Games in Language Teaching—Do they always work?

Elme Makuwing¹, Assoc. Prof. Thanyapa Chiramanee, Ph. D.²

¹ M.A. in Teaching English as an International Language Program, Department of Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Prince of Songkla University
² Department of Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Prince of Songkla University

Abstract

The purposes of this study were to investigate learners’ vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary retention. There were two subject groups: an experimental group and a control group, each with 30 mixed ability students, selected using a purposive sampling method. The data were collected in the first semester of the academic year 2009 at Bannibongpattana School, Province Office of Yala Education Zone 1, Amphoe Muang, Yala. The instruments used in this study were: 1) 13 one-hour lesson plans for teaching English vocabulary through games to the experimental group, and 13 one-hour lesson plans for teaching English vocabulary through a conventional method to the control group, and 2) a 60-item vocabulary test used to assess the subjects’ vocabulary knowledge after the use of the two different methods, and to assess their vocabulary retention 3 weeks after the experiment.

The findings of the study were:

1. The score for vocabulary knowledge of the experimental group was higher than that of the control group but the difference was not statistically significant at 0.5.
2. The score for vocabulary retention of the experimental group was higher than that of the control group but the difference was not statistically significant at 0.5.

Keywords: memorizing English vocabulary, English vocabulary retention, lesson plans for teaching through games, lesson plans for teaching through a conventional method
1. Rationale

The communicative approach has been widely used for English teaching, and it is an approach that focuses on learners to integratily learn all the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing correctly according to linguistic and grammatical principles (Aksaranukhro, 1989). Because language is communication, learners have to use language to communicate with people around them (Richards and Rodgers, 1991).

Language is a tool that human beings use to communicate with each other (Harmer, 1983), and Lee (2000) also states that learning a language is to use that language for communication in different situations. However, communicating using a language is not only using it verbally for conversations but also communicating through letters or reading and writing. In a conversation, the listener understands the sentence that the speaker says which is the same as when the reader understands the sentence written by the writer. Therefore, the learner needs to have good knowledge of grammar and skills of the language in order to use the language to communicate correctly and suitably for the situation and circumstance.

Learners who learn language through the communicative approach need to use the language with fluency in order to communicate effectively as intended with other people. Harmer (1991) states that to communicate successfully, it is most important that the learner has a purpose to communicate. This is in accordance with Edge (1993) who maintains that the purpose of communication is to receive, give, and exchange information. Thus, the learner who has knowledge and ability in communicating will be able to communicate effectively.

To communicate effectively and successfully as intended, learners must have knowledge and understanding as well as language skills so that they can use vocabulary in the target language well. This is because the ability to communicate requires knowledge and understanding in vocabulary. McCarthy (1990) claims that the largest language unit of all languages is vocabulary. No matter how well grammar is learned, without knowledge in vocabulary, communication in a second language cannot take place for vocabulary is the key in developing language skills. For a person to communicate as he or she wishes he or she needs to have adequate vocabulary; if he or she has no vocabulary for the context he or she wishes to communicate, he or she will not be able to communicate at all. Thus, the key in learning a foreign language is to increase one’s vocabulary.

Therefore, how to teach vocabulary in class is important for the teacher to realize. Teaching vocabulary requires a teaching process that can attract the learner’s attention and make it fun for the learner. The teacher should also create a good learning atmosphere with activities that the learner enjoys for they can make the learner happy and learn the content without stress. As a result, the learner will have good attitudes towards the subject they learn and have motivation to learn the subject at a more advanced level.

One of the teaching methods that can be used effectively and many teachers of English are interested in is teaching through games. Games are activities with rules; they have a clear starting and ending points; and they are fun. Richard et al (1999) in Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics defines the word "game" as "an organized activity that usually has the following properties: a) a particular task or objective; b) a set of rules, c) a competition between players; and d) communication between players by spoken or written language. In this study, the researcher used games as part of the study with an objective of enhancing the fun of
learning English vocabulary in class using various types of games that were suitable for the learners’ level and age.

