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Effects of Instructional Games on Facilitating of Students' Vocabulary Learning

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Abstract: Teaching a new language to the young learners of other languages can be considered as a challenging job while it can be facilitated by applying some instructional games. This small and case study was conducted to identify the role of the games and level of vocabulary learning among 70 female students in the age of 12- 13 years old students were selected from *Bu-Ali* one of the Iranian primary schools in Urmia, Iran. The employment of pretest and posttest instruments allows instructors a single opportunity to empirically evaluate the effectiveness of their instruction and assess the acquisition of course content material by students through formative assessment. After analyzing the pre-test and post-test it was found that applying games has the important and determine role in teaching vocabularies to the language learners, as it was not possible as well as learning with just repetition and memorizing methods. Moreover, Game has its potential as an educational tool for literary training; and can motivate and engage learners especially the quiet and passive ones in the whole learning process.

Key words: learning vocabulary, application Game, pre and post – test.

INTRODUCTION

In learning a foreign language, vocabulary plays an important role. It is one element that links the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing all together. In order to communicate well in a foreign language, students should acquire an adequate number of words and should know how to use them accurately. There is an old and prevalent perception that learning occurs well only in a restrained and tense and oppressive environment. Many teachers believed that learning should happen in a formal environment and if one is having fun and there is hilarity and laughter, then it is not really teaching (Lee, 1995). On the other hand we can apply some teaching strategies like games to reduce the stress level among the students. Instructional games create an active sometimes noisy and apparently disorganized learning setting (Evans, 1979). Such scene can be threatening to most teachers. There is always the urge to fully control all the students' activity moreover, to have everyone seated quietly in rows and above all, to have the teacher at the center of all class activities. Does not such a tense learning environment cause stressful environment in which students do not feel convenient to interact and communicate with their peers and also teacher? Is it possible learners to learn a language and enjoy themselves at the same time? This project was set to unveil the effects of games on language learning on the aspect of vocabulary.

Iranian language classrooms are mostly teachers dominated and they just follow the syllabus that have been given by the head of the institution and schools (Ministry of Education, 1932). ESL teachers, on one hand, are in dilemma as there is no explicit grammatical direction for them to embark on. They have to find their own way to teach grammar. ESL learners, on the other hand, are expected to pick up grammar through participating in authentic communicative activities.

However, ESL learners acquire patchy and imperfect repertoire of performance which is not supported by an underlying competence (Widdowson, 1990, cited in Pillay & North, 1997). How will the learning change if teachers shift the teachers' dominated environment to a more fun and students' centered classrooms? How grammar can be effectively taught and learnt in context? This research was therefore conducted to look into the potentiality of using games on teaching.

The Purpose of the Study:

Teaching can be facilitated by applying different tools. One of these teaching tools is instructional games. It seems that language games have positive effects on learners' vocabulary learning. Thus, this research was conducted to identify how games may facilitate the teaching process and help students to learn vocabulary. And it has tried to find out whether games can improve ESL learners' vocabulary learning as well as identify the potentiality of using games for literary training.

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Literature Review:

Particular attention is also drawn to the problems related teaching and learning vocabulary. In addition, a review on the potentials of using games to make language learning fun and interesting is provided. Learners of English have to deal with unfamiliar vocabulary during their language acquisition. In order to learn and retain new words, learners should participate in different task-based activities in their classroom whether it is a guessing task, a describing exercise or conversation making. Such activities also include vocabulary games which especially focus on helping learners develop and use words in different contexts by making the lessons enjoyable. Therefore, it is necessary to explore whether students learn vocabulary effectively through games and how they learn it.Traditionally, vocabulary has not been a particular subject for students to learn, but has been taught within lessons of speaking, listening, reading and writing. During the lesson, students use their own vocabulary and are introduced to new words provided by the teacher and classmates which they apply to classroom activities. For many learners of English, whenever they think of vocabulary, they think of learning a list of new words with meanings in their native language without any real context practice. A number of learners may share the same experience of looking up words in a bilingual dictionary to find their meanings or definitions when they encounter new words. They may even write down lines of new words without any idea of the real use of them in context. Working this way, after a short period of time, many learners may find out that learning vocabulary in lists does not satisfy themselves, and they think the cause for it is just their bad memorization. Research and publications have shown that this is not a very effective way to study. Decarrico (2001) mentioned that words should not be learnt separately or by memorization unless those were understood. Moreover, "learning new words is a cumulative process, with words enriched and established as they are met again", Nation (2000, p.6). Therefore, the "look and remember" way of vocabulary learning seems to be not very effective for learners of the English language. Furthermore, some other students may require teachers to give meaning and grammatical function for words that they are not familiar. Learners just wait for teachers who control the lesson to provide new forms of words then they write those words in their notebooks or complete their exercises. They may use words they learn in the exact formats as the original patterns in which those words appeared. This kind of rote verbal memorization is good to a certain extent since it helps learners learn and use the correct form of words. However, according to Decarrico (2001), the vocabulary used in such context is rather simple because grammatical and phonologic aspects are emphasized; and as a result, the lexical aspect is neglected. In other words, learners just know how to use the vocabulary in an exact form, but they do not know how to use it with different shades of meanings in real life communication.

