The Effects of Using Games to Reinforce Vocabulary Learning

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Introduction

This is a study of the effects of using games to practice vocabulary in the teaching of English to young learners. Teaching vocabulary through games was chosen as the focus area for my research for several reasons. Firstly, I observed during the course of many teaching practice placements during my undergraduate studies that new vocabulary in English lessons in UAE schools is mostly taught through the use of flashcards. Secondly, I observed that it is often taught out of context, as isolated words, and thirdly, I noticed that there is minimal variation in the teaching style used in English language teaching in UAE schools.

The study was conducted with twenty-nine students in Grade Six in a primary girls’ school in in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). According to my observations of how vocabulary is taught in schools, it relies on drilling the vocabulary to get the students to produce the correct pronunciation of words. Other strategies such as implementing games are very occasionally used to teach vocabulary; however, they are only used for a limited time. Using games is considered time consuming, so teachers prefer to use drilling as an immediate way of teaching and practicing vocabulary. In the school where the research was conducted, Arabic is the medium of instruction. In English class, students are encouraged to speak in English when they answer, and while they interact with their classmates. Translation is generally avoided, but it is sometimes used to clarify difficult linguistic concepts, and also to clarify meaning.

Research Questions

In view of the above, three questions about vocabulary teaching and learning have guided my research:

- Do language games enhance students’ ability to memorize the words?
- Do language games develop positive interaction?
- Do language games enhance students’ motivation?

Literature Review

There are two main approaches to vocabulary teaching used in the UAE: the grammar translation method and the audio-lingual method. The first method focuses more on memorizing lists of vocabulary for translation tasks and for final assessments. The main feature of this approach is that lists of vocabulary are learnt to illustrate grammatical rules (Richards and Renandya, 2002). The other method is the audio–lingual approach, which focuses on attention to pronunciation and intensive oral drilling.

These two methods focus on the learning of words in isolation from their contexts. For example, one lesson from the Grade Six coursebook, English for the Emirates (Al Jazzar, Noamani, Al-Zubi, and Al-Hussain, 1997), includes widely different lexis from widely different contexts for students to learn, e.g. "angry", "hear", "husband" and
"address". The main criticism of this is that vocabulary can't be learnt in isolation; that vocabulary items don't have one fixed meaning; and that each word holds from fifteen to twenty meanings (Fries, 1945, cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002). Thus, vocabulary items from different contexts are harder to learn, because they cannot be easily taught together. Nunan (1991) suggests that “When teaching new vocabulary, we should begin by teaching the new item in context, but at a later stage learners should be given the opportunity of dealing with the words out of context” (p.122).

Word memorization is important in language learning, and memorization is helped when words are recycled regularly. Vocabulary development is a continuous process, where learners meet the words many times in their learning to increase and deepen their knowledge and their use of words in the foreign language (Cameron, 2001). It is also facilitated through using meaningful activities to practice vocabulary, as it provides the learners with opportunities to memorize the words effectively, more than if they just practice them orally by drilling or by using flashcards. Activities which involve learners in thinking about the words and making decisions about them allow learners to remember the words effectively. As Thornbury (2002) states, "To ensure long-term recall and retention, new knowledge should be integrated to old/existing knowledge, i.e. they need to be placed into working memory e.g. being compared, combined, matched, sorted, visualized and re-shuffled, as well as being repeatedly filed away and recalled" (p.45). Therefore, students need exposure to a variety of activities that challenge their thinking and promote their decision making.

Through effective interaction children are in a position to be exposed to comprehensible input; that is, language they understand. Children can be exposed to such input through interactive activities, as they provide learners with the opportunity to practice the language with other children. Similarly, Vygotsky (cited in Lightbown and Spada, 1999) claimed that language is developed by interacting with others, and children cannot develop it alone. They also use resources such as their facial expression, body language, dramatization, repetition and so on (Peregoy and Boyle, 2001). Therefore, teachers should organize times when students can interact cooperatively, to practice the words in meaningful context.

