

EFFECTIVENESS OF LANGUAGE GAMES IN SECOND LANGUAGE VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT: *The focus of this study was to find out the effectiveness of language games in acquiring vocabulary while learning English as a second language (ESL) in the Pakistani context. The study sought to explore how games encouraged second language (L2) learners in retaining vocabulary because being able to use vocabulary accurately can be more important in many aspects of language fluency than merely achieving grammatical competence. Educational games help learners acquire vocabulary unconsciously while they are engaged in the game process. Utilizing games can also be very facilitating for the language teacher because of the playful atmosphere, which makes the teaching-learning process more facilitating. The data was collected by selecting five English language teachers and 150 students of class 8 from various public sector schools of Lahore. Evaluation checklist and survey questionnaire were employed as research tools. The findings obtained after an analysis revealed that games could acquaint students with new words or phrases and facilitate deep learning of vocabulary in a better and faster way in comparison to memorization. Games also help develop students' communicative competence. Most of the students agreed that new techniques via games had fruitful benefits in improving vocabulary. However, to improve certain limitations, the researchers also suggested some recommendations.*

Key words: Effectiveness, language games, vocabulary, acquisition, second language (L2)

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in everyday as well as academic communication. Its significance is evident even in the initial stages of second language learning process. In this way, vocabulary is one of the core elements of language aptitude and reflects how well learners listen, speak, read and write. Language ability of learners can be improved by vocabulary improvement [1]. The importance of the methods of vocabulary acquisition is increasing day by day as vocabulary learning is often considered a laborious and monotonous process. However, various approaches have been introduced in helping second language learners develop and learn vocabulary, i.e. reading books, newspapers, playing games, watching foreign cartoons or films with subtitles, listening to foreign music, etc. Using games for teaching and learning vocabulary is very popular in many countries of the world.

Unfortunately, in Pakistani public schools, vocabulary teaching and learning is one of the most neglected areas in the process of second language acquisition (SLA). Inadequate knowledge of sentence structures and vocabulary is considered as the leading problems in learning the language [2]. Teachers mostly use Grammar Translation Method (GTM) to teach English without using even a single language activity. As a result, learners get bored and lose interest in the learning process. As memorization is the main vocabulary learning method in SLA in Pakistan, motivation decreases to a great level in L2 classroom [3.] This study explores the effectiveness of using games as a vocabulary teaching technique in L2 classrooms in Pakistani public sector schools. Whereas many teachers do not pay heed to it, it can be an interesting method towards facilitating vocabulary acquisition.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research aims to look for answers to the following questions:

1. How does the use of language games affect vocabulary learning?
2. Do games motivate learners to develop and focus more on learning and using words in different contexts?
3. Do games affect class discipline?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study will be useful for Pakistani English teachers in general and public school teachers in particular to know the importance of using games to teach new words to L2 learners. The study will also help them familiarize with English language teaching (ELT) classroom strategies and inspire them to innovate a variety of game based activities according to the needs of their students that can ensure effective classroom management as well as improve students' motivation level during the tedious classroom learning process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"If language structure makes up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and flesh," (Hammer, 1991, p. 153).

While it may be difficult to understand a sentence with grammatical errors, it is impossible to convey anything without accurate vocabulary [4]. However, language ability of students can be reasonably improved by vocabulary enhancement. Learning the exact vocabulary is very significant for fluency than learning grammar of the target language. Therefore, vocabulary games bring real world context into the classroom, and improve students' use of English language in an adaptable and appropriate communicative way [5]. Vocabulary learning language games help and encourage ESL learners to sustain their interest. Games result in fun and motivation for students making them learn new items effortlessly. Some games can be quite instructive and enlightening.

Educational language games play a vital role in learning basic language skills. Games are a "form of play governed by

rules.” However, they can be relished only if they are entertaining [6]. They should not turn out to be a heavy preoccupation; rather provide a break from routine exercises, making students utilize the language as amusement. Likewise, [7] labels language games as a blend of rules and fun aimed to achieve a goal. There are many types of language games that can be used according to the level of the students.

Whereas, the students may learn language significantly and effectively via games [8], positive criticisms from teachers or students can help both to adapt the classroom based on needs analysis. They can measure themselves whether learning objectives were met or not without any outside observation and input.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this action research, ‘plan, act, observe and reflect’ procedure was used by the researchers. To measure the effectiveness of learning vocabulary through games [5], [9] a game design was developed to investigate whether and how games could help students in learning vocabulary adequately. The researchers requested and guided the teachers to use simple language games like listing, erasing a word, circle rotation, mini game show, charades, sketching and categorizing in their respective classes, the detail of which is as follows:

Listing

The teachers were guided to divide students into two groups and each group was supposed to list as many words either on notebooks or on white board as they could recall from the unit covered that day. The team with most words won. This game required pens and papers or a board and board marker.

