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Research Article

Enhancing Vocabulary Usage Through Word Games

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The Implementation of the Numbered Head Games Learning Method in Tajweed Lessons to Enhance Students' Understanding at TPQ Roudhotul Jannah, East Lampung

Abstract. This study examines the effect of word games on vocabulary acquisition in the context of Advanced Certificate in English (ACE) learners at the Sri Lanka Youth Vocational Training Centre of the National Youth Services Council. Using a quasi-experimental mixed methods approach, the study included twenty participants engaged in pre- and post-tests, class observations, and feedbacks. The intervention process involved the use of word games for six weeks including activities such as crosswords, scrabble, and vocabulary relays. From the quantitative results point of view, there has been a significant improvement in post-test scores from an average score of 47.5 in the pre-test to 62.8 in the post-test. As for qualitative results, there has been a positive motivation level, cooperation,

and low anxiety levels among the learners. At the same time, there were some issues including limited memory span and resource constraints. Generally, word games were found to be a very effective pedagogical technique in terms of vocabulary acquisition.

Keywords: Vocabulary acquisition, Word games, Second language learners, Action games.

INTRODUCTION

For ESL learners, effective vocabulary acquisition is essential to their success in English proficiency. It affects a great deal on their comprehension, communication and academic performance. Traditional methods of vocabulary teaching have been found to be important but often lack the ability to engage learners and promote long term retention. This challenge is particularly evident in rural educational contexts such as Sri Lanka Youth Vocational Training Centre of the National Youth Services Council in Sri Lanka where the students at Advanced Certificate in English (ACE) are suffering from limited lexical resources and passive learning environment. As Wilkins (1972) rightly points out, "Very little can be conveyed without grammar; nothing can be conveyed without vocabulary" (p. 109). Therefore, the need arises to rethink ways of teaching vocabulary.

The study fills this gap by investigating the effectiveness of word games as a novel learner-centered approach to improve vocabulary acquisition. Games have been recognised as powerful tools for reducing language anxiety and encouraging active participation due to their inherent fun, competition and collaboration (Martinson & Chu, 2008). In Sri Lankan ESL classrooms, English is often perceived by students as a daunting subject and word games provide a dynamic alternative to traditional methods. Previous studies have shown that repeated exposure, contextualized practice, and retrieval reinforcement are cognitive benefits (Nation, 2001; Nguyen & Khuat, 2003). However, empirical studies on their application in rural Sri Lankan Youth Vocational Training Centre of the National Youth Services Council are scarce thus calling for this action research.

The study was conducted at the Sri Lanka Youth Vocational Training Centre of the National Youth Services Council serving a linguistically diverse student population in Ampara district. In this institution, Advanced Certificate in English (ACE) program students face ongoing challenges with vocabulary retention and application, and it highly affects their academic performance and confidence in using English. The research seeks to investigate the employment of interactive approaches like word games within the curriculum; examples of such include crosswords, scrabble, and other vocabulary-related exercises. The results are aimed at helping in providing practical recommendations on how best to embrace these gamified learning methods within the English second language curriculum so as to enhance collaborative and interactive learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of having a good vocabulary in the process of acquiring second language skills cannot be overstated because it enables learners to understand what they see and hear as well as express their thoughts and succeed academically. In his book on linguistics, David Wilkins made an important remark stating that “without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed.” David Wilkins (1972) famously claimed that “without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed” emphasizing that lexical knowledge is more fundamental than grammatical competence for meaningful communication. This is even more important in multilingual environments such as Sri Lanka where learners are exposed to limited English and frequent cross-linguistic interference.

Old-school techniques used in the teaching of vocabulary especially memorization are not as effective in ensuring retention and engagement. According to Paul Nation (2001), there needs to be several repetitions, retrievals and contextualization for the learning process to take place. This is easily facilitated by game-based learning, where repetition and engagement are easily accomplished. Examples of such word-based games include crosswords and scrabble, which help learners acquire spelling proficiency and word associations. Other forms of activities include vocabulary relay.

Numerous empirical studies validate such pedagogical techniques. According to Nguyen Thi Thanh Huyen and Khuat Thi Thu Nga (2003), in a quasi-experimental investigation, learners who participated in vocabulary games scored more highly compared to those instructed traditionally, due to a lack of stress and motivational increase. James Paul Gee (2007) also emphasizes the importance of using technology-based tools like Quizlet for vocabulary acquisition via gamification, adaptive problems, and feedback systems.

