THEME-BASED TEACHING IN TEACHING ENGLISH VOCABULARY TO YOUNG LEARNERS

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Abstract: This present study tries to investigate the students' responses towards theme-based teaching in teaching English vocabulary. This study involved 32 students in the fifth grade of one primary school in Bandung. The methodology used in this study was classroom action research by conducting observation through field notes and questionnaire as the instruments. The findings of this study revealed that students' responses were highly positive towards the implementation of theme-based teaching. It was shown that theme-based teaching could enhance students' interest in learning process that was supported by the themes chosen. Moreover, the students also argued that theme-based teaching could improve their vocabulary.

Keywords: theme-based teaching, vocabulary, young learners

Introduction

In Indonesia, English has been taught since elementary level as a foreign language. But, the status of English as a local subject will be changed in the relation with the replacement of the latest curriculum, School-Based Curriculum, with Curriculum 2013 that has been proposed by Ministry of Education and Culture (November, 2012). English subject will be treated as the additional subject in the after school activity since it is considered that the number of the main subjects have given too much burden for the students.

Besides of the changes of some subjects' status, it also seems that the learning activity will be based on theme-based teaching. The theme-based teaching, which is also called by Brinton et al. (Masako, 1996) as the theme-based approach, is one of the three models of content-based instructional models in which content is a driving force in designing a curriculum. The primary purposes of the theme based model is to help students develop L2 competence with a specific topic area with a focus on language skills and function while the other two models aim at content mastery. Furthermore, Brown (2001) states that theme-based instruction offers an alternative in teaching learning process by designing a course around theme or topic that can increase students' interest and focus on content chosen.

In foreign language learning, vocabulary has been treated as one of the important parts in order to build other language skills. Cameron (2001:72) states that, "*building up a useful vocabulary is central to the learning of a foreign language at primary level*". There are two forms of vocabulary classified by Lehr, *et al.* (2006); oral vocabulary that is recognized and used in listening and speaking, and print vocabulary that is recognized and used in reading and writing. This vocabulary learning has been found as a problem as the researcher's observation in SD X, Bandung. The problem was found on how the children were being introduced to English vocabulary that focus on translation and memorization without giving contextual meaning.

Hence, the theme-based teaching is expected to be a solution of this learning problem. Cameron (2001) argued that theme-based teaching offers more opportunities to introduce new vocabulary items that focus on a theme that can expand the vocabulary meaning and use since vocabulary items that have been learned before may be met again in the different context. In addition, she also states that teaching that is integrated around a theme is suitable with young learners since it can support them to learn naturally.

Furthermore, it has been found by Yang's research (2009) in Hong Kong that the children were very positive towards theme-based teaching. The majority of them thought that teaching activities and tasks are more integrated and organized with the implementation of theme-based teaching.

Methodology

This study is aimed at investigating the students' responses towards theme-based teaching in teaching English vocabulary. Classroom action research was conducted in this study since the improvement in learning process is expected to be beneficial in increasing students' positive response. As Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead (2002) states that in the action research, the use of knowledge can lead to improvement of understanding that will be beneficial for society.

Based on Lewin's (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002:41) theory, there are some steps needed in order to conduct this action research. It can be further described as:

> a spiral of steps involving planning, fact-finding (or reconnaissance) and execution, and which later came generally to be understood as an action–reflection cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting.
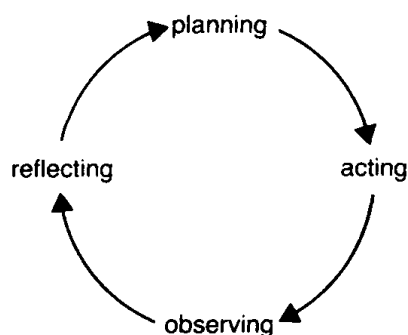
Action-reflection Cycle
(McNiff and Whitehead, 2002)

In this study, there were two cycles consisted of four meetings for each cycle. The first three meetings of each cycle were conducted to implement theme-based teaching and the last meeting was used to assess students' vocabulary.

In the first cycle, the theme was "Food and Drink. Planning is the first step of the cycle in which plan for some aspects that would be implemented in the acting step was made. After that, the acting, observing and reflecting step were carried out. Then, the second cycle with "Around the School" theme was conducted based on the data resulted from the first cycle.

The participants of this study were fifth grade students in which consisted of 32 students, 16 of them were boys and 16 of them were girls, in the range age of 11 years old. It was conducted in one primary school in Bandung that was going to implement curriculum 2013 and adapt theme based teaching as their new method in learning process.

In this study, observation through field notes and questionnaire were used to collect the data. Since the researcher took part as a teacher, the participant observation was taken in this study. The observation through field notes was needed in order to see students' behavior during the lesson. As Creswell (2009) mentions, field note was taken to record behaviors and activities in the research site. The field notes focuse on two aspects, which are learning skill and social skill that has been adapted from Moon (2000).

In the end of this study, the questionnaire was conducted in order to find out students' responses towards theme-based teaching. There were ten close questions provided in the questionnaire that was administered in Bahasa Indonesia.

