

The Impact of Playing Word Games on Young Iranian EFL Learners' Vocabulary Learning and Retention

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Abstract

Acquiring adequate vocabulary in a foreign language is very important but often difficult. Considering the importance of learner's vocabulary learning and retention, the present study aimed at examining the impact of playing word games on young Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning and retention at Irandoostan language Institute in Tabriz. To that end, 50 female learners at the age range of 8-12 were selected and assigned into an experimental (n=25) and a control (n=25) group. The design of the study was quasi-experimental with pretest, immediate posttest and delayed posttest. The content of the tests were based on the students' course books and consisted of 20 items. The researcher utilized the word games in order to teach the selected vocabulary items during the course which lasted for a month and a half. The games were played each session for about 15 minutes. The experimental group was engaged in playing word games as a treatment and the control group received usual instruction. After the treatment, the participants in both groups took the post-test and after two weeks the learners were asked to take the test once more. This time their scores were assigned as the retention post-test scores. The mean scores of two groups were compared three times through the independent samples t-test. The results of the data analysis revealed that playing word games were effective in helping learners to improve their vocabulary learning and retention.

Keywords: Vocabulary Learning, Vocabulary Retention, Young EFL Learners, Word Games

Introduction

Vocabulary plays an important role in learning a foreign language. Dolati and Mikaili (2011) stated that “it is one element that links the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing all together,” (p. 1). They also mention that it is necessary for the language learners to obtain a certain amount of vocabulary in order to be able to communicate well in a particular language. Harmer (1991) also mentioned the importance of vocabulary learning in learning a language and stated that “if language structure makes up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and flesh,” (p. 153). Boyle and Peregoy (1993) stated that utilizing games to introduce new vocabulary items provides learners with a great opportunity to be engaged in vocabulary development and retaining.

The process of learning a second language has often been described as the learner’s progress along the interlanguage continuum from a non-existent knowledge towards native-like competence without necessarily reaching it (Laufer, 1998). If this is the view we take of second language acquisition, then vocabulary learning should involve a gradual increase in the learner’s vocabulary size as the most striking difference between foreign language learners and native speakers is in the quantity of words each group possesses.

Since vocabulary is a sizable component in the learning process, learners across proficiency levels will encounter situations where they can understand only part of the written text or a sentence due to the fact that they do not know all the words. Encountering some unknown words might not hinder the overall understanding of the text, but if too many words or the most essential ones are unknown, then comprehension may fail. As this is the case, learners will resort to comprehension and communication strategies in order to compensate for the inadequacy of their second language (L2) resources in their L2 use. When learners encounter unfamiliar words, they can resort to different resources to deal with the problem, such as using dictionaries, seeking help from the teacher or a paper, attempting to determine the meaning of the word by guessing its meaning from the context.

Hulstijn (2001) suggested that teaching vocabulary should not only consist of teaching specific words but also aim at equipping learners with strategies necessary to expand their vocabulary knowledge. He also suggested that vocabulary of language should be seen as a “set of basic irregularities”, and its acquisition as a haphazard process of learning largely unrelated elements is long outdated.

In spite of the recent surge of interest in many aspects of vocabulary learning, little has been written about teaching /learning vocabulary to young learners. Today, the number of young learners of English is growing rapidly, with publication of course books to match. The theoretical debate taking place alongside this expansion has been less dramatic, with ideas from primary education being put together with communicative language teaching methodology to produce a hybrid and somewhat ad hoc framework for the teaching of young learners (Huss, 1998). As a matter of fact, the expansion of foreign language teaching in institutes has been made difficult by the lack of teachers trained, especially, for this purpose. There are few experts in the field who have both a thorough knowledge of the particular needs of this age group and linguistic insight to build up and teach a foreign language program especially vocabulary items. Teachers who teach young learners should have an understanding not only of first language development but of second/ foreign language acquisition. English language researchers and scholars, for example Ballantyne, Sanderman, and Levy (2012), and Wong -Fillmore and Snow (2000), indicate that although teachers feel they are well prepared to teach young learner and have completed minimum certification requirements, they believe that they need more training in language acquisition and understanding bilingual development.

Retention of vocabulary items is considered as one of the most challenging features of foreign language learning because vocabulary learning plays a major role in EFL language learners’ achievement (Gersten & Baker, 2000). Language teachers need to put in mind the number of vocabulary items presented at any one time, and as Gersten and Baker (2000) pointed out, “the standard method of presenting up to 20 or more new vocabulary words that students are expected to learn at a given time is

not an effective way to help the learners develop vocabulary” (Gersten & Baker, 2000, p. 1).