Motivation is one of the essential factors in language learning. Lightbown and Spada (1999) stress the importance of motivation. They emphasize that “The principal way that teachers can influence learners' motivation is by making the classroom a supportive environment in which students are stimulated, (and) engaged in (the) activities” (p.163). Motivated learners have a better chance of learning vocabulary successfully; unmotivated ones will have a lesser chance of success. Thus, in order to enhance learners' learning of vocabulary, they need to be motivated to play a game or to complete a task, and with the enjoyment achieved, learning the lexis occurs smoothly (Moon, 2000). Therefore, learning new vocabulary through enjoyable and out of the ordinary ways may assist the children to learn vocabulary. Accordingly, teachers should employ new vocabulary games that stimulate the students and entice them to participate. Teachers should consider games which are appropriate to students' age, cultural background and interests, and teacher also should consider activities where students can experience success (Lightbown and Spada, 1999).
Research Methodology

Action research is a process that aims to investigate issues in a variety of contexts and tries out ideas to improve or overcome the issues. Richards and Lockhart, cited in Troudi (2003), define action research as “teacher initiated classroom investigation which seeks to increase the teacher’s understanding of classroom teaching and learning and to bring about change in classroom practice” (p.186). Teachers can benefit from adapting action research in their classroom context, because they can increase their professional development by encouraging them to develop their teaching style and to refresh their knowledge about teaching methodology (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). In light of the importance in the literature of both active involvement of learners in the learning of lexis in context, and the importance of recycling, my teaching strategy for the purposes of this action research project was to try to use games to teach and practice vocabulary in order to contextualize the words and to recycle vocabulary. In order to assess the results of this strategy, I used three research tools: interviews, observations and a reflective journal. I used these three tools to collect data and to reflect on my teaching to ensure the consistency of gathering the information and to have a clear idea about how the opinions and thoughts have changed after implementing the action. I interviewed the students to find out their opinion about my vocabulary teaching strategy. While the students were playing the game and completing the activities, my mentor teacher and peer observers were taking notes on their behaviour. I also took notes while they were doing the activities, and in my reflective journal, I jotted down the informal conversations I had with teachers and with students.

In my action research, I tried to ensure ethical treatment by telling each individual who was observed, interviewed or quoted that they would be anonymous and the information would be used to fulfill the research purpose only, and it would not affect them negatively. The participants were clearly informed about the action research process; they were informed that they would be observed during the implementing of the action and they would be interviewed afterward. The documents were sent to parents, teachers, peers and the school principal to ensure their individual rights were recognised. The participants were informed that they were going to be observed and interviewed to gain more data to answer research questions. The teacher responsible for the group was informed that the implementation of my strategy would not negatively impact on learning time.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Having implemented the strategy of using games to teach and to recycle vocabulary, and having collecting the data through the interviews, observations and a journal, three main themes emerged:

- Using games to practice and recycle vocabulary seems to increase word memorization
- Using games to practice and recycle vocabulary seems to foster student interaction
Using games to practice and recycle vocabulary seems to enhance student motivation.

After implementing the games and activities to practice vocabulary, and after recycling words through the games every two weeks, it seems that students' ability to memorize the words has become more efficient. Through my observations of students, and especially when they had their regular revision of the previous lessons, I noticed their increased ability to recall the words. As I noted in my research journal, "I am glad to hear some students say 'We had this word in that game'; it shows me how well they remember the word." This might be because students were given cognitively demanding tasks, where they needed to do some thinking to complete them. My mentor teacher commented about students' general performance by saying:

In general, I think that students have good word memorization; the students get high marks in their tests and exams. Their general performance has increased over this semester.

When I interviewed students about what they thought about the games and the activities that demand thinking, the majority of them said that such games helped them in their spelling test, and they would help them in their upcoming tests. One student said:

It made us think about the correct spelling, and that enables us to avoid spelling mistakes in the test. Actually I remembered the seasons' names very effectively in our regular spelling test and that was because the activity needed thinking about the words forms.

Thornbury (2002) has observed that "The more decisions the learners make about a word, and the more cognitively demanding these decisions, the better the word is remembered" (p.25). Accordingly, it appears that using games enhances students' ability to memorize the words, as they activate learners' minds and give them the time to pause and think about the words, whether to compare, contrast, match or draw pictures which represent them, which store the words into students' working memory and hopefully the long term memory.

