vocabulary learning. Therefore, incidental vocabulary learning would be best achieved via the readers' theatre (RT) activity as it fulfils the criteria mentioned above.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Previous studies on RT mainly focus on the use and impact of RT to improve the learners' fluency, reading motivation, reading attitude and reading comprehension. However, studies on the impact of RT towards vocabulary learning are scarce despite knowing that oral reading helps to increase lexical knowledge (Nataporn Srichamnong, 2009) which is pivotal to language mastery(Schmidt, 2008).

Most of the past studies emphasised on the search of RT in terms on language learning on young children, elementary students and students with learning disabilities. However, research on the use of RT in vocabulary learning is rather scares. Similarly, the study on the use of RT on different educational levels is limited. Such studies should not be disregarded as the possibility of the different educational levels would explain the patterns of vocabulary learning among tertiary level students through RT activities in the second language classrooms.

Apart from that, it is known that vocabulary learning is particularly crucial in higher learning institution. University students who fail to possess a satisfactory amount of vocabulary would "bound to end up stranded in an explanatory void" (Cameron, 1997, p. 59). Empirical study on incidental vocabulary learning via RT among university students would give an insight in informing the current and future syllabus planning as to enhance the classrooms' teaching and learning. Not only that, the results would also enable the application of method in other discipline besides confining to language learning.

Generally, students who are underperform in academic particularly in English language learning is mainly due to the fact that they are not interested to read, they have poor reading habits, and they might have negative attitudes towards reading (Akabuike & Asika, 2012). The negativities that the students might have on reading is most driven by demotivation or challenges they faced while understanding the vocabulary and making the meaning across for comprehension. This could be helped as studies have shown that oral reading and story based reading would ease the tense of vocabulary learning for a better reading comprehension. Nevertheless, less study has been explored on the impact of RT in assisting the students to learn vocabulary and achieve comprehension orally especially for lack of confidence and weak students in English.

Relevant studies valued reading aloud narrative based text repetitively would address the fundamental needs for incidental vocabulary learning and thus lubricate the process to achieve comprehension. Study done by Jenkins, Stein and Wysocki (1984) emphasise that vocabulary learning is important for reading comprehension but it should not be taught in isolation. Instead, one of the ways that could maximise vocabulary learning is engaging students with classroom

presentations. The reason is, while preparing for the presentation, students would get greater exposure to the use of vocabulary used in context over time compared to common classroom reading activities which most of the time is a one off reading activity.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to examine the use of RT (verbal dramatization of written texts) in encouraging incidental vocabulary learning as compared to conventional reading lessons in the ESL classrooms.

Research Questions
1. What are the differences in the students' accuracy scores between the use of conventional reading lessons and readers' theatre?
2. To what extent readers' theatre can promote students' incidental vocabulary learning?

REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

Most research agrees that language learning and vocabulary learning are inseparable when it comes to second language learning. Vocabulary learning is particularly crucial to enhance the learners' vocabulary knowledge to perform strings of language skills such as reading and speaking (Nation & Waring, 1997).

Vocabulary learning involves a complex yet direct process. It kicks off with the ability to 'notice' the words in the text (Elis, 1995; Schmidt 1993, 1995, 2001). The greater the exposure given to the learners to the usage of words in various contextualised manner (Cain, 2007; Jenkins, Stein, & Wysocki, 1984) the better the learners would be in vocabulary learning. In order to enhance this favourable condition of vocabulary learning, repetitive reading comes in to keep the process empowered. Indirectly, incidental vocabulary learning would eventually take its active role in this process of repetitive reading process (Matsuoka & Hirsh, 2010) as to allow the readers to make meaning across the text they read. Thus, reading is accepted as the driven source for vocabulary learning due to its nature that provide ultimate opportunities for reading to 'notice' the words used in different context repetitively within the text itself. It is also said the learning of vocabulary is incidental when they read extensively as the learners learnt the vocabulary that appear in the text even though the main purpose of reading is not to learn the vocabulary (Swanborn & de Glopper, 2002).