Lee (1995) pointed out that a lot of teachers considered that learning must happen in a formal environment and if one is having fun and there is amusement and laughter, then it is not really teaching. Nowadays, language instructors and scholars believe that learning happens in stress-free environments; hence, teachers need to apply a variety of teaching methods to improve learning and teaching. One way to reduce learners’, especially young learners’ stress, is to teach them via games. Alemi (2010) states that “of course the criteria for selecting words should be considered carefully since it is not the case that all words can be taught through word games” (p. 2). Motivation is what triggers learning and games can highly motivate young learners since children like to have fun and enjoy playing games. Celce-Murcia and McIntosh (1979) refer to the usefulness of playing games in the following words:

games are by definition fun, and everyone agrees that if learning can be made enjoyable, students will learn more. In playing games, language use takes precedence over language practice, so games can be used as authentic language learning tools. (p. 54)

Based on the above mentioned ideas, it seems that language games have positive effects on learners’ vocabulary learning. So language teachers need to create a constructive classroom atmosphere, which encourages vocabulary development. By utilizing word games, teachers can also meet learners’ specific needs. Despite the usefulness of the word games in teaching and learning vocabulary, the use of these games is often neglected by the teachers. Language researchers have argued that the main goal of teaching vocabulary is to make learners more aware of word meaning and use and motivate learners to retain vocabulary more easily.

Many research projects have investigated the role of playing word games on EFL learners’ vocabulary learning and retention. Rahimi & Sahargand (2008) found that vocabulary learning could be fun. They discussed the problems that learners had learning vocabulary and offered some guidelines in their work which also familiarized teachers with useful

techniques and activities for presentation and fun games for practice and production.

Alemi (2010) also conducted a research with 60 Iranian EFL learners in two groups of experimental and control. In control group, traditional methods were used to teach vocabulary while the experimental group received word games as a treatment at the end of each session. The vocabulary post test analysis of the two groups showed that playing word had positive effect on expanding the participants' vocabulary.

Dolati & Mikaili (2011) conducted a study examine the role of games on vocabulary learning among 70 female students in the age of 12 to 15 at Bu-Ali Iranian primary school in Urmia, Iran. The results demonstrated that using games had the important role in teaching vocabularies to the language learners. Moreover, game could motivate and engage learners in the learning process.

In another study, Sorayaie Azar (2012) tried to find the answer to the question, "do games help English language learners learn vocabulary effectively, and if so, how?" So the researcher began an action research which included applying games in classes, observing other teachers' classes, and interviewing both teachers and learners and eliciting students' reactions and the effectiveness of games in vocabulary learning. The results revealed that games were effective in helping students to improve their vocabulary building skills.

Aslanabadi (2013) in a study tried to investigate the effect of games on improvement of Iranian EFL vocabulary knowledge. This study aimed to find a way to help learners fix the novel vocabulary in their minds at the beginning stage of language learning process. He divided the learners into the experimental group that were given an online language teaching game and the control group that were given regular teaching. This study was conducted at two kindergartens among 30 boys and girls between 6-7 age as an experimental group and 30 boys and girls at the same age as a control group. The results indicated that language games were a good strategy for learning a foreign language, also according to the findings of this study teachers would reconsider the role of the games and appreciate its value.

According to Rohani (2013), another researcher, vocabulary learning has always been a major concern for those who want to learn a second language. Her study aimed at the determining the effect of games on vocabulary gain of student. So, two groups of students were chosen as control and experimental group. The experimental group was taught by games but control group was exposed to text book teaching. Although both groups made noticeable progress after training program, there was no significant difference between the groups.

Taheri (2014) also conducted a research among Iranian EFL learners. Her study aimed at investigating the effect of using language games on elementary students' vocabulary retention. For this study 32 students were chosen from the same level of proficiency and were assigned into two groups of 16. The control group received traditional method of teaching vocabulary and the experimental group received language games as a treatment. After the treatment, post-test 1 was administered to both groups in order to investigate the students' immediate vocabulary learning in two different conditions, with and without language games. After two weeks, post- test 2 was administered to both groups to determine the delayed effect of learning again with and without the treatment. Four weeks after the second post-test, the post-test third was administered to determine the students' ability of retention in both group. The results of her research also revealed that the effect of the game – like activities was more significant in the delayed time than immediate one.

Following the same line of enquiry, the present study was aimed at examining how games such as “crossword puzzles”, “hangman”, and “Charades” may facilitate young Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning process.

The results of the present study can be beneficial for EFL teachers since they can make use of various teaching methods to teach more effectively. The findings of the present study may also be useful for the curriculum designers. In fact, they would design books and materials which contain word games to facilitate both vocabulary learning and teaching process. The following two research questions were developed in the present study:

1. Does playing word games have a significant effect on young Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning and retention?

