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## **Laughter is the Best Medicine : Eliciting Vocabulary from Comical Texts Among ESL Secondary Learners in a Rural School**

Nurul Hanin Binti Ibrahim, Lokman Hafiz Bin Asary  
SMK Raja Lope Nor Rashid,  
SMK Bagan Serai,  
Ministry of Education Malaysia,  
[nhaninibrahim@gmail.com](mailto:nhaninibrahim@gmail.com)  
[nomanasary@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:nomanasary@yahoo.co.uk)

### **ABSTRACT**

This longitudinal study addresses the issues of the less highlighted vocabulary teaching in the context of low-performing ESL secondary learners in a rural school in Tanjung Piandang, Perak. Due to heavy emphasis on conventional writing and traditional grammar rules, vocabulary teaching is then becoming less put forth despite its significance in language learning. This study therefore observes whether students vocabulary can be enhanced using a discovery learning method as well as to evaluate its effectiveness through students' writing. Thirty-four students are given a pre-test of forty multi-choice questions of linear and non-linear text. After eight weeks of interval teaching sessions where students read through comical articles, a post test of the same set of questions is carried out to examine their semantic understanding. The findings indicate that out of thirty-four candidates, twenty six candidates show improvement in their semantic understanding of the questions given while seven candidates obtain lesser marks than that of their pre-test leaving one candidate with no difference. An interview session is then executed to further probe the reasons behind such findings. This study also recommends that each of the teaching and learning session be incorporated with vocabulary teaching slot to help with students' language learning.

*Keywords:* Discovery Learning Method, ESL Learners, Semantic, Students' Language Performance, Vocabulary Teaching

### **Introduction**

For a long time, vocabulary teaching has been underrated in the teaching of English as a second or a foreign language. With the emphasis on grammar and writing, there is a lack of stress on vocabulary during English lessons. One of the most eminent problems faced by students in learning English is their lack of understanding the words that are being read in texts. With the low understanding of the meanings behind the words, students not only struggle with reading English texts, but also with the construction of sentences resulting with poor writing skills. This programme is designed to observe whether students' vocabulary can be enhanced using a discovery learning method and to evaluate on its effectiveness through students writings. By adding the element of humour to make the learning interesting and enjoyable, students were required to learn words from 'Laughter is the Best Medicine' section published monthly in the Reader's Digest magazines. The starting ground was created by assessing students through a pre-test consisting of 40 comprehension questions. Data were collected by means of results through the pre-test, teaching activities, results of the post-test, questionnaire and finally through evaluation meetings as a whole class and through selected individuals.

One of the researchers has been teaching English in this school in less than a year. Having been a fresh graduate and a novice teacher, lack of exposure on the reality of students' English performance in the rural area has taken the teacher aback and a building of increasing worry on finding ways to improve students' English acquisition. Being made aware that students hardly practice English in everyday conversations let alone in writing, the teacher faced a challenge in gaining students interest to improving English through reading texts. Initially, one the main problem that students faced and was observed by the teacher is in the construction of sentences. Students dislike sometimes abhors English writing lessons due to the obstacles that they face in finding the appropriate words to use in their sentences. Lack of vocabulary hinders students to create interesting sentences hence their writings were filled with repetition and redundant sentences. In order to increase students' confidence and interest in learning English, this research is conducted to help students build a stronger vocabulary foundation.

### **Literature Review**

Over the last several decades, numerous studies carried out abroad particularly in the States have shown that the majority of students in elementary schools are not proficient readers. A prominent website in US called *Begin to Read* (2009) revealed that two-thirds of students who cannot read proficiently by the end of the 4th grade will end up in jail or on welfare. Furthermore, it has been estimated that approximately 40% of US students are non-fluent readers (Daane et al, 2005). If this scenario is taking place in the US, Malaysians are to expect the worse since English is not the first language for majority of the students here. Students who grapple to read the text are most unlikely to benefit through the reading and thus unable them to elicit vocabularies.

