

THE BENEFITS OF GAMES IN TEACHING VOCABULARY TO PRIMARY STUDENTS

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine the benefits of games in teaching vocabulary to primary students. Comparing the final results of the Experimental Group with those obtained before the experiment revealed remarkable progress in language achievement for each student. Teachers should use games in vocabulary lessons and not only (games can be also applied when teaching grammar structures), especially with primary students in order to increase their interest in learning English.

Key words: experiment, game, primary students, vocabulary

Introduction

Learning a language is a process proceeding from the simple to the more difficult. It comprises lots of mechanisms and the acquisition of psychological habits closely related to the cultural and social background of people. By learning English, people can communicate easily with foreign people; misunderstanding can be reduced in communication. Teaching English to young learners is considered to be a process as complex as the learning process. Its components are: presentation and explanation of the new material (in a clear, comprehensible and available learning way), providing practice (in order to consolidate learning and improve performances), testing and evaluation (to check what has been achieved and what needs to be learned or reviewed). The teacher is the one who has to find ways for raising interest of students in learning English. This is the key to make them master the language easily. The teacher should also find the best techniques to introduce English so that the young learners may become motivated to learn English. This

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research paper discusses games as the best strategy to achieve vocabulary and make students enjoy learning a new language. It is known that children like playing, so during this study I want to demonstrate that games have lots of benefits in language acquisition. How could we define the word “game?” A game is a funny activity which combines rules and goals. It is a communicative activity which involves a real exchange of information.

Hadfield (2003) defines game as "an activity with rules, a goal and element of fun." Harmer (199, p. 101) states: "games are a vital part of a teacher's equipment, not only for the language practice they provide, but also for the therapeutic effect they have". They can be used at any stage of a class to provide an amusing and challenging respite from other classroom activities and are especially useful at the end of a long day to send students away feeling cheerful about their English class. Games do not provide only fun but also create a context for students to use English fast and easily. Through games, students are put in real situations, and they learn words by doing something; this is a good way to make their understanding about English much more easily, because fun activities will help them remember the material taught by the teacher. Allen (1983, p. 4) said that “there is truth in the belief that experience is the best vocabulary teacher”. Experiencing various fun activities makes students learn and memorize lots of words. Facing different situations in which language is used, students will deal with the new vocabulary more easily.

When dealing with games, the students' inhibition becomes lower; the teacher encourages risk-taking, praises students for their efforts in practicing language, tells students to be self-confident, directs students to share their knowledge, encourages students to ask questions, helps students to use their intuition and corrects only selected errors.

Primary students usually have to face unknown vocabulary during their language acquisition. Learners should be involved in different task-based activities such as vocabulary games or conversational games in which students become active and use the language meaningfully. Students should be trained to communicate by communicating. These activities also help learners to understand and use words in different situations by making the lessons pleasurable. Stress should be on the students developing their intrinsic motivation, which is concerned with what takes place in the classroom; intrinsic motivation plays an important role in the students' success or failure as language learners, being influenced by the physical condition in which learning takes place, the method by which students are taught, the teacher and his teaching style.

During our study, we used games as a strategy to give students reasons to work, to motivate them to fully take part in the process of learning. In language acquisition, vocabulary is very important as it links all the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Through games, there were created situations in which the learner was most suggestible and the material was presented in such a manner as to encourage positive reception and retention by the learner.

When dealing with games, the students were comfortable, relaxed; they gained, self-confidence, spontaneity and receptivity. The students learned from classroom management exchanges. They became responsible for their learning and the use of games developed their creative thinking. The thing that I have noticed is that they put much more effort in such activities; games offer them large possibilities to use the language and learn it both consciously and unconsciously. The classroom procedures favour interaction among them, giving them a chance to work in pairs or groups.

