UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

VOCABULARY LEARNING AND TEACHING THROUGH STUDENT-TEACHER NEGOTIATIONS IN THE MALAYSIAN ESL CLASSROOM

ROSLINA BINTI MOHD RASDI

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VOCABULARY LEARNING AND TEACHING THROUGH STUDENT-TEACHER NEGOTIATIONS IN THE MALAYSIAN ESL CLASSROOM

By

ROSLINA BINTI MOHD RASDI

Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of Master of Science

July 2009
DEDICATION

To

My Children

Mohammad Nor Shafiee
Mohammad Shafeer
Mohammad Adib Haqieeni
This study was conducted with the aim of investigating how vocabulary was taught and learned in three selected Malaysian schools. Specifically, it sought to explore the extent to which negotiation between students and teachers occurs in vocabulary learning and teaching. The study is delineated into three research questions that are concerned with the strategies used by the upper secondary teachers and students in vocabulary learning and teaching respectively; the perception of upper secondary teachers’ and students’ on the use and importance of student-teacher negotiation in learning and teaching vocabulary; and how negotiation between upper secondary students and teachers takes place in vocabulary learning and teaching in the Malaysian second language classroom.

A basic or generic qualitative research methodology was employed to answer these three research questions. For the purpose of triangulation, data was collected through classroom observations, one-to-one semi-structured interview with the teachers, and
focus group discussion (FGD) with the students. Specifically, six classroom observations were conducted to elicit the natural negotiation process between students and teachers during vocabulary learning and teaching. The English teachers from the observed classes were then interviewed to corroborate the findings of the classroom observations. Lastly, students from each observed class were selected to participate in the focused-group discussion. All collected data were either video or audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and triangulated. Reliability and validity were further ascertained through member checks, peer examination and maintenance of audit trail. The findings showed that incidental vocabulary learning and teaching (VLT) was the primary approach used by students and teachers in learning and teaching vocabulary. The classroom observations revealed that six strategies were employed in incidental VLT, one of which is student-teacher negotiation. The semi-structured interview and FGD showed that, generally, teachers and students have positive and negative perceptions towards student-teacher negotiation in VLT. The findings also showed that negotiation between upper secondary students and teachers took place under four conditions: creating an enjoyable and safe learning environment, preparing activities which were able to gain or capture the students’ interest to communicate, integrating negotiation with other vocabulary learning strategies, and placing the students with the same level of English in one class. An additional finding of the study was factors that promote or inhibit negotiation in the classroom. A conclusion of the study is that student-teacher negotiation seemed to be beneficial, but is not fully implemented by teachers and students. Theoretical and pedagogical implications are noted, and recommendations for further research are also suggested.
Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

PENGAJARAN DAN PEMBELAJARAN PERBENDAHARAAN KATA MELALUI PERUNDINGAN (NEGOTIATIONS) ANTARA GURU DAN PELAJAR DI DALAM KELAS “ESL” DI MALAYSIA

Oleh

ROSLINA BINTI MOHD RASDI

Julai 2009

Pengerusi : Profesor Madya Dr. Arshad Abd Samad

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Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji bagaimana perbendaharaan kata diajar dan dipelajari di tiga buah sekolah di Malaysia. Khususnya, objektif kajian adalah untuk melihat sejauh mana perundingan antara guru dan murid di dilaksanakan semasa proses pengajaran dan pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata bahasa Inggeris. Persoalan kajian dibahagikan kepada tiga, iaitu mengenai strategi yang digunakan oleh guru dan pelajar menengah atas semasa proses pengajaran dan pembelajaan perbendaharaan kata; persepsi guru-guru dan pelajar-pelajar menengah atas terhadap kepentingan dan penggunaan perundingan antara guru dan pelajar di dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata Bahasa Ingeris; dan bagaimana perundingan antara guru-guru dan pelajar-pelajar menengah atas dilaksanakan semasa pengajaran dan pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata bahasa Inggeris.