With the use of games, the teacher can create various contexts in which students have to use the language to communicate, exchange information and express their own opinions (Wright, Betteridge and Buckby, 1984). Huang (1996: 1) comes to a conclusion that "learning through games could encourage the operation of certain psychological and intellectual factors which could facilitate communication heightened self-esteem, motivation and spontaneity, reinforcing learning, improving intonation and building confidence."

Some experts have also figured out characteristics of games that make vocabulary learning more effectively. Lee (1995:35) lists several main advantages when games are used in the classroom, including "a welcome break from the usual routine of the language class", "motivating and challenging" "effort of learning", and "language practice in the various skills." Ersoz (2000) holds that games are highly appreciated thanks to their amusement and interest. Teachers can use games to help their students practice more their skills of communication. In addition, Uberman (1998) also affirms the helpful role of games in vocabulary teaching after quoting and analyzing different opinions of experts. From her own teaching experiences, Uberman observed the enthusiasm of her students in learning through games. She considers games a way to help students not only enjoy and entertain with the language they learn, but also practice it incidentally. In summary, games are useful and effective tools that should be applied in vocabulary classes. The use of vocabulary is a way to make the lessons more interesting, enjoyable and effective.

The Importance of Teaching and Learning Vocabulary:

Taylor (1990) points out that vocabulary is central to language teaching and learning. This implies that an explicit teaching and learning of vocabulary is essential especially when learning a new language is occurring and learners have to deal with unfamiliar vocabulary. Wallace (1989) adds that communication is only made possible through the vocabulary that one acquired. It is therefore obvious that the development of vocabulary skills must be carried out as a crucial part in learning a new language. It should be noted that learners who are rich in vocabulary are expected to be able to express themselves more freely and confidently.

Problems in Teaching and Learning Vocabulary:

The syllabus for English language outlined by the Ministry of Education (1932) upholds the teaching and learning of vocabulary in an integrated manner, that is through integration of skills, grammar items, the sound system and vocabulary, using the topics as a context. However, there are not predetermined strategies for grammatical items to be effectively taught and learnt in context. It is obvious that by advocating such a teaching

approach, many teachers regard the teaching and learning of vocabulary as trivial, partly because the process of learning the language also denotes learning about words or vocabulary. Chandlin (1987) points out that the teaching and learning of vocabulary has been neglected by most academicians.

Among all Iranian ESL learners including those undergraduates who cannot even write short paragraphs on any simple topics (Dahmardeh, 2010); and those who have failed to find any jobs due to their poor level of English proficiency (Bada & Okan ,2000), there is something in common which proves that most of the Iranian ESL learners have a big difficulty with language rules and even basic English grammar.

Using Games for Literary Training:

Gredler (1992) defined games as any contest among adversaries (players) operating under constraints (rules) for an objective (winning)".Games provide quite extensive language practice opportunities for both general and specific language skills and so they will be considered as an integral part of a teaching program (Carrier, 1980). Apart from sharing the view that games are an important and powerful educational tool, Evans (1979) adds that games can be used for a variety of specific purposes like as icebreakers, for social activities or even therapy.

As far as learning vocabulary is concerned, Nguyen & Khuat (2003) point out games help learners to learn and retain new words more easily. They also mentioned that vocabulary games enable learners to use English in a meaningful communicative context. It is understandable when one considers that games require physical participation of the learners and they no longer confine themselves to sitting on desks in rows. Games act as a powerful force to motivate learners and draw out the quiet or unsure learners. ESL teachers should tap on the vast potentials that games can provide and involve their learners in active learning of English – the language which majority of Iranian ESL learners are less proficient in it.