Our goal was to introduce students to new words which were then applied to games. Young learners usually think that achieving vocabulary means memorizing new words with meanings in their own language (without using them in a real context) or looking up the meaning of words in a dictionary. This is not wrong, but it will not enrich their vocabulary in an effective way. After a while, many learners may find out that they have forgotten most of the vocabulary learned, and they will blame their bad memorization. More than that, some other students may believe that it is the teacher's duty to provide meaning for new words. They just have to put them in their notebooks or solve tasks mechanically. They may come to use words in the same form in which those words were learned. The acquisition of vocabulary is a difficult aspect of learning a foreign language. Vocabulary plays an important role in the language learners' success.

According to Piaget's theory, a child of ten years old is interested in recognizing and learning new words; he repeats them again and again so that he will memorize them. Hatch and Brown (1995), identify some essential steps of learning vocabulary:

- creating a context for learning new words;
- getting an intelligible representation of the words form;
- achieving the meaning of words;
- establishing a connection between the form and the meaning of words
- using the words in different situations or contexts.

The number of words introduced to the beginners should be limited. Words should be selected in such a manner as to convey key concepts of high utility and relevant to the topic being learned. The words selected should also have meaning in the lives of learners. One of the principles of vocabulary growth is learning words meanings at a deeper level of understanding.

Games address the students' needs. The present study used a collection of games in which students were usefully exposed during their learning. The entire study focused on organizing, practicing and presenting vocabulary in various ways to make the material accessible and memorable to the learners. Students' inner abilities to play were used as a means of encouraging them to learn words.

English foreign language specialists justified the use of games referring to the motivation provided by them. They agree on the idea that games are fun and make learning enjoyable, they bring the classroom closer to the real world. It was proved that games can teach and I consider them a helpful tool in teaching English words, especially to beginners. Teachers are responsible for creating a constructive environment which sustains vocabulary exploitation so that students could acquire words easily and correctly.

Using games in the classroom removes any misconception that learning should be earnest and sober. Through games, it is possible to learn and have fun at the same time. Educational games are not time consuming, even though teachers prefer drilling as a method of practicing vocabulary. They are a real reinforcing device which improves students' vocabulary knowledge. Students usually seem to become bored in vocabulary lessons because they have the same traditional learning habits, such as copying words in their notebooks, listening to the teacher's explanations and trying to learn them by heart.

This study may be significant because it provides a pedagogical application. The results will provide a better perspective on using games in the classroom and will make them apply games more often in the learning process. The study will make them understand that games bring many benefits for students as well- they improve their abilities in mastering the vocabulary and help shy and weak learners to overcome their inferiority complex and participate in the lesson.

The conducted action research needed to find answers to the following questions:

- Do games help students learn words easily and effectively?
- Do games have beneficial effects on the students' vocabulary achievement? If so, what are they?

Methodology

Research group

This research paper involved a number of thirty-five students in grade four of “I. Gr. Teodorescu” School, Ruse. The students selected as participants in this study were children of two mixed-ability classes: the first one, 4th A, with seventeen students and the other one, 4th B, consisting of eighteen students. They were divided into two groups – an experimental and a control group. It is important to mention that all students were in the second year of study and learned with the same teacher in the last two years of school. The present study was an experimental research which was conducted during six weeks in the second semester of the school year.

Conducting my action research in the classroom revealed many advantages. According to Richards and Nunan (Richards and Nunan, 1990, pp. 10-12), there are a lot of advantages for the teacher who conducts the study: the ability to monitor their students’ actions and behaviours; the understanding of teaching methods and materials as well as their application; the awareness of the relationship between classroom behaviour and students’ growth; the ability to change their attitudes and behaviour based on the understanding in the classroom settings. All these advantages stated above enabled me, as a teacher to manage the class well, find out the students’ achievement gaps and apply a special approach.