Incidental vocabulary learning is essential particularly in tertiary education. Studies from Koda (1989) showed that, an increase of reading proficiency is strongly attributed to the increased proficiency in vocabulary (Matsuoka & Hirsh, 2010). Therefore, learners need to attain an adequate amount of vocabulary in assisting reading comprehension (Hwang & Nation, 1995; Laufer 1991), which is one of the basic skills in academic settings for them to attain the world knowledge. Another research done by Rashidi and Ganbari Adivi (2010), also agrees with the notion of when the students get into the habit of learning words incidentally, wide range of genre may be incorporated in maximizing students' interest in reading. Apart from that, Cameron

(1997) explains the vocabulary learning in the light of the second language classrooms among the university learners have been rudimentary. Without a satisfactory account of the vocabulary learning in the higher learning institution, the impacts of incidental vocabulary learning among the university students is "bound to end up stranded in an explanatory void" (p. 59).Therefore, in short, vocabulary knowledge is strongly related with reading comprehension especially when the knowledge of vocabulary is acquired incidentally.

Studies have shown that, in most cases, oral reading is recognised to be more effective in terms of promoting reading comprehension and improving incidental vocabulary learning. However, recent studies have established that effective read-aloud contributes to students' comprehension development (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004; Hickman, Pollard-Durodola,& Vaughn, 2004). In addition to that, Beck, Mckeown, Hamilton, and Kucan (1997), mention that text-based discussions may increase vocabulary learning besides improving comprehension particularly for students who struggle with decoding skills or who are just learning to read fluently. Thus, it is reasonable to accept that students are able to understand better when a conversational text (such as those with more dialogues) is read aloud. In the other studies, learners seem to have better incidental vocabulary learning and comprehension via oral reading when the genre of text is story based. Rashidi and Ganbari Adivi (2010) reported from their study on the incidental vocabulary learning through reading short stories that the high school students demonstrated positive vocabulary learning when they were engaged in extensive reading. Leaners' interest grows greater when they are involved in various oral activities, such as storytelling (Mason, 2004) and dramatic play (McMaster, 1998).

Results from the studies done by Santoro, Chard, Howard and Baker (2008) strengthen the point that vocal reading enhances incidental vocabulary learning in assisting students to comprehend the text, narratives or story based texts. Their studies revealed that students who have gone through the read-aloud lessons were able to make longer retellings specifically in narrative texts as compared to those who did not. Besides, they also demonstrated a depth of text comprehension in their retellings and vocabulary knowledge, even though the main purpose of their readings are not learning the vocabulary. Thus, it would be true that Silent Reading , which is commonly practised in most of the classroom reading lessons might not be able to help students to achieve good comprehension as it leaves no space for them to express what they have read and understood orally (Young & Rasinski, 2009). With that said, when comprehension is challenging normal reading classrooms, it also means it would be difficult for learners to learn the vocabulary incidentally in this context too.

Readers Theatre in the Classrooms
It is believed that utilising Readers Theatre (RT) in the reading classroom would encourage incidental vocabulary learning and thus promotes better comprehension as learners need to go through repeated readings (Dowhower, 1989; Samuels, 1979). It facilitates the recognition skills of the words in the context of a narrative and enables them to express their reading vocally. RT is an approach that has been extensively used in the language classrooms, especially in the ESL/EFL classrooms, and it successfully worked on the young children, elementary students and students with learning disabilities. Recent studies suggest that RT gives a great impact towards

language learning in various areas. It contributes towards the improvement of learners' fluency, reading motivation, reading attitude and reading comprehension. For example, among the middle school students, Allinder, Dunse, Brunken and Obermiller-Krolikowki (2001) found that the comprehension scores for students (including students with learning disability) who were exposed to daily oral reading increased. Similarly, Chard, Vaughn, and Tyler (2002) found that the reading fluency of the elementary students with learning disability significantly improved after repeated reading interventions. A lot more studies have proved the success of RT in improving the attitudes (Morris, 2011; Rees, 2005; Smith, 2011), confidence, word recognition (Rinehart, 1999), fluency (Rasinki, 2006) and motivation to read (Carrick, 2001; Rinehart, 1999). These researches have consistently shown that RT is a successful approach for language learning.

RT is able to link reading comprehension and vocabulary learning as it improves reading fluency, accuracy, automaticity, prosody which further leads to good comprehension (Rasinski, 2006). Through RT, students are able to recognize the words and pronounce it without error (accuracy), and this is the first step of language learning. When students have the ability to read the words correctly, effortlessly and meaningfully via their finite cognitive resources (automaticity), they are able to perform a successful RT. On top of that, RT requires students not only merely read their script but with the ability to render the text with appropriate expressions and phrasing (prosody). This allows the readers to reflect their understanding of the script semantically and syntactically (comprehension). Lastly, RT also helps students to become a more fluent speaker (fluency). Since the key step to language mastery would simply start from vocabulary learning, reading is accepted as a rich source for vocabulary learning in a contextualized manner; and RT is much encouraging, especially for students who are lacking of confidence and have lower English proficiency.