There are many advantages in using games in the classroom. Wright et al (1998) say that classrooms with games as alternative activities can interest learners and attract them to pay attention to the content, and games help learners to understand the lesson more effectively. Dobson (1970) states that playing games is a good language exercise because playing makes learning fun and relaxing even though learners are actually learning a language. Lee (2000) claims that most language games decrease the learner’s interest in language form and stop thinking about the language system but focus on using the language to communicate instead. Using games in a process of language learning enables learners to remember the content and retain what they have learned. Chanama (1995) also states that learning that results in knowledge retention is derived from learner participation in thinking and doing it with pleasure and immediately receive reinforcement from the doing.

In terms of disadvantages, games can also affect learners if games are complicated and hard to understand. Some games can be used with only intermediate and advanced learners and cannot be used with low proficiency learners. Hence, the teacher must consider whether that particular game is suitable or not for the learners’ level of language proficiency.

In short, the teacher should select games that are suitable for learners’ language ability because games chosen for teaching vocabulary can attract learners to pay attention to the content of the lesson. The teacher should also choose games that are not too complicated for learners.

2. Research questions

This study tested learners’ vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary retention using two teaching methods. Teaching through games for the experimental group and teaching with a conventional method for the control group. There were two research questions:

1. Which teaching method helps learners to memorize vocabulary better, a conventional teaching method or teaching through games?
2. Which teaching method helps learners to have better vocabulary retention, a conventional teaching method or teaching through games?

3. Scope of the study

1. In this study, there were 72 words to be taught through games, and through a conventional teaching method. The words were in the main curriculum content of the lessons for Prathomsuksa 6 students of Bannibongpattana School in the first semester of the academic year 2009.

2. The learners in both groups: the experimental and the control group did not know the 72 words that were included in the lesson plans. Two tests were employed: a post-test and a vocabulary retention test.

4. Research procedure

This quasi-experimental study aimed to compare the ability of learners who were taught through games against those who were taught through a conventional teaching method in terms of their ability in vocabulary learning, and vocabulary retention. The research procedure was as follows:
4.1 The population for this study were Prathomsuksa 6 students in the first semester of the academic year 2009 of Bannibongpattana School, Office of Yala Education Zone 1, Amphoe Muang, Yala Province.

The subject groups consisted of 60 Prathomsuksa 6 students in Class 6/1 and Class 6/2, each with 30 students, in the first semester of the academic year 2009 of Bannibongpattana School, Office of Yala Education Zone 1, Amphoe Muang, Yala Province. The subjects were selected using a purposive sampling method. Class 6/1 consisting of 30 students was used as an experimental group, and Class 6/2 also consisting of 30 students was used as a control group. The students in both groups were of mixed ability in English since the school arranged classes in such a way that there were students who were very good, moderate, and weak in their language ability. The two subject groups were taught vocabulary using different teaching methods, i.e. the experimental group was taught through games, and the control group was taught with a conventional teaching method. The subjects in both groups had the same ability in vocabulary knowledge, that is to say, they did not know the vocabulary words that were used in the study.

4.2 Variables

Independent variables were the two methods of teaching:
1. teaching vocabulary through games
2. teaching vocabulary through a conventional teaching method

Dependent variables were
1. memorizing English vocabulary
2. English vocabulary retention

4.3 The study length of time

The study was conducted in Semester 1 of the academic year 2009. The two subject groups, the experimental and the control groups were taught by the researcher for 7 weeks, 2 hours a week totaling 13 hours for each group. The subjects were then given a post-test followed by a vocabulary retention test in the third week after the post-test.

4.4 Research instruments

The instruments used in the study were:

4.4.1 Lesson plans

4.4.1.1 Lesson plans for teaching through games

There were 13 lesson plans for the experimental group that was taught through games. Each lesson plan consisted of the method and process for the subjects to use the words or give meanings of the words taught. The lesson began from the presentation stage, then the practice stage, and the production stage, respectively. In the practice stage, the subjects were taught through games. In each 1-hour lesson plan, there were at least 2 games and 5-6 vocabulary words were taught (See Table 1 in the Appendix).

4.4.1.2 The vocabulary

The researcher gathered the vocabulary words from the curriculum designed for Prathomsuksa 6 students comprising 146 words to use in a vocabulary survey. The subjects in both groups were asked to mark each word and state whether or not they knew the word or were not sure of the meaning. The result showed that there were 72 words that all the subjects did not know, and the researcher included these 72 words in the lesson plans for this study.

