

Improving Nigerian and Malaysian Primary School Students Vocabulary Skills Using Flash Cards

Iliyasu Hussaini¹, Lee Ming Foong¹, Dikko Suleiman², Abba Aji Abubakar³

¹Faculty of Technical & Vocational Education, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia.

²Universal Basic Education Commission, Abuja, Nigeria.

³Faculty of Educational Studies, University Putra Malaysia.

Corresponding Author: Iliyasu Hussaini

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ABSTRACT

Flashcards are becoming very popular in the globe, the aim of this article is to introduce the importance of using flashcards, how to use them in language teaching. Especially in Nigerian and Malaysian primary levels and to construct an actual purpose for language use and offer a reasonable perspective for language study. This article is will introduce how Flashcards could be utilized in teaching vocabulary in three phases of planning, presentation, and review phases. It is recommended that language teachers should use flashcards when learning English vocabulary in Nigerian and Malaysian primary schools.

Key words: Flashcards, Vocabulary, Primary students and foreign language.

INTRODUCTION

English is the official language in Nigeria. It is accorded this as a result of different languages in Nigeria. To easily communicate in school and workplace there is a need for a universal language that can be spoken by all citizens. ^[1] For Nigerian primary students to perform well in English, it is hence essential for them to communicate fluently in The English language. Nigeria is a multilingual country with different ethnic groups, each of these tribal groups speaks a different language making it hard to communicate with fellow countrymen from the different ethnic group, and it is equally not possible to learn how to speak all the languages. As a country, therefore, it becomes necessary to unify the language for the purpose of political, social and academic activities. It is, therefore, essential for students' to have basic proficiency in English because all subjects

are taught in English except language subjects (Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo). In Malaysia, English is a foreign language. Just like Nigeria, Malaysia is a multilingual country, but a bilingual system of education was adopted. Bahasa Malayu is adopted as the official language in Malaysia, while English is taught as a subject in schools. ^[2]

Background of the Study

As an official language, English is used as the medium of instruction and also taught as a subject in all Nigerian schools; most of the school curriculums are communicated and planned in English language except for primary 1-3 who use the language of the immediate environment as the medium of instruction. English is used as the medium of instruction from primary four to tertiary level. The poor performance of learners in English at primary level consequently affects other levels of their educational career. However,

the poor performance of the student at primary level has caused mass failures in the final examination of learners in the Secondary School examination; this failure has significantly affected student's entry requirement.

For any student to be admitted into a Nigerian University, he/she must a minimum of five passes, the total number of subjects to be registered by any candidate is nine, so a pass in the English language is mandatory while four passes in the remaining eight subjects can be accepted to fulfill the entry requirement. Failure to meet this requirement has made it difficult for some students to gain admission into the university. In a study conducted by, [3] they stated in their study that the report of the West African examination council shows poor student achievement in English in the examinations from 1996 to 2007, they also stated the current statistics revealed by the federal ministry of education on the statistics of students achievement in their West African examination council in English examination shows no improvement in the students performance.

Hence in 2007, out of 1,275,466 candidates, 325,754 (25.5%) passed English Language with other four subjects while, in 2008, 188,442 (13.76%) passed English with additional Four subjects (out of 1,369,42. This was even worse than 2007. In 2009, out of 1,373,009 candidates, 356,981 (25.9%) passed. The improvement in that year was appreciable. However, in 2010 the percentage of students who passed English Language with four other subjects dropped to 24.9%, because only 337,071 passed out of 1,351,557 Candidates." This revelation is very disturbing because it shows that in 2007 On 26% of the Nigerian students were qualified to enter the university, 14% in 2008, 26% in 2009 and 25% in 2010. On the average, only 23% of students are qualified to enter into the university. There is no replacement for English language in Nigeria because almost all the school subjects are taught in English and most of the school curriculum and

textbooks are written and taught in English. So for any learner to be able to comprehend the lesson very well then he/she needs to be proficient in English language.

Students in Malaysia face similar language learning difficulties that are faced by Nigerian Learners. In Malaysia, also, many studies revealed little English proficiency of learners. As challenging as the case could be, Malaysian students were found to have weak language skills. As stated in the study conducted by, [4] he studied how private and public college and university students' perceived the learning of different English skills to be. They mentioned that they had difficulties in learning all the language skills. Lack of confidence, teachers' method of teaching and unfamiliarity with several English vocabularies are some of the factors affecting their proficiency level. This article, therefore, aims at complementing the teaching of English by enhancing students' vocabulary skills using flashcards.

