The Influence of Formal Language Learning Environment on Vocabulary Learning Strategies

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Abstract—**This study investigates ESL students studying in the program Teaching English as a Second Language in Universiti Putra Malaysia. This investigation attempts to understand the influence of a formal language learning environment (classroom, teachers, and peers) on vocabulary learning strategies. This study describes how school environments as well as mediating agents interfere in vocabulary learning strategies of ESL students or support them. This research adopts the qualitative method. The researcher gathered data through in depth interviews and used open coding as well as constant comparative methods to analyze the data. The findings suggest that teaching methods, the level of encouragement students received, peers' negative and positive behaviors, classroom's activity and textbooks were significant factors that generally effected the learners' choice of vocabulary learning strategies in school.**

Index Terms—**formal language learning environment, vocabulary learning strategies, ESL**

I. INTRODUCTION

In general, one of the most popular languages need in the world is the English language. In this computer era, English language is the only language that everyone assumes to understand. This leads English to be a dominant international language in communication, science, business, aviation, entertainment, radio and diplomacy. Hence, one of the greatest challenges faced by schools and universities in non-native English speaking countries especially Asian countries is the attempt to educate and communicate properly with a large and growing population of children and adults who cannot speak the English language. In this regard, learning English as an important subject is needed for students all over of the world.

Lack of vocabulary knowledge will have an effect on all four language skills: Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking. In addition, language learners learn the English language in an environment of a second language, one of the most common learning environments in today's world. Nevertheless, one of major concerns in Malaysian second language learning research is second language learning environment. As mentioned by Maesin et al. (2009), "in second language learning, students find difficulties to utilize the language skills outside of language classrooms as there are fewer opportunities to do so due to poor language environments" (p.71).

Regarding the importance of formal and informal language learning environment and learners' autonomy, this study investigates the reported vocabulary learning strategies of ESL university students at UPM (Universiti Putra Malaysia) in Malaysia. There have been studies which have investigated the use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) by native speakers of Arabic, Japanese, and Sudanese students. However, to the best of my knowledge, there have been very few studies investigating the vocabulary learning strategies of Malaysian students learning the English language in Malaysia (Tuluhong, 2006). This study is conducted to add to the list by answering to the following question: How do ESL students' formal language learning environment (teachers, peers, and school) influence their vocabulary learning strategies?

II. DEFINITION OF LEARNING

There has been continuing development by the educators and researchers to emphasize the importance of learning theories in second language learning following the increasing role of learning theories and learning environment in educational psychology. However as the learning theories are applicable to many different branches of education in areas such as educational psychology, training and development, and social psychology, both academics and expertness

have carried out various studies in different language learning. A considerate numbers of these theories are essential to find out their implications in the field of second language acquisition. Learning can be associated to the ways learners answer questions that is related to learning theories or second language learning.

III. DEFINITIONS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES (LLS)

The knowledge has been gradually increasing on the frequency of the strategies used by learners in the language learning process Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975). This is to say that, even with the best teachers and best teaching methods, the students are the only ones who can fundamentally do the learning, as Nyikos and Oxford (1993) stated "learning begins with the learner" (p.11).

One of the most creative researchers in this field, Rubin (1975), provided an exclusive definition of learning strategies as "the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge" (p.46). In 1975 she recognized two types of learning strategies: those which contribute directly to learning, and those which contribute indirectly to learning. She separated direct learning strategies into six types, 1) Clarification/verification, 2) Monitoring, 3) Memorization, 4) Guessing/inductive Inferencing, 5) Deductive reasoning and 6) Practice. As for the indirect learning strategies, she divided then into two types: a) Creating opportunities for practice and b) Production tricks.

During this decade two researchers Ellis (1995) and Cohen (1998) have distinguished between language use strategies and language learning strategies. Both sets of strategies are delineated as actions that learners "consciously select either to improve the learning of L2, the use of it, or both" (p.23) (Cohen, 1998).

However, as O'Malley and Chamot (1990) expressed, learning strategies are behavior or thoughts that learners use to comprehend, learn or preserve new information. Cook (2001) described a learning strategy to be "a choice that the learner makes while learning or using the second language which affects learning" (p.45). Oxford (1990) defined that learning strategy is very broad as it's composed of approximately every decision made in the process of L2 learning.

