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How to Integrate English Learning with Arts for Young Learners? An Action Research Study

Shu-Chiu Hung

Ming Chuan University, Taiwan

Hui-Ling Wu

Houde Elementary School, Taiwan

Introduction

Since the 2000s, English has been one language subject which all students are required to take in the elementary education curriculum in Taiwan. After implementing English teaching in elementary schools for more than 15 years, the overall results of several studies of English learning outcomes have been reported to show a bi-modal distribution. Therefore, it has been noticed that not every young English learner is able to study or learn English well as had been expected. In response to the unsatisfactory results, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan initiated programs, for example ‘After-school Programs’ and ‘Hand-in-Hand Projects’ to assist pupils who are temporarily identified as low-and-under achievers to increase their learning in various subjects including Chinese, math, and English (MOE, 2007) which is in line with the mission “Leave No Children Behind.” Consequently, remedial English teaching has also been offered in many elementary schools. However, how can remedial instruction work better for those young learners who have fallen behind? The purpose of the present study is to develop remedial instruction with an aim to integrate English teaching with the arts for young English learners, and, thus, to explore the impact and value of such integrated remedial instruction.

Literature Review

The literature related to remedial English instruction in elementary schools and characteristics of low achievers in English learning and the previous studies of remedial English instruction are reviewed in this section.

Remedial English Instruction in Elementary Schools

The importance of remedial instruction and early intervention have been emphasized, and simultaneously, the application of particular teaching methods and materials in remedial programs have

also been urged (Wang, 2005; Wu, 2006). Li (2001) identified several common types of remedial programs in Taiwan. They are after-school sessions and summer/winter remedial instruction programs, resource programs, and the learning package and computer assisted language instruction. There is no fixed teaching material or method for remedial English instruction. Nevertheless, pull-out remedial programs are considered to be the mainstream in Taiwan (Li, 2001). In addition to the pull-out mode of remedial teaching, efforts are requested to set up more remedial English instruction which could assist the low-and-under achievers in the elementary schools in developing their English learning in a more effective way. Moreover, insufficient exposure to an English language learning environment and context results in insufficient use of the language. Remedial English instruction should also be more concerned with how to help the young, low-achieving English learners to become more motivated in their English learning in Taiwan.

Characteristics of Low-achievers in English Learning

Detra and Susan (2004) point out that the characteristics of low-achievers are the lack of learning strategies, having weak learning motivation and having fewer learning opportunities. Jadal (2012) has found that low achievers in English at the primary level are extremely inadequate in all four skills and they often lack concentration, retention and abstract thinking skills. Since the process of learning a second language is complicated, lots of young English learners encounter various difficulties while learning the English language at schools in Taiwan. Unless remedial measures are taken at this stage, these low achievers will find the learning of English to be a tough task, get frustrated by it and then eventually, they will fail in their school examinations.

Previous Studies of Remedial English Teaching

Jiang (2004) incorporated story books with remedial English teaching for four underachievers and found they enjoyed the reading and showed improvement in listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities. Wu (2006) investigated the effects of applying story books for remedial teaching and proposed that underachievers gained more benefits from learning through story books than from textbooks. Yin (2006) investigated the effects of nursery rhyme instruction on elementary EFL underachievers and the findings indicated that remedial instruction utilizing nursery rhymes could effectively help EFL underachievers improve their early literacy skills and their learning attitudes towards English. Lin (2007), Yang (2009) and Lin (2012) explored the impact of English learning utilizing computer-assisted or IWB-assisted remedial instruction on English underachievers. They found that those underachievers promoted their English learning outcomes and improved their English learning attitudes after engaging in computer assisted language learning. With respect to integrating the arts into language lessons, Allen (1990) observed that art work can attract students' attention, elicit their creativity, and bring them a sense of involvement. Moore et al. (1994) developed a series of language learning units integrated with arts and found that these classes helped students to develop and enhance their second language learning, by engaging in such activities as finishing reflective essays with grammatical accuracy. In addition, students had positive attitudes towards the learning, because the artistic experience seemed to encourage them with a greater sharing of work and ideas.