Apart from the above concern, students in Malaysia have always been known to have a low aptitude for language learning which is significantly evident in ESL classrooms. To fan the flame, many are quite apprehensive of their English skills since English is not their mother tongue. Even though English takes the official status as the second language for the country; it remains a foreign language to many of the students (Ruzaini, 2008). From past experiences, a great number of the students experience problem in articulation especially when asked to speak the language. Besides the poor oral fluency of English language, reading comprehension is yet another main concern among ESL educators. Therefore, this programme is designed to help low-performing students in a rural school eliciting vocabularies from comical texts.

Besides that, a vast gap which exists between the students in urban area and those studying in rural area should not be a minor concern. Students from the rural counterpart always face great difficulty to understand let alone decipher the underlying meaning of the literature text. This is due to the generally-acknowledged fact that they are much less proficient in English compared to those students in the urban area.

Reading has always been acknowledged as one of the core skills in mastering a language (Almasi, 2003). Real reading, when it occurs, is characterized primarily by joy of the reading (Miller, J.H., 1991). Likewise, if the target language is a second language, input that gained from reading is just as highly noteworthy as other skills. Reading is useful in language acquisition and also has positive effects on students' vocabulary, spelling and writing (Harmer, J., 2008). If reading came naturally, teaching would be a much easier job, but the truth is, there is much to consider when teaching reading skill to the students particularly young learners.

Caws, M.A. (1985) says that reading transports readers beyond the geographical boundaries and allows reader to explore the world without having to travel around the globe. (Augusto Boal, 2006), in the mean time, states that reading is the most important skill because it

allows readers to explore the power of words. Words are means of transport, like buses and lorries. In the same way as buses transport people and lorries cargo, words transport our ideas, desires and emotions. Therefore, if teachers expect students to get access to a wide range of informative knowledge, they must consider the aspect of teaching of reading first.

Reading is not merely uttering words either vocally or cognitively as readers read a text, but the sad thing is that educators always forget this. Urmson, J.O., and Sbisa, M. (1975) claim that we often use reading and utterances in ways beyond the scope at least of traditional grammar which is not good. Children would learn to read as readily as they learn to speak. In this situation, teachers would only need to give students the chance to practice their skills. But unfortunately, children do not learn to read just from being exposed to books. Reading must be taught. For many children, reading must be taught explicitly and systematically, one small step at a time. Reading, whether for delight or for information must take into account conditions which stimulate personal involvement of the text. (Loomis, R.S., and Clark,D.L.) This in a way suggests that reading must be taught to the students as to ensure they do meaningful and purposeful reading as should be expected of them if they are to make use this skill wisely.

As for learners, they face a lot of difficulties in coping up with this skill. According to hickman, Pollard Durodola & Vaughn, English learners are the ones among those who struggle with vocabulary and comprehension. They have to master certain techniques as to ensure optimum result in digging up as many inputs as possible. Reading is not merely reading from lines to lines but we also need to look at what is written between lines and what need to be looked upon so that only important and necessary information filtered in (Brown, 1995). Most often, students are forced to read for the sake of preparing them for examination. Students are made to read more than they can ever enjoy, too little of too many things in a way calculated to destroy personal involvement with the writer. (Locke, L.G., Gibson, W.M., and Arms,G.). But, in reality, they are not taught of this skill properly.

Therefore, vocabulary teaching through reading is seen as one of the available methodologies which is highly recommended to be integrated in classroom reading activity.

### **Methodology**

The methodology is divided into subtopics which are the research question, research design and research instrument.

#### **Design of the Study**

This programme was done through a series of steps. Students were given a pre-test to be evaluated on comprising of 40 questions of linear and non-linear texts. The results were set as a foundation for the researcher to delve further into solving the action research problem.

For the next eight weeks, students went through the teaching activities given. The activities were designed to be done in 10 minutes, where students were required to read through texts based on 'Laughter is the Best Medicine' section in the Reader's Digest magazines. Students were to choose 5 new words that they are unfamiliar or have never come across with and find the meaning in their dictionary. This activity was carried out in every single lesson, 5 periods per week for the next 8 weeks. Then the students were reevaluated with a post test.