Method

Participants

Fifty young female EFL learners from Irandoostan Language Academy in Tabriz participated in the present study. The age range of the participants was 10 to 15. The researcher randomly divided the participants into two groups, an experimental and a control group. The students in the experimental group were exposed to some word games, namely: Hangman, Charades, Crossword Puzzles, as a vocabulary teaching technique. The control group received traditional teacher-centered vocabulary instruction.

Instruments and Materials

The researcher utilized a teacher-made test of vocabulary to assess the participants' level of vocabulary knowledge in the pre-test, and two post tests. The test consisted of 20 questions, which required learners to listen to their teacher and identify the right item on the exam sheet, and listen to their teacher and color some other items. This test assessed learners' knowledge of vocabulary presented in New Parade Starter book. The teacher-made test was piloted by the researcher among 10 young Iranian EFL learners. The consistency of the test scores over time was checked through test-retest method with a two-week interval. The reliability index was found to be quite as high as .90.

Procedure

The study began with the administration of the the researcher-made vocabulary test in order to examine the participants' level of vocabulary at the beginning of the study. It took the participants 15 minutes to complete the vocabulary test. We selected four language games in order to probe the possible effect of the games on vocabulary learning and retention. From the very first session, we asked learners to role play in order to acquire vocabulary items actively. we asked learners to cut out Karl and Katie's puppets, the two characters introduced in the starter book to help learners learn English, then asked one student to choose one of the puppets and ask his/her classmates some information questions (e.g. what is this? What color is it? etc.). We also played three most welcomed games among the learners. The games were Hangman, Charades, and Crossword puzzles. The word

games were designed in advance by the researchers so that the learners would have to use the lexical items needed to be practiced and learned. These three games were played after the fifth session so that the learners could have enough time to learn how to spell the vocabulary items they had studied.

The participants were also asked to role play using the puppets at the back of the student books. One of the learners was asked to choose a puppet, Karl or Katie's. The learner with the puppet asked a question, such as: *what is this? What color is it? Which shape is it?*, and the other student answered the question by naming the items.

Finally, by the end of the term, we administered the same vocabulary test and after two weeks the learners were asked to take the test once more. This time their scores were assigned as their vocabulary retention test scores.

Design

The design of the study was quasi-experimental with pretest, immediate post-test, and delayed post-test. The participants were randomly assigned into two groups, the experimental and the control. The vocabulary learning and retention were considered as dependent variables and playing word games was considered as the independent variable.

Results

The first statistical analysis was the examination of the reliability of the teacher made vocabulary test. For this purpose the test-retest method of reliability estimation was used because the test would be used for three times and the main concern was the stability of the test scores over time. Table 1 shows that the coefficient of correlation as the reliability estimate of the test scores was as high as 0.90. As the threshold for acceptable test-retest reliability is 0.75 and the coefficient of correlation is higher than this threshold amount, the provision of the stability of the test scores over time was met.

Table 1
Test-Retest Reliability of the Vocabulary Test

		Reliability Test	Reliability Retest
Reliability Test	Pearson Correlation	1	.90
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.04
	N	10	10
Reliability Retest	Pearson Correlation	.90	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.04	
	N	10	10

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for the pretest results in both experimental and control groups. The number of students in both groups was 25.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for the Distribution of the Participants' Pre-test Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-Test Control	25	0	2	1.04	.935
Pre-Test Experimental	25	0	2	1.00	.913

As it is seen in Table 2, the mean score of the control group in the pre-test was 1.04 with the standard deviation of 0.93 and the mean score of the experimental group was 1.00 with the standard deviation of 0.91. As the maximum score of the participants in both groups was 2, all of them could be considered as beginners and none of the students was left out for the purpose of homogenizing.

Table 3 shows the results of independent-samples t-test for pretest results. As it is seen in Table 3, the Levene's Test for Equal variances yielded a p-value of 0.68. This means that the difference between the variances was not statistically significant, and the statistics in the first row of the t-test analysis had to be examined to check the significance of the difference between the means of the two groups.

Table.3
Independent Samples t-test for the Pre-test Scores

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pre-Test	Equal variances assumed	.16	.68	.153	48	.87	.040	.26	-.485	.56
	Equal variances not assumed			.153	47.97	.87	.040	.26	-.485	.56

The p-value observed was 0.87 and was higher than the alpha level of 0.05 which was the level of significance for the examination of the amount of difference between the two groups. The results showed that there was not a statistically significant difference between the pre-test scores of the participants in the two groups. Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics of the post test results in two groups.

