The Use of Memory and Guessing Games in Teaching Vocabulary to Young Learners

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Introduction

This action research was carried out during the first and second semesters of my final year’s teaching practice in a boys’ primary school in Al Ain in the U.A.E. I observed that the English language teachers in the schools tend to rely heavily on drilling and questioning as strategies for teaching and learning vocabulary. It seemed that learning English is restricted to inside the classroom, and students have no other opportunities to use or be exposed to English.

From previous teaching practice placements, I found that learners had problems learning and retaining new vocabulary. In addition, games play a very important role in learning vocabulary, especially with young learners. Therefore, I decided to investigate whether the use of games - especially guessing and memory games - in the English classroom would assist the learning of vocabulary.

The standard textbook used in the class has some games in it, but these games are not explained clearly. It is important to mention also that, as I observed, most of the games in the book are not familiar to the students, nor it would seem, to the teacher. In my preliminary investigation I decided to investigate the role of games in learning and teaching vocabulary. From the results of this preliminary investigation, I continued to plan and use games and these activities were integrated into my lessons.

Research Questions

I believed that incorporating games into the learning of vocabulary will create an inviting classroom environment and will gradually improve learners’ vocabulary knowledge, and learners will become more interested and motivated towards learning English. The following questions were designed to help me achieve my goals:

- In what ways can the use of games in the classroom help the learning of vocabulary?
- What are the practical challenges of implementing games?

Review of the Literature

In order to gain more information about the effect of games on teaching vocabulary, I reviewed the existing literature on games and their importance for young learners. I also looked at the literature on approaches to the teaching of vocabulary, and I examined too what has been written in the literature about games and classroom management.

Games

Many researchers support the use of language games in the classroom. Games are not widely used in English classrooms in state schools in the UAE at the moment, so
applying them may make learning more enjoyable and may develop different abilities in students. Phillips (1997) states that “Games in the language classroom help children to see learning English as enjoyable and rewarding. Playing games in the classroom develops the ability to cooperate, to compete without being aggressive, and to be a good loser (p. 85).

Moreover, Antonaros and Couri (2003) state that “Games in the foreign language classroom … encourage and develop socialization, cooperating with others, learning self-discipline, respecting rules, peer teaching and cooperative learning.” (p. 6) Although researchers believe that games are useful, Allen (1983) comments that “Not all games are helpful for language learning, of course... when we are considering possible games for use, we should ask, “Will this game help to make several English words seem interesting and important to my students?” (p. 54). According to Allen, “Games are helpful because they can make students feel that certain words are important and necessary, because without those words, the object of the game cannot be achieved” (p. 52). Therefore, when playing a game they will concentrate and will try to recall words learnt in order to play the game. If games were used more often in U.A.E. classrooms, this may help students learn vocabulary because vocabulary is introduced and used in an enjoyable and challenging way, instead of asking students to copy vocabulary in their copybooks.

There are many types of games, including memory and guessing games which, as Slattery and Willis (2001) suggest, will “help children become familiar with new vocabulary in an enjoyable way” (p. 49). Besides, Allen points out that “guessing games, for example, create conditions in which the use of the target language is necessary for leading players to the correct guess” (p. 52). Similarly, Wright, Betteridge and Buckby (1984) agree that memory games “challenge the players’ ability to remember” (p. 139).

As a result of reading the literature on the use of games, I decided to use these specific types of games, as they are considered to be the simplest to start with for U.A.E. learners who are not used to playing language games in the classroom.

**Learning Vocabulary through Games**

Staines (1990) suggests that “There is no mystery to learning through play. When children play, they cannot help but learn and develop” (p.7). I believe that the play we provide for children through games will help learning to be successful. Similarly, Moon (2000) argues that when we use games with young learners, we "appeal to their sense of fun and arouse their interest. … … games give them a real purpose for using language and provide opportunities for them to use language more freely” (p. 12). Although this seems to be good, I think that many teachers would argue that students will not benefit from playing games, and it a waste of time.

Moreover, according to Rixon, “Games help students revise vocabulary and recalling something that happened in a game may help a student remember the language connected with it” (1992, p. 82). Moreover, the author continues, “Vocabulary games
provide a good chance for students to learn something from one another” (p. 80). Research reveals that games seem to provide young learners with the element of fun and enjoyment which is important for learning. However, not a lot of teachers consider games worthwhile, and only worry about finishing the curriculum.

Classroom Environment

According to Phillips (1997), there are many factors that affect learners: “The atmosphere of the classroom, the attitude of the teacher, and the organization of the lesson all affect children’s learning” (p. 141). During my teaching practice experience, I noticed that all the desks were arranged in rows. Phillips emphasizes that teachers should organize the classroom in a way that would facilitate learning by trying to achieve “a warm, friendly, relaxed atmosphere and by displaying the children’s work and relevant posters on walls, and keeping the displays up to date” (p. 141). Similarly, Allen (1983) claims that “Creating conditions which encourage vocabulary expansion” and by providing “well-chosen games can help the students acquire English” (p. 52). Therefore, by providing an inviting classroom and suitable language games in U.A.E. classrooms, I think students will be motivated to learn.

Research Methodology

I carried out my action research according to the definition of Action Research as provided by Mills (2003): “A systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers … to gather information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn” (p. 5). I wanted to investigate how using games might bring about a change or an improvement in my students’ learning.

