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The effects of using the play method to enhance the mastery of vocabulary among preschool children

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Abstract

This paper is based on a quasi experimental study. This study compares the effects of using the play method and the conventional method to teach the Malay Language to preschool children. The researchers investigated whether the use of the play method helped to enhance the mastery of Malay vocabulary and interest in the Malay Language among preschool children. The subjects consisted of 100 preschool children from a Tamil-medium, government preschool. The Experimental Group was taught using the play method and the Control Group was taught using the conventional method. The study was conducted over a period of six weeks. The findings of this research indicate that the utilization of the play method significantly enhances the mastery of vocabulary and interest in learning the Malay Language among the pupils.

Keywords: First keywords play method, second keywords: preschool, third keywords: vocabulary, forth keywords: interest

1. Introduction

In Malaysian pre-schools, teachers employ various methods in the process of teaching and learning. The play method helps children to adapt themselves to new social environments. Dewey (1939) stressed that play is considered a task for children but this task does not have a definite aim or ending. Play should not be a forced activity as naturally children love to play (Kraus, 1990). Carr (2000) stressed that play gives the opportunity to children to reveal their negative emotions and to channel their opinions.

Preschool Francais (2011) stresses that, ‘The play way method universally is the best way to stimulate the nerve cells in a child’s brain. It improves alertness, improves memory and the benefit is surely visible in the child’s interactive skills’. Donnell (2011), highlighted that young children learn best through play, games, stories, art, puppetry and social interaction. In view of these advantages, this study focuses on the play method in teaching Malay vocabulary to Tamil, preschool children.

Statement of Problem

A preliminary study done by the researchers in early 2009, among 10 Tamil preschool teachers in the Kinta district, showed that the performance of Tamil preschool children in mastering the Malay Language was not
satisfactory. Mastery of the Malay Language is vital among Tamil preschool children because the Malay Language is the national language and is used as the medium of instruction in schools at the secondary level. The study also showed that teachers seldom used the play method in teaching vocabulary because they did not know how to implement it in the classroom. 90% of the teachers believed that they would face problems in controlling the class if they used the play method. 70% of the teachers agreed that teachers face problems in teaching Malay vocabulary to Tamil preschool children because the Malay Language is the pupils’ second or third language. Preschool teachers should provide support for Malay Language development and they should utilize effective methods to build children’s Malay vocabulary. As such, this study focuses on the effectiveness of using the play method to teach Malay vocabulary to Tamil preschool children.

Objective of the Study

The objectives of this study are twofold. The first is to investigate whether the play method enhances the mastery of pre-school pupils’ Malay vocabulary compared with the conventional method. The second aim is to explore primary school pupils’ interest in the Malay Language after being taught using the play method.

Hypotheses

The following are the five null hypotheses tested in this study.

Ho 1. There is no significant difference between the subjects of the Experimental Group and the Control Group in their scores in vocabulary on the theme of ‘Nature’.

Ho 2. There is no significant difference between the subjects of the Experimental Group and the Control Group in their scores in vocabulary on the theme of ‘Weather’.

Ho 3. There is no significant difference between the subjects of the Experimental Group and the Control Group in their scores in vocabulary on the theme of ‘Deepavali Celebrations’.

Ho 4. There is no significant difference between the subjects of the Experimental Group and the Control Group in their scores in vocabulary on the theme ‘Games’.

Ho 5. There is no significant difference between the subjects of the Experimental Group and the Control Group in their interest in learning the Malay language.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Play and child development

Ginsburg (2007) stressed that play is so important for optimal child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations for Human Rights as a right for every child. Play is essential for development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being. As such, preschool teachers should emphasize on play methods in the classroom because it enhances children’s learning processes and interest towards learning languages. The play method provides maximum interaction and correspondence with others in the classroom and helps children to master vocabulary through fun and enjoyment.

