

Popsicle Simile: An Innovative Tool in Promoting Creative Writing among Rural Primary School ESL Learners

Imy Tracy Madut¹, Melor Md Yunus²
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia
emie78@gmail.com¹, melor@ukm.edu.my²

Abstract: This qualitative study seeks to explore how “Popsicle Simile” works as an innovative tool of learning simile and writing creatively. Through lesson observations and interviews, this study aims to develop a fuller understanding of the motivations that drive teachers to adopt this innovative tool and the considerations they have when using it in the teaching and learning of core content. This study thus emphasizes the need to promote 21st century skills and academic content knowledge. Participants for this study were 5 primary school teachers in one of the rural primary schools in Padawan, Sarawak. The findings indicate that by engaging with the innovative “Popsicle Simile”, learners are able to generate content through relevant lexical search and write coherent paragraphs in creative writing. It is also beneficial to ESL teachers and educators, as it can be as an alternative tool which can assist them in teaching creative writing. It is suggested that future research should include the perceptions of the pupils and English language teachers from other schools towards the tool as well.

Keywords: innovation, ESL learners, primary schools, creative writing, motivation

Innovation in teaching is helpful in providing adequate information as well as knowledge. Innovative materials are created for native learners of that language and it is used in the classroom to help learners to perform well in learning the language. Using innovative material is an alternative and untraditional ways of teaching which helps students to acquire an effective communicative competence in the target language. Moreover, the use innovative materials in ESL classroom benefit the teachers to bridge the gap between the classroom knowledge and students’ participation in the classroom. It is not totally opposite of traditional class but it is a fun way to make the traditional classes more interactive and student-centered. Just as the curriculum evolves to include new knowledge and skills that students need for the 21st century, professional development for educators become critical to equip them as designers of exciting learning experiences. Teachers’ preparation and professional development programs would require continual innovation to develop a generation of teachers who can actualize this vision (Hong & Kwek, n.d.). Effective and efficient learning materials need to be developed, implemented, and continuously improved. Research should be unremittingly performed to better understand the effectiveness of those innovative tools and their implications in the educational field. The focus of the present study was to investigate the effectiveness of using innovative materials to help EFL learners enhance their vocabulary and achieve better writing ability. The challenge remains how to best improve EFL learning and teaching. Furthermore, teachers’ motivation on the use of innovative material is an educational tool for promoting creative writing among the young ESL learners. Those who study or learn English as a second language need a good production of material and practice in learning the second language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing is likely to be a challenging task for ESL students who are easily bored with the conventional approach. While many educators today viewed that these learners are impossible to engage, game designers are solving with enviable success the dilemma that educators still grapple with: getting students to master something that is time-consuming and challenging, and derive pleasure from it (Hong & Kwek, n.d.). In Malaysia, students who are from rural areas and low socio-economy background will have trouble in writing as they seldom use English in their daily conversation and have limited access to English. In general, “writing is the skill that most Malaysian students are least proficient in” according to Chitravelu, Sithamparam, & Teh, (2005) as cited by (Zakaria, Yunus, Nazri, & Shah, 2016). Rather, many students, particularly adult learners, have a limited knowledge of English vocabulary words according to Chen (1998) as cited by Lee (2011).

Writing is an important area of literacy that supports comprehension, critical and innovative thinking over content areas and students needs a conducive environment to practice the habits and processes of successful writers. Writing skill plays a vital role for the instruction of second-language learners because it is not only an effective tool for the evolvement of academic language proficiency and a vital skill for academic success, but it also allows second language learners to enhance their perception of knowledge gaps (Warchauer, 2010). In the ESL classroom, the teacher tries to enable the students to be proficient in mastering the language skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking. As to facilitate above intention, materials, teaching aids, course plan, practice, evaluation, etc. are produced. Using appropriate materials can help the students to gauge their understanding of the lesson as well as to scaffold them during a lesson in the classroom.