Methodology:

Since our study is concerned with game competence of Persian speaker intermediate stage learners, quantitative instruments; pre and post tests are utilized in the beginning and at the end of the study. According to Harkness (2005) the significance of implementing these instruments in a research, is regarded to the reason that ***"pre and posttest data can reveal a variance in scores that can be measured for significance."*** She also highlighted that ***"The utilization of pretest and posttest instruments allows instructors a unique opportunity to empirically evaluate the effectiveness of their instruction and assess the acquisition of course content material by students through formative assessment."***

The participants for this research were 70 students in two classes of Noor primary school in Urmia, Iran. The samples of the study were 12- 13-years old female students and of the low intermediate level. Moreover, these students mostly came from the same socio-economic background.

In this research, firstly a pretest was given to 100 students to a) determine the pretest scores B) find a criterion based on which to place the students in either control and treatment (experimental) group.Out of 100 students who took the pretest, we excluded 30 of them who could get the highest score and which seem that they have totally high level of language proficiency and the vocabulary items.

Later as it can be seen In Table 1, the scores of other 70 students were classified in groups of 10 (0-1, 11-20, 21-30, 31-40, 41-50) then the students whose scores were in each group were divided into two equal groups as control and experimental so that, the students were distributed in each group similarly.

Table 1: Classification into Control group (Cg) and Experimental group (Eg) Based on pretest scores.

Scores	No. of students in Cg.	No. of students in Eg.
0-10	15	14
11-20	9	10
21-30	6	6
31-40	3	4
41-50	2	1
50 -100	0	0
Total	35	35

As it can be seen in Table 1 the other 70 students were classified into two groups either control or experimental. Control group consisted of 35 students and they had undergone normal teaching lessons while the treatment group consisted of another 35 pupils and undergone a different teaching method that is using the language games to teach specific vocabulary items. The duration of the study was four lessons while the two aforementioned groups were given the same amount of time with the same amount of targeted vocabulary items to learn but through the different methods of teaching.

Instruments:

Four research instruments were used to collect data for this research, namely the pre-test, two games called 'Find me game' and 'The Charade' and finally the post-test. Since this study was small scale, using the four instruments for data collection would help to validate the findings; the findings from all the instruments could

converge to present the result of this research. Data gathered from the pre and post test were counted and tabulated to make comparison of achievements of the pupils. Later analyses were done accordingly.

Pre-Test:

The pre test was given to the pupils at the beginning of the research where the pupil had poor level of proficiency and the vocabulary items. Both groups had the same test. The test consisted of 22 simple questions on 'info gap' exercise where lists of animals were given to be matched with lists of verbs (how the animals move). The duration of 30 minutes was given for the pupils to complete the test. The scores were recorded for comparison and analyses.

Find Me Game:

The game started by dividing the class into four groups. The researcher intended to divide the pupils into groups so that would create some sort of spirit of competition and willingness to win. Teacher then read out the instructions and also the rules of the games. Then, the list of movements (verbs) was given to the leader of each group and flashcards of animals were spread upside down on the floor. The pupils were supposed to find the correct animal and paste it under the verbs on the walls. The group with the most correct match won and was rewarded.

The Charade Game:

This game was another teaching tool to teach the vocabularies. This was mostly regarded as reinforcement while the verbs were introduced previously. The students were in the same groups and were asked to play the guessing game. The teacher gave a brief description of an animal and the students gave stripes of sentences. Then, they were supposed to mimic the action of the animals based on the sentences given and the rest guessed what the animal could be. The group with the most correct answers won the game and was rewarded too.

Post Test:

The post test was the same as the pre test and was given to all students from both groups. The purpose of the post test was to see whether the pupils are able to master the vocabularies items targeted for them. The scores were recorded for comparisons and analysis.

Data Analysis:

After collecting data and placing the students into two groups of control and experimental group the researcher started to analyze the data. The data analyses of this study were done based on the frequency counting method and the findings were recorded in two phases. The first one was done as soon as the pre test was over. The scores were recorded and tabulated for easy reference of comparison later. The second phase was done right after the post test took place. Again, the scores were recorded and tabulated for the purpose of comparison too.

Most importantly, after the post test, the marginal improvement was carefully calculated and converted into percentage to be used in the discussion of findings later. All these numbers were presented in the forms of tables so that the reader could have easy comprehension of the pre test scores, the post test scores and the marginal improvement of the pupils. It was convenient for the readers to compare and contrast and see what the researcher meant as the marginal improvement were counted and converted into percentage, so that the readers did not have to make their own calculation and reading was smooth and undisturbed.

