

The Role of Games in Enhancing EFL Students' Vocabulary Acquisition

Wagdi Rashad Ali Bin-Hady

Assistant Professor, Department of
English Language, Faculty of Education, Socotra
Hadhramout University, Yemen
wagdyrashad@hu.edu.ye

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Abstract

The aim of this paper review is to explore the advantages of (digital) games for developing EFL students' vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, this review discusses some of the most widely games used to enhance students' vocabulary acquisition and introduces them to EFL instructors so they can be widely used in their classroom teaching practices. The present review also explores the essential classroom procedures needed for incorporating games in the classroom teaching. It is found that games make lessons' enjoyable to students, minimize students' anxiety, help students recall vocabulary easily and naturally, and bring context to the classroom. The review also revealed that games such as The Sims, and Semantic Boggle are amongst the most widely used games for vocabulary retention. Teachers are advised to use the suitable vocabulary games for teaching vocabulary and link the games with the course content. The present paper review recommends the inclusion of games in English curriculum and classroom teachings.

Introduction

Vocabulary may be one of the main blocks essential for developing students' language skills and systems (Nation, 2001; 2003; Schmitt, 2000; Yudintseva, 2015). However, acquiring considerable number of vocabulary is not an easy task. Traditionally, as in grammar translation method, students are usually required to memorize lists of words belonging to a reading text with their meanings in L1. This strategy may be boring to students, and students may only learn the words partially. At the time of digitalization and integration of information and communications technology (hereafter ICT) tools in the learning/teaching process, and the call for students-centered approach, students willingly expose themselves to vocabulary unconsciously and deal with the new words in real situations. Therefore, acquiring sufficient vocabulary promotes intelligible communication (Salavati & Salehi, 2016; Wu & Huang, 2017) because vocabulary is considered the basis that links the four language skills together (Wulanjani, 2016). However, the acquisition of new vocabulary for English as a foreign language (EFL) learning may be challenging (Derakhshan & Khatir, 2015). Therefore, vocabulary learning strategies should be applied in the classroom to promote students' vocabulary acquisition (Salavati & Salehi, 2016). Several studies explored the effects of digital games on developing EFL students' vocabulary (AlNatour & Hijazi, 2018; Benoit, 2017; Derakhshan & Khatir, 2015; Jhon, 2016; Lorenset & Piazza, 2019). In addition, the use of games in EFL learning provides a genuine context for language acquisition (Gozcu & Caganaga, 2016). Hence, students absorb words because of the many times they face in the games (Toma, Alexandru, Dascalu, Dessus, & Trausan-Matu, 2017). In order to promote the acquisition process, it is thought that using games to teaching vocabulary may be viewed as a new method to enhance students' abilities in English (AlNatour & Hijazi, 2018). Thus, games

may bring real context for learners to use the language in the classrooms (Derakhshan & Khatir, 2015), and they may also prevent negative evaluation because students focus on the play of game and interactions, and not on the language per se (Wulanjani, 2016). A study was conducted by Salavati and Salehi (2016) concluded that even shy students would become more motivated and would participate in games, becoming more confident of themselves. Even though games can motivate students to retain new vocabulary easily, it is essential for teachers to select the appropriate games to achieve the aims (AlNatour & Hijazi, 2018). This will be discussed in the next section. This section is compiled to focus on the previous studies related to games used for vocabulary learning and the suitable procedures for using games in the classroom for learning purposes.

Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics defined games as 'an organized activity that usually has the following properties: a particular task or objective, a set of rules, a competition between players, and a communication between players by spoken or written language.' (Richards et al., 1995, p. 89). Derakhshan and Khatir (2015) mentioned that games are important for developing students' vocabulary because 'they enhance students' ability to memorize words, encourage student's interaction, improve their communicative skills and enhance students' motivation. Games also can help the teachers to create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful' (p. 39). Similarly, Mahdi (2018) explored the effect of mobile device in learning vocabulary. The study used meta-analysis to compare learning outcomes between students who use mobile to learn vocabulary and other students who traditionally learn the vocabulary. The study reported that mobile learning has moderate effect on learning vocabulary. It also revealed that adults' learners learn better than young learners and finally mobile learning has moderate effect on all aspects of vocabulary learning.

Guaqueta and Castro-garces (2018) investigated the effect of language learning applications (Duolingo and Kahoot) in developing EFL students' vocabulary. The study followed mixed method approach. The study reported contradiction on the use of technology in rural classroom, however, there were signs that technology and classroom practice can enhance students' vocabulary acquisition. AlNatour and Hijazi (2018) studied the impact of digital games on teaching vocabulary to kindergarten students in the Jordanian setting. The study aligned experimental design in which a pretest and post-test were conducted and between them a treatment was given to the experimental group. The study revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group. The study also showed that there was no any statistically significant difference attributed to gender.

