

EFFECTS OF DICTIONARY USAGE ON STUDENTS' READING AND COMPREHENSION ABILITY

By

Jacqueline Martin

Sek. Men. Keb. Sri Aman,
9500 Sri Aman.

Abstract

Reading constitutes a large part of the students' learning process and failure in doing so could cause a decline interest in reading English materials in and outside the classroom. This paper presents the findings of an action research on the effects of dictionary usage on students' reading and comprehension ability. The study involved five students of Form 5F in SMK Sri Aman. For the purpose of this study, observation, questionnaires, interviews and 3 series of reading and comprehension exercises methods were used to collect data. The research outcomes from the procedures conducted indicated improved ability to comprehend among the participants. The encouraging outcomes are shown in term of students' increased marks and positive attitude towards reading.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

How can I help my students to improve their reading and comprehension ability? This is one of the questions I always ask myself every time I felt frustrated when my students could not understand and complete the reading comprehension exercises as expected. Today's classrooms are filled with diverse learners who possess a variety level of proficiency in certain subjects. In the teaching process, I found that majority of the students who are very weak in English in Form 5F could not read effectively which prevented them from making progress and gaining high scores in the English tests or examination. This scenario led me to start emphasising on using the dictionary in learning vocabulary in order to help the students improve their reading and comprehension ability.

It is important for the students to acquire as much vocabulary as possible when learning the English language and any other subjects that are taught in English such as Mathematics and Science. If the students' vocabulary improved, the students' ability in learning could also be improved as well as increasing their interest in learning the language itself.

As an English teacher for upper forms in a secondary school, I am intrigued by the lack of English vocabulary among my students and that has become one of the obstacles in learning the language. I was curious about the crucial need of dictionary to help them in reading and comprehend reading texts. After a year of teaching in the school, I could see that not every student owns a dictionary or uses it as one of the sources of reference especially during the English lessons. They preferred to ask their teachers the meaning of difficult or unfamiliar words. Due to the poor English proficiency among my students, most of the time I had to translate even simple and common words into the Malay or Iban language to help them understand any text in English and get them interested to participate in the lesson. I knew that this is an ineffective way in helping the students to learn the foreign language because they tend to forget easily unless they write the words and the meanings in their notes or exercise books and do revisions. I have been stressing on the importance of having and using the dictionary to my students. However the responses were not encouraging. It seem that the usage of traditional reference such as dictionary had been side-lined or forgotten.

Therefore, I hope that through this research I would find out what are the effects of the usage of dictionary on my students' reading and comprehension ability? If the effects are positive, I would definitely encourage the students to use this traditional and yet simple method to help improve the students' vocabulary, which will then help them comprehend better when reading English texts. If this happen, I believe the students will feel more confident as we go through the process of reading and learning together. I also hope to encourage reading and eventually to inculcate the reading habit among the students.

THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Among other, the objectives of this study are to:

- i) assist the students in Form 5F to improve their reading and comprehension ability through the usage of dictionary,
- ii) find out the effects of dictionary usage on students' reading and comprehension ability,
- iii) encourage the usage of dictionary among the students, and
- iv) improve my practice in teaching reading and comprehension.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

After facing the problem in teaching reading and comprehension, observing my students' attitude for quite sometimes and also as one of the attempts to improve my teaching practice, I always asked myself on ways to improve their reading and comprehension ability. That created my research question that is "What are the effects of dictionary usage on students' reading and comprehension ability?"

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study took place in Form 5F class during reading and comprehension activities as well as in the school's staffroom. The participants were selected randomly and the study was conducted based on personal observations, informal interviews with the five participants and three series of reading comprehension exercises. This group of students were from the weak English proficiency level. Through my observation and analysis, these five students have the potential to pass an English test or examination if there is proper guide on ways to improve their vocabulary and English comprehension ability. They have the initiative and interest to learn English but their main obstacle was the lack of English vocabulary due to among others, the lack of awareness on the importance of using the dictionary as one of the main reference resources in learning the language. During the informal interview with them, each expressed concern on their learning problem and had the desire to improve their reading and comprehension ability. These students were from rural areas in Sri Aman and came from poor and low educated families.

