The Effect of Games on Improvement of Iranian EFL Vocabulary Knowledge in Kindergartens

Hossein Aslanabadi

(Corresponding Author)

English Language Department

Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad University

13 New Pastor St., Azadi Bld, Postal Code - 5163984737

Tabriz, Iran

E-mail: Aihon52@yahoo.com

Giti Rasouli

University of Tabriz

Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages

Department of English Language and Literature

Tabriz, Iran

E-mail: gityrassoli@yahoo.com

Abstract

ICC Vocabulary, especially at the beginning stage of language learning process, is easily forgotten. This study aimed to find a way to help young EFL learners fix the novel vocabulary in their minds. The researchers divided the learners into the experimental group (giving an online language teaching game taken from: http//anglomaniacy.pl) and the control group (giving regular teaching). The result with the experimental group was superior to those of the control group. Games not only bring fun to the class, but they also motivate students and build their confidence. The study was conducted at two kindergartens, Golriz (N=30, 15 boys and 15 girls; age 6-7) as an experimental group and Golhayeh Zendeghi (N=30, 15 boys and 15 girls; age 6-7) as a control group. Language games seem to be a good strategy for learning a foreign language. The results of the study were analyzed, using (T test). The study indicated that there are statistically significant differences in mean scores of vocabulary test in favor of the experimental group in the post application. It is hoped that due to the findings of this study teachers will reconsider the role of games and appreciate its value and that learners can fix the novel vocabulary in their minds because of the cheerful environment.

Keywords: Games, EFL teaching methods, vocabulary learning strategies.

1. Introduction

"If language structure makes up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and flesh," (Hammer, 1991, p. 153). Language ability of learners will be improved overall by vocabulary improvement (Linse, 2006). So it is strongly supported that learning the exact vocabulary can be considered more important than learning part of grammar as the basic need for learning a language.

Vocabulary games bring real world context into the classroom, and enhance students' use of English in a flexible, communicative way (Huyen and Nga, 2003).

Vocabulary learning language games help and encourage EFL learners to sustain their interest and work. Games have always brought in relaxation and fun for students, and they learn and retain new items easily. Some games can be quite instructive and enlightening.

Advocates of applying language games for teaching vocabulary offer that introducing new vocabularies through games needs to be practiced within a determined period of time with appropriate technology and facilities. By embedding new vocabulary in a presumptive game, words are more likely to be practiced, more likely to be related to their interests and needs and are more easily accessed in memory.

Vocabulary learning Games have many advantages for language teachers and learners at the same time. For example they help learners to learn the language when they are engaged in the game and enjoy it without noticing that they are learning the language, and the teacher is pleased because he enjoys presenting the language in a playful atmosphere which makes the job interesting.

McCallum (1980, p. ix) emphasizes this point by saying that "games automatically stimulate student interest, a properly introduced game can be one of the highest motivating techniques." Another advantage of using games in language learning setting is clearing stressful moments. Language learning takes place in a stress-free environment and vocabulary learning games reduce the children negative stress. Games are advantageous at this point because they reduce anxiety, increase positive feelings and improve self-confidence because learners are not afraid of punishment or criticism while practicing the target language freely (Crookal, 1990, p.112).

1.1 Characteristics of Language Games

According to Bradley (2010, p. 3), games have some characteristics that are advantageous to language learners as follows:

"First, games engage all students in the learning process. When students play games in pairs or groups, they have the opportunity to recognize and appreciate the contributions of others and use team-building skills. Some classroom games focus on individuals working to win against all other peers in the class. This type of game works well with students who are highly motivated and competitive.

Second, games provide an opportunity for collaboration and/or cooperation. Classroom games provide an opportunity for students to collaborate and cooperate with each other, while working towards a common goal - winning. In some games, students are paired or grouped, which may lead to peer tutoring and the use of cooperative skills in order to win. They may not realize that they are actually learning, but they are working together towards a common goal.

Third, games provide an enjoyable learning experience. Creating a fun and enjoyable learning environment is a large first step toward motivating students. Research indicates that classroom games are effective strategies that facilitate learning.
Finally, games help engage all students, provide an opportunity for collaboration and/or cooperation, and provide an enjoyable learning experience."

