

Article Title

LEARNING VOCABULARY THROUGH GAMES

The Effectiveness of Learning Vocabulary Through Games

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Abstract

Vietnamese students usually feel bored in vocabulary lessons because they have not changed their learning habits, such as writing words on paper, trying to learn by heart or learning passively through the teacher's explanations. To help students find language classes, especially vocabulary lessons more interesting, and to achieve more from games, we conducted action research to find the answer to the question, "Do games help students learn vocabulary effectively, and if so, how?" Most academic reviews start from an assumption that games, bundled with other aspects of learning, e.g., CALL, are beneficial. However we singled out the component of games to study that in isolation. After reviewing academic opinions on this specifically focussed matter, of which there are relatively few, we began action research which included applying games in our own classes, observing other teachers' classes, and interviewing both teachers and learners so as to elicit students' reactions, feelings and the effectiveness of games in vocabulary learning. The research

shows they are effective in helping students to improve their vocabulary building skills.

1.0 Introduction

Problem

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.

Even though students realize the importance of vocabulary when learning language, most Vietnamese students learn vocabulary passively due to several factors. First, they consider the teacher's explanation for meaning or definition, pronunciation, spelling and grammatical functions boring. In this case scenario, language learners have nothing to do in a vocabulary learning section but to listen to their teacher. Second, students only think of vocabulary learning as knowing the primary meaning of new words.

Therefore, they ignore all other functions of the words. Third, students usually only acquire new vocabulary through new words in their textbooks or when given by teachers during classroom lessons. For example, learners find many new words in a text and then ask the teacher to explain the meanings and usage's. Forth, many Vietnamese learners do not want to take risks in applying what they have learnt. Students may recognize a word in a written or spoken form and think that they already "know the word", but they may not be able to use that word properly in different contexts or pronounce it correctly.

In recent years, communicative language teaching (CLT) has been applied in Vietnam and from our own experience, it has shown its effectiveness in teaching and learning language. CLT is an approach that helps students be more active in real life situations through the means of individual, pair and group work activities. It encourages students to practice the language they learn in meaningful ways. In a CLT classroom, playing vocabulary games is one of the activities which requires students to actively communicate with their classmates, using their own language. Thus the question we began to examine is, "Do games help students learn vocabulary effectively and if so, how?"

[Literature review](#)

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, Gnoinska (1998:12). Research and publications have shown that this is not a very effective way to study. Decarrico (2001) states that words should not be learnt separately or by memorization without understanding. 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.

Unlike the traditional method of learning and teaching, in a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, learners are required to take part in a number of meaningful activities with different tasks. This is to improve learners' communicative competence by encouraging them to be a part of the lessons themselves. Newton (2001) refers to this approach as a way that can enable learners to manage their vocabulary meaning and develop their communicative skills at the same time. Many experts of language teaching methodology also agree that playing games is a good way to learn vocabulary, especially in CLT class. 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.

Method

To assess the effectiveness of learning vocabulary through games in the classroom, we want to know how students' experiences help with their learning and what progress they gain. Specifically, can we apply games as an effective means to make students feel more comfortable and interested in learning the subject of vocabulary, which, in Vietnam, is usually believed to be boring rather than enjoyable?

To achieve our goal, we focused on the perception and attitudes of our students as well as what students gained through their learning with vocabulary games. The plan involved conducting different kinds of games in our lessons so that we could see how students reacted to this method of learning vocabulary. We also wanted to find if there were any problems that occurred during the process of teaching. In addition, in line with research methodology and principles (Robertson, 2002) it was necessary to enrich our perspectives by observing some experienced teachers' classes at HUFS, reviewing other teachers' lesson

plans for games and interviewing some teachers and students as well.

Over a period of two weeks we tried to apply as many games as possible in our classes at the Distance Education Center (DEC) to learn from learners' reactions whether they liked games or not and if games could help improve their existing vocabulary. Another way for us to gather data was to interview our learners at DEC orally so that we were able to better understand their expectations, problems and progress in their process of learning vocabulary. In addition, we observed the classes of CLT teachers at HUFS, and reflected back in our journals. We also conducted a small post-class survey to elicit student's feelings and their own experiences in learning vocabulary. A simple questionnaire was designed beforehand to help students understand clearly the purpose of the survey. Furthermore, experienced teachers also helped us work out different ways of conducting effective vocabulary games by their lesson plans, handouts for games and their helpful advice. Further triangulation involved interviewing a student who had conducted similar research one year prior.