One way of enhancing students’ motivation and engagement to write is to provide opportunities for them to engage at a more meaningful level with the language through refocusing their writing classes to make them relevant to their social and cultural context as well as designing writing tasks which have meaning and interest to them and offer opportunities for social interaction and self-expression (Roschelle et al., 2006). As stated by Huang (2004) in Bamanger (2015), another difficulty that many language learners might face is their limited understanding of classroom lectures and materials. Literary texts such as poetry, prose, novels, short stories can help the teachers to approach the students with a humanistic touch (Murali, 2016).

Advantages of using innovative and interesting materials

Providing learners with suitable materials can scaffold learner’s ability in developing language skills in the classroom. Therefore, when teachers are concerned with helping their students to develop reading skills, they should think about the methods of teaching being used and materials being taught to students (Rashid & Majid, 2014). In addition, teaching materials help to bridge the gap between the language being taught in the classroom and the language used by real people (Genhard, 1996).

In order for appropriate and situated methodology and learning to happen, tools need to be sufficiently flexible that they can be tailored to specific contexts for teaching and learning. Studies have shown that teachers with positive previous experience of self-access are much more likely to motivate their students to use it (Pickering & Gunashekar, 2015). Motivation is an essential element of successful language acquisition and is a dynamic process subject to continuous flux (Dornyei, 2001). Williams and Burden (1997) as cited by (Lo & Hyland, 2007) suggest that each individual L2 learner’s motivation is influenced by both external factors

related to the socio- cultural and contextual background of the learner and internal factors related to the individual learner. Internal factors include the learners' attitudes towards the activity, its intrinsic interest, and the perceived relevance and value of the activity. As in a study done by Lira (2012), a proper classroom environment; teacher support and respect students' ideas; will make students become motivated to work with peers.

Furthermore, Yunus & Salehi (2012) stressed on the importance of integrating technology into a pedagogical tool in which it was a more student-centered approach. It is important to provide suitable tools to overcome students' weaknesses in writing creatively. The use of innovative materials such as popsicle simile as an educational tool in learning can motivate learners especially the young learners in rural school to learn simile in a fun and meaningful way. Students can learn the real life experiences inside the classroom in which they can participate in making the materials based on their understanding of the lesson. The use of popsicle and pop-up simile book are some of the educational tools that teacher can use in the classroom to engage young learners in the 21st century learning environment.

Since no one single book will be totally embraced or rejected, teachers are given a lot of leeway to pick out any and all texts that they believe to be theme-appropriate, culturally relevant, and that match the target learners' current state of language development (Tseng, 2010). According to a study done by Harmer (1991) as cited by Belaid & Murray, (2015), he states that the use of authentic materials would improve and develop the learners' listening and reading skills in the target language, despite the heavy use of textbook materials. It is not important for teachers to define whether the materials are authentic or genuine materials rather teacher should be careful and attentive when choosing authentic materials for a particular classroom (Lira, 2012).

The advantages of using the innovative materials as an educational tool motivate teachers as they can curb the shortcomings of teaching creative writing among the ESL learners especially those in rural schools.

Objectives

1. To identify teachers' motivation in using innovative material (popsicle simile) in teaching creative writing.
2. To create fun and meaningful learning on similes among primary school ESL learners.

Questions

1. What motivate teachers in using innovative popsicle simile?
2. What are the advantages of using innovative material (popsicle simile book) in ESL classroom?

METHODOLOGY

The study took place in a rural primary (elementary) school in Padawan, Sarawak Malaysia where the researcher was teaching. This school was one of the low-enrolment primary schools in Padawan. This study involved 5 preservice ESL teachers who have been teaching for three to 25 years. Most of the teachers believe that the hardest part in teaching language art is for the students to write creatively. English was, however, a second language for the vast majority of the students in the class, and they were not, on the whole, fluent and confident English language speakers and writers. In writing, most of them showed a heavy reliance on rote memorization of essay types and reformulation of model answers. This study employs a qualitative design by collecting the data through observation and interview.

