

**Educational Games as a Vehicle to Teaching Vocabulary by Minoo Alemi****Educational Games as a Vehicle to Teaching Vocabulary****Minoo Alemi**

Minoo Alemi is a faculty member of Sharif University of Technology, Tehran, Iran. Her main areas of interest are (1) second language acquisition, (2) ESP, (3) vocabulary, and (4) syllabus design. Alemi has published about ten textbooks in General English and ESP, a large number of papers in different areas in international journals, and given presentations on TEFL at many international conferences. Her email address is: alemi@sharif.ir

Abstract

One of the most difficult aspects of learning a foreign language (particularly in an EFL context) is the retention of vocabulary. Vocabulary learning plays a major role in English language learner's success. The standard method of presenting up to 20 or more new vocabulary words that students are expected to learn at a given time is not an effective way to help the learners develop vocabulary (Gresten and Baker, 2000). To this end, most ESL/EFL specialists often justify the use of games with reference to the motivation that they can provide for the students. Scholars suggest many techniques for learning, and word game is one of them. Educational games in general and word game specifically as a reinforcing device on improving student's vocabulary knowledge is a topic which needs to be investigated. This study attempted to investigate the role of using word games in expanding the learner's vocabulary. In so doing, an experiment using five word games, named Twenty Questions, Charades, Definition Game's, Passwords, and Crossword Puzzles respectively was conducted. The participants were selected randomly from a male/ female group of third-grade junior high school students studying at a private school. First, a standardized test was administered to 100 students out of which 60 almost homogeneous students were selected and randomly divided into two groups: experimental and control. Both groups were taught words using traditional methods, however, the experimental group received word games as a treatment at the end of each session. Finally, a vocabulary test was administered to both groups to determine the differences between them. The score obtained from the groups were



Educational Games as a Vehicle to Teaching Vocabulary by Minoo Alemi

compared through independent t-test. The calculated t exceeded the t-critical value, confirming the positive effect of word games on expanding learners' vocabulary.

Key Words: educational games, word games, vocabulary knowledge, cross word puzzles, definition games, charades, passwords

1. Introduction

One of the most difficult aspects of learning a foreign language, particularly in an EFL context, is the retention of vocabulary. Vocabulary learning plays a major role in English language learner's success. Some Teachers believe that the number of new vocabulary terms introduced at any one time should be limited. The standard method of presenting up to 20 or more new vocabulary words that students are expected to learn at a given time is not an effective way to help the learners develop vocabulary (Gersten and Baker, 2000).

A better technique might be use of word games that students would work on over a longer period of time. Of course the criteria for selecting words should be considered carefully since it is not the case that all words can be thought through word games. However, care should be taken to select those words which convey key concepts, are of high utility, and relevant to the bulk of the content being learned, and have meaning in the lives of the students. Another important issue in that restricting the number of words students are expected to learn will help them learn words meanings at a deeper level of understanding, which can be considered an important principle of sustained vocabulary growth.

Meantime, it has been argued that the purpose of vocabulary instruction should be to make the learner more discrimination of word meaning and word use. To achieve this, one can teach vocabulary through thinking in terms of activities (like word games) with warning focus rather than clearly demarcated lessons. In that case the learners can be involved in the



Educational Games as a Vehicle to Teaching Vocabulary by Minoo Alemi

process of deciding what should be taught, and when. This should enhance motivation and engagement.

The use of word games also addresses specific learner needs. This would mean that, for intermediate and advanced learners, traditional techniques for teaching vocabulary might be given a lower priority. Yet the use of word games is an area often neglected in the teaching of vocabulary (Lazar, 1996). This study suggested examples of types of word games to which students may usefully be exposed in the course of their learning. Over the last decade books for teachers and students have focused on ways of organizing, practicing, and presenting new vocabulary to make accessible and memorable to the students. Word games, and the way in which we can increase student awareness of it has perhaps been paid less attention that it deserves.

