

Using Visual Aids in Storytelling with Low-Achieving Learners

Background and rationale

Teaching reading skills to learners, particularly low-achieving learners, needs more than words to help them understand the story. The purpose of our small-scale study was to determine the effectiveness of using visual aids to support the development of strong reading skills. Our school is a small, rural school, and many pupils have reading difficulties. We observed that pupils could not understand stories, and that their vocabulary was limited. In a previous study, we introduced word cards and flashcards into our remedial classroom, and this helped our students a little more. However, we still were not satisfied with their improvement and decided to look for other ways to support struggling readers. When our school was selected for the British Council's Power of Reading programme, we given a box of high quality picture books, and having these as a resource motivated us to use them in class alongside the KSSR syllabus, to support and motivate our pupils. This research grew from there.

Data

Seven pupils were selected by the researchers from the Year 3 class (7 pupils from a total 16 in the class.) They were chosen through teacher observation in class, based on their low achievement in English.

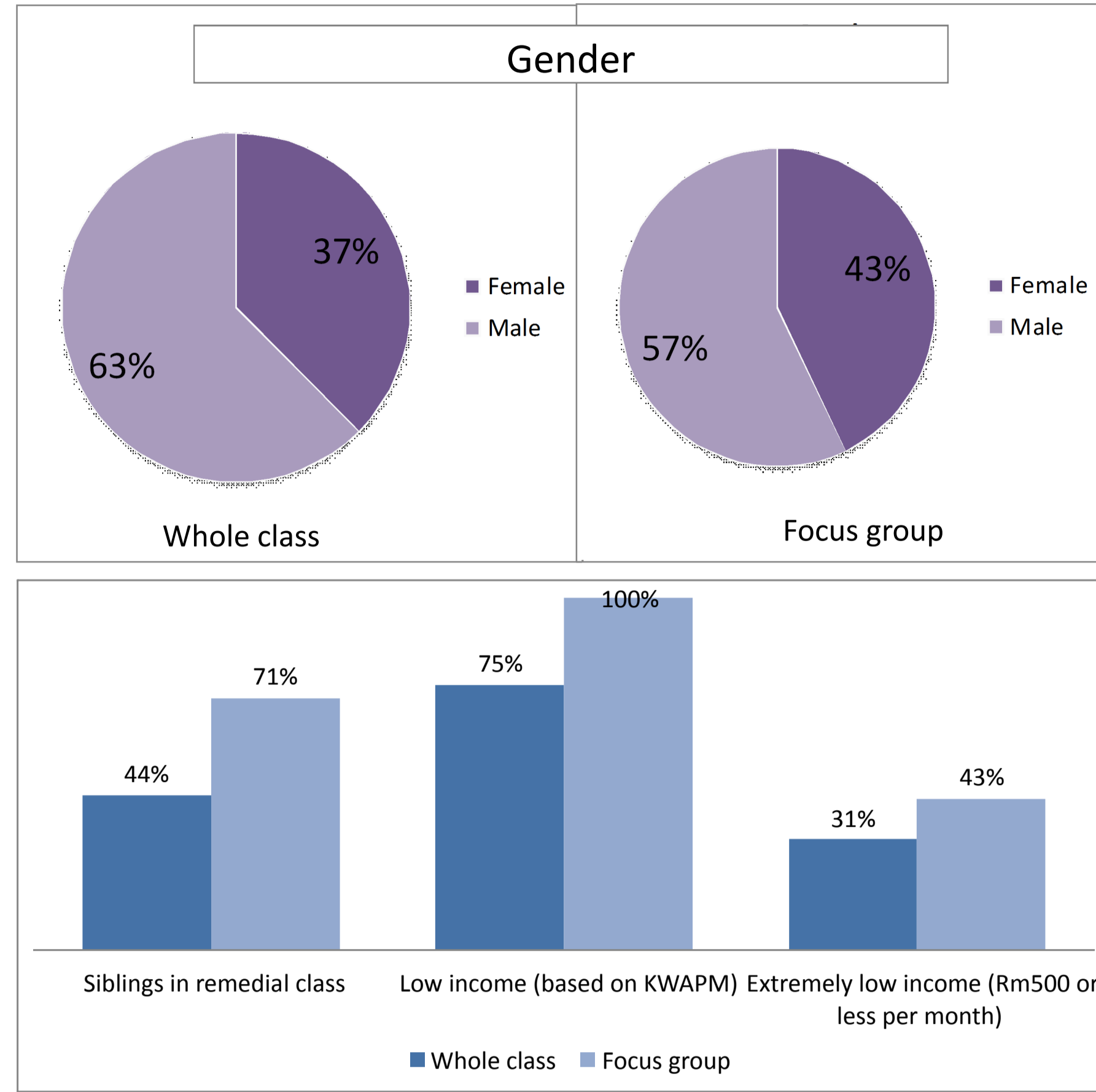
Of the seven students in the focus group, 4 were boys (57%); this is broadly in line with the gender ratio in the whole class.