The pre-test and the post-test were of the same identical format and questions to ensure reliability and validity to the programme. The two tests were taken in the duration of one hour, similar to that of the normal English Paper 1 format. The result of the test would determine of using humourous text could help increase students' vocabulary.

During the final stages of the programme, questionnaires were given to students to collect data on how they felt about the research as well as additional data that came from holding evaluation meeting with the students as a group or a one on one session.

### Pre-test and Post-test

The programme instrument consists of the pre-test and the post-test which were given to the students according to an examination environment. The tests were performed in the classroom and consists of 40 multiple choices items in 8 sections of linear and non-linear texts. The test was done in 1 hour, administered and monitored by the teacher. Students were required to answer is a separate answer sheet. During the programme, the pre-test was administered first before the teaching activities can be done concluded by the post test. This is due to being able to compare the difference of students' performance between the pre-test and the post test.

### Questionnaires

Besides relying on raw data, a questionnaire using the Likert scale was given to students. This questionnaire is used to gain an insight on students' point of view regarding the programme that was done on whether they are satisfied with the overall procedures of the programme and whether if the programme brings benefits to them in increasing their vocabulary skill. Below is the sample used in the questionnaire.

1.	The programme is useful for your learning. <i>Program ini berguna untuk pembelajaran anda.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
2.	The programme is helpful to you in learning English. <i>Program ini membantu anda dalam mempelajari Bahasa Inggris.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
3.	The programme is helpful in building your vocabulary. <i>Program ini membantu dalam penambahan kosa kata Bahasa Inggris.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
4.	You have applied the vocabulary learned in this programme into your English writing exercise. <i>Anda telah menggunakan kosa kata yang dipelajari dalam program ini ke dalam penulisan Bahasa Inggris.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
5.	The programme encourages you to read English magazines? <i>Program ini menggalakkan anda membaca majalah Bahasa Inggris.</i>	1	2	3	4	5
6.	The programme encourages you to use the dictionary when you come across a word that you do not know. <i>Program ini menggalakkan anda menggunakan kamus untuk mencari maksud kepada perkataan yang anda tidak tahu akan maksudnya.</i>	1	2	3	4	5

7. You enjoyed the way the lessons are done in the programme. 1 2 3 4 5  
*Anda suka akan cara pembelajaran yang dilakukan dalam program ini.*

#### Answer Key

- 1 : Absolutely Agree  
 2 : Agree  
 3 : Maybe  
 4 : Disagree  
 5 : Absolutely Disagree

#### Interview

The evaluation meetings were held between the teachers and a few students that were randomly chosen to get a view on how the students felt during the process of the programme. The interviews were held randomly throughout the progress of the research. First interview was held in the year of 2011 by choosing five random students who had participated in the programme.

In the purpose of a longitudinal study, another interview has been done with the students to observe the effectiveness of programme that they have done 4 years later. The main purpose of this interview is to see whether their vocabulary practice learned 4 years before has become a normalcy in their study life especially since this year the students will be sitting for their form five national exam, the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM).

We were only able to hold the interview with a few students, Respondent A, Respondent B and Respondent C, as quite a number has left school after sitting for the form three national exam, the *Penilaian Menengah Rendah* (PMR) to attend Vocational College.

#### Results and Discussion

##### Data from the Pre-Test and the Post-Test

The pre-test was administered on the 1/9/2011 by the teacher researchers. The test was marked and the result was documented into a table. The data was analysed in terms of marks and grades. Similarly the post test was conducted on the 10/11/2011 and procedures were repeated by the teacher. The data collected was compared to one another. The findings are shown below.