Method

Two main research questions are addressed in the present study:

- a. To what extent do participants who experienced the art-English integrated teaching mode perform differently in their motivation for learning English?

- b. To what extent do participants improve their English achievement after receiving remedial English teaching integrated with the arts?

Data Collection

The current study explores the impact of the art-English integrated teaching mode on the motivation and achievement of young underachievers. As for data collection, the Learning Motivation Questionnaire (LMQ I, LMQ II) and the English Learning Achievement Test (ELAT) were administered. The Learning Motivation Questionnaires were used to investigate whether students' learning motivation in English would change after they received the art-English integrated instruction. The basic structure of the questionnaire had been adapted from questionnaires used in Shieh's (2007) studies. Based on the needs of the present study, different questions were selected, and some words and sentence structures were changed to meet students' cognition levels. The English Learning Achievement Test (ELAT) was used to measure the participants' learning achievement of English after they experienced this art-English integrated teaching mode. The participants in the current study were six low-achieving 2nd graders in one elementary school in Taipei. In the current study, low-achieving students were defined as those who received grades lower than 70 points in the previous semester.

Research Design in the Current Study

All art forms could be used as teaching aids and for designing language learning activities. Visual arts take various forms and include drawings, photographs, paintings, posters, charts, cartoons, and clay work. The use of visual arts in language teaching does not require a deep study of arts. Specifically, the use of art as instructional materials for language teaching may eliminate boredom caused by teaching based on textbooks. More importantly, English language teaching involving artwork will provide learners with better opportunities to construct their own knowledge, appreciation of diversity, expressions and imagination. In other words, the integration of arts into English lessons is more likely to develop young learners' language learning capacity together with their aesthetic ability. In the present study, the remedial instruction, a self-designed teaching plan, was employed to teach young participants who were temporarily categorized as low-achievers. In the remedial teaching, there are two main learning topics in the remedial teaching. One topic is "Animals" and the other is "Emotions." Every learning topic comprised of a three-session art-English integrated course design, teaching activities and art work. The two topics and six sessions of the art-English integrated course design are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Two Topics and Six Sessions of Art-English Integrated Course Design

Learning Topics	Sessions	Teaching activities	Art work
Topic I: Animals Art-English: The forest	1. Learn the new language (40 minutes).	1a. Introduce vocabulary and sentence patterns	1. Draw/ Paint a forest.
	2. Combine the new and recycled language (40 minutes).	1b. Give clear instruction about how to make a painting (show some examples)	2. The forest w/English (sentence patterns)
	3. Practice and get familiar with the old/new sentence patterns (40 minutes).	2a. Introduce the animals they drew 2b. Practice the sentence patterns involved in their drawings 3a. Practice the new language in pairs 3b. Write down one short story by using the old/new sentence patterns.	3. The forest w/ English (a short story)
Topic II: Emotion Art-English: The face	4. Learn the new language (40 minutes).	4a. Introduce vocabulary and sentence patterns	4. Make a face
	5. Combine the new and recycled language (40 minutes).	4b. Provide an example about how to make a changeable face. 5a. Practice sentence patterns by operating a "changeable face"	5. Face w/English (sentences)
	6. Practice and make familiar with the old/new language (40 minutes).	5b. Listening and doing activity 6a. Practice the new language by pairs 6b. Listening and number activity	6. Face w/English (dialogues)

Results and Discussion

The research questions proposed in the present study are answered through the results of the questionnaires and achievement test.

Results of the Questionnaires

To what extent do participants who experience an art-English integrated teaching mode perform differently in their motivation of learning English?

TABLE 2
The Comparison of LMQ I and LMQ II (N=6)