Literature Review

Several factors have been identified to be affecting Nigerian and Malaysian students English academic achievement. The interference of the L1 in learning English has greatly affected student's proficiency in the second language. In Nigeria and Malaysia, many English teachers communicate in the first language when teaching the target language; this factor has resulted to learners low proficiency skills in English making it difficult for the learners to communicate in the target language. According to [5,6] using mother tongue in the school as the medium of instruction contributes towards learners poor English proficiency skills. To strengthen learners English proficiency skills. Therefore, they suggested the use of the target language as the language of instruction both in the class and after the lesson, with this; both parties (teachers and learners) English proficiency skills will be enhanced, and qualified language teachers should be employed in teaching the English language.

Limited use of teaching aids when teaching English is another factor influencing student's poor performance in English. This is supported by many studies where it was found out that the poor performance of learners in English is as a result of teachers frequently using textbooks in their lesson always, and when teaching aids are used, they are not adequately provided in the lesson. They emphasized on using teaching aids or improvising teaching aids when teaching English as the solution to learners little English proficiency skills. [7-9]

Additionally, teacher's method of teaching is another factor promoting students little proficiency skills in English. Studies have shown that the use of the traditional method in teaching English is among the factors hindering students' academic achievement in English. Studies such as, [10-12] all found the improper method used by teachers to be one of the challenges of effective language teaching.

Effectiveness of Using Flashcards in Teaching Vocabulary

Different studies show that when flashcards are used in teaching vocabulary, student's vocabulary skills are improved. [13] conducted a study on the effect of using flash cards on student's vocabulary knowledge. To ascertain the level of student's vocabulary skills, a pre-test was administered to two different groups of students (control and experimental group), no significant difference was established in the pre-test, to know how efficient the use of this technique could be, a treatment using flashcard was administered to the experimental group while the control group was taught vocabulary in the traditional way. At the end of their study, another test (post-test) was administered to the two groups, analysis of the post-test shows that there was a significant difference between the performances of the two groups, the experimental group have a higher achievement score than the control group. This highperformance is related to the use of flash cards in teaching the experimental

groups some vocabularies. Similar studies supported these findings on the use of flashcards as an effective means of improving students' vocabulary mastery skills. [14-16]

Moreover, the use of flashcards in teaching vocabulary is not limited only to elementary learners. In a study conducted by, [15] they conducted a comparison on undergraduate student's knowledge using flashcards and word lists, after the experiment, the result revealed that, students taught vocabulary using flashcards have better mean scores in the post-test.

Importance of Learning Vocabulary

According to, [17] when learners have an adequate vocabulary, they have a better chance of expressing their opinions when they are learning a language different from their mother tongue. He is the view that the mastery of a second language is pending on how many words the individual identifies. Learning vocabulary is vital in any foreign language, adequacy of new words in a foreign language inspire learners to communicate in the target language. [18,19] Weak vocabulary leads to little proficiency skills in foreign language. This is stated in the studies of, [20,21] all reported that vocabulary knowledge is essential for second language learners and that lack of vocabulary skills is among the factors affecting students English proficiency skills.

Flashcards and Vocabulary

Flashcards are sets of *cards* bearing information, as words or numbers, on either or both sides, used in classroom drills or private study. The teacher can display a question on the *card* and an answer overleaf. This technique is a great way to improving learner's vocabulary. Whereas vocabulary, on the other hand, is set of words within a language that are, students or individuals make use of in communicating or learning a language.

A vocabulary usually develops with age, and serves as a useful and fundamental tool for communication and acquiring knowledge. [13] Acquiring an extensive vocabulary skill is among the challenges in

learning a second/foreign language. In every lesson, the teacher has to describe how to apply the new words in the lesson, the effect of this will allow the students to comprehend the meanings and learn how to use them. If the student's, comprehend the words before the actual lesson, they will easily understand the lesson. It is, therefore, necessary to acquire some basic vocabulary skills so as to overcome the challenges that teachers and learners encounter towards acquiring proficiency in the English language in Nigeria and Malaysia. Vocabulary acquisition is essential in second language learning, if students are taught vocabulary, they can easily retain new words and use them to communicate. There are different ways of teaching vocabulary, but this paper will focus on the use of flashcards to teach students vocabulary in three phases:

Planning Phase

To effectively learn vocabulary using flashcards, the first point is to brainstorm ideas, this activity can play a major role towards enhancing students level of comprehension in a lesson, it also makes students interest towards learning to be positive, and this will make them enthusiastic to actively participate in the lesson. ^[22] Brainstorming using flashcards provides teachers with numerous approaches in teaching. It creates interest and excitement towards participating in class work. For this reason, it is essential to brainstorm ideas at the beginning of every lesson. The teacher should present pictures of some of the new words that students will use in the teaching.

