

# 13 Using Games to Promote Vocabulary Learning

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on the use of games to teach vocabulary to young learners of English. I was motivated to investigate this issue by my own experience as a teacher, from which I have seen that learners have significant problems remembering vocabulary. I believe that games can be effective in motivating language learners, and the Basic Education curriculum for English in Oman also encourages the use of games, especially in Grades 1-4. Through this study I want to explore whether these positive views about the value of games are supported when games are used to teach vocabulary.

## 2 L2 VOCABULARY LEARNING

Nation (2001) identified three general processes involved in vocabulary learning. They are noticing, retrieval, and generative use. He also explores the distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. If learners can understand the meaning of the words through reading or listening they have receptive knowledge but if the learners can use the words meaningfully in writing or speaking and can spell words it will be productive knowledge. As Nation (2001) points out, receptive vocabulary involves perceiving the form of the word through listening or reading and retrieving its meaning. Productive vocabulary involves expressing meaning through speaking or writing and producing appropriate forms.

Holden (1999) describes a variety of ways to help learners remember new words and to choose strategies that suit their own learning styles. She recommends "repeated exposure to new lexical items using a variety of means" (p.42) and also suggests that integrative strategies for vocabulary learning have a positive effect on the retention of vocabulary in the learners' minds because words seem to be stored in word association networks and collocation networks. She suggested a number of memory and mnemonic strategies but I am more interested here in word association or word elaboration strategies in which learners have to relate new words to other

words in a way that helps the learners to remember the new vocabulary.

This study focuses on young learners. Harmer (2001) points out that young learners up to nine or ten years old tend to learn differently from older learners because they have a limited attention span. Thus, unless activities are engaging, they can easily get bored and lose interest. Harmer (2001) points out other ways in which young learners learn differently: they learn indirectly rather than directly; they understand from what they see and interact with around them as well as from teachers' explanations; and they are focused on themselves as individuals (me, here, now) and need individual attention. For the above reasons, games are especially appropriate for young learners.

Phillips (1993) also discusses the types of activities which are suitable for young learners, such as using vocabulary networks simple enough for children to understand. She suggests that new vocabulary items should always be taught in context and says that learners always need plenty of opportunities to practise and apply the target vocabulary items that they have learned. Phillips (1993:79) mentions that "games in the language classroom help children to see learning English as enjoyable and rewarding." I thus added some pictures to the games I used in this study because, as Phillips (1993:68) states "the best way to learn vocabulary is when the meaning of the word is illustrated for example by a picture or real objects."

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Questions**

The main research question examined here was: How useful are language games in developing knowledge of vocabulary with Grade 3 Basic Education children? My research sub-questions were

1. Do learners remember more vocabulary with or without games?
2. Which games appear most successful in supporting vocabulary learning?
3. How much do individual learners participate in games?

#### **3.2 Participants**

The participants in this study were two classes of Basic Education Grade 3 (Class 3-5 and Class 3-4) which I taught. The children were 9 to 10 year-old boys and girls in their third year of learning English. The total number of learners in the two classes was 48 (24 in each class) and the general level of ability of the two classes was similar. The textbook used in Grade 3 was English for Me (EFM).

#### **3.3 Data Collection**

This study had an experimental element to it. I compared two different ways of teaching the same vocabulary. I taught one class using the textbook method and one using games. I gave each class a test after each game, then compared the test results of the different groups. The four games were a 'collecting stars' game, a 'showing the cat the way home' game, a 'word snap' card game, and a 'telling the time' game.

Ideas for the games were adapted from activities in Morgan & Rinvoluceri (2004) and Holden (1999). Each class had the same amount of teaching time and neither of them took more time than the other on the tests.

The learners did four tests, one for each game. In each test, the learners had to first recognise the words and then use them. The words in each test were taken from the target vocabulary items in each unit of the EFM Grade 3B course book. I gave them only the words that were identified as most difficult for learners to remember so in each unit I found eight words that needed to be focused on.

In Test 1 the learners first had to read eight sentences and then complete them with expressions from the box. All they had to do was write the number of the correct expression from the box. In Test 2 the learners had to read and match a set of pictures with words describing them (see Appendix). In Test 3 the learners had to match vocabulary with the picture they refer to. Test 4 was divided into two parts. In Part 1 the learners had to read and draw the time on a clock-face. In Part 2 the learners had to read clock-faces and match the correct sentences with the correct times. The vocabulary games and the tests were carried out over a period of four months.

In addition to the tests I collected observational data by paying attention to the participation of one group of learners in the experimental group when they were doing the games.

## 4 FINDINGS

### 4.1 Tests

Figure 1 presents the results of the tests administered after each vocabulary learning game. The mean score is given for each group on the four tests. These results show very clearly that the experimental group – that which received the vocabulary games – performed much better on each test than the control group, who were taught the vocabulary as suggested in the textbook and without any games.