In the same way, Ashraf, Motlagh, and Salami (2014) explored the effect of the online games on building Irani EFL learners' vocabulary. The study assigned experimental design in which a pretest was conducted, and a treatment was given for the experimental group in which online computer games were used, and the control group was taught traditionally. The finding revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the vocabulary-based test. Likewise, Salavati and Salehi (2016) studied the significance of using instructional video games in helping Iranian learners to retain vocabulary in comparison with traditional vocabulary memorizing methods. An experimental designed was attempted in which both experimental and control groups were pre-tested and the experimental group was exposed into video games while learning vocabulary while the control group was traditionally taught new words. The two groups appeared in post-test after one month of teaching. The findings reported statistically significant difference in the post test in favour of the experimental group.

Game-based learning activities

Games are of two types: competitive and cooperative. In the first type, a team or player races to win the goal while the second teams or participants work together for a common goal (Wulanjani, 2016). Lorenset and Piazza (2019) explored the properties of digital games and how games participate in enhancing EFL learners' vocabulary building. They also explained how some digital games like *The Sims*, *Civilization III* and *Runaway: A Road Adventure* help in enhancing students' vocabulary learning.

Gamification is defined by Plass, Homer, & Kinzer (2015) as 'the use of game elements, such as incentive systems, to motivate players to engage in a task they otherwise would not find attractive' (p. 259). Yuditseva (2015) states that 'game-enhanced learning provides a set of effective strategies such as language repetitions, contextual clues, interaction with native speakers and peers, and imagery to practice and use second language vocabulary in the authentic context' (p.101).

In general, games are advantageous not only for students as they subconsciously indulge in the language learning process with fun, and they also empower teachers to teach in motivational atmosphere (Gozcu & Caganaga, 2016), but to engage learners on an 'affective, behavioral, cognitive, and sociocultural level in ways few other learning environments are able to' (Plass et al., 2015, p. 263). Language games are believed of to be an entertaining technique for enriching students' repertoire in acquiring new vocabulary and retaining lexical items (Darfilal, 2015). Even though there are many advantages of games for foreign language learners, students may only play them for fun, and not for learning as a primary objective. Therefore, language teachers should be aware of when to use the games and how to connect them with the course content (Gozcu & Caganaga, 2016). Wulanjani (2016) mentioned some factors that should be taken

into consideration for selecting a game ‘the number of students, proficiency level, cultural context, timing, learning topic, and the classroom settings’ (p. 82).

Vocabulary learning games

Vocabulary is believed to be best acquired in stress-free, motivating and enthusiastic setting where learners expose to the new lexicon in authentic atmosphere and games are of such factors (Ashraf et al., 2014). There are some of the games used for learning/teaching vocabulary, like Hangman, The Sims, and Semantic Boggle.

Hangman.

It is a game that can be played with all level students and with few resources (such as a piece of paper or a blackboard). It is according to Wulanjani (2016) a guess and challenging game. The player should guess the word and if they cannot successfully answer, they will be hanged in a pole.

The Sims

The Sims is a game that comprises daily vocabulary, and it can be used for teaching several subjects. It is a game highly used because it can be adapted and changed by the students, creating motivation and agency. Lorenset and Tumolo (2019) confirmed that the Sims ‘is an example of a digital game especially used for vocabulary learning, since it provides gamers with vocabulary of actions carried out daily, such as cooking, cleaning, building, eating and shopping’ (p. 1009).

Semantic Boggle

Semantic Boggle is a board game in which players link letters in grid to find the longest word. The player wins the game if s/he finds the longest word. However, it is a guessing game that ‘brings educational

value [to learners] by identifying semantically-related words. The words are found using the ReaderBench framework and are placed in the game grid using a greedy algorithm' (Toma et al., 2017).

However, the many studies and much concerns that games based language learning received globally, (Alyaz & Genç, 2016) applying such learning is still far away from real implication due to financial, technical, sociological and instructional barriers.

Procedures for applying games in the classrooms

Even of the fact that games have many advantages for foreign language learners, students may only play games for fun, not for learning. Therefore, language teachers should be aware of when to use the games and how to connect them with the course content (Gozcu & Caganaga, 2016). The success of using games in learning vocabulary depends on the teachers' responsibility to use cooperative games and minimizing students' stress and bringing amusement to the class (AlNatour & Hijazi, 2018).

Conclusion

This study presented a discussion on how games can be applied in the EFL classroom and be applied for students' learning of vocabulary. Examples of digital and board games were presented based on previous studies. Despite the fact that games play major role in foreign language classrooms, lots of teachers ignore that games can be powerful learning resources and a strategy for learning (Gozcu & Caganaga, 2016). Due to that, it is necessary for teachers to update themselves in the use of games in language learning and teaching. After that, they can use them in their teaching to their students (Darfilal, 2015). All in all, the present study reported several benefits that games can enhance students' vocabulary, such as creating real context which allows students to use the language naturally and motivating students to learn the vocabulary more easily. This review

paper recommends further research to investigate the connection of digital games with specific course content, for example, reading comprehension, so students can benefit from digital games to acquire vocabulary. Subsequently, students can do their best to understand the reading texts.

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