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Vocabulary and Language Teaching Games

So far there has been quite good number of researches on vocabulary learning in a foreign language. Since vocabulary plays an important role in understanding any concept in the process of learning a foreign language, it is considered as one important element that links the four language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing altogether.

With the growing popularity of pedagogy and focus on games, it is important "to become involved in the design and implementation of new media systems before they are institutionalized". (Steuer, 1993, p. 21). It is generally agreed that nowadays we are living in a digital world dominated by computers and internet and nearly all children in major cities are familiar with this modern technology. Using computer at the first stage for children is fun, especially when they use games on it. Learning takes place unconsciously, as Freeman (2000, p78) suggests learning is facilitated in a cheerful environment. And games create such an environment in which children are engaged in a playful activity that makes language learning a fun. Freeman adds;

Communication takes place on 'two planes': on one the linguistic message is encoded; and on the other are factors which influence the linguistic message. On the conscious plane, the learner attends to the language; on the subconscious plane, the music suggests that learning is easy and pleasant. When there is a unity between conscious and subconscious, learning is enhanced. (Ibid)

So to increase the amount of vocabulary learning through computers, games are considered as an effective and entertaining tool which can be applied in any foreign language classrooms. Games can lower anxiety, thus making the acquisition of input more likely (Richard-Amato, 1988). Hornby (1995) believes that game is an activity that you do to have some fun. Games can make students focus on the game and learn the language unconsciously. They are highly motivating and entertaining, and they can give shy students more opportunity to express their opinion and feelings (Hansen, 1994).

2.2 Types of Vocabulary

Nation (1990:29) has divided vocabulary in the specific reference, such as word. "Receptive Vocabulary: Knowing a word involves being able to recognize it when it is heard (What is the sound like?) or when it seen (What does it look like?) and having an expectation of what grammatical pattern the word will occurrence. This includes being able to distinguish it from word with a similar form and being able to judge if the word form sounds right or look right. Productive Vocabulary: Knowing a word involves being able to pronounce the word, how to write and to spell it, how to use it in grammatical pattern along with the word in usually collocates with it, it also involves not using the word too often if it is typically a low frequency word and using it in a suitable situation using the word to stand for the meaning it represents and being able to think of suitable substitutes for the word if there any." And Aeborsold J. A. and Lee Field, M (1977:139) Classified Vocabulary into two terms of active and passive vocabulary as the following:

"Active Vocabulary refers to items the learner can use appropriately in speaking or writing and it is also called as productive vocabulary, although, in fact, it is more difficult to put into practice. It means that to use the productive vocabulary, the students are supposed to know how to pronounce it well, they must know and be able to use grammar of the language target, they are also hoped to familiar with collocation and understand the connotation meaning of the words. This type is often used in speaking and writing skill.'

'Passive Vocabulary refers to a language items that can be recognizes and understood in the context of reading or listening and also called as receptive Vocabulary. Passive Vocabulary or

comprehension consists of the words comprehended by the people, when they read and listen."

2.3 Advantages of Games Played in Foreign Language Teaching Classes

Games can encourage more interaction, thinking, and learning. Games have long been advocated for assisting language learning. Here are some of the reasons:

- Games add interest to what students might not find very interesting. Sustaining interest can mean sustaining effort (Thiagarajan, 1999; Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 2005).
- The emotions aroused when playing games add variety to the sometimes dry, serious process of language instruction ((Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).
- The variety and intensity that games offer may lower anxiety (Richard-Amato, 1988).
- Games can involve all the basic language skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and a number of skills are often involved in the same game (Lee, 1995).
- Many games can be played in small groups, thereby providing a venue for students to develop their skills in working with others, such as the skill of disagreeing politely and the skill of asking for help (Jacobs & Kline Liu, 1996).
- The team aspect of many games can encourage cooperation and build team spirit (Ersoz, 2000).
- Although many games involve competition, this is not necessarily the case (Orlick, 2006).
- As many games can be played outside of class, they provide a means for students to use the language outside of class time (Ellis, 2005).