Erasing a Word

The class was divided into two groups and each group students stood in lines. The teacher listed the vocabulary words in two columns. When the game began each group students pronounced and defined the word. If they did it correctly, the word was erased. The team who erased all words first, won. This game required a board and board marker only.

Circle Rotation

The class was divided into two groups to form two circles, inner and outer. Each circle student asked a question from the student facing him/her on their turn and on a correct answer signed his/her sheet. The team with most signatures won. The materials required were paper and pen.

Mini Game Show

The class was divided into two groups. The teacher gave a clue about a word. The first student to answer correctly got a point. The team with most points won. This game required no material except that the student who raised hand moved forward to answer.

Charades

The class was divided into two groups. A member from each group came to the front and acted the word picked from a basket. The other group was supposed to guess the word. On guessing right, each team got a point and the team with more points won. The material required was a basket and small pieces of papers.

Sketching

The class was divided into two or more groups. Each student of the group came to the front, picked a card with a word from the basket and drew the word on board. The team with the right guess got a point and the team with most points won. The materials required were a basket, pieces of papers or cards, board and board marker.

Categories

The teacher wrote word classes on the board and the students had to categorize the words from the unit read. The team with most correct listings won. The materials required were pen, paper, board and board marker.

While the games were embedded in lesson plans, the researchers observed the teachers and students for their responses and disposition. The instruments used were questionnaires, interviews and post-game surveys. The analysis is qualitative in nature. The population of the study was English Language teachers and students from public schools of Lahore. Sample of the study was five English language teachers and 150 EFL students of class

8.RESULTS

The results are grouped into two parts. The first part presents teachers opinions gathered through interviews and the evaluation checklist filled in by them, and the second part presents the results of survey questionnaire designed to know the feedback of the teachers and students about the effectiveness of games for teaching vocabulary.

EVALUATION CHECKLIST RESULTS

Following is the opinion of teachers about their experience in a question wise order.

- **Were the learning objectives met?**

It was observed that by the end of lessons, the students were able to learn meanings of words and majority of the students could successfully use vocabulary in spoken utterances. It was observed that the students created their own sentences by using words learnt in games.

- **Did the class allow adequate time for successful completion of games-based activities?**

The class time was forty minutes. Breaking from the traditional teaching and adding games initially created difficulties for the teachers but gradually they adjusted time for games and teaching.

- **Did you properly explain how to play the game and did the students understand it appropriately?**

All teachers were of the view that initially, the students made a mess and the teachers had to explain repeatedly. However, gradually they got familiarized with how to play the vocabulary games.

- **Did you use student friendly definitions and context based new vocabulary?**

All teachers used user-friendly language and all vocabulary was picked from the lessons of Class 8 textbook of Punjab board.

- **What type of behavior did you observe from students?**

Most students worked well, but some got distracted and started talking. Overall, they were happy to learn new games as well as words. They were motivated and enjoyed

all activities especially the fun game named mime or charades.

• Did the games disturb classroom discipline?

During the group work it was observed that the environment was messy and getting disordered because while getting responses students were being too noisy. During the activities, instructions were conveyed to students to stop talking. This worked for a while. Gradually, the discipline improved.

• Did you give reinforcement and feedback that encouraged student engagement?

The teachers encouraged the students and constantly gave corrective feedback. Students’ engagement was much higher than other classes where games were not introduced.

TEACHERS’ QUESTIONNAIRE

The questions asked from teachers have been graphically explained by pie charts.

1. Vocabulary games encourage and help learners to sustain their interest in second language learning.

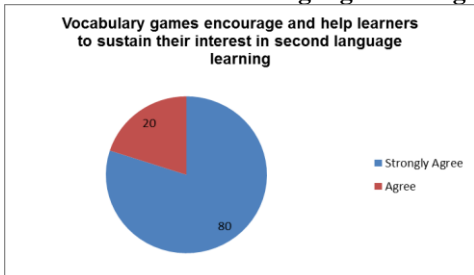


Figure 1

The pie chart given above indicates that 80% of the respondents strongly agreed to the statement that ‘vocabulary games’ encouraged and helped learners to sustain their interest and work, while 20% agreed to the statement. Most of the respondents found games helpful for teaching new words to the learners.