These 72 words consisted of nouns: parts of the body (10 words), occupations (6 words), learning instruments (6 words), foods and drinks (6 words), weather (3 words), and so on.
words), places (6 words), vegetables and fruits (6 words); adjectives (11 words); adjectives and nouns telling manners (8 words); and verbs (10 words).

4.4.1.3 Games

The games used in the study were included in the 13 lesson plans for the experimental group. Each lesson plan consisted of at least 2 games (games were mixed and repeated).

4.4.1.4 Lesson plans for the conventional teaching method

There were also 13 lesson plans for teaching with a conventional method for the control group. The 13 lesson plans were examined for their quality by experts. The lesson plans had the same teaching steps as those used for the experimental group except that games were not used in teaching vocabulary. Thus, the control group was taught the same number of words with the same teaching procedure but without games (See Table 1 in the Appendix).

4.4.2 The tests

4.4.2.1 The post-test

The post-test consisted of 60 items, 60 marks. There were two separate parts:

Part 1 consisted of 30 multiple-choice test items testing word spellings with 4 choices. 15 items were with pictures and the other 15 items were with meanings of the words. The subjects were to choose the correct choice according to the picture or the meaning of each word.

Part 2 consisted of 30 items testing word meanings. 15 items were in a matching type test in which the subjects matched words with pictures, and the other 15 items were in a 4-choice multiple choice test type.

The post-test was administered to both subject groups after all the teaching according to the 13 lesson plans was completed.

4.4.2.2 The vocabulary retention test

The vocabulary retention test was the same test as the post-test to measure the ability of the two subject groups in retaining the vocabulary they had learned, and to compare which of the teaching methods, teaching through games or teaching through a conventional method, helped the subjects to have better vocabulary retention.

After writing the test for the study, the researcher asked experts to examine the test. To test the reliability of the instrument, a revised version of the test was piloted with 25 students in the population group who were students in Class 6/3 of Bannibongpattana School, Office of Yala Education Zone 1, Amphoe Muang, Yala Province. The pilot was also conducted in the first semester of the academic year 2009. Cronbach’s Alpha was employed to determine the reliability of the test and the result obtained was 0.98.

5. Research instruments

There were three steps in devising the instruments:

5.1 Lesson plans for teaching vocabulary through games and through a conventional method

The researcher taught both of the subject groups using 13 one-hour lesson plans, two hours a week for 7 weeks. In each hour, the experimental group was taught vocabulary through at least 2 games while the control group was also taught vocabulary but through a conventional method without games for 13 hours over 7 weeks.

5.2 Testing the ability in vocabulary after being taught
After the two subject groups were taught vocabulary according to the lesson plans, at the end of Week 7, they were given a post-test in Week 8. There were two sets of test, each consisted of 60 items. The test was administered to measure the ability to memorize vocabulary and to compare the scores of the two subject groups that were taught with different teaching methods to see which of the methods, teaching through games or a conventional method, helped the learners remember the vocabulary better.

5.3 Testing vocabulary retention

Three weeks after the post-test, the two subject groups were given a vocabulary retention test in order to determine whether teaching through games or a conventional method helped the learners to have better vocabulary retention. The vocabulary retention tests were the same set as the post-tests which had 60 items.

6. Data analysis

6.1 The statistics used in data analysis

Mean and standard deviation were used to compare the ability in learning English vocabulary between the experimental and the control groups; t-test was used in the case that the groups were independent from each other.

7. Conclusions and discussions

7.1 The ability in memorizing English vocabulary

The results of the study revealed that in doing the 60-item test for the ability in learning vocabulary with a total score of 60, the average score of the experimental group that was taught through games was 22.97 which was higher than that of the control group taught by a conventional method, which was 19.60. However, the difference was not statistically significant at .05.

The reason for the difference that was not statistically significant could be due to factors arising from teaching through games including the class atmosphere while games were used to teach vocabulary, and the learners had too much fun and aiming to win the game. This could be a factor that made the teaching through games in this study not a success. While teaching vocabulary through games, the researcher found that the class was very noisy because the learners were enjoying the game tremendously and focusing on winning the game so much that they forgot that they were learning vocabulary. As a result, they could not spell and could not remember the vocabulary being taught through the game.