In terms of cognitive aspects of vocabulary learning, the concept of “involvement load” may be mentioned. According to Jan Hulstijn and Batia Laufer (2001), engaging in activities that demand greater involvement of the mind – e.g., sentence creation, problem solving, and errors identification – results in better lexical processing. For example, the process of building a sentence requires combining vocabulary and syntactical skills, which improves linguistic competencies of the learner.

Besides providing cognitive benefits, word games help to build affective aspects of learning too. According to research conducted by Taylor (2020) in classrooms in Sri Lanka, competitive and cooperative games such as Word Bingo may help to lower language anxiety and raise learner confidence. This idea is supported by the Social Development Theory of Lev Vygotsky that underscores the significance of peer interaction in the process of acquiring new skills and knowledge. By cooperating with peers, learners work within their Zone of Proximal Development and learn how to speak languages.

At the same time, the use of games to develop vocabulary in an English class raises some issues. First of all, according to Ian Bogost (2011), gamification may lead to shallow outcomes if it is focused on entertainment. Gamified learning apps often provide more attention to competition than accuracy; therefore, it might be difficult to achieve good results while working with them. Second, games need to be culturally

relevant for the learners. Baker and Wright (2020) claim most commercially available games are intended for western audiences, whereas it may not be so in countries like Sri Lanka.

However, limitations on resources make it difficult to implement this pedagogy in practice, especially at a rural educational level. According to Juho Hamari et al. (2014), digital technologies increase engagement; however, such engagement is only possible with adequate access to the technology and knowledge on the part of the educator. In many Sri Lankan classrooms, teachers use less costly approaches, such as flashcards and board games.

Moreover, theoretical concepts justify such an approach as well. As stated by Stephen Krashen (1985), it is important to offer comprehensible input to learners, which should not be significantly beyond the current learners' abilities (+1). Word games offer comprehensible input, especially during collaborative activities that require negotiation. Distinguishing "affect" from "effect," for instance, requires collaboration.

Current literature stresses the role of culturally relevant teaching methods in learning vocabularies. Lee (2020) showed that visual games were more used for novices than cognitive games like crosswords, which could be helpful for intermediate students. Fernando and Perera (2020) reported that introducing local contexts into word games improved students' participation levels in Sri Lanka. Games like "Paddy Field Scrabble" are helpful because they use agricultural vocabularies known to the students. Bilingual approaches that enable students to switch codes from English to local languages can help solve lexical difficulties.

Even though existing literature proves the efficiency of word games in learning vocabularies, further research is required regarding students' retention skills in word games and their implementation at low-resource settings. Sustainable implementations and teacher training programs require further consideration as current research pays little attention to them.

In summary, the research proves that the implementation of word games will facilitate vocabulary development through the use of repetition, context, and motivation. However, the efficiency of using word games requires proper adjustments considering cultural settings, resources, and willingness to implement new techniques by teachers. It is hoped that the current study will help fill the existing gap in knowledge in this particular area.

METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this study was to examine the efficacy of word games in vocabulary development for students enrolled in the Advanced Certificate in English (ACE) program at Sri Lanka Youth Vocational Training Centre, a part of the National Youth Services Council. This study adopted a quasi-experimental mixed methodology, which involved both quantitative pre-test and post-test procedures and qualitative observation of classrooms and feedback. An intentional sample of twenty participants (ten males and ten females) was selected for the research in order to obtain various levels of student proficiency. The study spanned over a period of eight

weeks and involved three main stages: pre-test, intervention through word games for six weeks, and post-test.

Vocabulary Skills			
Word Identification	Word Selection	Correction of Errors	Contextual Usage
20 Questions	20 Questions	20 Questions	20 Questions

The pre-test and post-test procedures contained questions that tested vocabulary skills in four areas namely: word identification, word selection, correction of errors, and contextual usage. The tests comprised of 20 questions per category (80 questions total) corresponding to the course syllabus. These involved activities such as matching words with their meanings for instance “innovative”, correcting grammatical errors in sentences such as “he speak loud,” and filling up sentences using vocabulary from the context. In order to get qualitative information, observations were carried out in the classrooms on how the participants interacted during the games.