To achieve the above-mentioned benefits some thought needs to be given to when and how to use games. This is the focus of this paper.1.2.4 Sociolinguistic competence

Sociolinguistic competence is made up of two different sets of rules-that is-Sociocultural competence and discourse. The former focuses on the extent to which certain propositions and communicative functions are appropriate within a given sociocultural context, and the extent to which appropriate attitude and register or style are conveyed by a particular grammatical form within a given sociocultural context. Rules of discourse are concerned with cohesion and coherence of groups of utterances.

3. Statement of the Problem

Rich vocabulary is a cornerstone skill of a proficient learner. Children can acquire and increase their vocabulary count more rapidly than do adults. But perfect knowledge of vocabulary seems to be almost impossible for many adults let alone for inexperienced children. There are more words than can ever be learnt, therefore, children must also be taught strategies to use the vocabulary they are expected to acquire in order to fix the meaning of new and unfamiliar words in their minds.

In spite of all the reasons given for the use of games and online language games for teaching vocabulary to young children, there are some assumptions about whether to use them as an effective tool for instruction or not. This problem was stated by a senior naval officer as follows. "Lack of quantifiable metrics or data to validate use of gaming technology as an effective delivery media *[sic]* for various training solutions… "(M. K. Gritton, personal communication, September 26, 2005).

4. Significance of the Study

Teaching through technology makes the teaching learning process enjoyable, alive, visible, attractive, and motivating **Safdar Rehman Ghazi (2013).**

The purpose of this research is to improve the performance of foreign language vocabulary learning at kindergarten levels. Learning vocabulary and the process of vocabulary retention have an important role in foreign language learning. Vocabulary plays an important role and it is an element that links the four skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing altogether in order to help language users communicate well in the new language. Children acquire a limited number of vocabularies between the ages of five and six which is considered the critical period.

To increase the vocabulary count, there has always been crucial need for novel method. Using games in learning process facilitates the learning and it can help children to focus more on learning because they do not feel that they are forced to learn "Games can lower anxiety, thus making the acquisition of input more likely"(Richard-Amato 1988:147).).

Games are highly motivating and entertaining, and they can give shy students more opportunity to express their opinions and feelings (Hansen 1994:118).). In the easy, relaxed atmosphere which is created by using games, students remember things faster and better (Wierus and Wierus 1994:218). Many teachers are enthusiastic about using games as "a teaching device," yet they often perceive games as mere time-fillers, "a break from the monotony of drilling" or frivolous activities. (Silvers, S. M. 1982:29). He also claims that many teachers often overlook the fact that in a relaxed atmosphere, real learning takes place, and students use the language they have been exposed to and have practiced earlier (Silvers, S. M. Ibid).

Zdybiewska (1994:6) supports the idea of using games for teaching languages and says that they are a good way of practicing language, for they provide a model of what learners will use the language for in real life in the future (1994:6).' Therefore the purpose of this study was to determine the effect of using an online language teaching computer game called Anglomaniacy, in learning and improving predetermined vocabulary at kindergarten levels.

4. Research Question and Hypotheses

In order to achieve the purpose of the study, the following research question and hypotheses were formulated:

Research Question (RQ): How does the use of language games affect the vocabulary learning of Iranian kindergarten EFL learners?

Null Hypothesis (H$_0$): There is no significant difference between using games at Iranian kindergartens for teaching young children learning English vocabulary and not using any games for this purpose.

Alternative Hypothesis (H): There is significant difference between using games at Iranian kindergartens for teaching young children learning English vocabulary and not using any games for this purpose.

5. Participants

The participants of this study are all bilingual (Azeri and Farsi speaking) children in 2013 in Tabriz who are 5-6 years old and are all at their beginning level of EFL learning. Using Power and Sample size (PS) software and considering $\alpha < .05$ and Power=.80, D=2 and SD=2.5, we found that the minimum number of the subjects would be estimated at least 26 learners at each group (control and experimental). But for the sake of improving the validity of the research, we increased the number of participants to 30 in each group, who were randomly selected from Golriz kindergarten (15 boys and 15 girls), as our experimental group, and Golhayeh Zendeghi kindergarten (15boys and 15 girls), as the control group. The kindergartens were also randomly selected. The learners were exposed to identical vocabulary learning items taught through two different techniques in the selected kindergartens in Tabriz.