“The games are a form of teaching which may be used in circumstances where ordinary approaches are not well tolerated; when attention is hard to get and harder to keep” (Nicolson and Williams, (1975, p. 1).

Teachers have long recognized and used students’ inner feelings to play as a means of encouraging them to learn. Some scholars reported the successful use of games when teaching French to elementary students. Learning activities such as puzzles and games form an essential part of learning. *“Playing with words can be linked to playground tennis or cricket or to any other practice game: it is a necessary preliminary to efficiency. For beginners at, say, cricket, you play with a soft ball and you bawl underarm, gently and straight; later on you cease to play with a soft ball and you bawl quite hard, with the occasional spinner or off-break”* (Nicolson and Williams, 1975, p.1). It is therefore important that the game should be adjusted to the students’ linguistic ability. Meantime, some instructor did not show any interest to use games, especially when teaching adolescents or adult learners (Celce-Murcia and Macintosh, 1979).



Educational Games as a Vehicle to Teaching Vocabulary by Minoo Alemi

Apart from the potential pedagogical values of games, Richards (1969) emphasized a significant point: *“Pleasure for its own sake is an important part of language learning, a fact which is often over-looked by the teacher in his quest for teaching points, or by the course designer focusing on presentation or repetition”* (Richards, 1969, p. 24).

Furthermore,, Nesselhauf and Tschichold (2002) noted that with the help of vocabulary building software for EFL it was very useful and easy to both implement collocational exercises and learn them. Hu hai-peng and Deng li-jing (2007) reported that multimedia vocabulary teaching is a very efficient approach in boosting learners’ vocabulary knowledge.

Florence (2006) also reported a study of the usefulness of online games in vocabulary learning for some undergraduate students. Therefore, the use of interactive games has impacted on the mode of learning (Foreman *et al.*, 2004). As Krasilovsky (1996, p. 20) claimed that young learners tend to ‘favor “edutainment” applications-academics-oriented games’.

1. 1. Statement of the problem and purpose of the study

ESL/EFL specialists often justified the use of games with reference to the motivation that they can provide for the students. *“Games are, by definition, fun, and nearly everyone would agree that if learning can be made enjoyable, then students will learn more”* (Celce-Murcia and Macintosh, 1979, p. 56). According to Allen (1983), adolescents and adults may enjoy games as much as children do and, if the purpose of a game is explained to them, they will not feel that it is childish. In games, *“language use takes precedence over language practice”* (Celce-Murcia and Macintosh, 1979, p. 54) and in this sense *“games bring classroom closer to the real world. Each game, by nature, focuses on one or more aspects of English like a grammar point, a vocabulary area, or a communication skill.”* Games can teach, and there might be no reason why they cannot be included as a part of a lesson.



Educational Games as a Vehicle to Teaching Vocabulary by Minoos Alemi

Therefore, language teachers can plan to introduce relevant vocabulary before undertaking any communication activity and/or to encourage students to look the word up in the dictionary. One of the best ways of doing so is the use of word games “*crossword puzzles, acrostics and double-acrostics, vocabulary expansion quizzes,*” (Rivers and Temperley, 1978, p. 17) word wheels, maze of vocabularies, charades, definition games, “*password, recipes, map games, paper hunts, drawing games, debates*” (Celce. Murcia and Macintosh, 1979, p. 53).

“The use of word games to teach vocabulary does not mean or suggest pleasant ways of passing the class time. The entertainment of students is not a teacher’s responsibility” (Allen, 1983, p. 10). Rather, teachers are responsible for creating a constructive classroom atmosphere, which encourages vocabulary expansion, and “*a well-chosen game can help the students acquire words correctly and feel that certain words are important and necessary because without those words, the objective of the game cannot be achieved*” (Allen, 1983, p. 10). The purpose of this study is then to evaluate and assess the probable use/role of various word games; i.e.: Twenty Questions, Charades, Definition Games, Passwords, and Crossword Puzzles in the development of vocabulary among third-grade junior high school students.

