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THE ROLE OF GAMES IN TEACHING ENGLISH VOCABULARY TO STUDENTS

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Abstract. The teaching and learning of English vocabulary remains one of the most essential yet challenging components in second language acquisition. Many learners struggle with retaining new lexical items due to the traditional emphasis on rote memorization and decontextualized instruction. This study investigates the role of games and fun activities as an instructional strategy for enhancing vocabulary acquisition among English language learners. It argues that game-based learning not only increases student motivation and engagement but also significantly improves vocabulary retention through meaningful repetition, contextual usage, and reduced learning anxiety. The study adopts a quasi-experimental design involving pre-test and post-test assessments, supported by qualitative feedback from learners exposed to vocabulary games such as word bingo, charades, crossword puzzles, matching activities, and digital quiz platforms.

Keywords: game-based learning, English vocabulary, language acquisition, student motivation, classroom engagement, fun activities, interactive learning, retention, EFL learners, teaching strategies.

Introduction. Vocabulary acquisition is widely recognized as the foundation of communicative competence in any language, as it enables learners to understand meaning, express ideas, and engage in meaningful interaction. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, however, vocabulary learning often becomes a difficult and monotonous process for students because it is frequently taught through memorization lists, repetition drills, and translation exercises that lack contextual relevance. As a result, learners tend to forget new words quickly and experience low motivation in language classrooms. This challenge has encouraged educators and researchers to explore more interactive and student-centered approaches to vocabulary instruction.

One of the most promising approaches is the use of games and playful activities in the language classroom. Game-based learning transforms vocabulary instruction from a passive memorization task into an active and engaging process in which students participate, collaborate, and compete in meaningful ways. Games introduce elements of challenge, reward, and enjoyment, which stimulate learners' intrinsic motivation and increase their willingness to use the target language. Moreover, games provide repeated exposure to vocabulary in different contexts, which supports deeper cognitive processing and long-term retention.

Methodology. This study adopts a quasi-experimental research design to examine the effectiveness of game-based learning in teaching English vocabulary. The research was conducted in a classroom setting involving secondary school students learning English as a foreign language. The participants represented a mixed proficiency group, allowing the study to observe the impact of games across different levels of language ability. The instructional intervention was carried out over several weeks, during which vocabulary lessons were integrated with various game-based activities designed to reinforce target words and encourage active participation.

Before the intervention began, a pre-test was administered to assess the students' initial vocabulary knowledge. The pre-test consisted of tasks that measured recognition and recall of selected vocabulary items. After the pre-test, students were taught vocabulary using a combination of traditional instruction and game-based learning. The traditional phase involved explanations of word meanings, pronunciation practice, and sentence examples. However, the primary focus of the intervention was the integration of games such as word bingo, matching card games, crossword puzzles, charades, and online quiz competitions. These activities were carefully selected to target different aspects of vocabulary knowledge, including spelling, meaning, usage, and recognition.

During the implementation phase, each lesson incorporated at least one game designed to reinforce the vocabulary items taught in that session. For example, in word bingo activities, students listened to definitions and marked corresponding words on their cards, while in charades, learners acted out vocabulary items for their peers to guess. Digital quizzes were also used to introduce a competitive element and immediate feedback. After the completion of the intervention period, a post-test identical in structure to the pre-test was administered to measure improvements in vocabulary acquisition.

In addition to quantitative data, qualitative data were collected through student questionnaires and informal classroom observations. These instruments were used to capture learners' perceptions of game-based learning, their level of motivation, and their overall classroom experience. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods for test scores and thematic analysis for qualitative responses, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the impact of games on vocabulary learning.

Results. The results of the study indicate a clear improvement in students' vocabulary knowledge following the integration of games into instruction. The comparison between pre-test and post-test scores revealed that most students achieved significantly higher scores after participating in game-based learning activities. This suggests that games had a positive effect on vocabulary retention and recall. Students who initially struggled with memorizing word lists showed noticeable improvement in recognizing and using vocabulary items correctly in context after repeated exposure through games.

Beyond test performance, classroom observations revealed a marked increase in student participation and engagement. During traditional instruction, students tended to be passive and reserved, often relying heavily on teacher input. However, during game-based sessions, learners became more active, frequently volunteering answers, collaborating with peers, and demonstrating enthusiasm toward learning tasks. The competitive and cooperative elements of games appeared to encourage even less confident students to participate more freely.

The qualitative feedback collected from students further supported these findings. Many learners reported that vocabulary games made learning more enjoyable and less stressful compared to conventional methods. Students indicated that they were able to remember words more easily because they encountered them repeatedly in different game contexts. They also expressed that games helped them understand word meanings better through actions, visuals, and peer interaction rather than memorization alone. Overall, the results suggest that game-based learning significantly enhances both cognitive achievement and affective engagement in vocabulary acquisition.

Discussion. The findings of this study highlight the pedagogical value of incorporating games into English vocabulary instruction. One of the most important outcomes is the improvement in learner motivation. Games create a learning environment that is emotionally stimulating, which increases students' interest and willingness to participate in classroom activities. When learners are

engaged and motivated, they are more likely to invest cognitive effort in processing and retaining new vocabulary items.

Another significant factor contributing to vocabulary improvement is the role of repetition and contextual learning embedded in games. Unlike traditional memorization techniques, games naturally require learners to encounter vocabulary multiple times in meaningful and varied contexts. For example, a word used in a matching game may later appear in a guessing activity or digital quiz, reinforcing its meaning and usage. This repeated exposure strengthens memory retention and helps transfer vocabulary from short-term to long-term memory.

Games also contribute to lowering the affective filter, a concept in language acquisition theory that refers to emotional barriers such as anxiety and lack of confidence. In traditional classrooms, students may feel pressured to provide correct answers, which can inhibit participation. In contrast, games create a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere where mistakes are perceived as part of the learning process rather than failure. This reduction in anxiety encourages learners to experiment with language and increases their willingness to communicate.

Despite these advantages, it is important to recognize that games should not replace structured instruction entirely. If used excessively or without clear learning objectives, games may become distracting and reduce instructional efficiency. Therefore, teachers must carefully design game-based activities that align with specific vocabulary goals and ensure that learning outcomes remain central to classroom activities. A balanced approach that combines traditional teaching methods with interactive games is likely to produce the most effective results in vocabulary instruction.

Conclusion. This study concludes that games play a highly effective role in teaching English vocabulary to students by enhancing motivation, engagement, and retention. The integration of game-based learning into vocabulary instruction provides learners with meaningful, interactive, and enjoyable experiences that support both understanding and long-term memory of lexical items. The findings demonstrate that students not only perform better academically after participating in vocabulary games but also develop more positive attitudes toward English language learning.

Therefore, it is recommended that language teachers incorporate well-structured games into their vocabulary teaching practices to create more dynamic and student-centered classrooms. However, these activities should be purposefully designed and aligned with instructional objectives to ensure that they contribute meaningfully to learning outcomes. Future research may explore the long-term impact of game-based vocabulary instruction and its effectiveness across different age groups and proficiency levels.

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