Flash a picture on a flashcard and ask the students to recognise what is it, teachers can also conceal what is on the flash card, then gradually disclose the picture. Ask the students the name of the object displayed. The advantage of conducting this activity is to give the students a visual representation of the new word to be learned. When they identify the picture, then they can match the new word with the picture. This is to enable them

remember the word when they see the picture.

Ask the students questions like who is in the picture? What is he holding? On what is the boy sitting? Summarise all the responses by the students but don't pass any judgment at this stage. Persuade all the students to contribute to creating ideas nevertheless don't compel them to participate. Allow students to ask the contributors to shed more light on their responses if they find any difficulty in comprehending the answer. Sort out similar ideas and group them. In the end, analyse all the responses, pick the answers that are correct and bring them forward and take off the responses that are not feasible. The advantage of this activity is that students are encouraged to share their thoughts and concepts in the class. The teacher or any member of the class should not criticise any comment. The teacher should entertain all comments.

Presentation Phase

At this stage, give the students idea on the objectives of the lesson through demonstration. For instance, display scenes of a school, materials that students regularly use at school (school bag, sandals, school uniform). The idea is to give them a visualization of how the school looks like. Since they all have daily access to these materials, presenting them will make the students comprehend the lesson very easy. Show the students materials on a flashcard.

When the students have a visual of all the materials needed in the lesson, write down the names of these materials on the board or on a word card, ask students to identify the materials based on the names written on the board/word card. Analyse all the responses made by the students, select the correct answers. Describe all the new words using the pictures and the words placed on the board/word card citing relevant examples. During this stage, students are expected to have the competencies to identify all the new words that they will use in the lesson. The teacher narrates the story by reading aloud, after

reading aloud the students reads after the teacher. Design all the scenes about the story on flashcards with the names of the objects and characters on the flashcards. However, the teacher will illustrate the flashcards of the particular event or object to the students concurrently when he is narrating the story; he should display the flashcards. Stop at different points of the story and explain further for better comprehension.

Another idea at this stage is for the teacher to arrange many flashcards showing some characters, place, time and event. Write down list of different words of the characters, place, time and event arranged on the flashcards. Instruct the students to select the correct words that best describe the scenes on the flashcards and ask them to construct their own stories using all the scenes and words on the flashcards.

Review Phase

After narrating the story, evaluate student's mastery of new vocabulary words. To do this, reflect on the responses students guess, compare them with the actual meaning of the words in the passage. Ask students to choose individually or in groups any of the object/word/events displayed on the flashcard, construct a new sentence, it does not have to relate to the story. This is to assess student's ability to use new words in similar or different conditions. Instruct the students to select any of the flashcards, use the words on the card and ask their peers any question; this will help the students to think about the new words and remember them without much stress. Discussion on all the activities should follow up to clarify any difficulty students are facing. This activity will help the teacher to tackle the problem of silence by some of the student's. The activities may provide chances for the students to communicate; this can enhance their fluency and confidence towards communicating in the target language.

CONCLUSION

Several studies reviewed in this shows that flashcards are vital materials towards enhancing student's vocabulary skills. In support of this, this article proposed three (3) phases through which language teachers can design activities for teaching vocabulary. Language teachers can examine the effectiveness of these stages by applying these steps in teaching vocabulary.

Based on this, it is recommended that language teachers should design different stages when using flashcards to teach vocabulary. Teachers should incorporate flashcards into activities, divide students into groups; instruct each group to use the new words on the cards to perform different activities (for example: ask them to construct new sentences). Language teachers should always integrate follow-up activities when teaching vocabulary; this will help the teacher to evaluate the lesson and make sure that the learning objectives are met. Teachers should use memorizing games and activities to help the students to recall new words. Hopefully, this study might serve as an additional reference in other research.

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