6. Context of the Study

Activities such as phonological awareness (e.g., rhyming games or segmenting words into syllables), letter discrimination, or letter copying are part of the repertoire of many kindergarteners (Shatil et al., 2001).

7. Design of the Study

The present research is a Quasi-experimental type of study in which the researchers used pretests and post-tests in both control group and experimental group. The independent variable of the study is teaching English language vocabulary through language games which is given to the experimental group, but this variable is not used with the control group which is taught the same area of the language through a traditional method. . In the control group teaching vocabulary is performed through a traditional approach using a book (New Parade Starter by Mario Herrera and Theresa. Then the researchers compared the results obtained from teaching the two different methods for presenting the equal amount of vocabulary during a 21- session of teaching period in both groups.

8. Materials

To carry out this study, first a validated pretest, extracted by the researchers out of quite a good number of online tests of vocabulary presented at http//anglomaniacy.pl (2013), was used to determine that all participants lacked no previous knowledge of the English language vocabulary.

The next instrument used in this study was a form filled by the researchers based on interviews with the parents of the learners and the information gained from the files of the learners in the kindergartens in order to elicit the required information about the participants for the pretest and posttest.

Other materials used in this study included; a textbook (New Parade Starter, by Mario Herrera and Theresa; Longman.UK 2009) (only for control group), and data projectors, computers equipped with the appropriate online games (only for experimental group), and whiteboards, markers, flash cards and posters/charts (for testing the vocabulary in both groups).

9. Procedures

The researchers selected two kindergartens (Golriz and Golhayeh Zendeghi) randomly in Tabriz, Iran. After receiving the authorities' cooperation at the kindergartens, the researchers started their research which lasted about three months to accomplish.

The children at Golriz kindergarten were considered as the experimental group who received online language games as a treatment, while the children at Golhayeh Zendeghi kindergarten were considered as the control group who did not receive any treatment and were instructed through a traditional method. In the experimental group all the teaching was through online language games which were teacher based.

In order to examine the effectiveness of teaching vocabulary through games, for experimental group at first we introduced vocabulary through using games to amuse the learners in such a way that we could make them learn vocabulary peripherally via interesting online games. The plan included conducting different kinds of games in their lessons so that we could see how the students reacted to this method of teaching vocabulary. Within the 21 sessions of training these students, the researchers tried to apply the online language games to observe the children's reaction and to see whether they increased their vocabulary count during the 7-week instruction or not.

During a 7-week teaching period, which consisted of three 45-minute sessions a week, the children in the experimental group were taught English vocabulary consisting the names of

different animals, parts of human body, fruits, colors, numbers and other familiar objects. While with the children in the control group, online games were not presented and they were taught lessons using only textbook. The online games used in this research were taken from: http//anglomaniacy.pl site 2013.

For treatment, at Golriz kindergarten, as our experimental group, online language games were presented as a treatment, while at Golhayeh Zendeghi kindergarten, as the control group, no treatment was presented and they were instructed through an ordinary method using only books.

In this study, for statistical analysis, SPSS 20 software was used, which is now officially named," IBM SPSS Statistics". This software was used to calculate the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient, check for linearity by drawing a scatter plot and generate a regression equation as a means of predicting the dependent variable based on the independent variable. Of course, it should be mentioned that the researchers used the T test for specifying the differences between the two selected groups' post-test results.