The methods used in data collection were:

Questionnaires

After selecting the participants, I distributed fifty questionnaires. The example of the questionnaire is on Appendix A. This is given to students to get their response on reading comprehension in English and the usage of dictionary among the students.

Interview

As for the participants, I interviewed them on 8th of March 2005 to get some information on their current reading skills and the approach they normally used in doing reading and comprehension exercise before I started the exercises procedure. The examples of questions posed are as on Appendix B. It is important to know this information as it would be easier for me to analyze the findings especially if there are any changes in participants in terms of their responses towards the usage of dictionary.

USAGE OF DICTIONARY

What I tried out in this study was giving the students three reading comprehension exercises. Each exercise had to be completed by the students without any discussion and dictionary as reference. This is then followed by the same exercise but the students are allowed to use the dictionary as a reference and still, they were not allowed to discuss among themselves. The marks for both the exercises were recorded. Once the exercises were completed, I repeated the cycle with another two reading and comprehension exercises. Again, the marks were recorded.

By repeatedly working their way through the various tasks of this 'standard exercise' (either in class or in the short sessions after the class hours), students are expected to improve their reading comprehension ability with various short English texts with the help of dictionary usage and eventually learn how to process the information in those texts more effectively.

Observation

Observations were done throughout the study which was from early March until end of May 2005 and notes were taken to record any qualitative information to help me in analysing the collected data at a later stage of this study. Any information such as facial expression and behaviour pattern were all recorded during the observations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the first questionnaires' result, all respondents agreed on the importance of English subject in school and the need to score the subject. 80% of the respondents admitted that they enjoyed reading English texts, despite their lacked of vocabulary and would share their English test results with their parents. Once again, all respondents were willing to find ways to improve their reading and comprehension skill despite 10% respondents said they feel that they could not improve their reading skill. 80% of the respondents claimed that they would get stomach ache when doing reading and comprehension exercises. However, all agreed that they would feel frustrated when they do not understand or make sense of their reading. 75% of them said that dictionary is an important source of reference; however, only 60% of the respondents own a dictionary. From that 60% respondent, only 60% of them frequently used dictionary.

Interesting results found when comparing the marks between the reading and comprehension exercises that were completed first without the aid of dictionaries and then followed by the exercises completed with the aid of dictionaries. Sample worksheet of exercises (with and without dictionary) of participants are shown here.

Nama : Anita

Kind and Selfless Friends

School was just over. It had been raining continuously for hours. Two friends, Gilbert and Seng Chai were waiting for a bus to take them home at a bus stop.
 The traffic seemed to be worse by the minute. The yellowish flood waters were spilling over from the drains.
 Out of the blue the boys heard a very loud sound of the car horns. They then saw a car that stopped in the flood waters. "Poor driver, he must be very sad!" Gilbert said to Seng Chai.
 In a twinkling of an eye, the boys ran to the car to lend a hand to the driver to get his car started. They pushed and pushed, using all their strength. Luckily, it was just a little Kancil, "Vroom..." the car at last started.
 The driver signaled to Gilbert and Seng Chai to get into the car. They quickly jumped in the car. As soon as they got home, they changed out of their wet uniform. They felt happy that they had helped the driver.

Sample of worksheet (without dictionary)

True/ False Statements

1. Gilbert and Seng Chai were on the way to their school. True ✓
2. It was raining when they were waiting for a bus. True ✓
3. There were a lot of vehicles on the road. False ✓
4. The car driver helped to push the car. True ✓
5. The boys went home by bus. False ✓

2/5

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Sample of worksheet (using dictionary)

True/ False Statements

1. Gilbert and Seng Chai were on the way to their school. False ✓
2. It was raining when they were waiting for a bus. False ✓
3. There were a lot of vehicles on the road. True ✓
4. The car driver helped to push the car. False ✓
5. The boys went home by bus. True ✓

2/5

Table 1 shows the results for each of the reading comprehension exercises completed with and without the aid of dictionaries.