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics for the Distribution of the Participants' Vocabulary Learning Test Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Post-Test Control	25	12	19	15.96	1.71
Post-Test Experimental	25	14	20	17.60	1.63

The mean score of the control group on the post-test was 15.96 with the standard deviation of 1.719 and the mean score of the experimental group was 17.60 with the standard deviation of 1.633. Table 5 shows the results of the independent samples t-test for the immediate post-test results. The p-value for Levene's Test of Equal Variances was 0.84 showing that the difference between the variances was not statistically significant and the two groups had equal variances.

Table .5
The Control and the Experimental Groups' Vocabulary Learning Difference

		Levene's Test for Equality of Means of Variances					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Post-Test	Equal variances assumed	.038	.84	-3.45	48	.001	-1.64	.47	-2.59	-.68
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.45	47.87	.001	-1.64	.47	-2.59	-.68

The statistics in the first row of the t-test analysis shows that the p-value observed was equal to .001 which was lower than the alpha level of 0.05 showing a statistically significant difference between post-test scores of the participants in the two groups. This result showed that the treatment of the study which was playing word games had a significant effect on young Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning and the learners in the experimental group had significant gains.

Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics for the results of the retention post test in two groups. It can be observed that the mean score of the control group in retention-test was 14.56 with the standard deviation of 1.635 and the mean score of the experimental group was 16.64 with the standard deviation of 1.705.

Table.6
Descriptive Statistics for the Distribution of the Participants' Vocabulary Retention Test Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Retention -Test Control	25	11	17	14.56	1.635
Retention -Test Experimental	25	13	20	16.64	1.705

Finally Table 7 shows the results of the independent samples t-test for the comparison of the mean scores of the two groups in the retention post-test.

Table 7
The Control and the Experimental Groups' Vocabulary Retention Difference

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Post-Test	Equal variances assumed	.017	.896	-4.403	48	.000	-2.080	.472	-3.030	-1.130
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.403	47.916	.000	-2.080	.472	-3.030	-1.130

The p-value observed for the t-test analysis was lower than the significance level of 0.05 showing a significant difference between retention-test scores of the participants in two groups. This result showed that playing word games had also a significant effect on vocabulary retention of young Iranian EFL learners. Thus, the results of both immediate posttest and the delayed posttest showed that the answer to the research question was affirmative.

Discussion

Based on the results of the statistical analyses, one can argue that there was a significant difference between the two traditional and innovative teaching methods in which the experimental group was taught with playing word games in learning English vocabulary. The experimental group outperformed the control group in both vocabulary learning and retention.

The findings of the present research confirmed the results of Aslanabadi's (2013) study which indicated that games had a positive effect on improvement of Iranian EFL vocabulary knowledge. So, his results indicated that playing games were useful for learning a foreign language and also games could help learners fix the novel vocabulary in their minds because of the cheerful environment.

According to Dolati and Mikaili (2011), teaching a new language to the young learners of other languages can be considered as a challenging job while it can be facilitated by using some instructional games. Therefore, the

results of their case study that was conducted to identify the role of the games on vocabulary learning indicated that games could motivate and engage learners in learning process.

Mobaslat (2012) also conducted a study to determine the role of educational games on learning a foreign language. She found that games had a good effect on improving the achievement for the primary stage and to create an interactive environment. She also claimed that games were helpful for the teacher as a procedure for language acquisition.

Moreover, the results of this study were consistent with the findings of Alemi (2010) who found that playing games helped her participants in their vocabulary achievement. The results of her research also revealed that there was a positive effect of word games on expanding learners' vocabulary.

The finding of the present study contradicts with the results of Rohani (2013) who found no significant difference between the experimental group in which games was thought and the control group that was exposed to text book teaching. The results in her study indicated that both groups made noticeable progress after training program and there was no significant difference between the groups.

In EFL contexts like Iran, 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, this research revealed 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 and also helps them to retain vocabularies. In the present study, we found that students were demanding a new way of teaching vocabulary, and they themselves were 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.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The study attempted to investigate the impact of teaching vocabulary items through playing word games. The statistical analyses showed that there was a significant difference between the two traditional and innovative teaching methods. Although learners in both groups enhanced their performance after being taught in both classes with both approaches, the instructional game approach proved to be more efficient than the traditional approach. To conclude, learning a new language and its vocabulary through games is one significant and interesting way that can be applied for low level language learners. The results of this study suggest that games are used not only for having fun in EFL classes, but more importantly, for the useful interaction and cooperation among young EFL learners. The language games can be considered as a practice and review of language lessons in EFL classrooms.

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Biodata

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