IV. THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Teaching methods, quality of materials, reward system, peer group, teacher-student relationship, classroom atmosphere, and homework assignment, are considers as a Learning environment and it can affect the learners' choice of vocabulary learning strategies (Kaylani, 1996).

Nakamura (2000) conducted a mixed method study by using questionnaires, observation and oral interviews to understand the effects of learner variables and an external variable – learning environment for Japanese learners of English use strategies when learning second language vocabulary. The subjects of this study were Japanese high school English learners in Japan (EFL situation) and the England (ESL situation). The finding of the study revealed that, the external variable of learning environment was the most significant factor affecting all aspects of vocabulary learning strategy use. That is, the subjects were most affected by the locations, which are EFL or ESL learning environment, when they learned the target language.

A. The Role of Classroom

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on the role of classroom and the recognition of the learning procedures focuses on the similarities and differences involving contribution and interaction inside as well as outside the classroom. Ellis (1997) described the second language acquisition as "the way in which people learn a language other than their mother tongue, inside or outside of a classroom" (p.3).

Then again, Hellermann (2008) defined a classroom as opportunities that learners mediated by the teacher in personal conversation, student's peer, or available texts in classroom. However formal instruction and teaching methods are one of the important aspects of classroom. In addition, Ellis (1990) defined formal instruction as the "attempt to teach some specific feature of the second language code-usually a grammatical feature-in one way or another" (p.13).

Formal instruction related to teaching, and in second language acquisition according to Ellis (1997) involves language pedagogy or language teaching. Many researchers approved the positive influence of formal instruction on second language learning (Briere, 1978; Carroll, 1967; Chihara and Oiler, 1978; Krashen et al., 1978 and Krashen and Seligar, 1976).

Haggan (1990) examined EFL students in Kuwait University where she perused the benefits of using newspapers in the teaching of English as a foreign language. She found out that the use of newspaper in EFL class is a successful approach in language learning. The students are encouraged indirectly to read the newspapers articles and that they have to find a funny section of doing so. Additionally the students learnt about positive, perhaps rather than specialized, in the process, usage of English, and enhance their understanding to the language in general.

Ohta (2001) Found that mature learners of Japanese in their first two years of language classes assisted each other with a variety of peer interactive. She added that, peer and teacher–learners communication facilitates learners to raise their knowledge in classroom. In line with that, classroom can be seen as interaction between teachers and students this view is supported by Hall and Verplaetse (2000) who described "in additional language learning is especially important. It is in their interactions with each other that teachers and students work together to create the intellectual and practical activities that shape both the form and the content of the target language as well as the processes and outcomes of

individual development (p.10)." On the other hand, the textbook is one of the main classroom materials that can affect the vocabulary learning strategies.

B. The Role Peers

Lantolf and Thorne (2004) explained the importance of peer group as a developmental process of learning occur through participation in cultural, linguistic, and previously formed settings such as family life and peer group interaction.

Shah (1999) interviewed nine undergraduate ESL students in National university of Malaysia using semi-structured questionnaires. One of the socio-cultural factors that she identified of ESL students was negative peers' reaction and behavior toward practicing English language among peers. Shah (1999) also quoted that "aspects such as an inappropriateness in the use of second language, show of dislike, boastfulness, showing off, and formality second language use are several other factors" (p.107). She added these factors are considered for the lack of oral communication and practice of second language among students.

Seng (2006) in his case study of cooperative learning among the secondary school students in Malaysia found that the key informants liked to share their inspirations and information with others and they learned better when a classmate explains something to them.

V. METHOD & MATERIAL

The students' use of vocabulary learning strategies in second language is examined from this viewpoint: how they obtained information about the strategies from their formal learning environments.

It was decided that the best method for this investigation to better understand the use of VLSs by these particular students is to adopt the qualitative research design. Cresswell (1994) identified qualitative research as an investigative method for understanding a phenomenon based on separate methodological traditions of inquiry that elicit human conditions or social problem.

One benefit of qualitative researches is that it presents plenty of descriptions and features. Researchers are able to learn a lot from particular phenomena. As Merriam (1988) explained, interview utilization is one of the major sources to obtain qualitative data from subjects. Hence, the method of conducting an interview is one of the most popular means to investigate, research and to inquire data from the one phenomenon.

