The Use of Colorful Semantics to Improve Sentence Construction in Writing Sentences among Year Four Pupils

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Abstract

This action research was set out to develop pupils' writing skill using colorful semantics. The main two objectives established from the outset were to develop pupils' sentence construction and improve my teaching practice in sentence construction teaching respectively. As the researcher, I conducted this classroom action research to 31 pupils which comprised 17 males and 14 females of Year 4J of SJK(C) Cheng Siu 2 in Malaysia. The data was gathered through pre- writing test and post- writing test, pupils' work as well as teacher's reflective journal. Over the course of four weeks, I introduced colorful semantics to my pupils in accordance to the sequence of 'who', 'what doing', 'what' and 'where'. As can be induced from the findings, colorful semantics was statistically significant to pupils' sentence construction through the enhancement of pupils' ability to understand words of each sentence part and also to write sentence in the correct order. The findings also depicted that utilization of colorful semantics improved my teaching practice to become a reflective, passionate, and motivational teacher. Therefore, the positive results warrant further research into colorful semantics with suggestions to integrate Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT) into lessons and expose pupils to more sentence types.

Keywords: sentence construction, colorful semantics, action research

A. Introduction

At primary school level in Malaysia, English paper is split into two which are comprehension and written paper respectively starting 2016 (Abas, 2015). Owing to the existence of the written paper, writing skill is now taking predominance over the other three language skills which are listening, speaking, and reading. In fact, writing is the most preferred outcome expected of pupils as it tests many aspects of a language such as vocabulary, grammar and punctuation (Kaufman &Gentile, 2002). Despite the importance of writing skill, I found that pupils in 4J class were weak in constructing sentences during my third teaching practice in SJK(C) Cheng Siu 2. To

further explain, most of them were unable to produce proper sentences as a result of their first language interference on writing. According to Cynthia (2010), the differences between English and Chinese language are apparent in parts of speech, grammatical rules, and tenses. These aspects confused my pupils and they tend to make mistakes in the second language which they were unfamiliar with.

Being an ability, writing can be learnt, practiced and mastered (Bransford, 2008). Hence, teachers should give formal instructions and guide pupils step by step to lay the foundation for their writing skill. Therefore, my action research aims to improve pupils' sentence construction and consequently constitute to their better writing skill.

B. Literature Review

1. Scaffolding and Cognitive Learning Theory

The underpinning theories for my research are scaffolding and Cognitive Learning Theory. Firstly, utilization of colorful semantics was in accordance to scaffolding technique because the color code cards acted as a guide in exposing proper sentence structure to pupils. Hence, pupils knew what was expected of them in writing sentences. They could also refer to the chart if they were unsure of the structure of a sentence. Next, underpinning the familiarization of pupils with different parts of sentences was cognitive learning theory proposed by Robert Gagne (1985). The core of this theory is Cognitive Information Processing (CIP) model which conceives learner to be a processor of information, in much the same way a computer is. In order to store information in pupils' short term memory, repetition plays a crucial role as information tends to decay without being frequently attended to. Therefore, I drilled pupils on words and sentence pattern frequently during the action implementation.

2. Colorful Semantics

I utilized colorful semantics proposed by Bryan (1997) to provide pupils with a framework to construct sentences. Under this method, color codes were used to break down a sentence structure. To further explain, nouns, verbs and other parts of speech were written on cards of different colors and pupils would learn the ways to join the cards to form a correct sentence.

In fact, the action was chosen mainly because of its significance, workability, and practicality. Firstly, the significance of this method can be seen through the positive result shown by six 5 and 6-year-olds learning predicate argument structure of sentences in a study as cited by Bolderson et al. (2011). The therapy of eight weeks duration resulted in an improved mean of sentence length scores of all research participants. As a visual clue, colorful semantics itself also conveyed high workability. The color code cards helped to reinforce the knowledge on how and where words could be used in a sentence in pupils' mind. For the chosen action's high practicality, the supportive evidences could be seen from the low cost in printing the word cards, available sources such as workbook and pictures from the Internet, easy to mark questions and also the relatively long time the pasted color code cards were durable on information board.