1.2. Significance of the study

The present study is considered to be significant for some major reasons. It can offer pedagogical applications for teachers, students as well as textbook developers. First of all, the results will help teachers have a better view on using a variety of activities as games. In this way, they would utilize this appropriate technique to improve students’ linguistic abilities. This study may also reject some teachers’ opinions regarding the impracticality of the application of innovative techniques in Iranian schools. Games help the teachers create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful. Secondly, language games have many benefits for students as well. The application of language games in classrooms brings



Educational Games as a Vehicle to Teaching Vocabulary by Minoo Alemi

about a sound competition among the students. In a similar way, it can reduce inhibition among shy and weak students calling them to participate in the games.

Finally, textbook developers will also take substantial benefits from this study. They can select integrate various types of games for different skills and elements of language in the syllabus of the course books. This research addressed the following question:

Does the use of word games have positive effect on vocabulary development of third-grade junior high school students?

2. Method

2.1. Subjects

A number of 60 students participated in this research. The subjects were to be selected randomly from a group of 100 third-grade junior high school students(their ages ranged between 13-14 years old), studying at a private school. The subjects were further divided into two groups, one experimental and one control, identical in number. Private school here refers to the school supervised by the Ministry of Education where the students were charged and provided with some supplementary curricular materials.

2.2. Instrumentation

This study thrived to apply two instruments: First, a proficiency test was administered to screen the subjects and homogenize them based on their level of proficiency. They study benefited from **Test Of General English** for junior high school, grade three that had been designed and validated by H. Farhady (2000). The test booklet which consists of first multiple-choice items for each of which one point was assigned had two main parts: **Section One** that included questions on structure, vocabulary, and expressions and **Section Two**, which included questions on pronunciation. The participants were asked to take the test in fifty minutes under testing condition.



Educational Games as a Vehicle to Teaching Vocabulary by Minoo Alemi

Second, an achievement test for the final measurement and evaluation was conducted. The study utilized a similar test (similar in content as well as form) of Farhady's test. The newly developed test battery consisting of vocabulary went under repeated revisions, and the final version was used for the pilot administration phase of the study. Based on the performances of the participants the characteristics of the individual items were determined and some items were revised again, in order to ensure test separability. The reliability of the test was calculated by using KR-21 formula at this stage. The results showed a reliability index of 0.641. It was also validated against Farhady's proficiency test. The computed index was 0.957. The test had a total of thirty points and the time allowance was thirty minutes.

The word games were designed in advance by the researcher through pilot studies. The games included five common word games named Twenty Questions, Charades, Definition Games, Passwords, and Crossword Puzzles that had possible effects on the development of vocabulary among third-grade junior high school student.

2.3. Procedure

To accomplish the purpose of the study, the following procedures were followed:

First, it was a selection of the subjects and administration of the proficiency test. This test was constructed by the researcher herself and was piloted to determine its validity and reliability. The purpose of validation of the above mentioned test was to come up with a standard test to quite thoroughly the subjects' level of proficiency. The reason, however, was that most of the proficiency tests available in the market were above the actual level of proficiency of the students at third grade guidance school.

After getting the results of the proficiency test, the homogeneity of subjects was determined. In order to extract the outliers, the researcher included only those subjects whose scores were one standard deviation above and below the mean in the proficiency test.



Educational Games as a Vehicle to Teaching Vocabulary by Minoo Alemi

The teacher as well as the method of teaching was the same. All conditions except treatment were the same. The control group received no treatment and the experimental group was exposed to language games as a treatment. The researcher used word games in ten separate sessions, allocating each game two sessions and in each session twenty minutes. It is worth mentioning that the word games were to be used for practicing not teaching purposes.

G1	T1	E	%	T2
G2	T1	C	0	T2

This research applied a true experimental design.

The selection of the above-mentioned word games was based on three important features: proficiency level, teaching points, and practical feasibility. The final step included the administration of the final test and the evaluation of the results.

3. Results and discussion

Several statistical analyses were conducted to answer the research question in this study.