Results

After collecting data by observing CLT teachers' classes, interviewing teachers and students, and from our reflections of applying games in the classes we are teaching, we have come to some findings that will be helpful for teaching and learning vocabulary. The results will be displayed in three subsections, (i) students' expectations and attitudes, (ii) students' progress and (iii) unanticipated problems.

i. Students' expectations and attitudes

When being asked about the way of learning English vocabulary, most students in our classes at the Distance Education Center said they just copied new words provided by teachers or looked up words in the dictionary. Many of them marked or underlined words they did not know in their textbooks and noted the meaning in Vietnamese. Some students noted the time they had to copy lines and lines of new words in their notebooks which were forgotten soon. "It was so boring. I hated learning new words that way!". Sometimes, students asked many questions regarding learning vocabulary like "Teacher, how can I remember words and their meanings quickly and for a long time?", "How can I use words properly in different contexts?", "Can you tell me an easy and simple way to retain the vocabulary that I have learnt?" etc. (Khuat, Teaching journal, March, 2003). All of the learners expressed their wish to learn vocabulary effectively in more interesting ways than the traditional ways that they knew. What we wanted to know was whether vocabulary games worked or not.

Most of the learners (17 out of 20) were willing to join our games in groups and they tried their best to be the winners. The students especially liked such games as "Hangman" (guessing words that belong to the topic of jobs), animal squares (words puzzle) and advertisement poster competition (making an advertisement for a travel tour). Students collaborated quite actively in games that required group work, even the quiet students. They said that they liked the relaxed atmosphere, the competitiveness and the motivation that games brought to the classroom. This is because students have a chance to "use their imagination and creativity" during activities like games in the classroom; therefore they are

motivated to learn, Domke (1991).

However, there were usually one or two students who seemed to isolate themselves from the activities. When asked to join their classmates, some students were reluctant to move from their seats to play games with their groups, some others just said they simply did not like to play the games. Nevertheless, 17 among 20 students expressed their satisfaction after the games and many of them wanted to play more as they said those games were fun and they found games helpful for their learning. In general, it was encouraging for us to know that most of our students showed pleasant feelings and positive attitudes towards learning vocabulary through games.

Moreover, we observed four lessons which applied games in providing and retaining students' vocabulary by two CLT teachers at HUFS. In two different classes, we watched the game-like activity called "Selling and Buying Things (in which 10 students were shopkeepers selling fruits and food to the rest of the class. The shopkeepers had to sell all food they had and the shoppers had to buy all food they needed in the shortest time) in two different classes, and we observed the same students' reaction in both classes. Before the game started, the teachers tried to explain the game' rules to students and gave some examples. Once students understood the rules, they quickly rearranged their seats and grouped as instructed. The classes became as noisy as a real market. Students tried to use as many phrases and words they had learnt as possible. Thus, through this kind of activity students may be able to remember their vocabulary better.

We had a second opportunity to observe a class again. This time, the teacher used a game called "Snakes and Ladders". Students worked in groups of five and everyone went from the start and tried to reach the finish as soon as possible by answering correctly to questions which were prepared by the teacher. After observing the game, we gave a small survey to 20 students with some questions about their feelings toward the game like; "Do you think this game is useful for you to remember words you have learnt?" and, "How can your classmates help you learn through the game ?"... From this survey, we learnt that all 20 students agreed that games help them a lot in vocabulary learning. Among them, 12 students said that they could answer well two-thirds of questions in the game; and only one student could always respond to all questions.

ii. Students' progress

Although our games were short activities and were applied to create a relaxed, pleasant learning atmosphere in the classrooms, we wanted games to be more than just fun. Games should also promote learning and teach students vocabulary as well. Therefore, it was important to know if our students made any progress in learning vocabulary through games. However, the action research was conducted in a limited time of two weeks, and it was hard to assess what our students had achieved because vocabulary learning is a cumulative process.