3. Kurt Lewin's Action Research Model

I selected the spiral model founded by Kurt Lewin as a basic framework of my action research. Lewin made action research a method of acceptable inquiry which proceeds in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of planning, action, and fact-finding about the results of the action (Burnes, 2014). Hence, I first observed pupils' sentence construction by referring to their written work. Next, I reflected on my past teaching experiences in order to find out root causes of their problem in constructing sentences. I also did a research on possible actions to curb the dispute and came up with a workable solution which suited them the most. The following stage was action in which my selected action was carried out in a systematic way. During this stage, preparation of teaching materials was a must in order to result in smooth teaching and learning progress. Moving on to the next stage was evaluation whereby I analyzed pupils' work both individually and in groups followed by assignment of marks to their written work. Lastly, I jotted down the weaknesses of the action's implementation to be amended and modified.

C. Methodology

1. Research Design

This research applied Classroom Action Research. Through self-inquiry and reflection about my own teaching practice and experience, I will be able to find shortcomings in my teaching and formulate a plan to address it. Action research is an approach which encourages practitioners to be in control of their own lives and contexts (Hine, 2013). I believe that teachers can help to

improve the standard of English in our country through the improvement of their own practice. I conducted this action research in order to improve my own self practice, and at the same time, contribute to the improvement of the English language among my pupils.

The actions were conducted over the course of four weeks. During the first week, I focused on 'who' whereby different occupations and names of people were taught. For the following week, I introduced verbs to pupils and related this knowledge to their prior one which was 'who'. During the third week, I shifted my attention to input on objects which categorized under 'what'. The lesson also enabled pupils to construct simple sentences made up by 'who', 'what doing' and 'what'. The fourth action, emphasized on knowledge on 'where' and required pupils to construct simple sentences according to the order of 'who', 'doing what', 'what' and 'where'.

2. Participants

As a researcher, I carried out this action research to all pupils in 4J class. There were altogether 31 pupils in the class with 14 females and 17 males. Among them, there were two Malays and 29 Chinese pupils. They varied in English proficiency level from intermediate to very low level. Despite their poor academic performance, they were obedient and well disciplined.

I had carried out preliminary investigation to identify the flaws in writing among pupils. First of all, I looked at pupils' written work to pinpoint their exact level in writing. I paid attention mainly to pupils' sentence structures to identify to what extent the severity of their problem on sentence construction was. For instance, a pupil wrote "She is donates but she vegetables to orphan" which did not make sense to me. Another example would be "I took her to the zebra crossing the road" which was written by another pupil who performed better in the same class.

In addition, I also looked at pupils' performance on Section C of their English test which focused on sentence writing. I then categorized the results into groups of different grades. Referring to the pupils' test results, 14 pupils scored lower than 50 marks and this proved the existence of the identified problem among the pupils.

3. Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Prior to the selection of data collection methods, I kept in mind the importance of data triangulation to decrease deficiencies or biases which stem from a single method. Whenever cross verification is made on two or more sources, triangulation is said to occur (Kulkarni, 2013). In other words, researchers need to apply and combine several research methods in the study of the same phenomenon. This is called as methodological triangulation which involves the use of more than one kind of method in a study.

According to Whitehead (2008), the data collected must be able to help the researcher to judge the workability of the action. I utilized three methods to collect data which are pre and post-writing tests, pupils' work, and teacher's reflective journal with different rationales being justified:

(a) Pre-Writing Test and Post-Writing Test

I utilized test as one of my data collection methods to quantify the knowledge learnt by pupils after the implementation of action. There were two types of test which I carried out namely pre-writing test and post- writing test. To further explain, pre-writing test was administered to pupils before action implementation in order to check their baseline knowledge and preparedness for sentence writing. After four weeks of action implementation, a post-writing test was carried out to look at pupils' improvement on the subject matter. Bearing in mind the aim to examine the impact of colorful semantics on pupils' sentence construction, the questions of pre-writing test and post-writing test were constructed with only a minimal difference. Pupils' scores on both tests were further recorded as a quantitative data source.

(b) Pupils' work

Goh (2012) endorsed pupils' work as all forms of pupils' by-products after a lesson such as assignments, projects, and essays. Hence, pupils' work serves as a rich source of qualitative data for teacher to carry out further analysis. In addition, due to the inevitability of pupils' work during a lesson, it is then a natural and convenient method of data collection. In this research, pupils were given a task sheet to be completed at the end of each lesson. I then collected and marked their task sheets for evaluation purpose. In fact, the task sheets served both learning and assessment purposes as they consolidated knowledge learnt in pupils as well as enabled me to check on their performance.