Instructional Intervention strategy word games such as Scrabble, Word Bingo, and Vocabulary Relay made up this intervention strategy, which was conducted three times a week for about 45 minutes. Students played Scrabble by forming words using lettered tiles that consisted of new words taught, and in Vocabulary Relay, they were required to work together in correcting the mistakes made in the board within set time limits. The games varied depending on skill level such that those at a beginner stage had easy games (such as finding synonyms), whereas those at an advanced level performed difficult tasks.

HYPOTHESES

H1: Word games facilitate learning of vocabulary and improve vocabulary retention.

From the results obtained in data collection, there is a 15.3-point difference between the mean score of the post-test (from 47.5 to 62.8), indicating that word games contribute to vocabulary retention. Statistics show significant differences in word identification (+4.6 points) and error correction (+5.3 points). During contextual post-tests, the use of words like “sustainable” and “innovative” was observed in the responses provided by participants. Students commented on how word games like Scrabble and Word Bingo helped make memorization easy and fun, as stated by a participant, “We used ‘environmental’ in a game related to recycling.” This result is consistent with Nation’s (2001) theory about frequent repetition through engaging activities.

H2: Peer learning increases through collaborative games, and language anxiety decreases.

There was a decrease of 40% in the number of blank answers in post-test questions, which proves H2 about how collaborative games build confidence and support peer learning. The observation showed that games like Vocabulary Relay helped students feel free to correct their peers’ mistakes, without judgment. For instance, during one of the relay tasks, a student pointed out that “She quick runs”

should be changed to “She runs quickly” by correcting his or her peer’s mistake. There were students who felt relaxed working in groups, as confirmed by 75% of students who believed that “collaborative work in groups made them feel more relaxed.”

H3: Game-based adaptive difficulty accommodates varied levels of proficiency.

Results of post-tests indicated a relatively equal increase in score among different levels of proficiency, supporting H3. Students at beginner levels increased their scores by 12.5 points, while those at advanced levels increased theirs by 15 points. As an example, Word Bingo (synonym matching) aided students at a beginner level, while advanced students created sentences incorporating words such as “biodiversity” in Scrabble. Teachers observed that “adaptable game rules ensured that every student participated without being overwhelmed.” This supports Lee’s (2020) claim that varied activities help accommodate different students’ needs.

H4: Exposure to word games leads to consistent usage of vocabulary in the long term.

Despite the improvement in performance in the post-test, the performance after four weeks indicated a decrease in retention by 20%, thus partly refuting H4. The students could not remember the word “renewable” due to lack of consistent practice. However, analysis of qualitative data indicates that those learners who participated in extra word games in a week managed to acquire 15% more vocabulary than their peers. It is supported by Schmitt (2008) in his argument about constant practice. H4 is provisionally accepted.

H5: The use of teacher scaffolding enhances the impact of game-based learning.

Classes that were highly engaged with teachers scored 11.3 more points on average compared to classes that involved low levels of facilitation, and hence supported H5. As an example, in Word Charades, where teachers used hints on how to use the words, students felt comfortable using words such as “gracefully” in dialogue games. It was pointed out that “teacher hints made games less confusing.” This corroborates the notion suggested by Gee (2007), which makes H5 clearly acceptable.

In conclusion, the experiment’s findings generally support all the hypotheses, showing a positive correlation between playing games and vocabulary acquisition. It was found that the use of structured games enhances retention (H1), cooperative games relieve stress (H2), and adaptive methods cater to different levels of competence (H3). Teacher participation was found to be extremely important (H5). Long-term retention (H4), however, requires constant reinforcement. Therefore, game-based learning is proved to be essential in ESL courses, and should be systematically incorporated in curriculums.

Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Quantitative data were analyzed through paired-sample t-test, whereby qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis in order to identify recurrent themes, such as improved confidence and consistent spelling errors. An example of qualitative statement that was identified within the theme of decreased fear of

making errors during games was, “I felt less afraid of making mistakes while playing the games.” Ethical considerations entailed getting signed consent from the participants’ parents and the head teacher, confidentiality in reporting of participant data (such as use of code names such as S₁, S₂), and prioritizing group rather than individual learning so as to reduce pressure.