However, students in our classes are gradually progressing in English vocabulary and games help them to learn new words and phrases that appear in the games and to recall their existing vocabulary at the same time. Generally, teachers can use the first part of a

lesson, warm-up activity, for checking what students remember about the previous lesson or how many words of the topic they have. For example, a CLT teacher at HUFS, conducted the game "Simon Says" to examine students' vocabulary of parts of body. In the same way, we chose the game "Hangman" with the topic of jobs to check students' memory of the vocabulary introduced in previous lessons. Our students got eleven correct answers out of twelve job cards which were passed out.

Many students were really quick at answering and their answers were all accurate; others could not guess, but they could learn from their friends' answers. Another example is the advertisement poster game. This is a game to check the students' understanding of the reading exercise about holiday tours in the U.S.A. and to see if students can use similar vocabulary and structures to create a short piece of advertising for an interesting place. Students worked in four groups and all groups in the class produced quite nice, funny posters with short sentences using vocabulary of tourism and advertising. The classroom atmosphere was exciting as students discussed and chose the best poster of the class. In addition, our students revealed that games were very useful for them to enrich their vocabulary because they could learn from their classmates.

Regarding the effectiveness of games, interviewed teachers reported that their students seemed to learn new vocabulary more quickly and retain it better when it was applied in a relaxed and comfortable environment such as while playing games. In the same way, Giang, a junior student at HUFS that we interviewed also shared that she could remember new words more quickly and also for a long time when she learnt them through games.

Through our post-game survey of one teacher's class, all students confirmed that their classmates helped them to remember words for the games. 16 out of 20 students said they could learn lots of new words from their classmates. Also, 18 questioned students said that games are one of the most effective ways of learning vocabulary. Most students agreed that their use of vocabulary was becoming better since they actively joined games.

iii. Unanticipated problems

At first, we hypothesized that if vocabulary learning became more active with activities like games, students would not face any difficulties. However, journal reflections from our own experience, observations of other teachers' classes and interviews reveal that sometimes games create problems for both students and teachers.

Games cannot be successful if the teacher does not explain the tasks and roles of students clearly in playing games. An American teacher working at HUFSS once told us that sometimes she failed to make her students understand the games' rules. Her students felt embarrassed because they did not know how the games went and what procedures they had to follow. Fortunately, some of her students were able to find out what they had to do in the games and re-explained to their classmates. Since then, the games went smoothly.

Using games in the classroom sometimes fails due to the lack of cooperation among members of the class. Games require all students' involvement and they promote friendly competition, therefore, it is very important that students have a cooperative attitude. One

attempt to conduct the game "Marvelous Cone Hat" (the Vietnamese television version of the American "Wheel of Fortune") in a class at the Distance Education Center was not successful. "I divided my students into three groups, each group was a team. While members of two groups were enthusiastic to join with others to win the game, members of the third group did not cooperate with each other. As a result, the third group lost the game." (Nguyen, Teaching journal, November, 2002)

Another issue related to using games for language teaching is while playing games, students usually speak in their mother tongue to discuss instead of the language they are learning. From our own experience and HUFS teachers' comments, it is hard to control the use of first language (L1) in classrooms when we use games as a tool to have students practice more their communicative skills in a foreign language. One unavoidable thing in utilizing games in English classrooms is that students, especially those who speak the same language, prefer using their first language to English. Even advanced students in our classes at the Distance Education Center still discussed with each other in L1. Note Dash (2002) suggests this approach must be allowed.

Conclusion

In Vietnam, learning vocabulary has been considered a boring subject for a long time and the traditional way of learning vocabulary by mere copying and remembering has shown to be less than effective. Meanwhile, games are also seen as a time-filling activity in most English classrooms. It is believed that games are just for fun and they have very little effect in teaching and learning. However, our research reveals that games contribute to

vocabulary learning if they give students a chance to learn, practice and to review the English language in a pleasant atmosphere. From the research, we found that students are demanding a new way of teaching vocabulary, and they themselves are in search of a new way of learning this subject as well.

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.

1. DEC, established by HUFs, is a center of English for learners who can either go to a class or learn from a distance. Students are admitted to take the DEC's course, beginning at elementary level if they pass the entrance exam.