(c) Teacher's reflective journals

According to Goh (2012), a reflective journal emphasizes on learning through questioning and investigation in order to develop a better understanding of teachers on their teaching practices. Hence, I reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of each lesson and jotted them down in a reflective journal. Besides, I also marked down what transpired throughout this action research along with my own personal feelings and emotion regarding the implemented action in the reflective journals. The collection of reflection notes was made continuously as a backup source of qualitative data.

4. Technique of Data Analysis

There were two ways of analyzing the collected data namely qualitative and quantitative analysis. I marked research participants' pre-writing test and post-writing test and tabulated the scores into percentages and tables. On the other hand, teacher's reflective journal entries and pupils' work were analyzed and interpreted as qualitative data.

D. Findings and Discussion

1. Findings

In order to analyze pre-writing test and post-writing test, I tabulated the research participants' scores into percentage and table. A comparison between research participants' marks of pre-writing test and post-writing test was made to look at their improvement after the action implementation. The percentage depicts that all research participants showed an increase in scores. Among them, RP4's improvement was the most significant as his score rocketed from 0 to 82.5. On the other hand, the score of RP6 marked the second highest rise which attributed to 70 marks. RP1 also improved sharply on his test score from 17.5 to 77.5 which accounted to an increase of 60 marks.

Table 1. Data of pre-writing test and post-writing test

Descriptive Data	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pre-writing test	16.3	14.9
Post-writing test	62	27.5

On the other hand, the table displays the mean and standard deviation of pre-writing test and post-writing test respectively. First of all, the mean score of 16.3 for pre-writing test is very low, way below the passing mark for the test. It indicates that the overall performance of my research participants is unsatisfactory. Pleasantly, the mean value rises to 62 during the post-writing test and proves the improvement of research participants' writing skill.

The next data, standard deviation is the measure of spread of the numbers in a set of data from its mean value (Creswell, 2012). For pre-writing test, the small value of 14.9 indicates that the research participants are of similar ability. In contrary, the score of 27.5 for the post-writing test's standard deviation suggests that the variability of the group being assessed is high. In other words, it can be induced from the score that the range of research participants' results is wide. Hence, from the research participants' group which consists of those who are weak in writing, it transforms to a group which encompasses better writers.

Besides, I also analysed the pupils' work qualitatively in accordance to two themes which are understanding words of each sentence part and the ability to write sentences with correct sequence. For 'who' task sheet, RP1 and RP6 scored all correct while the othersanswered two or three questions wrongly. Moving on to the next was 'doing' task sheet whereby research participants needed to fill in the blanks with correct verb and tense. For this worksheet, most of them scored 8 out of 10. During the third lesson, research participants were required to match the 'what' to 'doing' such as 'drinking + a cup of coffee'. Among them, RP1, RP2, RP4 and RP6 were able to get all the questions right. The analysis of the last task sheet, 'where' worksheet depicts that most of the research participants were able to match names of place to the pictures correctly. Overall, the analysis of four task sheets indicates that most of the research participants picked up the vocabularies and were able to demonstrate their understanding on the words.

The theme which comes next is the research participants' ability to write sentences with correct sequence. In this context, the result of research participants' fifth task sheet on sentence writing was excellent. This is because all of them were capable to construct sentences in the correct order. For instance, the sentences wrote by RP2 was almost error free. She made only

two mistakes in total which were 'at the washroom' instead of 'in the washroom' and mispelled 'ice-cram' for 'ice-cream'. On the other hand, sentences wrote by the other research participants were all well constructed despite the grammatical and spelling mistakes that they made. Although some grammatical errors existed in the research participants' sentences, their structures were mainly correct and this was exactly the dominant aspect which I kept emphasising on.

Last but not the least, I analyzed my reflective journals and sorted the information into different themes. To further explain, I highlighted the phrases and sentences which showed importance to my analysis in accordance to four themes which were pupils' reactions and emotions, weaknesses of the lesson, effect of the action on pupils' writing and how I had improved my teaching practice in relation to sentence construction teaching. The data were further tabulated according to the themes identified.

My Pupils' Reactions and Emotions
The pupils enjoyed the lesson as portrayed by the smiles on their faces while playing charades.

> *"My pupils enjoyed playing this game very much especially when*
> *I read their group names fast… contented to see the smile on their faces."*

- Journal Entry 1-

The pupils were also excited to follow me to Bestari Room indicating that they loved my writing lessons. Other than that, the implemented action was successful in motivating my pupils to learn as they were very keen to write whenever I gave them writing activity using colorful semantics.