Questionnaire	LMQ I	LMQ I	LMQ II	LMQ II
Item/Response	Totally agree	Totally disagree	Totally agree	Totally disagree
Q1	83.33% (5)	16.67% (1)	100% (6)	0% (0)
Q2	0% (0)	100% (6)	66.67% (4)	33.33% (2)
Q3	50% (3)	50% (3)	83.33% (5)	16.67% (1)
Q4	50% (3)	50% (3)	100% (6)	0% (0)
Q5	83.33% (5)	16.67% (1)	83.33% (5)	16.67% (1)
Q6	50% (3)	50% (3)	83.33% (5)	16.67% (1)
Q7	66.67% (4)	33.33% (2)	83.33% (5)	16.67% (1)
Q8	83.33% (5)	16.67% (1)	100% (6)	0% (0)
Q9	16.67% (1)	83.33% (5)	66.67% (4)	33.33% (2)
Q10	0%	100% (6)	66.67% (4)	33.33% (2)
Q11	16.67% (1)	66.67% (4)	83.33% (5)	16.67% (1)
Q12	66.67% (4)	33.33% (2)	83.33% (5)	16.67% (1)
Q13	66.67% (4)	33.33% (2)	83.33% (5)	16.67% (1)
Q14	33.33% (2)	66.67% (4)	100% (6)	0% (0)
Q15	-	-	83.33% (5)	16.67% (1)
Q16	-	-	83.33% (5)	16.67% (1)
Q17	-	-	66.67% (4)	33.33% (2)
Q18	-	-	100% (6)	0% (0)

As seen from Table 2 above, all six students responded “totally disagree” to Question 2 “Learning English is easy for me.” That indicates that learning English was not easy for them. However, four out of six students (66.67%), after receiving the integrated English-art instruction, responded that learning English became easy. Responding to Question 4 “I think learning English can help me become more confident,” before the English-art integrated instruction 50% of the participants totally agreed with the statement, whereas 100% of the students after the remedial instruction responded “totally agree” that they were becoming more confident in learning English. 100% of the participants, responding to Question 10 “I enjoy the content of the English learning” totally disagreed with that statement. However, 66.67% responded that they enjoyed the content of the English learning after they experienced the art-English remedial instruction. Moreover, 66.67% of the participants disagreed with Question 11 “I enjoy the ways of English learning in school.” before receiving the remedial instruction. However, 83.33% of the participants responded to enjoy the ways of learning after they received the integrated instruction. As to Question 18 “After the art-English integrated teaching, I learn many new words.” Finally, 100% of the subjects totally agreed that they learned many new words after receiving the remedial instruction.

Results of the English Achievement Test

To what extent do the participants improve their English achievements after receiving remedial English teaching integrated with arts?

As seen from Table 3, the learning gains of Students A, C and D have increased significantly, and Student B made improvements. Students E and F seemed not to benefit from the remedial instruction. However, the six students obtained higher grades on “vocabulary recognition” and “sentence structure (Q&A).” After interviewing the six students, 100% of them contributed their good grades to their art work. They expressed that the English words became much easier to learn when they “drew new words” in English class. In other words, upon finishing the art work, the students became more involved in the learning of English words. As such, the learning of English words became vivid and more enjoyable.

TABLE 3
Results of English Achievement Test

Subjects	Vocabulary recognition (28%)	Spelling (32%)	Sentence structure 1 (match) (20%)	Sentence structure 2 (Q&A) (20%)	Total scores
A (male)	28	24	20	20	92**
B (male)	28	20	10	20	78*
C (male)	28	16	20	20	84**
D (female)	28	24	20	20	92**
E (female)	24	16	10	10	60
F (female)	20	16	10	10	56

Conclusion

In the current study, results indicate that it is promising to integrate the arts with English teaching and learning into remedial English teaching for young learners who are temporarily at a disadvantageous standpoint in their English learning. The six participants appeared to have increased their learning motivation and have developed confidence and had a pleasant English learning experience after they received the remedial English-art remedial instruction. In addition, the six participants showed improvements in their English learning gains in terms of “vocabulary recognition” and “sentence structure” as measured by the English Learning Achievement Test (ELAT).

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The Authors

Shu-chiu Hung is an assistant professor at Ming Chuan University, Taiwan. Her research interests are in language pedagogy, Applied Linguistics, syllabus design, language development, English/Chinese language teaching, and English for specific purposes.

Hui-Ling Wu is a teacher at Houde Elementary School, New Taipei City, Taiwan. She has experience in teaching young learners at the primary education level for more than fifteen years. Hui-Ling Wu completed her MA. in Applied English, and her interests are in teaching English for children, materials development, and remedial instruction.

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