Another factor that could affect the effectiveness of teaching through games in this study was the mixed ability of learners in the class. Learners with good learning ability had advantage over those who were weak learners, and good learners always won the game. Moreover, good learners spent less time in understanding the content, spelling, and understanding the meaning of the vocabulary taught while weak learners who were the majority of the class spent more time in doing the same things. As a result, weak learners were bored with the content taught through such games involving competition. In addition, learners with moderate and little learning ability who were the majority of the class did not pay much attention to the activity and the content that the researcher tried to teach in order that they have remembering skill and know the meaning of the words.

Besides, another problem that could be a weak point of using games in teaching was the time factor. Explaining the game and its rules was rather time-consuming while the class time was limited for one hour, and hence, some of the games were not conducted with a complete procedure and not all students could
participate in the games. Due to the limited time but so many learners in class, the awareness of the vocabulary words taught was not balanced among the learners.

Therefore, teaching through games where there were a clear set of rules, a lot of fun, and a competition among players might give too much fun to students that they could not effectively learn the vocabulary that meant for them to learn.

7.2 The ability to retain English vocabulary

The results of the study revealed that 3 weeks after the experiment, the experimental and the control groups were not statistically different in their ability to retain vocabulary taught to them even though the average score obtained by the experimental group (23.30 out of 60) was higher than that (19.97 out of 60) of the control group. The difference was not statically significant at 0.5.

The difference between the experimental and the control groups in their vocabulary retention was not statically significant. This could be a result of several factors such as the teaching materials (word cards and picture cards) and the time spent for the experimental and the control groups.

Teaching materials such as word cards and picture cards can help learners to understand and memorize words better. In this study, the researcher used picture cards with clear pictures that were easy for learners to understand; therefore the control group could memorize the vocabulary taught approximately as much as the experimental group did even though they were not taught through games. During the teaching of vocabulary words, the researcher used word cards and picture cards in the presentation stage. Using picture cards with clear pictures to teach vocabulary words helped the control subject group to remember the pictures and the meanings of the words well. Using word cards and picture cards to teach vocabulary, the researcher found out that they could communicate the meanings of the words well. Thus, it can be regarded that using word cards and picture cards can be a teaching method that stimulates learners to be interested in the lesson and helps them to understand and memorize the words to some extent even though games were not used.

The time factor could also be a cause of the difference that was not statistically significant. Although the class time for the experimental and the control groups was the same (one hour), the control group spent more of the time in learning and reviewing the vocabulary words because they did not have to learn about the rules for the games. As they could spend the whole time in learning the vocabulary, their vocabulary retention was not statistically different from that of the experimental group that was taught through games.

8. Recommendations

The followings are recommendations for further study on teaching vocabulary through games:

1. In this study, the researcher used only some parts of games to experiment with the population because of the time limit. Games vary in their complication; some games require more time than others for explanation of how to play them as well as for explanation of their rules. For further study, it is suggested that games should be piloted before being used with the subject group to obtain highest efficiency.

2. Using games in teaching vocabulary, the teacher should take into account learners’ differences in their expression and intelligence. The teacher should also take every learner into consideration because each learner participates differently. Learners who are not very expressive and usually are weak learners do not take part in
the game as much as those who are good learners. Therefore, the teacher should use games that every student can take part, not only a particular ability group of subjects.

3. The teacher should let students practice more on word spelling because in some lesson plans, games do not involve word spelling. The teacher should provide more for students to practice word spelling because the test includes word spelling. The time for spelling practice in this study was different for the two subject groups. Thus, the teacher should allot 5-10 minutes at the end of each class for spelling practice.

In conclusion, though the results of this study revealed that there was no statistically difference between the two teaching methods in terms of learners’ ability in memorizing the vocabulary taught, and in their vocabulary retention, the researcher believed that using games in teaching English vocabulary could encourage learners to have good attitudes towards learning English and enabled them to have a better long term vocabulary retention. This was because the class was fun and the class atmosphere was good which could enable the students to love and pay attention to learning English. The teacher should also realize that games have their weak points that should be dealt with before using them in teaching vocabulary so that the teaching is more effective.