To collect data I used interviews, surveys, observations, and video recordings. I used observations to gather information and comments on the games used during my lessons. My supervising school teacher and my supervising college teacher were invited to conduct observations during my lessons. I interviewed the English teachers in the school also, and I used semi-structured interviews for this. The interview conducted with my supervising school teacher allowed me to find out about games she already used in the classroom.

Implementing the Action

From my findings in the preliminary investigation which I conducted the previous semester, I decided to implement memory and guessing games to enhance vocabulary learning. A minimum of two games per week were to be used in this action plan. I used the games in the textbook, and I also designed some of my own. In addition, the students had English classes in the new classroom I prepared during the first semester where they were seated in groups. The class had a print-rich environment, and English displays were visible around the classroom. In order to check the children’s progress in using games, I gathered students’ records for the second semester and compared
them to what I had in the first semester to see if there were differences in their performance. I looked at the outcomes of my intervention, and the results that emerged from the data are grouped according to a set of themes in the next section.

Data Analysis

After collecting data, I analyzed it and grouped it according to themes. The following themes emerged from the data:

Games in the U.A.E. Classroom

The possibility of using games in language learning already exists in U.A.E. classroom and games are occasionally included in the textbooks. My SST said the following in an interview:

> Games are sometimes essential in the lesson because I think that the boys read better when they, we use games. I think games are essential in each lesson, every lesson we must play games.

However, my observations and video recording indicated that the class teacher rarely actually used any types of games. She used only one during one lesson that I observed.

One important point is that from the interview conducted with my classroom teacher, and from the lesson plans I collected, she believed that she uses a variety of strategies when teaching vocabulary that would interest students and keep them motivated, and language games were one of her stated teaching techniques. The following is an answer she gave for this question:

**Question:** What are the strategies you use in the teaching of vocabulary?

**Answer:** I use games, real objects, flash cards, pictures; something like this. (Nov. 2004)

However, observations and video recordings revealed the opposite. The most common strategy the teacher used was Total Physical Response (TPR). Drilling was another strategy the teacher used to get the students to repeat words. She said in the interview:

> Drilling is important because pupils need to focus on something. When we see that he is weak in some points, we can do more drilling on these points through activities, through drills. (November 2004)

However, documents collected showed that what was written in the lesson plan did not actually happen in the class. The teacher planned to play a game at the beginning, but she did not. In the lessons I observed, and in the only one game I saw played, lacked the element of fun and interest, which is one of the essential components of language
games. Findings collected from interviews with the teacher, video recording, and documentation showed that games were not used to enhance learning, and all lessons were merely another page in the book that should be finished.

**Classroom Environment**

An interview conducted with my classroom teacher revealed that she believed that classroom organization did have an impact on the lesson and learning. She said:

> When I put children in a room which is full of English words, materials, games, making groups, they benefit more. (November 2004)

Seating arrangements also had an effect on how students reacted to the teacher. Observations and video recordings showed that students who were seated far away tended to hide behind their peers, so the teacher would not see them. In addition, I think that students had difficulties in listening and looking at what the teacher was doing, especially those seated at the back. Looking at the videotape, I saw that many students were not listening to the teacher. Some were eating and some did not bring their game cards, so they were not taking part in the lesson. Lightbown and Spada (1999) suggest that “the conditions for learning differ in terms of the physical environment, the age and motivation of the students” (p. 95), so the classroom conditions had affected the lesson and the game.

One day I video recorded a lesson that included the playing of a game. In this observation I saw that:

> Many students did not pay attention to the teacher as many were eating and playing with toys in their desks. The seating arrangement was not good really because many students were seated near the wall which created a good place to lounge against. In addition, those who were seated at the back were hiding and sliding under their desks to hide and do what ever they want to do because the teacher did not monitor the class frequently. (October 2004)

Guessing games and other strategies designed to attract students’ interest were used to enhance the learning of vocabulary. During the action plan, I used games to gain students’ attention in learning vocabulary. When I monitored and observed students playing a game, I saw them talk to each other about the game; take turns hearing each other try to spell the words; and some were asking me if the words were correct or not. These observations were confirmed by my supervising college teacher, whose reports revealed that I used games that promoted learning and that students were engaged.

Moreover, surveys demonstrated that students enjoyed playing language games, and parents as well agreed that their children told them that they liked playing the vocabulary development games provided in the English class. In terms of surveys done with students, they reported that they liked the games because they helped them to learn. They said that they learned words through these games, and in particular that they learned food names, and it helped them in learning English in general. In the Bingo
game, for example, students enjoyed shouting out “Bingo” and marking the boxes. The survey revealed that students enjoyed playing games because they think it is fun, although some said that it is not studying, but playing.

All these findings lead me to conclude that my use of language games were able to gain students’ attention. Generally, students were doing very well learning vocabulary. Although students showed a lot of interest in games, and especially in playing Bingo and the guessing game, some students were reluctant to co-operate and play with others in games that required students to play in groups. It appeared to me that students enjoyed playing games such as Bingo more than other types of cooperative games, as it only required them to play the game on their own, and not with another student.

Conclusion

I believe that doing this action research project has enriched my teaching experience. In looking at the learning of vocabulary through the use of games, this action research project made me realize that language games help students learn vocabulary, and help their learning in general. Drilling is not the only way to achieve memorization of vocabulary. For a student like me who is doing action research for the first time, I learned that there are many things that happen in the classroom which affect students and the lesson. This research leads me to think that in the future I should plan carefully because what we do in the classroom affects how students learn. Another thing I will try to do is to provide teachers with some professional development sessions about games that work with young learners, and try to convince them that games are not a waste of time, because young language learners in schools are going to benefit a lot from them.

References


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