This study will be conducted during English Language subject during Language Art session as allocated by the Ministry of Education. The first step to this study was, the researchers had to get the teachers to get familiar with the materials. The use of pop-up book is

used for this mean. Due to a small number of students, the researchers found out the best solution for this matter was by using the pop-up simile book. The similes are taken from the textbook based on the topic taught for the day. Later, the students have to list their preferable similes in order to create a simple poem. This is to help the students to compose creative writing among them.

During the teaching and learning process, the researchers conducted observations for two times. This observation is using 'Yes' and 'No' indicators. The main focus of the observation were on; (1) students' participation and, (2) students' outcomes. (1) Students' participation focused on the how well the students master the language skill as stated in Standard Document KSSR, the students understand the concept of using simile in composing creative writing and they gave feedback on the lesson. As for (2) students' outcomes; the creativity of the students in composing are writing with similes learned and to be able to present their outcomes. The observation was using 'Yes' and 'No' indicators.

The researchers also conducted an interview for the teachers. The interview was done after the lesson or during recess time. This was to prevent any problems during intercession teaching and learning process. The interview was conducted informally to avoid partialities. There were six questions for this interview. The questions were as follow;

1. What do you think of today's lesson?
2. Do you think it is easy for the students to learn simile using the material?
3. Do you think the usage of popsicle simile interesting?
4. Did your students enjoy the lesson?
5. Did your students able to write simple descriptive writing using the popsicle simile?
6. Do you think the materials motivate you to use innovative materials in your ESL classroom?

The interviews answers were analyzed by identifying (1) teachers' motivation and (2) advantages of using the materials.

Sampling

Respondents are selected through purposive sampling. The study involved 5 pre-service ESL primary school teachers. All of them are experience pre service ESL teachers who have been teaching for 3-25 years.

Data Collection

The data is collected during and after the teaching and learning lesson. The skill for the targeted skill is taken from the Standard Document for KSSR; 4.3 By the end of the 6-year primary schooling, pupils will be able to plan, organize and produce creative works for enjoyment. Hence, the data for both instruments are based on the Content Standard in Standard Document KSSR stage two for primary school from Malaysia Education Ministry.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is document analyses which are divided into themes. The themes are (1) teachers' motivation (2) the advantages. The data is corresponding with RQ and RO.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study was carried out on the third and fourth week of June during Language and Art for English Language subject. The findings below were based on two instruments which were observation and semi structured interview.

Observation - Students' Participation

Mastering the language skill for creative writing

The rationale to have this lesson for the students is to get them to master the language skill as required in Standard Document of KSSR. During the lesson, it showed that the 4 students were able to master the language skill required. This was shown by (C1) how well the students participate in the class during the Q and A (Questioning and answering session). (C2) The students were able to apply the similes in for of list of words which were related with the topic taught for the week. The students also showed their passion in finding suitable similes in order to compose their very own creative writing. Another positive feature of the students' reaction to the new materials was that they saw more opportunities to voice their own thoughts and feelings. At this point the students are required to compose a poem based on their similes list. However, there is only one student who was having difficulties in using similes in her writing due to lack of vocabulary and she is not competent with the language. However, the result is amazing. (C3) Three of them managed to help their friends by finding the similes with meaning and sample of sentence. Their feedback for the lesson was encouraging and they like to do more on this particular skill.

Observation - Students' outcomes

For this area of observation, (C4) the students were able to create their own popsicles similes poem. (C5) They were also able to give comments to their friends' poem by rating them with similes and give their opinion on how to improve the poems.

Interview

The teachers interviewed by the end of the lesson, which was at the closure stage of teaching and learning process. Most of the teachers answered the question given based on their teaching in ESL classroom. This finding was supported by the interviews

What do you think of today's lesson?

4 out of 5 teachers gave almost the same answer to this question. They stated that it was an interesting lesson as suitable materials were used and the students participated actively during the lesson. The teachers also stated that the lesson was fun and interesting as their students can use similes to write creatively and the writing are more interesting to read. However, one of the teachers believed that more similes should be introduced during the lesson using the materials.