Data Presentation and Discussion

The data findings of this study were collected from the observation through field notes and questionnaire. From the questionnaire result, most of the students gave positive response towards the

implementation of theme-based teaching. In the first statement of the questionnaire (*"I like English subject"*), 43.75% of the students strongly agreed and 50% agreed that they like English subject. It basically means that most of the students have had their own interest and motivation in learning an English language.

In the second statement (*"I like English subject with the use of theme"*), 75% of the students strongly agreed and the rest of them agreed that they like learning English by using theme. Since there was a higher percentage of the students' positive view about English subject, it could be implied that the implementation of theme-based teaching raised students' interest in learning English.

This was also supported from the findings of the field notes in the third point that in each meeting, students showed their interest in learning by actively participated in the activities. The students' participation could reflect that they were motivated during the lesson. As Gliksman (Gardner, 1985) found in his research, students who were integratively motivated were likely to volunteered more frequently rather than those who not so motivated. The students' interest also could be supported by the theme chosen as the result in the next points.

The next three points that were explored related with the students' point of view to the two themes ("Food and Drink" and "Around the School") chosen for the learning activities. The students' view about the theme used in the classroom was seen through three aspects; the suitability with the students' interest, the suitability with their proficiency level, and its relation with their daily life.

The result showed that in the third statement (*"The themes chosen are interesting"*), most of the students (65.63%) strongly agreed and 31.25% of them agreed that the themes chosen suit their interest. This is in line with Brown (2001) statement that theme-based instruction offers an alternative in teaching learning process by designing a course around theme or topic that can increase students' interest and focus on content chosen. Their interest in the theme chosen could also be supported by the students' opinion about the theme chosen.

In the statement number 4 (*"The themes chosen are appropriate with my proficiency"*), 53.13% of the students strongly agreed and 40.63% agreed that the themes chosen were suitable with their proficiency level. In this point, it related with the findings of the field notes that mostly the students were able to work independently of the teacher and could

carry out own work activity. The students might find the materials related with the theme chosen were appropriate with their proficiency level as it was designed to be related with students' daily life. This could be supported by the result of the next item.

In the fifth statement (*"The themes chosen relates with my daily life"*), 46.88% of the students strongly agreed and the rest agreed that the themes chosen relates to their daily life. Since the students' responses towards the theme chosen were highly positive as also the increase of their interest in learning English, it could be implied that the themes chosen need to be adjusted with students' daily life, interests, and also their proficiency level to increase their positive attitude toward English learning.

From the next two points, it relates with the students perception of the theme-based teaching implication towards the English learning. It was shown from the statement number 6 (*"English learning becomes easier by the use of theme"*) that 75% of students strongly agreed and the rest of them agreed that English learning becomes easier by the use of themes.

In the next statement (*"English learning becomes more pleasant by the use of theme"*), the students' perception towards the implication of theme-based teaching was highly positive. It revealed

that 65.63% of students strongly agreed and the rest of them agreed that the use of theme makes the English learning more pleasant for them. This also related with the findings from the field notes which showed that the students had interest in the learning since they actively participated in the lesson as it related with the discussion before.

In the next two items, it focused on the students' vocabulary mastery related to the implementation of theme-based teaching. In the eight statement (*"English vocabulary are easier to be learned by the use of theme"*), there were 43.75% students strongly agreed and 53.13% agreed that many vocabularies can be learned easier by the use of theme. The same percentage was also shown in the next statement (*"More vocabulary can be learned by the use of theme"*) that there are 43.75% students strongly agreed and 53.13% agreed that more vocabulary can be learned by the use of theme.

It reflected that the implementation of theme-based teaching could help students in their vocabulary learning. The findings from field notes that students were able to cooperate with others in pair/group works could also support this point. The students' interaction with others could reflect their achievement in English learning since students who are sociable

and can interact freely with others will be successful at learning a second language (Gardner, 1985). Their ability to cooperate with others might help them to learn easier and expand their vocabulary knowledge during the lesson. Moreover, it also relates with Cameron (2001) who states that theme-based teaching offers more opportunities to introduce new vocabulary items that focus on a theme that can support for the vocabulary meaning and use. Vocabulary items that have been learned before may be met again in the different context and it can expand the vocabulary knowledge since it can add new meaning of the words.

The last item showed the students' interest to use themes in their future English learning. In the last statement (*"In the future, I want to learn English by using theme"),* it was discovered that more than half percentage of the students (65.63%) strongly agreed and 28.12% of them agree to use themes in their future English learning.

In conclusion, the students' view about the theme used in the classroom is highly positive. Even though not all of the students like English in general, but their interest was increased after the implementation of the theme-based teaching. The suitability of the theme chosen with the students' interest, daily life,

and proficiency level need to be considered since it can influence their learning performance.

Conclusions

This study was aimed at investigating students' responses towards theme-based teaching in teaching English vocabulary.

The findings gained from the questionnaires and field notes showed students' positive responses towards the implementation of theme-based teaching. It was shown that they had strong interest in learning English that increased after the implementation of theme-based teaching.

The students argued that the themes given were suitable with their interest, their level of proficiency and their daily life. It could be supported by the findings that they actively participated during the lesson. They were also able to cooperate with others in pair and group work that could support their improvement in English vocabulary learning. Moreover, most of them stated that they were willing to use themes for their next English learning.

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