The play method provides room for children to use their creativity and develop their imagination. Play allows children to learn through experience, enhances confidence and self-esteem and also develops interest towards learning language. Scarfo & Littleford (2008) asserted that teachers should allow children to play with things like sand, water and blocks. By setting up a play environment, children are given the opportunity to manipulate, explore and experience with a variety of new material which enhances learning. Through play, children learn independence, knowledge and application of new vocabulary. Bodrova (2008) also stressed that play helps children master the symbolic nature of words. A study by Istimina (1977) showed that preschool children could remember more items in the dramatic play condition, functioning at the level that older children could demonstrate in the non-play condition that was similar to typical school task.

2.2. Theories related to play method

Vygotsky (1967), the pioneer in social constructivist theory asserted that children learn better through play and social interaction. Dewey (1938) stressed that children learn through their living experiences; as such the play
method can be used by teachers to encourage pupils in the process of learning language and vocabulary. Froebel (1970), a German philosopher on early childhood education discovered that all the tasks given to children should have elements of play and the objects used in the learning process can arouse the interest of children towards learning. Rousseau (1956) believed that the role of the teacher is to facilitate children to play and explore knowledge independently. Locke (1632-1704) affirmed play as a necessary and important part of the educational process and children learn faster through the play method because they love fun.

Piaget (1962) strongly believed that preschool children use symbols in play during the pre-operational stage of learning. For example, at this stage, children might use a book to resemble a car when they play on the floor. Piaget concluded that children learn through assimilation, accommodation and adaptation.

2.3. Research related to play method

Saayah (2008) investigated the effectiveness of using the play method in five kindergartens in Melaka, Malaysia. Her samples consisted of 25 teachers and 810 students. Her findings showed that kindergarten teachers lacked knowledge on the play method, and the teachers found it difficult to implement the play method in the teaching and learning processes.

A study by Rohizani Yaakub (2006), showed that story telling helps in the emotional development of preschool children. Woolgar (1999) investigated projective doll play methodologies for pre-school children. The findings showed that doll play and story stem techniques are powerful tools for eliciting preschool children’s representations about the family and their social and moral understanding.

A study by Braton, Ray, Rhine & Jones (2005) revealed that the play method helps to resolve social, emotional and behavioral problems among preschool children. Smith & Connolly (1973) investigated the pattern of play and social interaction among preschool children. The findings showed that the play method enhances the learning process and social interaction among children.

2.4. The effects of the play method on interest in learning

Children’s interest in language learning can be enhanced if the teachers employ methods which consist of elements of joy and fun. Several studies have indicated that when children are actively involved in the process of learning, their interest in the subject is enhanced. Studies by Thirumalar (2006) and Shanmuga Velu (2005) have indicated that students’ interest in learning History was enhanced by the student centered learning method.

Jarvis, Odell & Troiano (2002) believed that role-play as a teaching strategy offers several advantages for both teachers and pupils. First, pupils’ interest in the subject matter is raised. Secondly, student participation in learning is increased (Fogg, 2001). The third advantage is that teachers’ empathy and understanding of the different perspectives increases (Poorman, 2002).

In the kindergarten room, children can do role play as shopkeepers, consumers, teachers, doctors, dentists and so on, which help them to reach the outside world and explore them in interesting manners, as the learning environment enhances the pupils’ interest in learning.

3. Methodology

This study employs a quasi experimental design. The subjects were divided into two groups; the Experimental group and the Control Group. The Experimental Group was taught using the play method and the control group was taught using the conventional method. The study was conducted over a period of six weeks.

3.1 Sample

The sample in the study consists of 100 preschool children from two Tamil medium government preschools (School A and School B). Two classes of preschool children from school A were chosen as the Experimental Group
(50 pupils), and two classes of preschool children from school B were chosen as the Control Group (50 pupils). The distance between school A and school B was less than 10km and the characteristics of both schools were similar.