Table 1

*Students Marks in the Pre Test and Post Test*

NO	STUDENT	PRE TEST		POST TEST		DIFFERENCE
		Marks	Grade	Marks	Grade	
1.	A	45	D	45	D	0
2.	B	33	E	30	E	-3
3.	C	35	E	38	E	+3
4.	D	53	C	58	C	+5
5.	E	50	C	55	C	+5

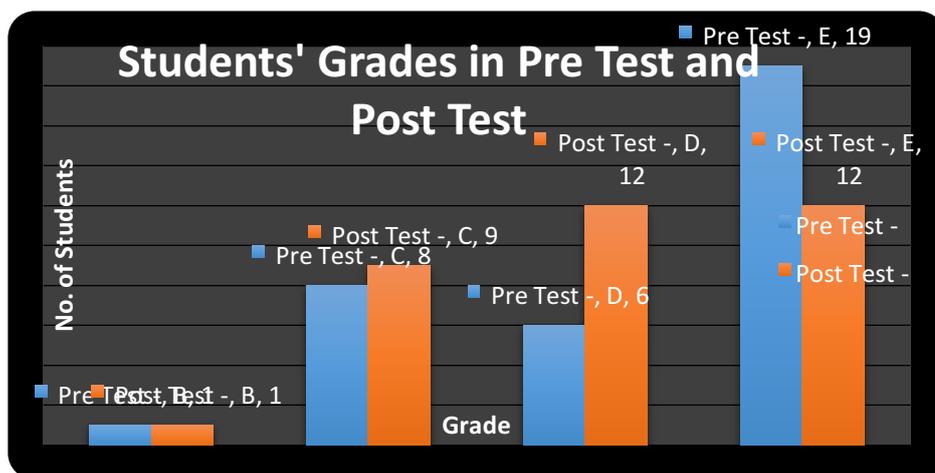
NO	STUDENT	PRE TEST		POST TEST		DIFFERENCE
		Marks	Grade	Marks	Grade	
6.	F	50	C	58	C	+8
7.	G	50	C	45	D	-5
8.	H	23	E	33	E	+10
9.	I	45	D	50	C	+5
10.	J	33	E	45	D	+12
11.	K	23	E	33	E	+10
12.	L	35	E	38	E	+3
13.	M	38	E	45	D	+7
14.	N	38	E	33	E	-5
15.	O	25	E	33	E	+8
16.	P	38	E	45	D	+7
17.	Q	25	E	33	E	+8
18.	R	43	D	38	E	-5
19.	S	35	E	45	D	+10
20.	T	33	E	38	E	+3
21.	U	38	E	33	E	-5
22.	V	45	D	38	E	-7
23.	W	55	C	58	C	+3
24.	X	45	D	43	D	-2
25.	Y	35	E	43	D	+8
26.	Z	33	E	45	D	+12
27.	AB	53	C	63	B	+10
28.	AC	43	D	50	C	+7
29.	AD	53	C	58	C	+5
30.	AE	45	D	43	D	-2
31.	AF	53	C	58	C	+5

NO	STUDENT	PRE TEST		POST TEST		DIFFERENCE
		Marks	Grade	Marks	Grade	
32.	AG	63	B	58	C	-5
33.	AH	38	E	45	D	+7
34.	AI	30	E	45	D	+15

Data in grades are converted as shown below:

Table 2  
*Students Grades in the Pre Test and Post Test*

Grades	Pre Test	Post Test
A	-	-
B	1	1
C	8	9
D	6	12
E	19	12



Graph 1. Students Grades in the Pre Test and Post Test

Improvement of marks in comparison between the pre test and the post test is shown below:

Table 3  
*Difference of Achievement between Pre Test and Post Test*

<b>Improvement in Marks</b>	<b>Gained Less Marks</b>	<b>Neutral</b>
24 students	9 students	1 student

Comparing the pre-test that was done on the 1/9/2011 with the final post-test that was done on the 10/11/2011, out of 34 students, 24 students show improvement in their understanding the text while 9 students gain a lesser mark than that of their pre-test. However the worst difference that showed the drop of mark is that of a 7 difference mark as can be seen in the marks of *Student V*. Compared to the marks of students that improved the biggest difference is that of the 15 marks difference by *Student AI*. And many students linger in the category between the difference of 10 marks, and the difference of 12 marks. One student however remained static in the marks as there has been no improvement no gaining a lesser mark in the post test compared to that of the pre-test.