2. Games facilitate teachers to create meaningful and useful language contexts

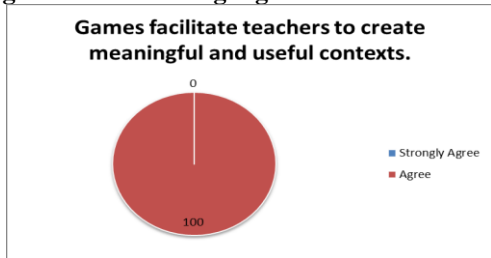


Figure 2

The pie chart depicts that all the respondents agreed that games facilitated the teacher to create meaningful and useful language contexts. The results for this question remain hundred percent positive

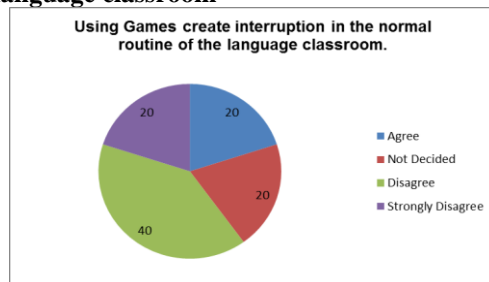
3. Vocabulary games do not motivate learners to a great extent for L2 learning



Figure 3

The pie chart shows that 60% of the respondents strongly agreed that vocabulary games motivate learners to learn English, whereas 40% agreed to it. None of them disagreed with the statement.

4. Using games create interruption in the normal routine of the language classroom



The pie chart given above reveals that 20% of the respondents agreed to the statement that using games create interruption from the normal routine of the language class, 20% were ‘not decided’, 40% disagreed and only 20% of the respondents strongly disagreed. It shows that there was some confusion among respondents as the method of using games was different from their usual teaching techniques or traditional methods.

5. Use of games is a good classroom strategy to help students increase their vocabulary

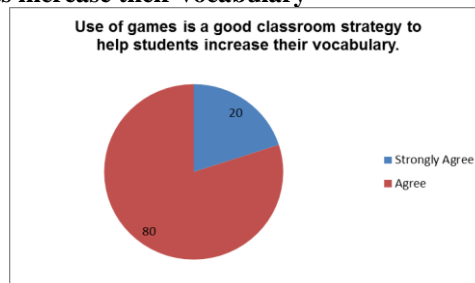


Figure 5

The pie chart given above depicts that only 20% of the respondents strongly agreed that games helped students increase their vocabulary whereas 80% agreed to it. Overall, all the respondents agreed that games facilitated the learners’ vocabulary acquisition.

6. Is the classroom messy and noisy because of games?

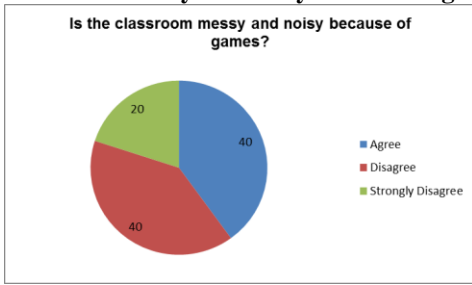


Figure 6

The pie chart given above shows that 40% of the respondents agreed that the classroom was messy and noisy because of games, 40% somewhat disagreed and 20% of the respondents strongly disagreed. Overall, the majority of the respondents disagreed with the statement.

7. Games increase fun and relaxation, so the learners retain vocabulary easily

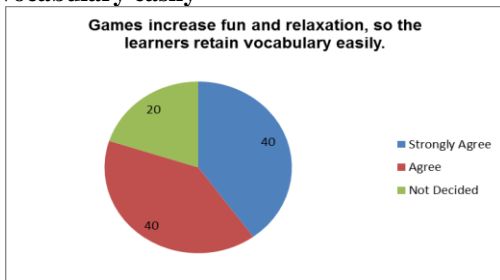


Figure 7

The pie chart indicates that 40% of the respondents strongly agreed that games increase fun and relaxation, so the learners retain vocabulary easily, 40% somewhat agreed whereas 20% chose the option 'not decided'. The majority of the teachers considered using games as helpful for teaching vocabulary.