Another theme which emerged from the study is that effective interaction occurs through using games and activities. Moon (2000) states that "(Interaction) is the main source of language input" (p.73). Through my observation, I noticed that while students completed the games and activities, they talked about the activity and how they can do it, but I rarely heard them chat with peers. "I was listening to their conversations and I was hearing the target language being used a lot", I noted in my observation. My observation is supported by my mentor teacher and my peers' observations, who commented that students talked with each other about the games, and they clarified complicated things. This is also supported by the students' interviews in which most of them have said that they talk about the activity, whether asking their classmates what to do, or asking what a specific word means. "I talk with my friends about the games or about new words. Sometimes I ask my friends what we have to do". According to my overall data, it seems that the games played in the lesson enabled students to assist each other with how they can complete them, clarify difficult points, translate difficult meanings, or share their ideas about the topic.
The last theme that emerged from the data is that games enhance students’ motivation. Kyriacou (2001) points out that “… Activities must elicit and sustain pupils attention, interest and motivation” (p.23). Before I prepared any games and tasks I thought about how the activity was going to motivate the students. Through my observations and interviews I can see how students were willing to play games and to have activities where they can interact with each other. A peer has described the students’ motivation during a game as follows: “They are willing to do the activity; everybody wants to participate.”

The majority of students’ comments were also positive. One student described why she liked one particular game by saying “It’s fun; it’s the first time we play such game. We enjoyed hitting the words with our sticks. I feel that it will help me to remember the words.” In my journal, I have described my observation of the reaction of the students while they were doing that game:

They really enjoyed doing that and they were motivated to hit using the sticks. The most important thing was the look of enjoyment that was shown on students’ faces especially the weak and the quiet girls. They were participating by having a turn to say, hear the words, and hit them. I really felt satisfied when I saw them participating and learning with enjoyment.

Students’ positive attitude towards games and activities may show that students really enjoyed them. This may mean that the students really want to have the opportunity to play games, as they provide an active and supportive environment in the classroom. Further, students get bored with their usual classes where they sit passively. This can be shown by one student who said to me “This is the first time we play games. We never had a teacher who offers such games.” Halliwell (1992) has summarized the benefits of meaningful games as follows: “They exploit and develop the capacity for interaction and talk, the capacity for indirect learning, the capacity for creative use of language resources, and the capacity for playing and fun” (p.40). Accordingly, games and activities provide students with chances to examine the words closely, as well as enhancing their motivation to learn.

**Conclusion**

To summarize, my classroom research suggests that using games to practice vocabulary improves learners’ ability to memorize the words effectively. Games provide comprehensible input while learners interact in the group, allowing students to clarify meanings of words in such contexts. The use of games also enhanced students’ motivation to learn vocabulary. This might be because the students have experienced new methods of teaching, as they have been used only to learning the new language through drilling the vocabulary. The strategy I adopted also allows them to interact with peers, which is also a new experience for them since they are used to teacher-centered methods for the whole of their learning experience. The games also provided a challenge, where they need their concentration to get the tasks done which strengthens students’ mental work. Such activities were also new to students’ experience, and they think carefully to get the right answers.
The current English course book for Grade Six groups different words from different contexts in a lesson, which forces the teacher to use drilling to teach the vocabulary. However, after using games to teach vocabulary, I can say that teachers can vary their methods of teaching. So, I recommend that teachers try using vocabulary games as well as drilling. I also recommend that teachers consider recycling words regularly - for example, every two weeks or after each unit - through the use of games as well as drilling.

It may not be appropriate to generalize the outcomes of this project to other contexts, because different contexts have different circumstances and needs. According to Mills (2003) generalisability is "a term that refers to the applicability of findings to settings and contexts different from the one in which they were obtained, that is, based on the behavior of a small group of individual researchers try to explain the behavior of a wider group of people" (p.88). However, based on my previous experience of teaching in government schools and from my experience as a learner in such schools, I would suggest that there are common aspects which might make this action research transferable to other UAE schools which share a similar school environment. For example, the majority of UAE English language teachers in state schools currently use the audio-lingual method. The classroom setting and the type of vocabulary children learn, and how they learn it, are similar from one school to another. Therefore, the use by teachers of meaningful activities and games could gain the interest of the majority of children in these schools. According to these features I mentioned, the results of my action research suggest that vocabulary games can be used successfully in state schools throughout the UAE.

To summarise, it was found that using games and activities to practice vocabulary enhances students’ ability to memorize words; encourages student interaction; and enhances student motivation. Furthermore, the whole process of conducting this action research and reading about vocabulary teaching and learning has contributed to my professional development in terms of providing me with knowledge of the varied current issues and strategies in teaching vocabulary. It has really enriched my theoretical background, and enhanced my ability to teach vocabulary effectively.

References