### **Data from Questionnaires**

The result of the questionnaire shows that many students were positive in their remarks about the programme. Many gave their opinions in the ‘absolutely agree’ category and ‘agree’ category. Only a few answered that they ‘disagree’ on a few items. To delve into this matter further, the teacher arranged with a few selected students to have evaluation meetings.

### **Evaluation Meetings (2011)**

Through the interview, we have found that students were struggling with understanding a higher- level text. At the beginning of the programme students struggled to understand the text as the English level is quite high compared to the level of English used in the their textbook.

However as the programme focuses on using the articles in the ‘Laughter is the Best Medicine’ section, the level of language used where not that academically high but is still written in the proper structure of grammatically correct English. The texts used in this programme are simple and light-weighted issues where students enjoyed reading them. The beginning struggle is also due to the fact that these students are not familiar or have never read an acclaimed English magazine before, thus they had an instant unneeded fear that they will not be able to read let alone understand the text. This is proven to be an incorrect hypothesis as by the third week students were comfortable with reading the articles in the humourous section let alone were even browsing through the main articles and interviews found in the magazine.

Also, through the interview, the students have mentioned that they did not know how to read the dictionary before. Some have never even owned one much less read them. Through this programme, they have been made aware that by knowing how to read the dictionary, they are able to learn and improve their vocabulary independently without depending on the teachers to explain the meaning in class. It gives them the mobility to learn outside of the classroom and without limitation on time.

### **Evaluation Meeting (2015)**

From the follow-up interview in 2015, we have gathered information on how often the students use the dictionary to find words. All three respondents have said that in order to find meaning on unfamiliar vocabulary, they did refer to the dictionary at first. However, with the easy access of technology and the internet, all three students depend more on internet applications particularly google translator. They were able to get result fast yet they admit that the meaning is sometimes out of context and practically incorrect. Regarding the published dictionary, Respondent A says that she still uses them especially at school. She depends on google translator when she does her schoolwork at home. Respondent B does not use a dictionary at school but admits that he is still confuse and still need guidance in understanding how to find the correct meaning in context with words that have multiple meanings. He prefers to use google translator as it is fast despite acknowledging that it confuses him at times as he doubts that the result given by the application is correct. However, because of his limited understanding of vocabulary and his trust for the internet, he feels that the result given is the correct one. Finally Respondent C mentions that he depends solely on google translator for his schoolwork. He does not use the dictionary at school and if he needs to know a word he still depends on the teacher to provide the meaning.

All three students recognised that there are limitations of using the google translator. The meaning sounds awkward and there are no indications to tell the user on the precision of the translation. These students recognised the importance of have a dictionary as a tool to learn English. They just like to use electronic devices rather than carrying bulky and heavy books. The students have expressed their wish to have a free trusted application governed by bodies such Oxford, Cambridge or Collins. They hope that in the near future, such efforts are taken by the Education Ministry to provide the application for students especially those from low income background.

### **Conclusion**

This study examines how vocabulary building activities are integrated in English language classroom of the low-performing learners in a rural area. The sessions mainly focus on getting the students to read and elicit vocabularies through comical texts provided. The findings of the study reveal that out of thirty-four candidates, twenty six candidates show improvement in their semantic understanding of the questions given while seven candidates obtain lesser marks than that of their pre test leaving one single candidate with no difference. The study does acknowledge the difficulties faced by students and teachers in the rural areas in the sense that they may encounter a lot of setbacks when vocabulary instruction is integrated in teaching and learning of English language with due to the pupils' low proficiency in English. However, implementing vocabulary instruction practices have suggested potentials to have shown beneficial effects on the children second language performance especially in developing their vocabulary. The findings of the study, apart from being potentially used elsewhere as guidance for the practising teachers both experienced and novices, also recommends that each of the teaching and learning session be incorporated with a short vocabulary teaching slot to help with students' language learning.

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