Mr Paulus: The lesson was fun but the simile list inside the book is limited. Even the pupils asked the teacher to teach them how to make the pop up simile book.

Do you think it is easy for the students to learn simile using the material?

All of the teachers stated that it was easier for their students to learn similes as it can help to make the writing more interesting to be read. In addition, the teachers also mentioned that by applying similes in their writing, the students will get extra mark for sentence construct in their exam. According to one of the senior teachers, similes were challenging thing to be taught in the classroom. However, by learning it in a fun and entertaining way, the students had the

passion to produce more writing not only for poem but in other writing types such as short story and narrative story.

Madam Helena: This pop-up book makes it easier for the students to learn simile. I was having problem when I tried to teach them simile during previous lesson but..emmm.. Today I can see that the students were enjoying themselves making the popsicle simile.

Do you think the usage of Popsicle simile interesting?

All of the teachers thought that, by using interesting material in teaching simile, it does help the students to learn to write creatively. They also stated that the use of innovative materials using Popsicle can be applied in teaching other language skills especially grammar. One of the teachers, Madam Gita said that "... I think we can use this to teach antonym also..."

Did your students enjoy the lesson?

All of the teachers mentioned that their students enjoyed the lesson and some of the students were asking the same activities to be done during next lesson. The teachers also stated that they prefer to have hands-on activities with the students so that they can understand the topic better especially in language art and creative writing. Miss Pammy, who teach Year 2 classroom mentioned that even the low learner students can write simple shape poem using the popsicle simile.

Miss Pammy: This material is colorful. My weak student participated actively during the lesson. They wanted to do the activities again.

Did your students able to write simple descriptive writing using the popsicle simile?

4 out of 5 teachers stated that their students gave positive feedback in learning the similes. According to the teachers, the students enjoyed making the popsicle simile using the colorful and at the same time looking at the pop up books. The Year 5 teacher also mentioned that their students can compose a simple poem from the popsicle simile that they had done. The teachers also found the task was challenging and it was such a great fun for their students to explore more about similes.

Do you think the materials motivate you to use innovative materials in your ESL classroom?

All of the teachers agreed that they felt motivated to use the popsicle simile as a tool to teach creative writing. One of the teachers admitted that she was having problem when teaching creative writing to the Year 3 students. But when she used the materials in the classroom, her students participated actively and they can write simple poem using the materials. She felt motivated to use the material and will try to adapt the material for other language skills.

LIMITATION & RECOMMENDATION

The present study on using authentic materials at tertiary level has several limitations. First of all, the total number of sample is very small. If there were more population then the result could have been more valid. Moreover, the study is done with 5 pre-service ESL teachers in a rural primary school. The survey could be done with the teachers of other schools as well. It could also focus on students' perspectives on teachers' use of authentic material in classroom. The review of related literature in this paper contains a number of fruitful ideas that allow attention to focus on the following implications 1) teachers should encourage students to play an active role in the learning process; 2) instructional materials should be based on multiple strategy approach such as 'reciprocal teaching'; 3) teachers can make a good use of social technological tools to teach the culture of the target language.

CONCLUSION

Although some of the findings of the study were quite unexpected, they were considered by the researcher to provide support for incorporating suitable materials for writing creatively based on these young students' life experiences into their classes. English teachers at primary school need to have the expertise to engage their students with delightful experiences of studying a second language in general and reading and writing in particular. Learning to read and write are the indispensable educational achievements in the primary school pupils. Reading and writing are closely related and are the gateway to learning productivity in today's digital age. With the appropriate reading and writing materials, a conducive environment, and teachers with adequate educational qualifications, good reading skills will help produce pupils who perform well in other subjects. By using appropriate tool for teaching creative writing, students can engage in the lesson actively.

*Note:

All names of individuals discussed here are pseudonyms

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