This study required a comparison of two groups drawn from the population (third grade) junior high school students in Tehran.

The findings of the two independent *t-tests* rejected the null-hypothesis. The reason was that she found a high enough *t-value* to make sure that such a large difference was not due to change. The researcher set her acceptance level at 05, and attempted to reject the null-hypothesis (with the critical value for *t* when the sample size was 30 and she had two groups). The *t-value* was enough above *t-critical* and the null-hypothesis was rejected. The two groups have scored differently on the final test of vocabulary. The difference was statistically significance and the finding was support for the claim that using word games promotes



Educational Games as a Vehicle to Teaching Vocabulary by Minoo Alemi

vocabulary learning. The statistical procedure followed in this study can be summarized in the following three phases:

3.1. Phase one:

Test of Vocabulary (pre-test)

Test of proficiency

Correlation of the two

This was done to check whether the constructed test of vocabulary proves validity when it is compared and standardized with a well-designed and/or standard test like that of Dr. Farhady's. The results obtained through the statistical analysis showed that there is a high correlation (.975) between the scores obtained in the proficiency test and the scores obtained through vocabulary test so the test was valid. Also the reliability was gained through KR-21 formula (.64) which showed that the test was reliable.

Ss	Measures	r_{X_y}
60	Prof-test, pre-test	.956

3.2. Phase two:

Pre-test (Vocabulary) of the Experimental Group

Pre-test (Vocabulary) of the Control Group

Independent *t-test* for the to tests

The purpose behind such analysis was to see if the results obtained from the two groups (control and experimental) were the same or not. The analysis demonstrated that the difference was not significance. The reason was the fact that the *t* (.155) value obtained was less than *t-critical* (2.000), and therefore the null hypothesis (that there is no difference between the scores obtained from the pre-test vocabulary test in the control group and the



Educational Games as a Vehicle to Teaching Vocabulary by Minoo Alemi

same scores in the experimental group) could not be rejected. The reason could be that both groups had presumably the same (or nearly the same) level of knowledge in vocabulary.

3.3. Phase three:

Post-test (Vocabulary) of the Experimental Group

Post-test (Vocabulary) of the Control Group

Independent *t-test* for the two tests

The independent *t-test* between the two post-tests showed considerable difference. The *t-value* (8.946) obtained was above *t-critical* (2.000), and therefore the null-hypothesis (that there is no difference between the scores obtained from the post-test vocabulary test in the control group and the same scores in the experimental group) was rejected. Since all the variables were under control and the two groups were treated under equal circumstances (except for the experimental group, which was receiving the treatment), the reason could be traced in the effect of using word games (treatment) on the development of vocabulary knowledge.

Descriptive statistics

Test	Groups	N	X	SD
Prof. test	Experimental	30	37.46	2.16
	Control	30	37.43	2.20
Pre-test	Experimental	30	17.00	3.39
	Control	30	16.86	3.26
Post-test	Experimental	30	25.33	2.50
	Control	30	19.33	2.68



Educational Games as a Vehicle to Teaching Vocabulary by Minoo Alemi

t-test values

Test	t-value	df	SD	t-critical
Prof. test	.059	58	.5641	2.000
Pre-test	.155	58	.8600	2.000
Post-test	8.946	58	.6707	2.000

4. Conclusion and pedagogical implications

The results of the present study seem to support the hypothesis formulated in this study. That is the uses of word games have positive effect on vocabulary development of third-grade junior high school students.

The researcher tried to study the potential usefulness of word games as useful techniques in the inclusion of more practical aspects of learning vocabulary into language classroom.

Implications:

This study was attempted to investigate one of the most important issues in EFL instruction, i.e., vocabulary development. The study revealed that word games have a lot of potentialities, which can be of great use in EFL classroom settings. Based on the findings of this research, the following pedagogical implications might be presented.

