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Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences 2 (2010) 5212–5215

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

WCES-2010

Contextualizing young learners' English lessons with cartoons: Focus on grammar and vocabulary

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Received November 15, 2009; revised December 3, 2009; accepted January 25, 2010

Abstract

This study examined the effectiveness of authentic animated cartoons in teaching English to young Turkish learners. In this experimental study using pre and post-test design, a comparison is made between instruction based essentially on traditional grammar and vocabulary teaching and one that made use of authentic animated cartoons. Thirty 4th grade pupils studying in a private school took part in the study. The control group (n= 15) followed a traditional grammar-based syllabus for four weeks while the experimental group (n= 15) watched and made use of 'The Simpsons' as classroom material. Results indicate that the experimental group outperformed the control group in learning target grammar points and vocabulary items.
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Keywords: Authentic animated cartoons; contextualizing; grammar; vocabulary; young learner; Simpsons.

1. Introduction

Teaching of English to young learners brings a number of challenges most of which stem from the characteristics of young learners that are different from those of older learners (Cameron, 2003). Hence, taking these characteristics into account while determining the language instruction is of utmost importance. Young learners tend to learn implicitly rather than explicitly (Cameron, 2001; Halliwell, 1992; Keddle, 1997; Pinter, 2006; Slatterly and Willis, 2001). They can understand meaningful messages, but cannot analyze the language as a system yet. Within this line, it is a crucial need to present and use the language within 'meaningful contexts' reflecting the authentic use of language (Cameron, 2001; Halliwell, 1992). As Arikan's (2009: p. 90) review of research articulated, although all grammar teaching is contextual at differing degrees, it is expected that "the teacher can contextualize the lesson through numerous methods including (but not limited to), using audio or visual materials, bringing in realia and props, storytelling, problem solving, giving examples, showing grammar usage, playing games, and teaching explicitly or implicitly".

Children are good observers and they make use of such contextual clues like movements (body language), intonation, mimics and gestures, actions and messages in order to understand and interpret the language itself

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1877-0428 © 2010 Published by Elsevier Ltd.
doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.03.848

(Brewster et al., 2002; Cabrera and Martinez, 2001; Halliwell, 1992; Slatterly and Willis, 2001). A further characteristic is that young learners enjoy fantasy and imagination (Pinter, 2006). Games and cartoons suit well in fostering young learners' imagination and fantasy. The rationale behind choosing cartoons as teaching materials rather than pictures or stories is that they contain colorful characters and catchy visual presentations accompanied by enjoyable sounds and music (Bishop and Cates, 2001). Teachers are interested in using animations while teaching all kinds of subjects (Kristiansen, 2001).

1.1. Statement of the problem

In spite of the overall support for animations, there are few studies which reveal effects of using cartoons on enhancing learning or attitudes of learners (Kristiansen, 2001). Traditional methods which attribute the teacher a central role and the learners a passive role and present an explicit and de-contextualized language instruction which is not appropriate for the characteristics and needs of young learners and teachers are not satisfied with the results obtained through traditional methods (Nunan, 1999). Research on young learners' English language classrooms in Turkey reveal that methods, strategies and materials are rather inadequate (Aküzel, 2006; İşpınar, 2005; Mersinligil, 2002; Yıldırım and Şeker, 2004). These studies also echo that most language teachers do not appeal to young learners' characteristics and cannot cater for the need to contextualize language instruction.

1.2. Purpose of the study

Drawing on the problems related to teaching English to young learners it is believed that new insights should be incorporated into teaching YLs. Despite the overall support for contextualized instruction coming from L2 pedagogical circles, there are few empirical studies concerning its benefits over alternative approaches at primary school levels (Selçuk, 2000). In fact, most of the work done in the field is based on the studies as to the effectiveness of games, pictures, stories, and songs in teaching young learners. Given the limited scope of previous research on the issue, it was deemed appropriate to evaluate the effectiveness of authentic animated cartoon series "The Simpsons" in teaching grammar and vocabulary to young Turkish learners of English compared to traditional teaching sessions in a primary school setting. This is the hypothesis the researcher set out to test.

1.3. Research questions

To investigate the effectiveness of authentic animated cartoons in teaching grammar and vocabulary to young Turkish learners of English the following research questions are designed.

1. Is using authentic animated cartoons in language teaching effective?
2. Is there any significant difference between the test scores of the experimental group and the control group?