Our research paper is based on the assumption that this research would be a benefit for me as a teacher because it would increase my professional development, it would help me to know my students’ gaps and needs and it would support me to refresh my knowledge regarding English teaching methodology. Our research paper involves procedures that aim to investigate problems of the learning process in many contexts and tests ways to correct or improve them. Data collecting is very important in doing such a study. The researcher has to know which is the starting point and the key elements that would support him in accomplishing his purpose. The final results of the study usually come from the interpretation of the data collected. Our research used the questionnaire method to collect some information on our students’ level of interest in studying English and acquiring new words. Then I used a pre-test to check what the students’ level was at that time and also a post-test in order to see the students’ progress and their abilities in mastering the vocabulary taught at the end of the experiment. The questionnaire and the pre-test were administered at the first meeting of the first week. Then the experiment was conducted. It lasted five weeks and during this phase the class was scheduled twice a week. The students were involved in activities which enabled students to communicate, exchange ideas and express

their own opinions, in other words, to develop their communicative skills. My main preoccupation was to make students achieve new vocabulary unconsciously, creating different contexts for the vocabulary taught: predicting answers, spelling, guessing, acting-out, matching tasks. During the lesson, the students used the vocabulary they had at that time and then the teacher introduced new words. Most of them were surprised because they thought that learning a language means memorizing a list of words or looking up in a bilingual dictionary to find meanings of words. It was my mission to show them that learning words means more than a boring activity - it can be both effective and enjoyable. The present study covered five topics which were debated during the five weeks as in the table 1.

Table 1. Types of games achieved to develop the vocabulary

Period	Topics	Games	Types of games
1 st week	Family	❖ Maggie's family; ❖ Say & Swap	- Pictionary ; - Card game;
2 nd week	Jobs and Occupations	❖ Can you spell the job? ❖ Competition charades ❖ Fruit Salad ❖ Picture Halves	- Spelling game; - Miming game; - Acting-out game; - Matching game;
3 rd week	Animals	❖ Yes/ No Stations ❖ Classroom Safari ❖ Farm Animals	- Conversation game; - Acting-out game; - Conversation game;
4 th week	Weather	❖ Noughts & Crosses ❖ Weather walk ❖ Clothing stacker	- Pictionary; - Acting-out game; - Guessing game;
5 th week	Sports and activities	❖ Chain Spelling ❖ Hot Potato ❖ Modified Catch Phrase	- Spelling game; - Answering questions; - Guessing game.

It is important to mention that the students in the control group were taught the vocabulary using traditional methods. They learnt the vocabulary without being put in any real context practice. They saw the teacher as a controller who was obliged to give them meaning and grammatical function of the words, as well as new forms of the words, and then they wrote them down in their notebooks or completed some given tasks. The vocabulary was acquired mechanically so that students could not use the new words in real life communication. At the end of the experiment, students were given another questionnaire which had the aim to see the students' reaction towards learning English through games. In order to check their progress, the students were assigned a test and then there were analysed the results of the pre and post-test in order to draw the conclusions of the study.

Results

Before learning activities were started, there were analysed the results of the pre-test and the students' answers to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered only to the class where games were going to be implemented. The results of the questionnaire showed that the students enjoyed studying English but they had difficulties in achieving vocabulary, and they made efforts to memorize words. They thought that games could help them to sustain the effort of learning and would create a context for the language practice. As already mentioned, all the students involved in the study took the same pre-test during forty-five minutes. The test was designed to determine its validity and reliability. Some of the students needed five extra minutes to complete the test; they motivated that the items were more difficult than they had expected. The total score of the pre-test was 100 points. The students had to solve five items covering different types of vocabulary exercises. Comparing the results obtained by the students in the other class (4th A) to the 4th B class results, it is obvious that the students in 4th B have difficulties in mastering English vocabulary.