The instruments used to collect the data for the present investigation consist of a thirty-minute (on the average) audio-recorded interview which were conducted with thirty six subjects to gain a deep understanding of the subjects' varied backgrounds in vocabulary learning.

VI. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In answering the research question: "How do the ESL students' formal learning environments (teachers, peers in school) influence their vocabulary learning strategies?" Several themes were emerged. These themes are including the role of teachers, the role of peers, and the role of classroom emerged as important influences on how the students acquire new words in English language.

A. The Role of Teachers

The Teachers' Teachings Methods

Teachers are considered as a dynamic force of the school. A school without its teachers is just like a body without the soul. A teacher carries a big responsibility to her/his classroom. One reason is that all students depend on her/him for their academic pursuit. Everything the teacher says will have an impact on his/her students. In this regard, the majority of those who interviewed indicated that they acquired vocabulary learning strategies from their teachers in schools. Rose claimed that her teacher provides a good atmosphere for the students in school to learn new words, for instance the teacher asked her to prepare a notebook to write down new words. The teachers' teaching methods has framed the subjects' vocabulary learning strategies of the current study as they use same strategies to learn new words at present.

Teachers' Encouragement

The students interviewed for this study asserted that their teacher encouraged them in various ways during their learning process every day. For instance, Rose's English teacher's teaching style and her responsibility as a language teacher have made a big difference in Rose's life. At the moment she is currently studying English in the university.

Jim said his teacher in his drama class influenced his English vocabulary learning for the rest of his life. He mentioned the role of his drama class and the importance of pronunciation of the words. This teacher has taught him to learn new words in an easy and enjoyable way.

Jamal mentioned that, during primary school his teacher has helped him to transform into a more confident more committed and motivated person to pursue English vocabulary learning in specific and learning English in general. An instance which boosted his confidence was when he went to a new primary school in Kula Lumpur.

Learning New Words in Classroom

The classroom was the supportive environment that impacted the subjects' vocabulary learning strategies. However in the classroom students are influenced very much by teachers and peers. Two concepts are emerged from the data to help the participants learn new words in school. These two concepts are doing assignments, and reading text books.

Doing Assignments

An ordinary attribute in the participants' vocabulary learning patterns was that they generally study vocabulary as slightly as it might be. In addition, many of them studied words vigorously just with the intention of doing assignments in schools. For example,

For Jim on the other hand, gratification towards teachers and doing what they asked to do was important. Besides, Jim talked about his drama class as an advantage which assisted him to enjoy learning English words.

Textbooks

Sarah commented that the only source for learning new words is classroom use by using two vital English resources: teachers and text books. However, she did not study new words outside the school environment, when she faced a problem in understanding the new words the only trustful source was her teacher. On the other hand, Eva has learnt the new words from text books used in classroom. Rose stated that her teachers were not speaking English in classroom and she learned new words form text books.

B. The Role of Peers

Unhelpful Peers' Reaction

The experience of speaking English along with peers produced both pressure and pleasure. The single most striking observation to emerge from the data comparison was the lack of positive attitude towards speaking English in schools. Several students mentioned that they couldn't practice their learned vocabulary by speaking English in schools because other students changed their mind toward them.

It is challenging to practice new words in their daily speaking in schools because of this perspective. In this regard Rose added that "As I like English language so when I was in school I spoke in English and some students told me that, you want to show us something that make you different from us in both secondary and primary schools." On the other hand, Jasmine wants to use new words in her daily conversation to practice her English.

Helpful Peers' Reaction

Some subjects reported that they had learned new words from their friends in school. Jim indicated that he had got some words from his friends. Jasmine describes her friends in secondary school as the people who corrected her wrong pronunciation of new words and spoke to her in English. On the other hand, Eva assisted her classmates to learn new words by clarifying them or spelling the meaning.

In short, the main point of dealing with peers in order to learn new words in the current study is that students can promote their new learned vocabulary through participating in conversation with their peers. Noteworthy, when students lived and studied in closer proximity to each other they can examine themselves freely (Anderson and Boud, 1996). Unfortunately the concepts of peer learning for some subjects of this study had a negative impact on their strategies.