METHODOLOGY

The study involved 160 diploma students of various disciplines in a public university. They were divided equally into two groups – classroom reading (CR) group and Readers' Theatre (RT) group. Only those who have given their consent to participate in the study were selected for the study as the willingness of the participants were valued in order to avoid dishonest responses for the data collected.

A proficiency test was conducted on both groups to determine their vocabulary level. The test items were adopted from Laufer and Nation (1999) database. Based on the results, a suitable story was selected as their reading material.

The CR group read the story through a normal reading lesson in class while the RT group was required to verbally dramatize the text through readers' theatre activity. Then, a post-test based on vocabulary levels (Vocabulary Test) was carried out.

Data Collection Procedures
The procedures in collecting the data needed for this study is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1
Data collection procedures

Tests /instruments \ Participants	**Proficiency Test** Laufer & Nation (1999) (to measure current vocabulary proficiency level)	**Readers' Theater (RT)**	**Vocabulary Test** Selected words from text by 30
Classroom Reading group (CR grp) (80 students)	✓ (before reading activity)	✘	✓ (To measure the effects of classroom reading in ESL incidental vocabulary learning)
Readers' Theatre Group(RT grp) (80 students)	✓ (before RT performances)	✓	✓ (To measure the effects of readers' theatre in ESL incidental vocabulary learning)

Proficiency Test
In general, Laufer and Nation (1999) have categorised words from frequently seen to least encountered into 5 categories (1K word level, 2K word level, 3K word level, 5K word level,10k word level and academic words level).

Thus, this test adopted 10 question items for each category of word level making it a total of 50 question items from the database of Laufer and Nation (1999), h*ttp://www.er.uqam.ca/nobel/r21270/levels/2kc.html*. Participants were requested to only complete the spelling of the word instead of filling in the blank as the main purpose of the test is to examine the participants' familiarity of the words of different levels instead of the proficiency of the language as a whole.

The results from the proficiency test for all 160 participants revealed the following accuracy percentage for each level (10 words for each level) as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Accuracy percentage of each word level (N=160)

Levels	Accuracy
1K	92%
2K	66%
3K	56%
5K	35%
10K	27%

In general, the proficiency level of the participants was largely between 1K to 3K word levels. Only a small number of them were able to identify words beyond 3K level and the accuracy was also very low. Based on this, it has provided a good indicator on the choice of texts to be used in this study.

Vocabulary Test

The most frequently encountered words in the story are to be chosen from the texts upon the majority agreement of the researchers as to enhance the common agreement of the most frequently encountered words in the story. The word form of the selected words from the story was ensured to be the same in the Vocabulary Test as a means to fulfil the criteria of contextualisation. For instance, the chosen word "pursue" is a Verb in the written text, its word form remained in the Vocabulary Test while constructing the question items. The amount of words or test items for the Vocabulary Test is not limited, all majority agreed words chosen from the text are to be taken into the Vocabulary Test. . The list of agreed words is shown in Table 4.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

A frequency count on the correct items for the Vocabulary Test was done for both CR and RT groups. During the marking, minor spelling and grammatical mistakes were ignored as the main purpose of both Tests is to test their familiarity of the words instead of the proficiency of their language as a whole. The total scores of the Vocabulary Test of both CR and RT groups were then compared.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 3 shows the scores obtained by the two groups of students. For the CR group, the total score obtained is 933 with an average of 12.4 for each student. As for the RT group, the total score obtained is higher with 1544 and an average of 19.3 per student. It means that out of 30 words in the vocabulary test, the CR group only managed to correctly use 12 words (40% accuracy) while the RT group managed to get 19 words (63% accuracy). The difference in the scores obtained by the two groups provides an initial positive outcome on the use of RT as a technique to increase vocabulary learning.

Table 3
Overall performance of the two groups

Scores	CR Group (n=80)	RT Group (n=80)
Total	933	1544
Average	12.4	19.3

Table 4
Students' performance by Word levels

1000 word family lists	Categories	No. of words used in the test	No. of words CR group scored higher than RT group
1k-3k	High-frequency	16 words	0
4k-10k	Low-frequency	14 words	1

The 5 word levels were grouped into two main categories: high-frequency and low-frequency to allow clearer comparisons since only 30 words are used in the vocabulary test (see Table 4). For the high-frequency level (1k-3k words), the RT group outperformed the CR group in all 16 words while they only scored lower for 1 word in the low-frequency level (3k-10k).