Finding and Discussions:

As it can be seen in Table 2, most of the students (42%) in both control and experimental group obtained the score of 0 to 10 in pre test which is the lowest score, while no (0%) students gained higher score.

Table 2: Pretest in Percentage.

Score	No. of students of Cg. in percentage	No. of students of Eg. in percentage
0-10	42%	42%
11-20	25%	28%
21-30	18%	17%
31-40	9%	11%
41-50	6%	2%
50-100	0%	0%
Total	35	35
	100%	100%

After applying the two games for the students of for groups, a post test was taken. The result of the post test is tabulated in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3: Post test of control group.

Score	Control group	
	No. of students	No. of pupils in percentage
0-10	6	17%
11-20	8	23%
21-30	15	43%
31-40	4	11%
41-50	2	6%
50-100	0	0%
Total	35	100%

Table 4: Post test of experimental group.

Score	Experimental group	
	No. of Students	No. of pupils in percentage
0-10	0	0%
11-20	1	3%
21-30	4	11%
31-40	13	35%
41-50	11	30%
50-100	8	21%
Total	Total	100%

As you can see in Table 3 and Table 4, all the students in the experimental group show encouraging improvements comparing those in control group. None of the students in the experimental group scored less than 10 while in control group again, there are 6 students who got the score less than ten.

Based on the findings above, it was obvious that games benefit the pupils in the experimental group in their vocabulary learning compared to controlled group. The findings therefore, supported the view by Nguyen and Khuat (2003) that games help the learners to learn and retain new words more easily.

It was also found that the learning environment for the experimental group is more hectic and lively. The pupils were enthusiastic and even the quiet and passive ones were also drawn into the games. The lessons on games proved to be fruitful as reflected by the pupils' active participation and their improvement in vocabulary learning through the games. The findings to a certain extend indicated that game holds the potential as an effective educational tool for literary training.

In addition, the researcher found that the other positive effect of using games in teaching vocabulary to the pupils is that the games give opportunity for the pupils to be in control of the lessons. They were independent and were able to move on their own to complete the tasks given. Furthermore, the elements of competition in games made them learn faster implicitly. On the other hand, the controlled group was dominated by the teacher and the pupils were told what to do. The lessons were fully developed and directed by the teacher using textbook-based approach. The pupils only did what they were told. Here, pupils were totally dependent on the teacher for input resources and there were no room for self development and fun. On top of that, findings show that the experimental group improved more than the controlled group.

Moreover, the experimental group reveals a higher degree of marginal improvement especially for the Low English Proficiency (LEP) and shy pupils. In these lessons the language games used allowed the LEP and passive pupils to participate and be active; although, they were slowly. The High English Proficiency (HEP) and LEP pupils were working together in groups also incorporated good moral values as well as encouraging positive peer learning. Thus, this result explains the higher marginal improvement of the experimental group as compared to the controlled group. In the controlled group, only the HEP students will benefit as they dominated the lessons most of the time and left the LEP to struggle on their own. Therefore, from the findings, in the controlled group, we could have noted that there was a pupil who did not improve at all and obviously, she is a LEP pupil.

Another observation which was worth noticing was the noise level during both treatments. During the controlled group lesson, the pupils made noise which was tolerable. The teacher played minimal role in controlling the class. However, during the experimental group lesson the noise level was high. Students were seen shouting at each other and moving about here and there. Yet, the environment was controllable because the pupils need to be attentive to the teacher's instructions. This supports the fact that games by their very nature creation is really an activation role and sometimes noisy and apparently disorganized learning setting (Evans, 1979).

Another noticeable observation is the willingness of the pupils to try and not afraid of making mistakes among the experimental group which is one of the essential factors for the learning and making interaction and conversation with other learners without stress and anxiety in relation to speech out. This important point is very worth to mention that most of students have behavior problem and they shy when they tend to speak in front of the active students and who they are comfortable students they are afraid of laughing and mocking from their friends. But it is observed that by using of playing the game and participate in the playing they have done same as the other friends. During the controlled group lessons, the pupils were willing to try when they were

prompted or asked to do so. Students were reluctant to make mistakes. This was noticed when questions were asked during the controlled group lesson, nobody volunteered. When a pupil was called, the pupil referred to friends for consultation. In contract, the experimental group participants were willing to try. The even managed to delegate tasks by assigning certain individuals to certain words. Discussions to decide which answers was suitable or not were carried out in split seconds.