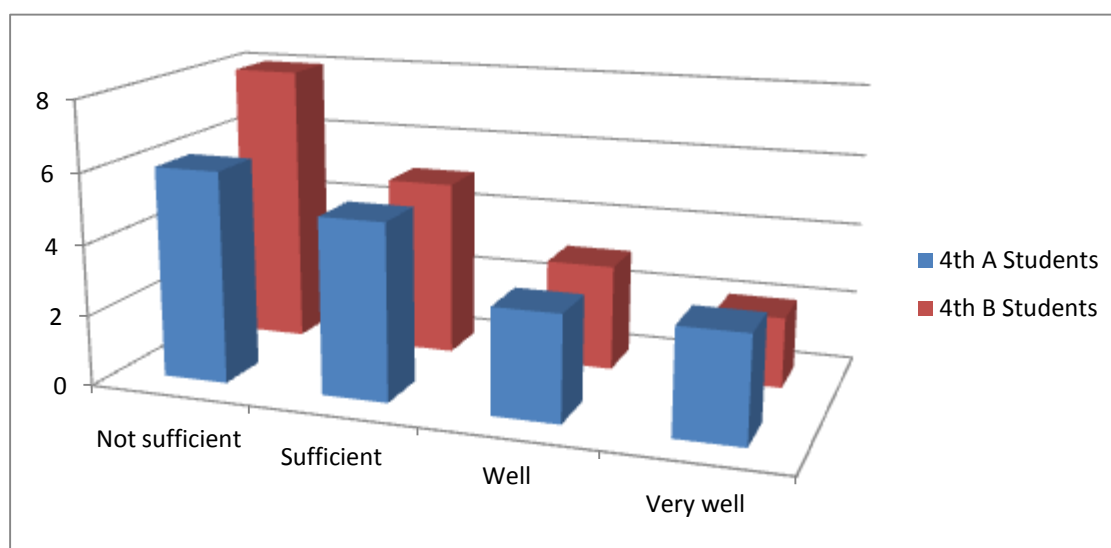


Figure 1. The results of students at the initial evaluation

The results of the initial evaluation highlighted the fact that the 4th-B students needed some real help in acquiring vocabulary, and it was our responsibility to find the best techniques to make them learn words. Hence, we included them as the experimental group in our research. We had to do something that would challenge students, stimulate their curiosity and increase their attention; we anticipated that games would be the perfect way to provide language practice, a good strategy that would encourage them to interact and communicate.

During the experimental phase, games were implemented at the 4th-B class students. They were exposed to language games while the control group (4th A) was taught traditionally, with no special treatment. Vocabulary games were used in five sessions, which were introduced as a practice stage of the lesson. Each activity was based on the following steps: greeting the class, warming-up, presentation strategy, assessment. The word games selected for this study were based on the following three features: proficiency level, teaching topics, practicability. The final step included the conduction of a final test and the assessment of the results. After the activities set for this research were performed, the students got the final test. This test was meant to highlight the real progress of the students.

After the experimental phase, the last two meetings were allocated for the administration of the post-test and the final analysis of the results. Before applying the tests, we took fifteen minutes to revise the five topics covered during the research. Then, the post-test was administered. The students were given forty-five minutes to solve the test. The items included in the test were not similar to those in the pre-test. They concerned only the vocabulary part studied during the four weeks of the experiment. The same test was administered to the Control Group students. If we compare the results after the post-test with the ones obtained before the experiment started, there can be noticed a small progress even if the students were taught traditionally, without the use of games. Their progress can be seen in the Figure 2.