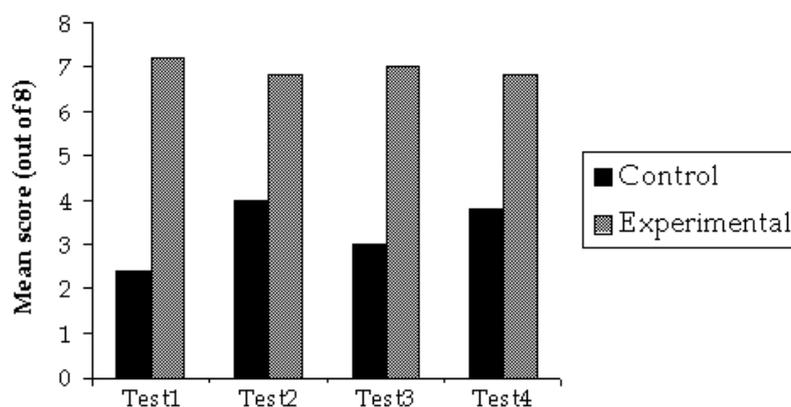


Figure 1: Test scores for two groups after four games

## 4.2 Observations

I also observed the participation in the games with one small group in the experimental class. This was to help me find out more about the learners' attitudes to the games because if they had a positive attitude that might support my provisional conclusion that games were useful in vocabulary learning. I think that the learners' participation in games is important because it can provide insight into their attitude and confidence. I observed the learners while they were doing the games to see if the games are useful for individual learners and if the learners seemed to enjoy any of the games more than the other games. Table 1 summarizes my observations about learners' participation in each game. In this table participation for each learner is rated on a scale of 1-5, where 1 refers to a high level of participation throughout the game and 5 means that the learner did not participate.

As these figures show, some learners participated a little but did not like to play the games, for example Boy 2 did not like any of the four games because he did not have much language to use independently. This might also be a cultural issue because the boy did not like playing with the girls or it could be a matter of a preferred learning style as the boy liked being told what to do rather than playing the games. Also through these data I found that some learners had more language and this allowed them to play the games more easily. For example Girl 1 played all games all the way through until the end. She liked to play and win at the end of the game. This girl liked to use the language with her group because she felt proud that she knew how to play and knew the words in English. I also found that some learners knew the language but they questioned why they had to play the game all the way through until the end because they knew the game and knew the target words so they felt they did not need to play it until the end. Consequently these learners stopped playing the game after some time but they still knew all the words correctly and understood them. Overall, my observations of these five learners did not show consistently high levels of participation in the games.

*Table 1 Learners' participation in games*

Game	1	2	3	4	Comment
Boy 1	4	3	3	4	This boy stopped participating after the first try in Game 1 and in Game 4 and then just watched.
Boy 2	5	5	5	5	This boy did not really participate actively at all in any of the games but watched what the others were doing.
Girl 1	1	1	1	2	This girl participated actively all the time in each game and often took the lead.
Girl 2	2	2	4	2	This girl stopped participating after the second try in Game 3 but participated actively in the other games.
Girl 3	4	4	4	3	This girl stopped participating after a few minutes in each game and then just watched.

## 5 DISCUSSION

There is evidence in this study that the learners were generally motivated by the games I used to help them work on their vocabulary, although this motivation was not consistent across learners; in some cases learners responded well to some games and not to others. Other learners did not mind repeating the same game more than once, while others seemed to lose interest after playing the game once. One conclusion from this study, then, is that we cannot assume that all learners will always respond positively to games. Care is thus required in making sure that the games we select for our learners are ones they are likely to respond positively to.

In terms of the impact of the games on the learners' knowledge of vocabulary, the learners who experienced the games certainly did much better on all four tests than those who learned vocabulary in the manner suggested by the coursebook. Due to the design of the study, though (I discuss this below) I cannot claim this superior performance was the result of the games. I am confident from my experience of this project that participating in the games did give learners added opportunities to encounter the target vocabulary repeatedly and in a meaningful way, and these are factors which do contribute to L2 vocabulary learning. However I do not have strong enough evidence to show, on the basis of this study, that playing language games was the reason why one group of learners here did much better than the other.

### 5.1 Limitations

As already suggested, the design of this study limits any claims I can make about the impact of the games on learners' vocabulary knowledge. Firstly, although I assumed that the two classes were equivalent in their vocabulary knowledge at the start of the study I did not check this through a test and thus the group that did better on the tests in this study may have simply been better at the start. I could have also varied the study to allow each groups to experience two normal and experimental classes; if the experimental groups always performed better under such circumstances it would be easier to attribute this to the games.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This study has been a beneficial experience for me in many ways. It has allowed me to develop my understandings of how games might be used to support L2 vocabulary learning. It has also given me insights into the different ways that different learners respond to different types of games – clearly not all games have the motivating effect on learners we hope for as teachers. Doing this project has also been very important in my development as a researcher and I now feel more confident about conducting research in my own classroom in order to improve my learners' experience of learning English.

## REFERENCES

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## APPENDIX: TEST 2

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Class: \_\_\_\_\_

### Read and match

1. a fishing rod

2. a tent

3. a book

4. a paint brush

5. a mask

6. a bandage

7. a drum

8. a rubber ring