This methodology offered a sound basis to establish the correlation between game-based approaches and learners’ vocabulary acquisition skills, taking into account the hypotheses and unique circumstances of this study’s setting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis and results highlight the representation of the data collected, which corresponds with the chosen research design for this paper. The approach includes the use of quantitative analysis of pre-test and post-test data along with qualitative information obtained through observation in classrooms, students’ opinions, and teachers’ interviews. The results have helped understand the difficulties that the participants had when it came to vocabulary retention, its application in context, and their general level of language proficiency at the stage of the pre-test. The strategies used to help them in terms of addressing those difficulties included playing different word games.

Comparative Analysis of Pre-Test and Post-Test Results

The analysis depicts well the progress of the students of the Advanced Certificate in English (ACE) program conducted at the Sri Lanka Youth Vocational Training Centre of the National Youth Services Council on four vocabulary domains, after the word game activity. These include Word Identification (Q₁), Word Selection (Q₂), Error Correction (Q₃), and Contextual Application (Q₄). The highest improvement was observed in Error Correction (Q₃) with an increase of +5.2 points (8.4 to 13.6). Students, for instance, corrected sentences such as “She quick runs” into “She runs quickly.” The third domain of Contextual Application (Q₄) also showed improvements of +3.3 points (6.7 to 10.0). This is because the students used words such as “sustainable” in context of sustainable farming methods. It was noted in qualitative assessments that cooperative activities such as Vocabulary Relay allowed the students to learn from each other through error correction. One teacher reported, “They argued about using either affect or effect in their sentences, stimulating critical thinking skills.” Feedback from learners revealed a decrease in anxiety levels, with one student saying, “These games transformed grammar exercises into puzzles rather than exams.” These results correspond to Schmitt’s (2000) focus on contextualized exercises for vocabulary acquisition and the involvement load hypothesis by Hulstijn & Laufer (2001). One teacher reported, “They argued about using either affect or effect in their sentences, stimulating critical thinking skills.” Feedback from learners revealed a decrease in anxiety levels, with one student saying, “These games transformed grammar exercises into puzzles rather than exams.” These results correspond to Schmitt’s (2000) focus on contextualized exercises for vocabulary acquisition and the involvement load hypothesis by Hulstijn & Laufer (2001).

Common Errors in Vocabulary Usage

The analysis illustrates the common issues encountered in language learning in the acquisition of vocabulary in the ACE program in Sri Lanka Youth Vocational Training Centre of the National Youth Services Council. These findings have classified the mistakes into four categories, namely spelling mistakes (35%), wrong choice of words (30%), grammatical mistakes (25%) and blank answers (10%). The majority of mistakes were made in spelling words due to misspelling words like “necassary” instead of “necessary” and influenced by the Tamil alphabet. In addition, they doubled the consonant letters like “fertiliser” instead of fertilizer. Wrong choice of words included confusion in their meanings like writing “affect” instead of “effect”. Grammatical mistakes included misuse of adverbs in a sentence like “he quickly solved the problem”. Blank answers were recorded when the learners did not know how to complete certain tasks like filling up blanks with innovative and similar words. However, when playing interactive games like Word Bingo, there was a 40% decrease in blank answers among peers. One participant expressed, “The process was easier because we had more freedom to guess words knowing there wouldn’t be any negative repercussions for making mistakes.” Educators observed that learning through such competition as Scrabble provided ample motivation for students to engage in correcting misspellings; “The class tried to correct ‘sustainable’ when they saw it on the board.” This aligns with the recommendations of Baker and Wright (2020) regarding culturally responsive teaching methods and promoting the use of bilingual games such as Tamil-English crosswords.

Impact of Instructional Strategies

Factor	Contribution to Improvement
Teacher Engagement	45%
Instruction Frequency	30%
Session Duration	15%

From the table above, it is evident how much each of the teaching methods contributed to the development of the vocabulary skills of the students taking the Advanced Certificate in English (ACE) course offered at the Sri Lanka Youth Vocational Training Centre of the National Youth Services Council. Teachers’ involvement contributed 45%, whereby students under highly engaging teachers managed an average score of 68.5 against 57.2 marks scored by their counterparts under less engaged teachers. For instance, when a teacher demonstrated “quickly” passionately in the Word Charades game, students would easily use the phrase in sentences such as “She solved the puzzle quickly.”