3.2 The instrument

Two types of instruments were used in this study; they are:
   a) Pretest and Posttest
   b) Structured Interview Questions

The contents of the pre-test and posttest were similar. Each test consisted of 20 pictures (5 pictures on each theme, namely, Nature, Weather, Deepavali Celebrations and Games. During the pretest and posttest, the class teachers of both the Experimental Group and the Control Group called the pupils individually and asked them to name the pictures in the Malay Language and their scores were recorded. 1 mark was awarded for every correct answer and the total marks were 20. In order to obtain the validity of the pretest and the posttest, two senior preschool teachers with more than 10 years of teaching experience were asked to verify the questions.

In order to gauge the interest of the pupils towards learning the Malay Language, before and after intervention, the teachers conducted the semi-structured interviews individually to get the pupils’ responses of either a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’. A score of 1 was awarded for the response ‘yes’ and a score of 0 given if the response was ‘no’. The total scores for the interview questions were used to gauge pupils’ interest in learning the Malay Language.

3.3 Pilot study and findings

Prior to the main study, a pilot study was conducted by the researchers to check the reliability of the pretest and posttest and the structured interview questions used in the study. The pilot test was carry out in a Tamil preschool (45 children) in Kinta District, Perak, Malaysia. The characteristics of the preschool children in the pilot study were similar to those in the experimental group and control group. The reliability of the structured interview questions was tested using Cronbach’s Alpha. The alpha value for the structured interview questions was 0.75, which indicated that the items in the structured interview questions were highly reliable. The findings of the pretest and the posttest in the pilot study also showed that the pupils understood the questions well. As such, the pretest and posttest were deemed reliable to test the children’s vocabulary.

3.4 Research procedure

The researchers trained the teacher in the Experimental Group to carry out the play method. The researchers also provided the lesson plans, learning objectives and teaching aids for six weeks. On the other hand, the teacher from the Control Group was only given the learning objectives.

The research was carried out for six weeks. In the first week the children from the Experimental Group and Control Group were given the pretest and the structured interview questions on their interest in the Malay Language. For six weeks the Experimental Group was taught the Malay Language using the play method. On the other hand, the Control Group was taught using the conventional method.

The researchers observed all the lessons that were conducted with the Experimental Group, to ensure the teacher taught according to every step of the play method in the lesson plan prepared by the researchers. At the end of the 6th week the preschool children from the Experimental Group and Control Group were given the posttest and structured interview questions to determine their achievement in Malay vocabulary and gauge their interest in the Malay Language.

3.5 Data analysis

The data obtained from the pretest, posttest and the structured interview questions were processed using the SPSS Windows version 16. The independent sample t-test was used to compare the mean scores of the Experimental
Group with that of the Control Group in their achievement in Malay vocabulary and interest in the Malay Language.

4. Findings

Ho 1. There is no significant difference between the subjects in the Experimental Group and the Control Group in their scores on vocabulary, on the theme ‘Nature’.

The pre-test results show that there is no significant difference between the Experimental Group and Control Group in their scores on vocabulary on the theme ‘Nature’, (t = 0.70, df = 98, p=0.50). The findings of the posttest show that there is a significant difference between the Experimental Group and the Control Group in their mean scores in vocabulary on the theme ‘Nature’, (t = 2.65, df = 98, p=0.01) The findings fail to accept null hypothesis one.

Ho 2. There is no significant difference between the subjects in the Experimental Group and the Control Group in their scores on vocabulary on the theme ‘Weather’.

The independent sample t-test conducted on the pretest scores shows that there is no significant difference between the Control Group and the Experimental Group in their scores in vocabulary on the theme ‘Weather’. On the other hand, the posttest results show that the Experimental Group performed significantly better than the Control Group (t = 2.23, df = 98, p=0.03). The findings thus fail to accept null hypothesis two.

Ho 3. There is no significant difference between the subjects in the Experimental Group and the Control Group in their scores in vocabulary on the theme ‘Deepavali Celebration’.

The pretest results indicate that there is no significant difference between the subjects in the Experimental Group and the Control Group in the mean scores in vocabulary on the theme ‘Deepavali Celebrations’, (t = 1.37, df = 98, p=0.17). The posttest results shows that the Experimental Group had significantly higher scores compared with the Control Group (t = 2.51, df = 98, p=0.01). Therefore null hypothesis three is rejected.