The Weaknesses of the Lesson
In my reflections, I was able to identify what I needed to improve on. Among them, pupils' vocabularies and subject verb agreement were the parts which I should pay more attention to. To further explain, there were several words that the pupils were not able to write well such as 'astronaut', 'artist' and 'dentist'. Besides, most of the pupils were weak in subject verb agreement as they were unsure to write either 'is', 'are' or 'am' after the name of person. Lastly, some pupils made mistakes in sentence writing at individual level. This was totally different from group task in which some pupils could take advantage on.

> *"…some of the pupils' task sheets illustrated grammatical or spelling*
> *mistakes or even a combination of both. This showed that they were*
> *unable to answer the task on their own."*

- Journal Entry 4 –

The Effect of the Action on Pupils' Sentence Writing
As can be induced from my reflective journals, pupils improved in sentence writing through picking up more vocabularies, learning to use correct subject verb agreement and understanding parts of sentences which constituted a sentence. These aspects were essential to sentence construction and contributed to pupils' improvement in sentence writing.

How I Had Improved My Teaching Practice in Relation to Sentence Construction Teaching
I had improved on my own teaching practice in several ways such as able to think critically about solutions to curb pupils' problem with regards to incorrect tenses and reflect on the level of difficulty of my teaching content to suit the pupils' level better. I had also become a more encouraging person in motivating pupils to try their best in completing their homework.
> *"…and give star to those who completed their task perfectly without*
> *error as an encouragement."*

- Journal Entry 3 –

Besides, I became better in my practice and changed my reputation from being a dull teacher who gave too much homework to a teacher who gave interesting activities to pupils. The following improvement on my teaching practice was clearly shown by my increased level of

patience. To illustrate, I spent most of my time giving ideas or guiding my pupils to write and create sentences both inside and outside the classroom. Furthermore, I also became more passionate and innovative in teaching. Such improvement can be seen through my effort to make amendment and modifications based on the weaknesses which I jotted down after each lesson in order to result in pupils' better learning.

2. Discussion

Research Question 1:

How does the use of colourful semantics help in improving Year 4 pupils' sentence construction?

Based on all the collected and analyzed data, it is clear that colorful semantics did a great job in improving pupils' sentence construction. The data from the pre-writing test and post-writing test showed promising results whereby all research participants scored higher in the post-writing test. There were three research participants who improved by leaps and bounds as their increase in scores accounted to 82.5, 70 and 60 respectively.

First of all, the use of colorful semantics helped in pupils' sentence construction through vocabulary learning. In this research, pupils picked up many vocabularies throughout the implementation of action. For each 'who', 'doing', 'what' and 'where' lesson, new words were taught to them through word cards and they in turn showed their understanding on the words by answering task sheet at the end of the lesson. Research participants' grasp on the words was satisfactory as shown by the analyses of their task sheets. During 'who' lesson, two research participants scored all correct while the others made only two or three mistakes out of nine. This result was better than my expectation as their proficiency level in English was very low. For 'what' and 'where' lesson, though the task sheets did not show good evidence that my research participants were able to answer the questions correctly, it did clearly illustrate their achievement in spelling out the key words right.

Furthermore, seeing the analyses of pupils' work in sentence writing reflected the pupils' ability to construct sentences in correct order. Except for RP1 who wrote a sentence not according to the sequence of colorful semantics, other research participants were able to construct proper sentences in accordance to the order of 'who', 'doing', 'what' and 'where'. Among them, RP 2 was able to write a totally correct sentence whereas the other two sentences consisted of only a minor mistake each. Overall, all research participants were capable to produce well construct sentences despite the grammatical and spelling mistakes that they made.

To conclude, the result of pre-writing test and post-writing test as well as pupils' work had shown an improvement on pupils' ability to construct proper sentences. Although they are still weak in grammar points which are subject-verb agreement and preposition of places, it is sure that they are now able to produce proper sentences better than before.

Research Question 2:

How does the use of colourful semantics help in improving my teaching practice in teaching sentence construction?

First of all, my improvement in teaching practice was supported by the analyses of pre-writing test and post-writing test whereby all research participants showed an improvement in the latter test. This implied that my teaching was good in order to result in pupils' rise in scores. To further explain, "good" in teaching does not necessary mean I am excellent in conducting lessons but more to the utilization of appropriate teaching styles, approaches as well as activities to suit my pupils' interests and proficiency level well.