References


Appendix

Table 1 Steps in teaching the content, the games and vocabulary words in the lesson plans for the experiment and the control group

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<tr>
<th>Plan (Hour)</th>
<th>Content/Vocabulary</th>
<th>Teaching procedure</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Presentation</td>
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<td>Experimental group</td>
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| 1 (Hours 1-2) | Parts of the body: a cheek, a chin, lips, shoulders, fingers, a wrist, a hip, a stomach, a waist, a toe | -Presenting new words  
-Reviewing words learned in the last class | -Presenting new words  
-Reviewing words learned in the last class | -Matching game  
-Sending word cards game | -Practice reading and spelling words  
-Practice a conversation  
-Word-building game  
-Word psychology game | -Reviewing vocabulary |
| 2 (Hours 3-4) | Occupations: a waiter, a butcher, a veterinary, a photographer, an astronaut, a librarian  
Learning instruments: glue, a picture, a duster, an eraser, scissors, a paintbrush | -Presenting new words  
-Reviewing words learned in the last class | -Presenting new words  
-Reviewing words learned in the last class | -Whispering game  
-Bingo game | Practice reading and spelling words  
-Practice a conversation  
-Word psychology game  
-Pronunciation contest game | -Reviewing vocabulary |
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<th>Plan (Hour)</th>
<th>Content/Vocabulary</th>
<th>Teaching procedure</th>
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<tr>
<td>3 (Hours 5-6)</td>
<td>Food: Ketchup, bread, an omelet, curry, soup, a lobster Places: a factory, a mountain, a theater, a library, a museum, a beach</td>
<td><strong>Presentation</strong>&lt;br&gt;Experimental group: -Reviewing words learned in the last class -Presenting new words Control group: -Reviewing words learned in the last class -Presenting new words&lt;br&gt;<strong>Practice</strong>&lt;br&gt;Experimental group: -Pronunciation contest game -Fast thinking game Control group: -Practice reading and spelling words -Practice a conversation&lt;br&gt;<strong>Production</strong>&lt;br&gt;Experimental group: -Spelling obstacle course game -One word game Control group: -Reviewing vocabulary</td>
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<td>4 (Hour 7)</td>
<td>Vegetables and fruits: beans, a pumpkin, a lettuce, a pineapple, grapes, a potato</td>
<td><strong>Presentation</strong>&lt;br&gt;Experimental group: -Reviewing words learned in the last class -Presenting new words Control group: -Reviewing words learned in the last class&lt;br&gt;<strong>Practice</strong>&lt;br&gt;Experimental group: -whispering game Control group: -Practice reading and spelling words -Practice a conversation&lt;br&gt;<strong>Production</strong>&lt;br&gt;Experimental group: -Balloon-blowing game Control group: -Reviewing vocabulary</td>
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<td>5 (Hours 8-9)</td>
<td>Adjectives: Clever, foolish, poor, rich, pretty, ugly, terrible, nice, cheap, expensive, white</td>
<td><strong>Presentation</strong>&lt;br&gt;Experimental group: -Reviewing words learned in the last class -Presenting new words Control group: -Reviewing words learned in the last class&lt;br&gt;<strong>Practice</strong>&lt;br&gt;Experimental group: -Hanged man game -Vocabulary domino game Control group: -Practice reading and spelling words -Practice a conversation&lt;br&gt;<strong>Production</strong>&lt;br&gt;Experimental group: -Word-building game -Spelling obstacle course game Control group: -Reviewing vocabulary</td>
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<td><strong>6</strong> (Hours 10-11)</td>
<td>Nouns telling feelings: toothache, stomachache, headache, faint, fever. Seasons and adjectives telling conditions: winter, spring, running nose, flu, sick, autumn.</td>
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<td>-Reviewing words learned in the last class. -Presenting new words.</td>
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<td><strong>7</strong> (Hours 12-13)</td>
<td>Verbs: read, draw, sing, think, fight, eat, fly, walk, jump, swim.</td>
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<td>-Reviewing words learned in the last class. -Presenting new words.</td>
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