Perhaps the most motivating factor in pupils' participation was the competitive nature of the language games. Students might not participate actively during normal lesson as there was no pressure to get the correct answers. Meanwhile, in the experimental group the students had strong desire to participate actively and even encourage the shy classmates to join. They collaborated with each other so that they would gain more marks than the other groups. This was so that they will the game.

Pedagogical Implications:

The followings are some pedagogical implications of this research study:

- The findings of this study show there is an improvement on the part of all ESL learners' in learning vocabulary through games. This implies that game is an effective teaching and learning tool that is appropriate for learners regardless of their language proficiency levels. Teachers therefore could make use of games as an educational tool for classroom language learning process.
- The different degree of improvement among the learners in learning vocabulary through games indicates that teachers need to be selective with the kind of games to be used for classroom language learning so as to bring about utmost benefit to as many learners as possible in the group.
- Games by their nature are not tailored to suit all learners of different social cultural backgrounds. As such, teachers may have to do some modifications to the selected games by considering their learners' level of language proficiency, social setting, needs and interest.
- As games have positive impacts on learners' vocabulary learning, this implies that games open up a way for teachers to engage their learners in language learning in a more interesting and fun way compared to the traditional teaching methods like mechanical drilling that often makes language learning a daunting experience to most learners.
- The use of games to teach vocabulary yields positive result in this research study. This also implies that games have the potential to be used for teaching language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Suggestions for Further Research:

The followings are suggestions for further studies:

- As games are effective tools to teach vocabulary, it is to suggest that further studies on the use of games to teach the language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing to be carried out.
- The use of computer-assisted language game in educational training is another area that is worth exploiting. As most Iranian schools special private schools nowadays are equipped with computers and Internet connection, the use of interactive computer games to teach language would make language learning more interesting and enjoyable.
- Teachers should not confine themselves to the use of games for classroom practices. There are outdoor games that can be carried out in open space like the school field, basketball or tennis court. It is therefore to suggest that further researches on the use of outdoor games that involve large school population to be conducted to ascertain the potential of games as a pedagogical or teaching mechanism in today's education.

Conclusion:

Game undoubtedly has high entertainment values. It provides opportunity for the ESL learners to learn language in an enjoyable way. Teachers need to reject the idea that learning is formal and thus, has to be conducted in a serious environment. Instead, if learners play and learn through games, then teachers must accept the fact that the active and sometime noisy and apparently disorganized learning setting has to be considered as legitimate and appropriate. This study with its primary concentration on using game in vocabulary learning has shed light on the potential of instructional games into the vocabulary learning goals. Under such circumstances, games have been shown to have advantages and effectiveness in learning vocabulary in various ways. First, games bring in relaxation and fun for students, thus help them learn and retain new words more easily. Second, games usually involve friendly competition and they keep learners interested. These create the motivation for learners of English to get involved and participate actively in the learning activities. Third, vocabulary games bring real world context into the classroom, and enhance students' use of English in a flexible, communicative way. Therefore, the role of games in teaching and learning vocabulary cannot be denied. However, in order to achieve the most from vocabulary games, it is essential that suitable games are chosen. Whenever a game is to be conducted, the number of students, proficiency level, cultural context, timing, learning topic, and the classroom settings are factors that should be taken into account.

In conclusion, learning vocabulary through games is one effective and interesting way that can be applied in any classrooms. The results of this research suggest that games are used not only for mere fun, but more importantly, for the useful practice and review of language lessons, thus leading toward the goal of improving learners' communicative competence.

Based on the findings and discussions, the following conclusions were drawn:

- All participants form the experimental group show different levels of improvement in their mastery of vocabulary through games based on their scores in the pre-test and post test.
- The different levels of improvement among the learners in the experimental group reflect that some learners benefit more from the games.
- Participants in the controlled group comparatively show less improvement in vocabulary learning through the usual classroom teaching practice.
- Game has its potential as an educational tool for literary training.
- Game can motivate and engage learners especially the quiet and passive ones in the whole learning process.
- It is proved that Game can give a good opportunity to the shy students to be active and from the psychology aspect they will show and improve their hidden abilities.
- Being happy is one the most important factor in children learning; because of this fact, game is the absolutely and perfect factor for drawing them to the learning forever; as it has showed in the researches the children, even adult can remember every details of any subject and event when they face it with visual and playing by seeing, touching and being in the happiness or sadness situations.
- In the following statement it needs to notice that everyone can remember any phenomenon when they were in replace of the characteristic of that role, due to this matter, the children can remember their lessons when they are in the role of a character in the game or drama.

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