Table 1: Participants' Marks for Three Series of Reading and Comprehension Exercises

Exercises Name of Student	Exercise 1		Exercise 2		Exercise 3	
	Without Dictionary	With dictionary	Without dictionary	With dictionary	Without dictionary	With dictionary
Anita	40	60	40	60	40	60
Kerandang	40	40	30	40	40	50
Kinta	40	50	20	50	40	60
Ovalisa	40	0	30	10	30	20
Susie	40	60	10	40	40	50

Results from Table 1 indicated that in the first reading comprehension exercise, three participants, Anita's, Kinta's and Susie's marks have increased after using the dictionary to complete the comprehension exercises. For the other two participants, Kerandang and Ovalisa, their marks remained the same. Throughout the one hour session, the participants seemed to be very eager in the activity. They paid full attention to the exercise and only turned and looked at me when I asked whether they have completed the exercises or not.

In the second reading comprehension exercises, one out of five participants, Ovalisa, showed a decrease in her marks even after using the dictionary to complete the exercise. The other four participants' marks increased. Through my observation, I noticed that Ovalisa looked uneasy where she was constantly moving her body, scratching her heads and looking up somewhere else while the other participants concentrated fully on the exercises given.

The last exercise showed similar results as the second reading comprehension exercises. All participants except Ovalisa indicated an increase in their marks after using the dictionary. From the first to last minute of the session, Ovalisa repeated the same behaviour in the previous session. This raised my curiosity to investigate the reasons for her behaviour.

To find what actually happen, I interviewed Ovalisa informally. She said that she did not really do the exercise seriously after the first session because of the lack of concentration and due to boredom. She did not pay full attention to the reading and comprehension handout given because she had read them before. According to her, she merely wanted to complete the task without thinking about scoring good marks in the exercises.

I also observed that the participants wrote meanings of words in Malay language that they found in the dictionary side-by-side to certain words in the reading comprehension exercises. There were signs of satisfaction and confidence on their faces every time they submitted the exercise for marking. They would smile and went off confidently.

Several different outcomes have been found in the quantitative results. My hypothesis was that students' reading comprehension (indicates by the marks) would increase if they use the dictionary as a tool in their reading. Based on the results for all the exercises conducted, four participants showed an increase in their marks. However, there was inconsistency for Ovalisa whereby her marks dropped after the first exercise even after using the dictionary. For the other four students, I could say that the usage of dictionary has positive effect on their marks.

After three series of reading and doing comprehension exercises, I distributed survey questionnaires for the participants to fill. They were required to tick the appropriate column of 'Yes', 'No' or 'Undecided' according to their individual answers in respond to the list of questions given. The example of the questionnaires is on Appendix C. The survey was administered on 14th June 2005 to get information on how they felt, their experiences when doing the exercises and on any changes in their knowledge on reading and comprehension ability.

The questionnaires were distributed after an English lesson. All the participants said that they understood the instructions and the questions given in the exercises but they were having difficulties in comprehending the reading texts. They claimed that the usage of dictionary had helped them a lot to comprehend the reading text and answer the comprehension questions given. All of them agreed that they felt more confident in their comprehension ability now and wanted to learn more on how to improve their English proficiency.

Below is the result of the questionnaires:

Questions	Number of participant(s)		
	Yes	No	Undecided
1. I understand what is expected of me when I do a reading comprehension exercise in English.	4	1	0
2. I understand the main idea of the text.	5	0	0
3. I can find supporting ideas for the main idea of the text.	4	1	0
4. I understand the test questions on reading and comprehension exercises.	4	1	0
5. I can focus on the questions and find the answers.	4	1	0
6. I apply reading strategies such as scanning, skimming and other skills when taking a reading comprehension exercises.	3	2	0
7. I feel relax when doing reading comprehension exercises.	4	1	0
8. I use dictionary to look up for meanings of unfamiliar words.	5	0	0
9. My marks are improving in reading comprehension exercises.	3	2	0
10. I feel more confident in my comprehension ability now.	5	0	0

REFLECTION

In the course of completing the research from the month of February till June 2005, I had encountered many problems. First and foremost, I was having time constraint. It is true that the action research is actually an on-going process and already started without me realizing it. But then, to put everything together in terms of collecting relevant data, design and administer the questionnaires, to have meetings with the students outside of school hours, analyze the data and put the findings into words really need some time.