C. The Role of Formal Learning Environment (Teachers, Peers, and Classroom)

The Role of Teachers

One of the aims of the present study was to determine the effect of teachers on the learners' choice of vocabulary learning strategies. Under this main factor two sub-factors emerged, the teachers' teaching methods and teachers' encouragements. The results of this study showed that some strategies which the students are using are related to the ways that they are trained by their teachers. These results are consistent with those of other studies such as (Briere, 1978; Carroll, 1967; Chihara and Oiler, 1978; Krashen, et al. 1978 and Krashen and Seligar, 1976) who suggested that the role of formal instruction on second language acquisition is undoubtedly important.

Teachers' Encouragements

In this study, teachers, peers, and classroom instruction were found to affect the students' perception of vocabulary learning strategies. Jamal mentioned that although there is lack of support by his parents to learn the English language, he is encouraged and given confidence by his teachers in the school. Jim described his drama class and his teacher as the important aspects which assist him to learn new vocabulary in the language. These findings are consistent with Gao (2006) noticed that "these mediating agents directly or indirectly caused the learners to adopt certain strategies" (p62).

Moreover, the present findings seem to be consistent with Ohta (2001) who found that teacher–learners communication facilitates learners to increase their knowledge in classroom and with those of Hall and Verplaetse (2000) which indicated that "teachers and students work together to create the intellectual and practical activities shape both the form and the content of the target language as well as the processes and outcomes of individual development (p.10)."

Learning New Words in Classroom

In this study, the classroom was found to cause the learners' choice of vocabulary learning strategies. Another important finding was that the learners tried to learn new words by doing their assignments in class. For instance Jim, Rose and, Jamal's ways of vocabulary learning strategies are adopted from their teachers. The possible explanation for these results which is also true for this study has been explained by (Rao, 2006). He clarified the fact that in Asian

culture the learners in classroom have to listen and obey their teachers and the teachers are the main source of knowledge and students are considered as passive learners.

The second sub-factor of the importance of classroom is using textbooks which were mentioned by participants of this study. These findings further support the idea of Richards and Mahoney (1996) and Richards (2005) who accounted the crucial role of textbooks in teaching and learning second language.

The Role of Peers

It is interesting to note that all the twelve participants of this study have shown both positive and negative attitudes toward learning new words with peers and classmates. This finding is in agreement with Lantolf and Thorne (2004) who advocated the role of peer group and classroom atmosphere on acquiring a second language.

Nevertheless, the findings of helpful reaction further support the idea of Anderson and Boud (1996) revealed that the psychological processes are not the only important factors involved in learning and that we should consider the learning as a social process. However they explained the role of peers as an important factor. "We learn from and with others and often learn best when we are forced to explain things to others" (p.17). In addition, positive behaviors and reactions of the subject's further support the idea of Seng (2006) who found that the students learned better when a classmate explains something to them.

On the other hand, the other finding of present study was unhelpful peer's reaction toward practicing new-learned words in their daily speaking. This finding is in agreement with the findings of Shah (1999) identified the negative peer's reaction and behavior as important patterns which contributed to the perception of low achiever ESL students about learning second language in Malaysia.

VII. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examines the influence of formal language learning environment (classroom, teachers, and peers) on the vocabulary learning strategies among ESL students in UPM. The purpose of the current study was to get acquainted with the topic of vocabulary learning strategies from the students' standpoint.

With regards to the importance of mediating agents such as the role of parents, English language teachers, peers, and classroom contexts, it is discovered that most of the students indicated that their teachers, peers and classroom environment are the most supportive factors that can be considered important to learn new words.

In addition, the reason why students wanted to learn the English language is that all of them wanted to be able to speak in the English language because they liked it and because it is an international language.

Based on the findings, some implications can be observed. The results of the current study can help language teachers to improve their teaching methods to facilitate students with regards to second language learning and teaching in Malaysia. Second, the findings of this research will assist language teachers to design their teachings based on factors such as learners' language learning experiences, home environment, peer groups, and individual differences.

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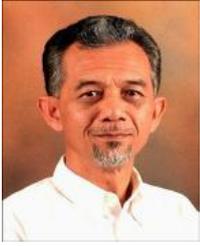
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