Critics have pointed out those understanding communicative tasks like the use of word games imply a process of active involvement and an act of engagement on the part of learner, through which linkage is established between the students and the teachers. It could be argued that, for the language learner, this process is applicable not only to language

**Educational Games as a Vehicle to Teaching Vocabulary by Minoo Alemi**

classroom, but to many other classes. Perhaps we can help our learners if we explicitly encourage them to work through this kind of practice.

Word learning is a complex task. Words have linguistics, psycholinguistics, and socio-linguistic aspects. Lexical competence is far more than the ability to define a given number of words; it involves knowing a great deal about each word. Learners develop complicated networks of associations in their mind over many years. Through the use of word games learners can increase the size of their recognition vocabulary, then move on to issues of skilled use.

Learning involves a range of skills. Word games might be good tools for improving the ability to recall meaning, infer meaning, comprehend better, and communicate easily.

Feedback improves better learning. Implementation of positive feedback into the instruction of vocabulary is very useful. Most teachers consider feedback positive for both evaluating and developing language classes. When feedback grows high among students, they would feel more independent and they can rely more on their classmates. They would also get encouraged to accept someone other than teacher as the guide in their learning. Another point is that feedback on the games provided insights so the students.

Since different students took roles in the games, they suggested words or meaning of the words differently or from a different perspective. This gave the other students different ways of thinking about the suggestion.

Moreover, the role of affective filter was reduced. As it is clear in a language classroom, affective variables play a big role. In fact,, when it is time for action (like in the word games),



Educational Games as a Vehicle to Teaching Vocabulary by Minoos Alemi

the student would feel less anxious and less nervous in playing the roles because everybody is engaged in the process of acting and playing.

Word games can provide the students a critical eye to observe their own behavior and to think about their classmates'. Word games can provide insights into how teachers evaluate the learning process. Through word games teachers can confirm progress that has been made to demonstrate how future efforts can be redirected.

5. References

- Allen, V.F. (1983). *Techniques in teaching vocabulary*. Oxford University Press.
- Celce-Murcia, M. & Macintosh, L. (1979). *Teaching English as a second or foreign language*. Newbury House Publishers.
- Farhady, H. (2000). *Evaluating students' language achievement at junior high schools in Iran*. Research report delivered to the Ministry of Education.
- Florence W. M. Yip, Alvin C. M. Kwan. (2006). *Online vocabulary games as a tool for teaching and learning English vocabulary*. Educational Media International, Vol. 43, No. 3, September 2006, pp. 233–249.
- Foreman, J., Gee, J. P., Herz, J. C., Hinrichs, R., Prensky, M. & Sawyer, B. (2004). *Game-based learning: how to delight and instruct in the 21st century*, *Educause Review*, 39(5), 50–66.
- Gersten & Baker, (2000). *What we know about effective instructional practices for English-language learners*. *Exceptional Children*, 66(4). 454-470.
- Hu Hai-peng, Deng Li-jing. (2007). *Vocabulary acquisition in multimedia environment*. *US-China Foreign Language*. Aug. 2007, 5, No.8 (Serial No.47), p.55-59, ISSN1539-8080.
- Krasilovsky, P. (1996). *A child's garden of virtual reality*, *American Demographics*, 1996 (September), 20–22

**Educational Games as a Vehicle to Teaching Vocabulary by Minoo Alemi**

Lazer, G. (1996). Using figurative language to expand students' vocabulary. *ELT Journal* 50, vol 1, Jan.1999, p.43-51

Nesselhauf, N., Tschichold, C. (2002). Collocations in CALL: an investigation of vocabulary- building software for EFL. *Computer Assisted Language Learning* 15, (3): 251-280.

Nicholson, D. & Williams, G. (1975) Word games for the teaching of reading. London. Pitman Education Library.

Richards, J.C. (1969) The role of vocabulary teaching. Oxford University Press.

Rivers, W.M. & Temperley, M. S. (1978). A practical guide to the teaching of English. Oxford University Press.

Uzun, L. (2009). The Intent, language learning, and international dialogue: Constructing online foreign language learning websites. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education-TOJDE* 11, (2:4) April 2010 ISSN 1302-6488.