A clearer breakdown of the scores obtained by the two groups is shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Total cores obtained by the participants for each word

Words	Scores CR Group	Scores RT Group	Differences
Shake	9	48	39
Shadows	25	42	17
Blood	57	79	22
Pointy	10	21	11
Dark	75	78	3
Midnight	53	67	14
Died	70	77	7
Frightened	44	55	11
Roared	55	77	22
Fright	12	23	11
Thundered	11	31	20
Spell	55	76	21
Tombstones	26	57	31
Graveyard	24	60	36
Haunted	71	80	9
Willies	57	70	13
Giant	12	20	8

Creaked	30	53	23
Groaned	28	63	35
Howled	9	36	27
Scared	38	27	-11
Skull	17	34	17
Shiver	42	65	23
Piercing	3	22	19
Eerie	16	66	50
Snarled	9	52	43
Skeleton	53	63	10
Quiver	13	49	36
Quake	0	33	33
Gripped	2	16	14

* Negative sign indicates CR group did better.

The RT group managed to score significantly higher for low-frequency words such as eerie, snarled and quiver. Clearly, verbal dramatization of the words during RT actually promote learning of words in context since most of the low-frequency words related to the similar "family" seemed to be retained by the participants in the RT group more than those in the CR group. This finding echoed the outcomes reported Schmidt (2001) and Rashidi and Ganbari Adivi (2010) in which repetitive readings allows better attainments of vocabulary and RT allows a greater active reading process since the learners need to learn to verbally dramatize it as well (Rinehart, 1999). However, the word that the RT group scored lower than CR group is the word "scared". 38 students from CR group managed to answer the word correctly as compared to 27 students from the RT group. Interestingly, both groups scored lower than expected for the word. Upon close checking, the participants used mostly "scary" which gives a different meaning. This somehow indicates the common confusion that students have in relation to the use of "scary" and "scared".

CONCLUSION

The study with the aim of exploring the potential use of RT in promoting incidental vocabulary learning has provided insightful outcomes. The findings revealed that incidental learning was more apparent in the RT group and their ability to learn words from the higher levels was noticeable through higher accuracy scores. The students in the RT group were able to accurately use the words given in the post-test as compared to their counterparts in the CR group. This is in line with the study by Rashidi and Ganbari Adivi (2010) who discovered the similar trend when students were encouraged to read a text repeatedly besides highlighting a parallel findings that was found by Rasinski (2006) in his research on the use of RT to improve vocabulary learning. All in all, this study has proven the suitability of RT as part of the teaching pedagogy in order to enhance incidental vocabulary learning for beginners besides promoting language mastery for intermediate- and advanced-level students. Although results may not be conclusive since it only involved the use of a small set of words, it provides an apparent glimpse on the usefulness of verbal dramatization in the form of RT. It not only enables students to engage in active reading

and learn new words, but also increase their motivation in learning the English language. Further research can be done by including more reading texts of different genres to check on RT's significance in promoting incidental vocabulary learning in a contextualised manner.

REFERENCES

Akabuike, I. G., & Asika, I. E. (2012). Reading habits of undergraduates and their academic performances: Issues and perspectives. *Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia*, *6* (2), 246-257.

Allinder, R. M., Dunse, L., Brunken, C. D., & Obermiller-Krolikowski, H. J. (2001). Improving fluency in at-risk readers and students with learning disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, *22* (1), 48-54.

Beck, I. L., Mckeown, M. G., Hamilton, R. L., & Kucan, L. (1997). *Questioning the author: An approach for enhancing student engagement with test*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Cain, K. (2007). Deriving word meanings from context: does explanation facilitate contextual analysis? *Journal of Research in Reading*, *30*(4), 347-359.

Cameron, D. (1997). Demythologizing sociolinguistics. In N. Coupland, & A. Jaworski, A. (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics: A reader and coursebook* 55-67. New York: MacMillan.

Carrick, L. (2001). Readers theater resources-Online and off-line. *The Reading Teacher, 54*, 514.

Chard, D., Vaughn, S., & Tyler, B. (2002). A synthesis of research on effective interventions for building reading fluency with elementary students with learning disabilities. J*ournal of Learning Disabilities, 35*, 386-406.

Dowhower, S. L. (1994). Repeated reading revisited: Research into practice.*Reading & Writing Quarterly: Overcoming Learning Difficulties*, *10*(4), 343-358.