Ho 4. There is no significant difference between the subjects in the Experimental Group and the Control Group in their scores in vocabulary on the theme ‘Games’.

The findings of the pretest show that there is no significant difference between the Experimental Group and Control Group in their achievements in vocabulary on the theme ‘Games’ (t = -1.58, df = 98, p=0.12). The posttest results show that the Experimental Group benefited from the play method and had significantly higher scores compared with the Control Group (t = 2.75, df = 98, p=0.01). Therefore null hypothesis four is not accepted.

Ho 5. There is no significant difference between the subjects in the Experimental Group and the Control Group in their interest in learning the Malay language.

The independent sample t-test on the pre-test results indicates that there is no significant difference between the Experimental Group and the Control Group in their scores on interest in learning the Malay Language. However the findings from the posttest show that the Experimental Group obtained higher and significant scores in their interest in learning the Malay Language compared with the Control Group (t = 8.18, df = 98, p=0.00). As such the findings fail to accept null hypothesis five.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that the play method has helped the pupils in the Experimental Group to master the vocabulary on the theme ‘Nature’ better than the pupils in the Control Group. The findings are parallel to the findings by Norliza Husin (1994, 1995), who stressed that a well organized play method helps preschool children master Malay vocabulary. Rousseau (1956) and Vygotsky (1967) have also supported the fact that the play method helps children in the process of learning and building knowledge.

Children from the Experimental Group have better scores in vocabulary on ‘Weather’ because they benefited from the play method and as such, were able to interact and play with their peers during the learning process. As asserted by Scarfo & Littleford (2008), the play method helped the children to build blocks of knowledge related to ‘Weather’ and improved their vocabulary.
The children from the Experimental Group also were actively engaged in role play such as in buying items for the ‘Deepavali Celebrations’ and making traditional cakes for the celebrations. The children enjoyed these activities and were therefore able to learn the vocabulary related to the theme ‘Deepavali Celebrations’ better than the Control Group. As suggested by Jarvis, Odell & Troiano (2002) and Fogg (2001), role play helps children to participate actively in the learning process and enhances learning.

In addition, children enjoyed playing the games and they learned the vocabulary faster than those in the Control Group. As asserted by Rousseau (1956), Bodrova (2008), & Freeman (2000), the play method gives the opportunity for children to learn through experience and practicing real games such as congkak, hide and seek, draughts, football, netball and badminton.

These findings enable us to conclude that the use of the play method has helped to arouse the children’s interest significantly in learning the Malay Language compared with the conventional method. These findings validate earlier findings from the researches conducted by Thirumalar (2006), Shanmuga Velu (2005) and Jarvis, Odell & Troiano (2002) that show when children are actively involved in the classroom their interest in the subject is enhanced. Furthermore, the play method enables children to enjoy and have fun during the activities. Thus, pupils’ interest in learning the subject increases and stimulates them in language learning.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the implementation of the play method can help to improve the mastery of vocabulary among preschool children compared with the conventional method. The findings also indicate that the play method enhances pupils’ interest in learning the Malay Language because they find the learning experience more enjoyable and full of fun. Children are also able to interact with their friends during the activities; as such they master the vocabulary better. The play method also creates opportunities for children to use their creativity especially in role play, playing games, and making traditional cakes from plasticine. Therefore, preschool teachers should consider the play method as an alternative method to teach preschool children. The play method provides opportunity for children to learn through touch, feel and experience especially when they play games, thus the children in the Experimental Group are able to remember the vocabulary related to the games better than those in the Control Group. While playing games such as congkak, draughts, football, netball and badminton children are able to interact and communicate with their friends using the Malay Language and at the same time they learn more vocabulary related to the games such as the congkak board, win, lose, strike goal, net, badminton racket, shuttlecock and etc. in a fun manner. On the whole, the play method offers full benefits to preschool children in the process of learning.

References


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