Dapatan kajian menunjukkan pembelajaran dan pengajaran perkataan secara tersirat (incidental) adalah kaedah utama yang digunakan oleh guru-guru dan pelajar-pelajar di dalam kelas bahasa Inggeris. Permerhatian di dalam kelas mendapati sebanyak enam strategi digunakan oleh guru-guru dan pelajar-pelajar menengah atas di dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran perkataan Bahasa Ingerís, di mana salah satunya ialah melalui perundingan antara guru dan pelajar. Temubual secara individu dengan guru-guru dan temubual di dalam kumpulan dengan pelajar-pelajar mendapati guru-guru dan pelajar-pelajar menengah atas mempunyai persepsi dan tanggapan yang positif dan negatif terhadap kaedah perundingan antara guru dan pelajar di dalam pengajaran
dan pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata bahasa Inggeris. Hasil kajian juga menunjukkan perundangan antara guru dan pelajar menengah atas berlaku di dalam empat keadaan: mewujudkan suasana pembelajaran yang selamat dan menyeronokkan, menyediakan aktiviti-aktiviti yang boleh meningkatkan minat pelajar untuk berkomunikasi, mengintegrasikan penrundingan bersama dengan strategi pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata yang lain dan meletakkan pelajar-pelajar yang mempunyai tahap kemahiran bahasa Inggeris yang sama di dalam satu kelas. Selain itu, faktor-faktor yang menggalakkan dan menghalang berlakunya perundingan guru dan pelajar juga telah ditemui secara tidak langsung daripada kajian ini. Kesimpulannya, kajian ini mendapati perundingan guru dan pelajar di dalam pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata adalah penting dan bermanfaat tetapi tidak dilaksanakan dengan secara menyeluruh dan berkesan. Implikasi terhadap teori dan pedagogi juga dinyatakan serta cadangan untuk penyelidikan pada masa akan datang juga disyorkan.
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“Words, Either Spoken or Written Can Make Us Laugh, Cry, Go to War or even Fall in Love”

Mark Twain

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through their participation in the research. Their willingness to share their knowledge
and ideas has enabled me to complete the research on time. To the students who had
participated in the focus group discussion, I thank them for their cooperation.
I certify that an Examination Committee has met on 27 July 2009 to conduct the final examination of Roslina binti Mohd Rasdi on his Master of Science thesis entitled “Vocabulary Learning and Teaching Through Student-Teacher Negotiations in the Malaysian ESL Classroom” in accordance with Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U. (A) 106] 15 March 1998. The committee recommends the candidate be awarded the Master of Science.

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Date: 16 October 2009
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia and other institutions.

_____________________________

ROSLINA BINTI MOHD RASDI

DATE: 5 May 2009
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary learning is one of the elements that are important in the teaching and learning of a second language in the classroom. Apart from mastering the sentences and grammar structure, learner’s vocabulary knowledge is a central and a very important component in acquiring a second language. Lewis (1993) advocates that acquisition of vocabulary plays a central role in learning a second language. A study by Horwitz (1988) also found that a substantial number of English as a Second Language’s (ESL) students either agreed or strongly agreed with the notion that the most essential element of learning a foreign language is learning the vocabulary. There are various strategies and approaches which learners and teachers can employ to learn and teach vocabulary respectively. This study investigates one of the many approaches in vocabulary learning and teaching, which is teaching and learning vocabulary via negotiation between students and teacher.

This chapter presents several aspects pertaining to this study. It will first present the background of the study. Then, the needs and necessities for a research regarding vocabulary learning and teaching as well as the use of negotiation as one of the possible strategies will be highlighted in the statement of the problem. Apart from the aims and objectives of the study, some insights on the significance of the study and limitations that were encountered in this study are discussed. Lastly, the important
research terms; negotiation, comprehensible input and, vocabulary learning and
teaching strategies are explained.

Background of the Study

The ability to use language fluently and grammatically correct is dependent on
knowledge at the level of individual as well as on the combination of words that is
built up over time based on large amounts of language exposure (Barcroft, 2004).
Learners with large vocabulary knowledge are more proficient in a wide range of
language skills than learners with limited vocabulary because vocabulary competency
contributes greatly to second language (L2) proficiency (Meara, 1996). Moreover, it
is believed that prior to teaching texts, teachers are encouraged to stimulate learners’
background knowledge by providing them with appropriate vocabulary, as
comprehension will take place when the right schema for a given language text is
activated (Carrel & Eisterhold, 1983). Therefore, the role of vocabulary knowledge in
second language learning is essential.

Besides that, in reading comprehension, an adequate and wide vocabulary is essential
as it is believed that a learner needs to have a threshold of vocabulary knowledge of
approximately 95 percent of the words in a given text in order to comprehend what is
read satisfactorily (Liu & Nation, 1985). This implies that it is essential for readers to
know at least 19 out of every 20 words that they encounter in a given text for basic
comprehension in reading. In other words, it is easier to establish the meaning of
unknown and unfamiliar words from the context if approximately 95 percent of the words in a text are known. Hu & Nation (2000) suggested it should be 98% which is even higher and more stringent. According to the summary report of the National Reading Panel (2000) which was set up in Washington D.C, “Reading comprehension is a cognitive process that integrates complex skills and cannot be understood without examining the critical role of vocabulary learning and instruction in its development” (p: 13). Related research and present educational practices have shown that there is a positive relationship between students’ knowledge of words and their reading comprehension (Gersten & Geva, 2003).