9.1 Descriptive Statistics of Pre-Test

The results obtained in the two groups, the control group which was taught through ordinary/traditional method of language teaching and the experimental group which was instructed using an online language teaching game.
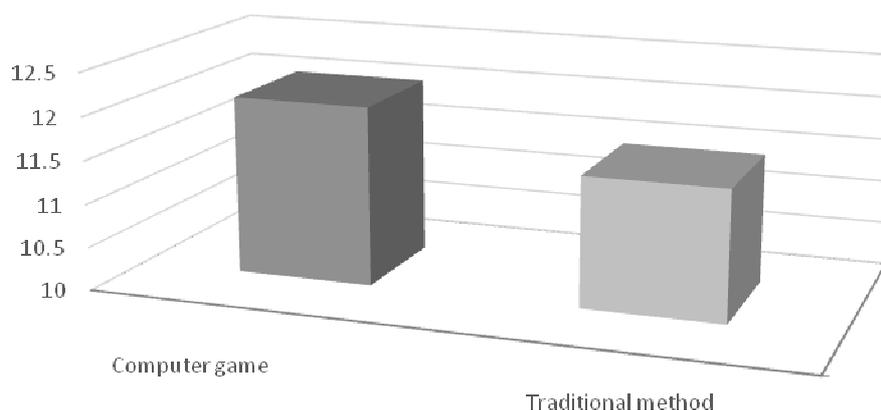

Figure 1: Descriptive statistics of pre-test

According to figure 4.1 there is only a little bit difference between the mean scores obtained in the two groups at the beginning of the study.

The results obtained in the two groups, the control group which was taught through ordinary/traditional method of language teaching and the experimental group which was instructed using an online language teaching game. Table 1: Clarifies the results:

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of post-test

Vocabulary				
Group	**N**	**Mean**	**St. Deviation**	**St. Error Mean**
Online game	30	15.21 67	3.74956	0.68457
Ordinary method	30	13.48 33	2.83294	0.51722

As can be seen through table 1 there are some differences between the two groups in vocabulary learning feature; that is, the mean for the experimental group is 15.53 which is significantly higher than that of the control group which is 13.47. The difference in the mean

scores of the two groups is 2.06. So, it is obvious that the learners in the experimental group got rather higher scores than the learners in the control group. This means that online language teaching games affected learners' vocabulary learning at kindergarten level more than ordinary method of teaching foreign languages in Iranian kindergartens.

9.2 Results

By attending to the table and the figure, it can be concluded that there is significance difference between the amounts of vocabulary learned which is instructed through online vocabulary teaching games and traditional method.

9.3 Analyzing Tasks for Pedagogical Purpose

Learners are asked to utilize the lifetime vocabularies that are relevant for their assigned tasks and the result of this study can help teachers and trainers in teaching and fixing vocabulary in children's mind. According to Rico, Agudo & Curado (2007) providing language learners with different quantity of vocabulary and word effects can be seen in the performance of language learners. So, according to other findings and investigations, the findings may also add to the present literature in foreign language learning theories, language testing, syllabus design, vocabulary learning, teaching and material development.

10. Findings

The findings of this study pointed out that online language teaching game affected the kindergarten children's vocabulary learning and memorizing of the second language vocabularies. In the case of fixing good number of vocabulary items in mind online language teaching game group, that is, our experimental group, outperformed the traditional method teaching group.

The researchers mentioned a research question and asked how the use of language games affects the vocabulary learning of Iranian kindergarten EFL learners. The researchers tried to find a reasonable answer for that; that is, they found that since kindergarten students like playing and they enjoy working with computers and using new technological device; so they eagerly use new technology like computer with playing to learn the foreign language vocabularies subconsciously.

They found that null hypotheses is rejected and the alternative hypotheses is accepted since they found that there is significant difference between using online language teaching games at Iranian kindergartens for teaching young children learning English vocabulary and not using any games for this purpose.

11. Suggestions for Further Research

Despite of the abovementioned limitations, the results of this study indicated directions for further studies. First, future research should be in such a way that it may appeal to the new generation and speed up the foreign language teaching process, using a teaching method which covers all needs and interests of learners bearing in mind the fast development of technology and science, which also covers aspects of vocabulary learning process starting from the planning stage to the end of the process. Second, this study investigated the effectiveness of online language teaching games in improving the vocabulary learning at kindergarten level in Iran. Future research should attempt to study the effects of this method with students in various levels of education and with different levels of English proficiency to determine the most appropriate levels of the students for the implementation of online language teaching games. Third, this study revealed the proportions of vocabulary learning only in oral form at kindergarten level with bilingual learners.