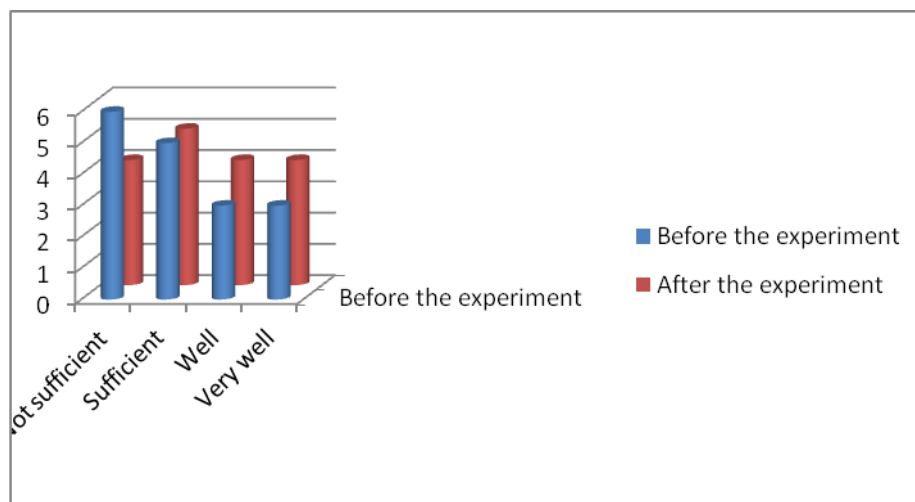


Figure 2. The results of students at the final evaluation

Working with the Control Group during the experiment was difficult enough because there were no materials to use except for the course book, the blackboard and some handouts used for assessment. During the lessons, many translations were done, the exercises in the textbook were solved orally or at the blackboard, the new vocabulary was written in the notebooks, the vocabulary was achieved through memorization based on repetition. The main skills involved in the lessons were reading and writing. Comparing the final results of the Experimental Group with those obtained before the experiment revealed remarkable progress in language achievement for each student. The results obtained by students from the experimental group are presented in the Figure 3.

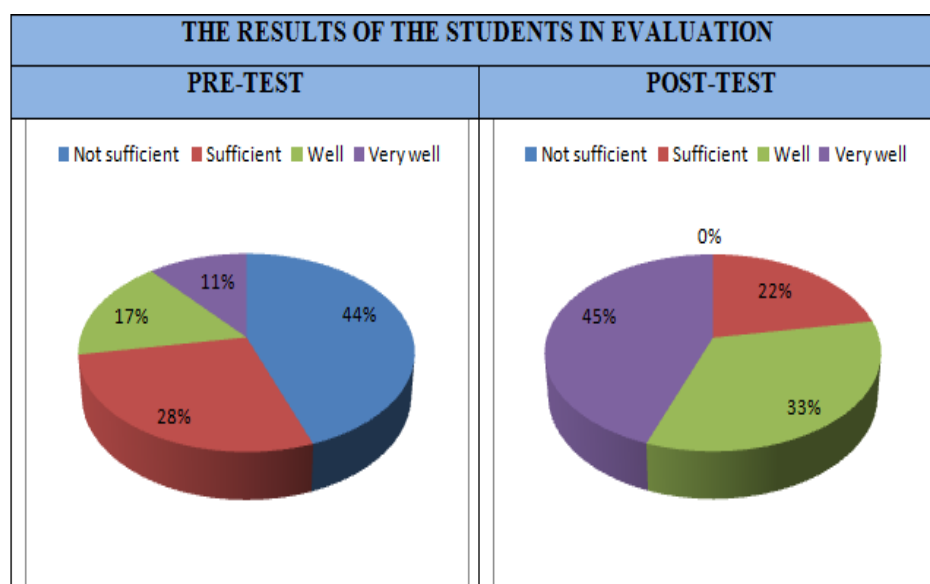


Figure 3. The results of students from the experimental group

Before introducing games in the process of learning, the results of the pre-test showed a low level of knowledge; 44% of students got “Not sufficient” to the test, 28% got “Sufficient”, 17% got “Well” and only 11% got “Very well”. Just after the initial evaluation, applied at the beginning of the school year, the results led us to conclude that students in this class needed help: they had communication problems, the good ones tended to isolate the poor ones, there was no interest in active participation from the part of poor students, they were just sitting on their seats and listening to me. They could not even understand what I was saying, so I was forced to use the mother tongue in order to get some feedback from them. The good students did not offer help to the others, I could not see a class as a “whole”. After having a discussion with their schoolmaster,

I understood their attitudes, reactions and behaviour. More than half of the students in the class come from poor families (having no income) their only earnings being the children's allowance (40 lei per month), some of the students had divorced parents or parents working abroad. Family problems may have disastrous effects on the students' learning motivation. Their social conditions make them less confident, self-isolated and often frustrated; they seem to be caught in this world of poverty and lack of affection.