8. Vocabulary games do not bring real world context to the classroom.

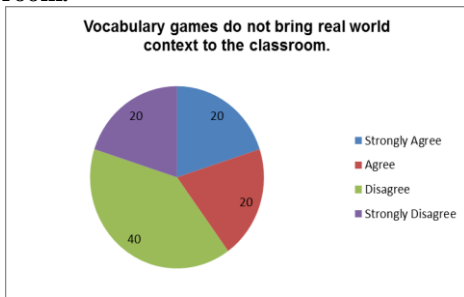


Figure 8

The pie chart depicts that only 20% of the respondents strongly agreed and 20% agreed to the statement that vocabulary games do not bring real world context to the classroom, whereas 40% of the respondents disagreed and 20% strongly disagreed to it.

9. Were you familiar with language games earlier?

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

The students' behavior was observed by the researchers and they were made to fill a very simple questionnaire with two questions only to keep it easy for them.

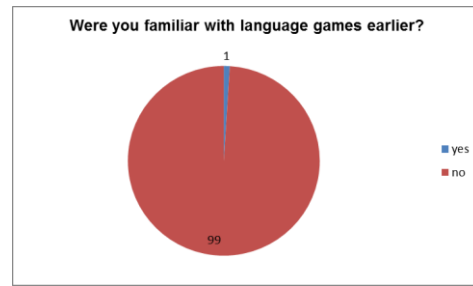


Figure 9

The pie chart shows that 99% students were never taught with the help of language games and it was a totally new experience for them.

10. Experience of learning English vocabulary through games

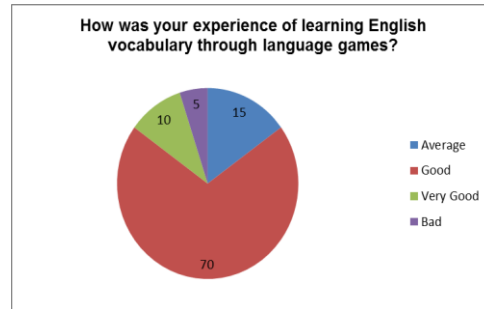


Figure 10

Most of the students found it a very good experience to learn English vocabulary through games as depicted by the pie chart given above.

DISCUSSION

Whereas this is a matter of serious concern that in Pakistani public schools, even in the most advanced areas like Lahore, English teachers do not have ELT training and as a result are unfamiliar with many ELT techniques, efforts towards training them can result in highly positive outcomes. Incorporating vocabulary-learning games in their lesson plans remained innovative for teachers, although they took a little time to adapt to the new methodology. However, once applied, the feedback was very positive. Initially the time management of textbook teaching with a vocabulary game in one class of 40 minutes remained challenging for the teachers but they gradually overcame the problems very well. Time management was appropriate and the effort to define vocabulary items in a student friendly way remained successful. Some of the teachers remained insistent on bilingual definitions of the words, but the games made a difference in spite of the continuation of the old teaching style. The students remained enthusiastic about the introduction of a new activity and gave a very positive feedback.

Although the percentage of the learning of new words increased a lot, the discipline of the classroom got disturbed, especially in the beginning of the introduction of the activity. The typical silent atmosphere of public school classrooms got disturbed by the students' movements like getting up, going to the board, or standing in rows and circles by the students. Some teachers were upset with an added element of

maintaining discipline, however, they controlled it very soon as they got used to it.

One of the most beneficial effects of the games was the increased interaction amongst the students, which resulted in better communication skills as well as more friendly and competitive atmosphere simultaneously as the groups got changed every time. Another important aspect was the kinesthetic element. The boredom of the classroom was eradicated on two levels, first by movement, second by game design itself. The games provided a break either in the middle or a relief at the end of the class.

The students kept on learning new words, definitions, spellings and pronunciations. The vocabulary to be learnt in the lesson was scaffolded on the previous lesson's vocabulary by creating a context where the students had to recall the previous lesson's vocabulary. In spite of all this, the classroom could not exactly reproduce real life situations. However, the shuffling of games maintained students' interest and their vocabulary was far better than the classes where language games were not introduced.

CONCLUSION

Games acquaint students with new words or phrases and help them remember vocabulary better and faster, they help develop students' communicative competence. Vocabulary games encourage ESL learners in retaining words through fun and relaxation as they usually involve friendly competitions which retain learners' interest. Thus, they lead to motivation for learners of English to get involved and participate actively in learning activities and imagine the real world context in the classroom to develop everyday use of L2. The use of games during the lessons motivated L2 learners to work further on the vocabulary on their own, thus the study shows that games are a good source of inspiration for the second language learners. However, it cannot be ignored that games are not the only useful way; other techniques should not be ignored.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Not only vocabulary games but language games of all kinds should be incorporated in all public schools of Pakistan at all levels.
- All primary and secondary teachers should be trained to teach English language using games.

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