Furthermore, the analyses of my own reflective journals also showed that I had improved on my own practice since I conducted this action research. To illustrate, from a dull and unimaginative teaching style, I changed to be a teacher who gave interesting activities to pupils. At first, I taught pupils on writing mostly based on drilling techniques as I believed that practice makes perfect. I had been too focused on trying to pursue excellence to the point that I forgot how it was like to have fun in class. However, after the use of colorful semantics which encompasses action games, competition in group and matching of pictures to words, the writing lessons became more enjoyable for pupils to participate in.

Further analyses of my reflection journals indicated that I became a motivational teacher in encouraging pupils to try their best in completing the writing task. This was done by giving oral appraisal as well as star stickers to those who succeeded in constructing proper sentences. This is because such extrinsic motivation plays a key role in determining the success or failure of learning a foreign language (Elyas, 2014). A research conducted by Goss (1999) on Japanese ESL classrooms further supported motivation as the main driving factor in learning English. Hence, I was glad to see my pupils enjoyed writing lessons and excited for the lesson to begin. They

attempted to write during group activity and handed in writing task sheets with prolonged length of sentences. These were excellent indicators of pupils' increased levels of motivation which might drive them to learn more about sentence writing in the future.

On top of that, I had also unexpectedly improved on my reflective thinking. As I needed to jot down the strengths and weaknesses in reflective journals, I reflected on my teaching methods critically after each lesson. Soon I found that self-reflection had become my habit when I related the use of the nursery rhyme 'London Bridge' to teaching subject verb agreement in present continuous tense once I encountered the video clip online. Besides, I also tried to think of other effective solutions to reinforce this grammar point in my pupils. Other than that, I reflected on the level of difficulty of my teaching content so that it suited my pupils better. At this point, I found out not only that I became self-reflective, I perceived myself as a more passionate teacher too.

E. Reflection

Over the four weeks of action research implementation, I have grown in many ways. First of all, I found that I had become a teacher who is very critical of my own actions at all times. This is beneficial to me as Poet et al. (2010) found that constant self-reflecting is the key trait towards self-improvement. Here, I would say that this action research made me self-reflect on my own actions far more than I had ever self-reflected in my life. To illustrate, the research findings indicate that I always reflected on the suitability of my teaching content and pinpointed solutions to curb the pupils' problems throughout the action implementation period. The practice of self-reflection made me very aware of myself, my habits and my strengths and weaknesses, and I had certainly improved myself a great deal as both a person and also a teacher.

As a teacher researcher who takes initiative in the lesson, I always aim for a better teaching and learning process and this underpins the identification on my own strengths and weaknesses so I can keep the good and leave the bad in the future. In accordance to my research findings in Question 2, my strength lied within the ability to make the learning environment enjoyable to pupils. To further explain, I fostered a sense of competition in teaching verbs whereby pupils needed to guess the verbs that their friends acted out in order to obtain scores. Besides, the use of pupils' names in giving examples engaged them in the lesson. I also utilized video clip and puppet during set induction stage and this tapped into pupils' interests well. As a result, the learning environment was made an enjoyable one which in turn, invited higher level of participation from pupils. As a result, pupils' constant attention led to the success of action implementation.

However, there is still a large room for improvement for me to prepare my teaching materials at a faster speed. As I am not an expertise user of crafts, I had then put in more effort in order to come up with attractive word cards. For instance, in order to save time to write on whiteboard and also enable pupils to look at words which match the pictures in a neat order, the cards were made in such a way that they are a picture card at first sight but can be pulled down to show the vocabulary beneath each card. Ranging from finding appropriate pictures, printing them out, pasting them on cards until adding word cards at the back to be pulled out, this lengthened my lesson preparation time. However, I found it a good way to enhance my arts skills and I believe such skills will become my asset in the future through on-going practices as practice makes perfect.

As a future teacher, my professionalism was enhanced through this action research. I realized that I am not only a knowledge disseminator but also a researcher to diagnose problems in pupils' learning and come out with effective solutions. In order to do so, I need to be exposed to different teaching methods. Discussion with senior teachers and literature review will definitely help to equip myself with such knowledge.

F. Conclusion

To conclude, the academic payoffs of having pupils to write using colorful semantics were significant. Although I realized that the desire to improve pupils' writing is a gargantuan task, the attempt at it will no doubt broaden both my knowledge and experience on teaching sentence construction to pupils at primary level. Hence, I will continue to be an action researcher in education with the aim to experience a dynamic method for linking theory to practice.

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