Working in groups was a good alternative. Students got to know each other better, a productive environment was created; the games which were implemented made each student feel important, they increased their responsibility and involvement. All these things led to the good results which were obtained at the end of the experiment. After the final evaluation, no student received "Not sufficient", 22% obtained "Sufficient", 33% obtained "Well" and 45% obtained "Very well". The Figure 4 shows the progress of students in vocabulary acquisition.

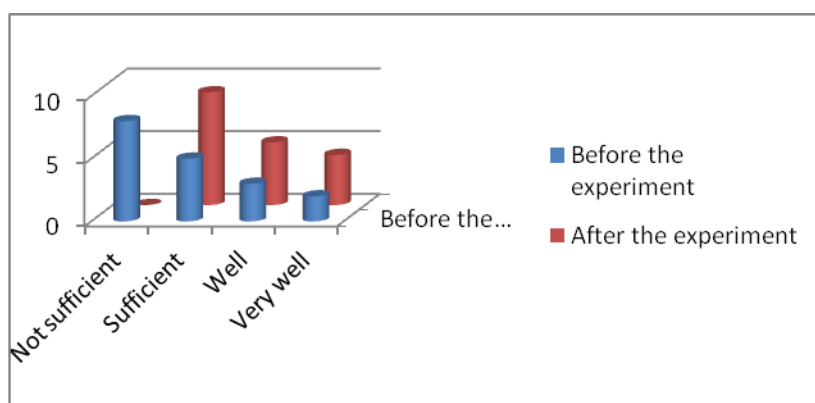


Figure 4. Comparative analysis of the results obtained by students in the pre-experimental and post-experimental stage

Comparing the score data, it can be stated that using games in the classroom seems to be successful. After the final results had been presented to the Experimental Group, the students were offered the possibility to express their feelings about the experience of learning English through games. The discussion with them brought me a feeling of contentment because they showed a high preference on learning using games in the classroom, their attitudes being positive towards using them during the English lessons.

Conclusions

Based on the final results of the research, some conclusions can be drawn. The students master very well the vocabulary regarding the five topics of the study (family members, jobs & occupations, animals, weather, sports & activities); this fact is highlighted by the difference in the scores from the pre and post-test results. According to the students' opinions, games are considered to be a real help in mastering vocabulary; the study revealed that games enhance the students' capacity of learning vocabulary; they encourage students to interact and increase their motivation to learning. Based on the students' attitudes towards games and the results of the study, it may be expected that using games would be a regular and continuous activity.

The implementation of games did not bring benefits only to the learning and acquisition section; the students got closer to the teacher; games helped them build a relationship of trust between teacher and students; they became more confident in their own forces; games also helped them to see that English language learning can be easy and fun. Therefore, it was demonstrated that there are plenty of advantages when using games in teaching vocabulary to primary students. Besides, games introduce students into a pleasant and fun environment, make them retain more words in a short time. Games usually involve competition in a friendly manner, and they keep learners' interest activated. This means that their motivation is also activated, and the class becomes lively during the learning activities. Vocabulary games create a real context into the classroom and enrich students' use of language in a flexible, expansive way. That is why the effectiveness of games in achieving vocabulary cannot be contested. It is important for the teacher to know how to choose the right games for the students so that they could learn as much language as possible. When a game is chosen to serve as a teaching purpose, the teacher should take into account some factors: the number of students, the time allocated for games, their level of knowledge, the topic to be learned, and the classroom surroundings. It means that learning new language through games should be carefully introduced and applied in the classroom. The results of my research show that games are used not only for fun, but also for practice and acquisition of a new language, leading towards the development of students' communicative competence.

All teachers should use games in vocabulary lessons and not only (games can be also applied when teaching grammar structures), especially with primary students in order to increase their interest in learning English. Other techniques that create a relaxed atmosphere and make the class come alive should also be applied. As a final conclusion, our research on using games in teaching vocabulary, as well as the process of reading and getting information about the different ways of teaching vocabulary, contributed to our professional development. It provided a context for using games as a technique in teaching vocabulary; it enriched our theoretical knowledge

about teaching and boosted our confidence in our abilities to teach vocabulary in an effective way.

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