One of the contents in the English syllabus of the New Secondary School Curriculum (Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah- KBSM) is the use of language for aesthetic and intrapersonal purposes. This includes the ability to use the language when interacting with others, to express ideas, thoughts, beliefs and feelings creatively and imaginatively. In order to achieve these objectives, students need vocabulary knowledge. This idea is supported by Meara (1996) who stated that “lexical competence is at the heart of communicative competence” (p:35) Furthermore, it is also stated in the Form Five English Language Curriculum Specifications (2003) that the maximum number of words that should be exposed to both Form 4 and 5 learners are 1600 words and 1800 words respectively. Teachers, however, should not be restricted to this list as they can add other words to ensure that the topic assigned is dealt with effectively. Students are also encouraged to extend their vocabulary to the highest level possible on their own initiative (Ministry of Education, 2003). It is the
National Education Philosophy’s aspiration to generate autonomous and holistic learners in the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual aspects. Students should acknowledge this and see the value of reading as well as understand the importance of vocabulary learning in order to master the target language.

One way to facilitate vocabulary learning is through the use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). Commonly used VLS are simple memorization, repetition, and taking notes (Schmitt, 2000). One can also ask teachers and students for the meaning of new words and they can respond in many ways (synonyms, translation, etc) (Schmitt, 2000). When learners ask for the meaning of new words or to resolve whatever that they do not understand in the teacher’s input, they may engage in a simple sequence of moves comprising the utterance that triggered the difficulty, the utterance that signalled the incomprehension, and the utterance that responds to this signal (Bitchener, 2004). In other words, they are involved in negotiation of meaning, the process whereby speakers work with each other’s messages to achieve understanding, and which is regarded as an essential element in second language development (Brooks, 1992).

In the negotiated sequence, the interlocutors are made aware of the gap between each other’s utterances and, therefore make use of the modified feedback in the reformulated utterance (Long, 1996). According to Hwang (2002), negotiated interaction provides an environment that encourages the use of target words, which enables learners to retain the words longer in memory. Hwang (2002) also claimed
that negotiation of meaning plays a more vital role than simplified or modified input in
the learning of a second language. When teachers engage learners in the negotiation of
meaning by using various discursive moves, they are at the same time promoting
learners’ active mental participation, which has a role in second language (L2)
learning (Anton, 1999). Through interaction, dialogue or negotiation, teachers can
provide learners with effective assistance that enable them to excel more than they
would otherwise (Anton, 1999).

**Statement of the Problem**

The importance of vocabulary acquisition in second language learning has posed some
challenges to the classroom teacher on how best to assist learners in storing and
retrieving words in the second language (Sokmen, 1997). Students who have learned
or are being taught vocabulary items for some time, still have difficulties in recalling
them when needed (Wallace, 1982). Due to this, they face problems in
communicating effectively, in conveying their actual meaning and, therefore, they
resort to finding other means to convey their messages (Wallace, 1982). This is
because vocabulary is basic to communication (Shameem & Wong, 2004, p: 588) and
it is also very important for understanding the meaning of any language (McCarthy,
2001). However, “vocabulary is often viewed as the greatest source of problems by
second and foreign language learners particularly among young adults” (Shameem &
lead to miscommunication, whereas the errors in grammar may not necessarily hamper
the meaning of the messages (Lewis, 1997). Furthermore, vocabulary is the building
blocks of a language (Brown, 2001) and if they are unable to expand their vocabulary growth, consequently, they will lose interest in learning the second language (Yang, 2000).

Comprehensible input is essential for L2 vocabulary acquisition (Krashen, 1985) and one of the meaningful ways in making input comprehensible is to negotiate meaning through interaction (Long, 1983). The interaction hypothesis which was proposed by Long (1983, 1996) claimed that the opportunities to attend to linguistic form during negotiated interaction may facilitate the second language (L2) acquisition process. The value of negotiation is related to the generative use of words in new contexts which stimulate a deeper understanding of their meaning (Nation, 2006). Despite the apparent contributions of negotiation in L2 learning, many teachers, educational practitioners and learners are not taking greater advantage of it (Pica, 1994a). Long (1987) stated that a second language teaching classroom offers only few opportunities for students to communicate in the target language or to hear it used for communicative purposes by others. In other words, the lack of negotiation or interaction in the target language between students and the teacher or between student and student in the classroom is likely to make L2 input difficult to comprehend, thus impeding L2 acquisition.

While there is a variety of communicative activities prepared for the students in the textbooks, little investigation has been done to explore what happens when learners of L2 are in the classroom and are actually participating in these activities (Brooks,