Hickman, P., Pollard-Durodola, S., & Vaughn, S. (2004). Storybook reading: Improving vocabulary and comprehension for English-language learners. *The Reading Teacher*, *57*(8), 720-730.

Huang, K., & Nation, I. S. P. (1989). Reducing the vocabulary load and encouraging vocabulary learning through reading newspaper. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 6, 323-335.

Elis, N. (1995). Consciousness in second language acquisition: A review of field studies and laboratory experiment. *Language Awareness, 4*, 123-146.

Fisher, D., Flood, J., Lapp, D., & Frey, N. (2004). Interactive read-louds: Is there a common set if implementation practices. *The Reading Teachers*, *58*, pp 8-17.

Jenkins, J. R., Stein, M. L., & Wysocki, K. (1984). Learning vocabulary through reading. *American Educational Research Journal*, *21*(4), 767-787.

Laufer, B. (1991). How much lexis is necessary for reading comprehension? In P. J. L. Arnaud & H. Bejoint (Eds.), Vocabualry and applied linguistics (pp.126-132). Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Laufer, B. & Nation, P. (1999). A vocabulary-size test of controlled productive ability. *Language Testing*, *16*(1), 33-51.

Matsuoko, W., & Hirsh, D. (2010). Vocabulary learning through reading: Does an ELT course book provide good opportunities? *Reading in foreign language. 22*(1), 56-70.

Mason, B. (2004). Vocabulary acquisition through storytelling. Paper presented at

PAC5, Vladivostok, Russia.

McMaster, J. C. (1998). "Doing" literature: Using Drama to build literacy. *The Reading Teacher, 51(7), 574- 584).*

Morris, E. W. (2011). *The effects of readers' theater on reading fluency and attitudes towards reading*. (Master's thesis). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (Accession order No: AAT 1502793)

Nataporn Srichamnong. (2009). Incidental EFL Vocabulary Learning: The effects of interactive multiple-choice glosses. Paper presented at *ICT for Language Learning*, Florence, Italy.

Nation, P., & Waring, R. (1997). Vocabulary size, text coverage and word list. In Schmitt, N. & McCarthy, M. (Ed.), *Vocabulary: Description, Acquisition and Pedagogy*: Cambridge University Press, p. 6-19.

Rasinski, T. V.(2006). Reading fluency instruction: Moving beyond accuracy, automaticity, and prosody. *The Reading Teacher*, *59*, 704-706.

Rashidi, N., & Ganbari Adivi, A. (2010). Incidental EFL vocabulary learning: The effects of interactive multiple-choice glosses. J*ournal of English Language, 53*(217), 111-129.

Rees, R. M. (2005). *The impact of participation in readers theaters on reading attitudes and fluency skills among ninth grade students in an alternativeprogram.* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Akron, United States.

Rinehart, S. (1999). Don't think for a minute that I'm getting up there: Opportunities for readers' theater in a tutorial for children with reading problems. *Journal of Reading Psychology, 20*, 71-89.

Santoro, L. E., Chard, D.J., Howard, L., & Baker, S.K. (2008). Making the very most of classroom read-alounds to promote comprehension and vocabulary. *The Reading Teacher*, *61*(5), 396-408.

Schmidt, R. (1993). Awareness and second language acquisition. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *13*, 206-226.

Schmidt, R. (1995). Consciousness and foreign language learning: A tutorial role of attention and awareness in learning. In R. Schmidt (Ed.), *Attention and Awareness in Foreign Language Learning*,. Honolulu: University of Hawai'I, Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center, pp. 1-63.

Schmidt, R. (2001). Attention In P. Robinson (Ed.), *Cognition and Second Language Instruction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 3-32.

Schmidt, R. (2008). The role of consciousness in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, *11*(2), 129-158.

Smith, D. M. (2011). *Readers theater: Its effectiveness in improving reading fluency, student motivation, and attitudes toward reading among second-grade students*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (Accession order No: AAT 3483738)

Swanborn, M. S. L., & de Glopper, K. (2002). The impact of reading purpose on incidental word learning from context. *Language Learning, 52*, 95-117

Young, C., & Rasinski, T. (2009). Implementing readers theater as an approach to classroom fluency approach. *The Reading Teacher, 63*(1), 4-13.

About the Authors

Ch'ng Looi Chin is a lecturer at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak Campus. She holds a B. Sc. (TESL) degree and a M.A (Applied Linguistics) degree. She is involved in research pertaining to language assessments and ELT teaching methodologies.