Finding free time even for an hour session to spend with the participants was also quite a struggle for me. Time constraint would not be so much a big deal if I could have conducted and integrated the data collection during my lessons in the class. Fortunately, I did not have many problems in getting all the participants together because they were very cooperative and committed to get involved in the research. Moreover, they were all staying in the school's hostel. Their keen cooperation and sense of commitment to my study actually motivated me to sacrifice some of my limited free time to continue with the study.

Some of my meetings with the participants were conducted outside of the classroom due to the conducive atmosphere in Form 5F class. The class was too noisy and had a lot of other distractions such as students wandering around and going in and out of the classroom. It was impossible for the participants to pay attention and participate actively in the research project. Therefore, I decided to conduct the meeting sessions (three times) in the staffroom after school hours, normally from three o'clock till four o'clock in the afternoon.

Other than that, lack of expertise in doing an action research was another problem. During the early stage of the project, I spent quite some time doing a bit of ground work, searching for information on how to do an action research and I managed to find a few references and guides on conducting the action research. Later, with the information and also guidance from the facilitators in the Action Research Workshops, I gained some ideas on action research and how to go about it.

I also gained a lot of interesting experience as well as learning new things. At the beginning of this project, I had selected five students as the participants. All of them are boys. Somehow, after the first meeting with them, they seemed to be uninterested to participate in the project and decided to withdraw. I then had to select another five participants. In one way or another, this had caused inconvenience as I had to put the research project on hold for a while until I found potential and interested participants to get involved in the project. At the end, in early March 2005, I managed to get another five participants and this time around all are girls. That was just coincidence without any prejudice towards the male gender.

By selecting only five students at a time to get involved in the project had raised some kind of dilemma in me. I received a few comments from the other students on their dissatisfaction because they thought that they were being 'side-lined' and they claimed that I was being 'biased' towards them. Some even showed their protest by not paying attention and being cold-shouldered during my lessons in the class. As the saying goes, a picture paints a thousand words. I knew that they behaved that way because I did not get them involve in the project. Their attitude remained even after my thorough explanation. The first two months of the research project period was really a hard time for me as I had to struggle to lay the ground work for the project and at the same time I had to face the discouraging attitudes of my students in Form 5F. My patience in coping with the behaviour paid off when gradually they understood my purposes of doing the study after about two months.

I think this research also had given me a chance to reflect back on a few things regarding my teaching and learning practice in the past. Instead of being a 'mobile dictionary' for my students as what had happened in the past, I would encourage each and everyone of them to own a dictionary and use them especially in learning English. This would help them to improve their vocabulary and be more independent in their learning. This is proved by the overall increase in the marks of the participants and the results of the questionnaires distributed to them. I could also say that they were being more independent in their learning when they looked up in the dictionary for any difficult words and wrote the meaning of words near the words in the exercises given instead of asking me to give them the meaning. And it is also their habit now to automatically open their dictionaries every time they want to find meaning of words during English lesson.

This action research also made me realized that I should be more creative in choosing reading and comprehension exercises so that my students will not get bored and eager to be involved in the teaching and learning process. Doing similar exercises all the time will affect the students' interest and motivation negatively.

As a teacher and a life-long learner, I will continue to conduct more action researches in the future to help me to improve myself. I might want to explore other techniques in teaching reading materials in English.