All of the focus group students were born and raised in Kg. Poring, and have easy access to preschool education; all of the students attended preschool.

Family background appears to be a contributor to the pupils' achievement at school. All of the parents of the focus group pupils left school at Form 5 (SPM) and work in low-income occupations (e.g. farming or "general work") or are single mothers. The link to family background is strengthened by the fact that 71% of the pupils have or had a sibling who also attended remedial classes, compared to 44% in the whole class. Of five pupils in the class who have an extremely low income (less than Rm500 per month with more than 6 dependents in the family), three are in remedial classes.

This supports our theory that the pupils in this focus group are heavily influenced by family background, as all pupils in the class share a broadly similar social and school environment.

Our suggested solution to this problem is to involve these children in the available school facilities—exposure to books, providing communicative language training in school hours, and setting up a strong educational support system from their teachers.



Resources used

We're Going on a Bear Hunt, by Michael Rosen

Memory card game

Sequencing cards

Puzzles

Story flashcards (text on back)

Preposition flashcards

Masks

Photographs of vocabulary

Felt board



The process

STAGE 1

Teacher reads the story with no resources
 *Shows some illustrations in picture book
 *Uses a few gestures

STAGE 2

Teacher reads the story with limited resources
 *Utilises illustrations in book—discusses cover and pictures with children
 *Body language and facial gestures
 *Focuses on some vocabulary while reading

STAGE 3

Children explore the story using lots of resources and activities
 *Teacher tells the story using flashcards instead of the book
 *Class activities—e.g. sequencing on board
 *Small group activities—e.g. matching games
 *Individual activities—e.g. mask-making

Phase 1

At the beginning of the storytelling process, pupils showed interest as they concentrated on the story book in front of them. The teacher only read the storybook and showed a few pictures in the book. Pupils tended to show less interest and concentration in the middle of the story as a few of the pupils started fighting to be able to look at the picture in the storybook. Thus, the storytelling process took time to finish and the teacher had to deal with behaviour management.

The teacher finished by asking the students some comprehension questions. The pupils could not answer any.



Phase 2

Pupils showed interest in the introduction session. Pupils were enthusiastic as the teacher pulled out a picture and word cards, and asked the pupils to help match the words to the pictures. As a result, the pupils got distracted and stopped listening to the storyline; the teacher grabbed interest again by asking pupils to practise the sounds in the book as the teacher told the story. Pupils started paying attention again and started to take turns to do the actions and sounds. At the end of the story, the teacher asked comprehension questions: the group could only answer 1 out of 5 questions correctly. Pupils were given a vocabulary sheet to colour in.



Phase 3

We used one of our reading corners for this session as a change of environment for the pupils. We introduced the session with two puzzles, each made of a different word and graphic. The pupils were able to complete the puzzle and read the words. We then told the story again, but this time, instead of using the book, we used picture cards. On the back of the picture cards we printed the story as a memory aid for the teacher. Pupils were able to do the appropriate actions, and even joined in with phrases and sentences that they could remember. After the storytelling, they were able to answer 4 out of 5 comprehension questions correctly, using both L1 and L2.