Other research on the effect of online language teaching games in teaching other skills and fields of study should be investigated. The results may reveal the effectiveness of

implementing online language teaching game into EFL classes in various fields of study. Finally, in future research, there should be a larger number of participants with various levels of language proficiency in order to gain more samples so that the effectiveness of online language teaching games can be generalized   by more relevant and statistically valid information

References

[1]   J.A. Aebersold, *From Reader to Reading Teacher: Issues and Strategies for Second Language Classrooms*, (1997), Cambridge University Press.

[2]   J.E. Agudo et al., Adaptive computer games for second language learning in early childhood, *Proceedings of the 3rd International Online Conference on Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, The Reading Matrix Inc., United States, (2007), 167-180.

[3]   L. Bradley, B. Lindstrm and H. Rystedt, Rationalities of collaboration for language learning in a wiki, *ReCALL*, 22(2) (2010), 247-265.

[4]   J.D. Bransford and A.L. Brown, In: R.R. Cocking (Eds.), How people learn: Brain, mind, experience and school (expanded edition), *Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education*, 86(2000), 32-109.

[5]   D. Crookal (Ed.), *Simulation, Gaming and Language Learning*, (1990), New York: Newbury House.

[6]   R. Ellis, Principles of instructed language learning, *Asian EFL Journal*, 7(3) (2005), 9-24.

[7]   A. Ersoz, Six games for EFL/ESL classroom, *The Internet TESL Journal*, 6(6) (June) (2000), 22-30, Retrieved from http://iteslj.org/Lessons/Ersoz-Games.html, February 11 (2005).

[8]   D.L. Freeman, *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching (2nd Ed.)*, (2000), London: Oxford University Press.

[9]   J. Harmer, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, (1991), London: Longman.

[10]   M. Hansen, Grajmy w jezyku francuskim, *Jezyki Obce w Szkole*, March-April (1994), 118-121.

[11]   M.S. Hornby, *The Turns of Translation Studies: New Paradigms or Shifting Viewpoints*, (1995), John Benjamins Pub Co.

[12]   N.T.T. Huyen and K.T.T. Nga, Learning vocabulary through games, *Asian EFL Journal*, 5(4) (2003), 90-105.

[13]   G.M. Jacobs and K.K. Liu, Integrating language functions and collaborative skills in the second language classroom, *TESL Reporter*, 29(1996), 21-33.

[14]   S.K. Lee, Creative games for the language class, *Forum*, 33(1) (January-March) (1995), 35, Retrieved from: http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/vols/vol33 /no1/P35.htm, February 11 (2006).

[15]   C.T. Linse, *Practical English Language Teaching: Young Learners*, (2006), New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

[16]   G.P. McCallum, *101 Word Games: For Students of English as a Second or Foreign Language*, (1980), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[17]   I.S.P. Nation, *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*, (1990), New York: Newbury House.

[18]   T. Orlick, *Cooperative Games and Sports: Joyful Activities for Everyone*, (2006), Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

[19]   P.A. Richard-Amato, *Making it Happen: Interaction in the Second Language Classroom from Theory to Practice*, (1988), New York: Longman.

[20]   E. Shatil, D.L. Share and I. Levin, On the contribution of kindergarten writing to grade 1 literacy: A longitudinal study in Hebrew, *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 21(1) (2000), 1-21.

[21]   S.M. Silvers, Games for the classroom and the English-speaking club, *English Teaching Forum*, 20(2) (1982), 29-33.

[22]   J. Steuer, Defining virtual reality: Dimensions determining telepresence, *Social Responses to Communication Technologies Paper*, #104(1993).

[23]   S. Thiagarajan, *Teamwork and Team Play: Games and Activities for Building and Training Teams*, (1999), San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
[24]   B. Wierus and A. Wierus, Zagraj razem a name, *Czesc I. Jezyki Obce w Szkole*, May-June (1994), 218-222.
[25]   A. Wright, D. Betteridge and M. Buckby, *Games for Language Learning (3rd Ed.)*, (2005), New York: Cambridge University Press.
[26]   M. Zdybiewska, *One-Hundred Language Games*, (1994), Warszawa: WSiP.
[27]   C. Zimmerman, Do reading and interactive vocabulary instruction make a difference? An empirical study, *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(1) (1997), 121-140.