1.4. Application

The control group was exposed to an essentially grammatical syllabus according to the traditional methodological guidelines as demanded by the National Ministry of Education. The students learned English through grammatical structures as central organizing principles of the curriculum. By focusing mainly on structure and vocabulary in a rather isolated manner, the instruction disregarded a communicative classroom based on sharing meaning. The pupils practiced the newly presented language forms and vocabulary items through mechanical exercises and question- answer drills. For example, the teacher introduced the school subjects by pointing to the weekly schedule of the students that were written in Turkish. Following that, the teacher gave the subjects' English counterparts. She went on talking about school subjects using the target structure 'I'm good at…' in its affirmative, negative, and interrogative forms through a set of sentences containing these structures and words describing the school subjects. Both Turkish (the students' and teacher's native language) and simplified English were used to explain the transformation from the affirmative to the negative or the interrogative case. Pair work, individual practice, and at times, structurally focused games were used to achieve the desired goal. These were followed by the reading of short texts and the writing of simple sentences, all of which contained the target structures. Throughout this process, however, a positive classroom atmosphere was achieved in which the pupils could participate in the class work

without much anxiety. In the experimental group, contextualized language instruction through cartoon series 'The Simpsons" was used whose grammatical and lexical content resembled the weekly plan demanded in the school curriculum. "The Simpsons" was chosen because it is the longest-running cartoon on prime time television and because pupils themselves mentioned it as one of the cartoons they love watching. Both researchers' viewing of the cartoon made sure that the cartoon's content was acceptable for these students from a moral and pedagogical perspective.

The experimental group watched one episode and made use of it each week during the allocated time for the research. The design of the first week is shared here to give the reader a sense of the instructional features of the application. Throughout the first week, the pupils first watched the episode 'Lisa the Drama Queen' for pleasure. In this viewing, the aim was to expose them to the natural language use in a non-threatening setting. Following this viewing, they spent three hours to get through the details of the episode which contained numerous references to schooling, school subjects, and structures containing lexical uses including "to be good at/ not good at something, my best friend is…, my favorite school subject is…, my favourite topic is…" and chunks such as "Excuse me!, Attention, everyone!, Are you OK?, You're scaring me!, I need you, What a mess!" which present authentic language use by allowing the pupils to use these in ordinary language. The teacher used the strategy of "pausing and replaying" by asking students questions related to the scene watched and she also used some PowerPoint presentations including some images captured from the episode. The pupils had an active role in all the sessions through role play activities, dialogs, and games.

1.5. Data collection and analyses

The pre-test prepared the researchers was applied to see any significant difference in both groups' proficiency levels. One month after the application of the pre-test, the same test was applied again to measure students' post-application performance. The test was composed of grammar and vocabulary questions. The quantitative data were analyzed by using a statistical package. The scores obtained from the tests were compared by using Independent-samples T-test.

2. Results

A statistical significant difference was not found in the pre-test results (Sig. 0,838). One month after the application, the same test was applied and a significant difference in the scores of these two groups was found. The table provides the means (M) and the standard deviations (std) of the pretest and posttest scores. As the means of two sets of scores reveal, the groups perform almost at the same level before the study is conducted.

Table. Results of the pretest and posttest exams

Groups	Pre-Test M	Post-Test M	Pre-Test std	Post-Test std
Control Group	49,00	74,20	7,94325	6,45
Experimental Group	49,66	88,66	9,64365	10,13

An independent-samples t-test has been carried out to compare the test scores for the experimental group and the control one. There was a significant difference between the scores of the experimental group (M=88,6667, SD=6,45497) and the control group (M= 74,2000, SD=10,13622), t(28)=4,662,p<.05. Furthermore, the magnitude of the difference in the means was very large (eta squared=.43). As Table 1 shows, the mean is 88,6 of the post-test scores of the experimental group whereas that of the control group is 74, 2. Moreover, as the significant difference between these groups show that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the post-test.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined if cartoons have a positive effect on teaching language young learners. In order to find out whether there was a significant effect of cartoons in grammar and vocabulary instruction to young learners, the researcher compared the performances of two groups. The overall results indicate that, at the beginning of the study,

both the experimental group and the control group performed poorly in the test; however at the end of the study the experimental group outperformed the control group. In line with this finding, it can be stated that teachers should create learning environments in which children get both aural and visual support in meaningful contexts. While doing that, authentic animated cartoons offer an invaluable way of contextualizing and introducing authentic language by providing audio-visual input. Further research should shed light on all aspects of the use of authentic animated cartoons in improving students' language skills and aspects.

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