After the storytelling, the pupils took part in the following activities:

1. They sequenced photo cards on the felt board
2. They played a memory game matching pictures to pictures
3. They demonstrated their understanding of over, through and under by using word cards
4. They coloured in, cut out, and created bear masks



Obstacles and solutions

Time management: We found it difficult to divide our time between family, regular work, and the research. It was an additional workload which needed a lot of our attention. Our Headmaster understood that we had this additional work and was very supportive. The other teachers at our school were also very helpful and supportive, and helped us to prepare the resources: cutting, gluing and laminating for us! Before we started the main section of the research, we asked for a meeting with our colleagues, where we explained about our objectives and goals, and described our research. They were already aware of the ELTDP because we are a small school, and because

they had all been closely involved with the Power of Reading, so, after the meeting, they all offered to help. Also, we feel that next time we will need to do less work, as now we know the techniques and process, and many resources have already been made.

Behaviour management: At the beginning, the pupils were quite difficult to control. We were worried that this would continue, especially because we were using learner-centred activities which are more difficult to control. However, as we moved into the second and third phases, the behaviour problems stopped, because the pupils were more involved and interested in the classes.

Cost of and access to equipment and resources: We did not have access to a good printer, and the activities used a lot of ink, paper and laminating film. Our Headmaster was supportive and allowed us to use some of the school's budget to pay for making the resources. Sometimes, we used our home printers. We could have printed some of the resources in black and white to save some money. However, we feel that once we have made the resources (which are stored in a secure cupboard which all teachers have access to), we will be able to use them again and again, with no further cost to the school, but with benefits for the pupils and therefore for the school and teachers.

Outcomes

At the end of the study, we observed that...



- Pupils were able to answer questions about the story better than in the past
- Pupils enjoyed the lessons and had fun
- There were more opportunities for speaking and listening than previously
- There were fewer behavioural problems than usual
- Pupils were introduced to a new book and encouraged to look for more in the library
- KSSR learning objectives were met in Band 4 (DL1EL, DL3E1), Band 5 (DL2E1) and Band 6 (DL1E1)
- Vocabulary was retained by the pupils—they were able to repeat lines from the book and match words to pictures a week after the lesson
- Teachers enjoyed the lessons
- Teachers felt more motivated and fulfilled
- Resources were made and stored which can now be used by the whole school faculty

Reflection

As teachers, we need to be concerned for our pupils' needs. In the past, both of us mainly used the textbook for teaching our classes. We rarely used picture books; when we did use picture books, we did not use any visual aids to support learning, but instead just read the story to the children, and then asked comprehension questions at the end. The pupils would find it really hard to understand, and then we would translate into B.M., and then we would feel guilty for translating! So nobody was happy.

When we were first asked to carry out a piece of research for the ELTDP, we thought it was going to be hard work, and we were afraid we wouldn't be able to complete the task, because of all the other school work we have to do. We didn't know the required format for the research. We were also nervous about having to present our research in front of other people. After we presented at a mini conference with other mentees in our district, we felt more confident about presenting because of the supportive reaction from the other mentees and from the two mentors.

With this current piece of research, the planning and preparation took the most amount of time. Once we started working with the children, we found it very interesting. We gained knowledge and experience in storytelling, and we liked having a reason to practise these techniques with the children.

Through our research, we realised that resources are one of the most important teaching tools for supporting low-achieving learners. Based on our experience, during the research and during the English Language Teacher Development Project, the addition of fun activities, such as games, or art and craft, to a storytelling lesson can help pupils to understand more than before.

We are glad to have been involved in this research. We feel more motivated to create visual aids, and to develop our knowledge of the strategies we can use to teach reading, because the results proved to us that we are able to achieve much more than before. We have developed professionally and personally and in the future we hope to continue that development through further research, and interaction with other teachers.

Sources and bibliography

We used resources downloaded from the following websites:

1. www.kidprintables.com
2. www.makinglearningfun.com
3. www.educate.org.uk
4. www.twinkl.co.uk
5. www.primaryresources.wordpress.com

Researchers

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