Frequency of the sessions contributed to the success of the lessons, with the students undertaking three lessons per week of Word Bingo. This enabled the acquisition and retention of words such as “renewable.” On the other hand, session time played no significant role as the students showed more engagements within the 45-minute lesson.

The qualitative analysis indicated that the teachers’ creativity motivated the learners. “When Miss acted out ‘carefully,’ I remembered it better!” one learner

reported. Also, a teacher commented, “Games made abstract words tangible!” This finding corroborates the theories of Gee (2007) and Taylor (2020).

CONCLUSION

The mixed method research conclusively proves that the use of word games substantially contributes to vocabulary learning for the second language learners studying in the Advanced Certificate in English (ACE) course at the Sri Lanka Youth Vocational Training Centre of the National Youth Services Council. The use of such word games has helped improve overall scores by 15.3, especially in error correction (5.2) and contextual usage (3.3). Cooperative activities such as Vocabulary Relay and Scrabble have promoted peer learning, reduced stress levels and made the learners bold enough to try using the new words.

Nonetheless, there are some drawbacks associated with the study. The challenge of retaining knowledge over a short period of time was seen to be an impediment to remembering vocabulary without constant reminder. It is important to incorporate strategies that involve using repetition such as weekly review through vocabulary games to reinforce retention. Lack of adequate resources, especially technology, made the number of games available very limited. It was suggested that other games can be created using flashcards or local board games. There was a significant reduction in the achievement gender gap witnessed prior to conducting the experiments.

These results support the need for a paradigm shift in teaching ESL, where innovative approaches are preferred to conventional methods. This requires teacher training institutions to incorporate game design strategies within their training programs for teachers so that they can devise game structures based on learners’ cultures and languages. Moreover, there is a need for resource allocation by administrators to provide instructional materials like kits for playing word games. Also, it is recommended that the government take a look at the national curriculum of English as a second language and integrate game mechanisms into the curriculum.

Regarding future research, there is a requirement for longitudinal studies on the effectiveness of such techniques and their effects on the use of digital technology in hybrid settings. The cross-cultural approach may also be studied. Using these recommendations will allow teachers to enable students to use their vocabulary effectively to improve communication skills.

In conclusion, the research has demonstrated the power of word games in enhancing learners’ academic performance and communication skills. In essence, this approach allows students to learn in an entertaining way while acquiring necessary linguistic skills.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The results that this study brings forth are extremely crucial to English language instruction, especially in rural and multicultural societies such as Sri Lanka. This is because the effectiveness of the use of word games in improving the ability to remember new vocabulary and make learning enjoyable has been proven by this study. From an educator’s perspective, it shows that traditional approaches such as

memorization through repetition should not be used but rather more interactive and learner-focused methods that are enjoyable. Practical measures that educators can employ include conducting class activities such as Scrabble or the Vocabulary Relay on a weekly basis. In such situations, minimal effort would be needed since no sophisticated material would be required. Moreover, it would allow for the incorporation of topics relevant to the society.

As far as the administrators are concerned, the study makes it imperative that they emphasize gamification training for teachers. Training can allow the teachers to be adept at creating context-specific games that can include the use of flashcards, which are bilingual or playing roles according to real-life situations, which can include marketplaces nearby. In addition, investing in inexpensive tools for classroom learning, such as board games or applications (Quizlet), can help make the innovative tools available to all schools regardless of their budgets. Moreover, the policymakers can use the results obtained from the current study and work towards curriculum development, which would involve more interactive means of learning.

The study is equally focused on the impact of community and parental participation in the sustenance of the process of vocabulary development. This can be done through such programs as “Vocabulary Game Nights” and others. Another benefit is that this research brings attention to several issues that second language learners face when studying, among which is linguistic interference, and a possible solution based on cultural sensitivity, for instance, developing Tamil-English bilingual games.

Lastly, this research contributes to the ongoing academic debate concerning language teaching methodology through proving that game activities can serve as efficient means of vocabulary building. The findings of the current research open many avenues for further investigations, including longitudinal studies aimed at exploring the effectiveness of game-based vocabulary development over time and studies that will explore the efficiency of the combined model of using electronic games and regular ones.

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