As a conclusion, I think from this research I could say that if given more time and practices, the usage of dictionary has positive effects on the students in terms of comprehending any reading texts better and at the same time build their confidence in learning the language more.

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Appendix A

Sample: Questionnaire on reading, comprehension ability and the usage of dictionary

Circle your form:	1	2	3	4	5
Choose one answer only.	Yes	No	Undecided		
1. English is a very important subject in school.	1	2	3		
2. It is important to get high marks in English.	1	2	3		
3. Do you enjoy reading text in English?	1	2	3		
4. I do not have problem in reading English text.	1	2	3		
5. I share the results of my tests with my parents.	1	2	3		
6. Do you want to find ways of improving your reading comprehension skill?	1	2	3		
7. Do feel that you cannot improve your reading in English?	1	2	3		
8. I get stomach ache when doing reading and comprehension exercise.	1	2	3		
9. Do you feel frustrated when you do not understand what you are reading?	1	2	3		
10. Do you think dictionary is an important reference to help you to understand the reading text better?	1	2	3		
11. Do you have a dictionary?	1	2	3		
12. Do you use a dictionary often?	1	2	3		
13. Do you know how to use a dictionary?	1	2	3		
14. Do you think the dictionary helps you a lot as a source of reference to learn unfamiliar words?	1	2	3		

Sample: Interview questions for students before reading and comprehension exercises

Interviewer's Questions	Student's Answers
1. How would you rate your knowledge of English; good, average or weak?	
2. What is easier for you; reading, writing or speaking?	
3. How do you feel when you are doing a reading comprehension exercise?	
4. Have you ever been taught how to approach a reading comprehension test?	
5. Do you read the text, or look at the questions first?	
6. Would you like to learn how to do a reading comprehension?	
7. Do you want to know the content of a reading text given?	
8. What will you do if you can not understand the text after reading it?	
9. Will you use the dictionary to look up for meanings of unfamiliar words?	
10. Do you always complete the exercises within a given time?	

Sample: Survey questionnaire for participants after reading and comprehension exercises

Choose one answer only. The questions apply to reading comprehension exercises in English.	Yes	No	Undecided
1. I understand what is expected of me when I do a reading comprehension exercise in English.			
2. I understand the main idea of the text.			
3. I can find supporting ideas for the main idea of the text.			
4. I understand the test questions on reading and comprehension exercises.			
5. I can focus on the questions and find the answers.			
6. I apply reading strategies such as scanning, skimming and other skills when taking a reading comprehension exercises.			
7. I feel relax when doing reading comprehension exercises.			
8. I use dictionary to look up for meanings of unfamiliar words.			
9. My marks are improving in reading comprehension exercises.			
10. I feel more confident in my comprehension ability now.			

Ringkasan Sesi

Soalan 1: How did you choose the text for reading and comprehension ability? (Cikgu Abang Adenan)

Jawapan: Based on students' level and from magazines, newspapers and stories (Cikgu Jacqueline).

Soalan 2: What kind of dictionary did you use? (Cikgu Abang Adenan)

Jawapan: Any kind of dictionary that is suitable. I used Longman dictionary (Cikgu Jacqueline).

Soalan 3: Why is the mark of Olisa different from the others? (Cikgu Abang Adenan)

Jawapan: The participant was bored with the activity and using dictionary (Cikgu Jacqueline).

Soalan 4: How did you make the usage of dictionary more effective? (Cikgu Daniel)

Jawapan: Less time explaining and answering as students referred to dictionary (Cikgu Jacqueline).

Soalan 5: What types of questions did you use to test the students? (Cikgu Storey)

Jawapan: True/ False, multiple choice (A – D), fill in the blanks (Cikgu Jacqueline).

Soalan 6: You mentioned that the success of this AR is for the researcher. How about the students? (Cikgu Christina)

Jawapan: Marks is not the only indicator as there is a learning process going on for the students (Cikgu Jacqueline).

Dilaporkan oleh:

Cikgu Mary Kong
Sek. Jenis Keb. Cina Chung Hua Bangkong