The Significance of Language Games in Improving English Vocabulary

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Abstract:

   Vocabulary plays a very preponderant role in one's communication. Many young learners, who have regional language as medium of instruction, develop phobia and anxiety towards the learning of English vocabulary, invariably it de-motivates them. They perceive it very difficult to learn vocabulary, to retain it for a longer period and to recollect it. In order to ease the process of teaching vocabulary, every English language teacher uses numerous techniques and strategies. One such predominant technique is the use of Language Games. These games not only create interest in learning vocabulary but also debilitate their phobia and anxiety. This study, logically done on a group of young students studying in the state of Telangana with Telugu language as medium of instruction, attempts to examine the effect of language games in improving English vocabulary.

Key words: *Language Games, Vocabulary teaching, improving vocabulary*

1.   Introduction:

   Knowing a sufficient amount of vocabulary is indispensable for communicating more effectively and for comprehending language successfully. Giving a centre stage to vocabulary, Wilkins (1972) justifies that ". . . while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (pp. 111–112). This statement makes it clear that, with some useful words and expressions we can express our ideas, even without grammar. Harmer (2007) states that, "If language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and the flesh". Besides this, the academic achievement of a learner largely depends on the vocabulary, as the knowledge of vocabulary facilitates access to new information. Thus, the importance of vocabulary cannot be overestimated at school level.

1.1. What is Vocabulary learning?

   Vocabulary can be defined as the words of a language, and these words include a single element and phrase or chunks of several words which convey a particular meaning.

Learning vocabulary is not just knowing the meaning of the words but to be aware of many things about that word.

1. The learners need to be acquainted with the exact meaning of a word.

2. The learners need to identify the number of situations in which a word can be used.

3. The learners need to discern the other meanings of the word.

4. The learners need to distinguish the semantic gradients of that word.

5. The learners need to know the spelling of the word, its pronunciation and stress.

6. The learners need to recognize the grammar that the word uses.

7. The learners need to be on familiar terms with its collocations.

2.Review of Literature:

It is a misconception and misbelief to think that learning should always be marked by seriousness. It should be fun and interesting to ease learning and to motivate learners. The relationship between language games and ESL has already been explored in several studies. Jill Hadfield (1990) defines a game as *"an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun."* The amalgamation of language games in the process of learning makes it relaxing and amusing. Learning becomes less stressful and more enjoyable. Rooyackers (2002: Preface) defines, *"Language is immensely powerful, but it can also be loads of fun. In fact, a sense of fun can make language more powerful ..... Language and play complement and enrich each other. A fusion of the two produces language games."*

Language games are often learner-centred activities as learners engage in the games actively. Games also provide a meaningful context for learning new words. One of the substantial benefits of language games is that they motivate learners to learn vocabulary as there is practical involvement by the learners rather than lengthy explanation by the students.

The previous research works in this field focused primarily on using language games to improve other language skills. The present study primarily aims at proving the potential of language games in improving the vocabulary of young learners studying in government schools.

3. Significance of Study:

In the government schools of the state, where the researcher is working, vocabulary is taught to the students by giving the meaning of the new words in their mother tongue before giving the meaning in English. Only a few teachers of English use techniques like presenting unfamiliar words through gestures, showing pictures or realia. It is observed that few teachers use these words in meaningful sentences. Furthermore, the meaning of the unfamiliar words is not elicited from the learners.

Another issue with the teaching of vocabulary in these government schools is that the teachers confined teaching of vocabulary strictly to the textbook. Participation of learners is often not taken care of and learning of vocabulary is not meaningful and effective.

The key problems with all these issues are that learners do not use the unfamiliar words productively and they grow boredom and indifference. So this study has been done with a view of showing the impact of language games on teaching and learning vocabulary.

3.1. Statement of the Problem:

Vocabulary learning is decisive in the communicative competence and academic achievement of a learner. While teaching vocabulary to the young students, one of the significant things in ELT is how to teach vocabulary. The main aim of the present study is to answer the following question;

1. Do language games play a significant role in learning Vocabulary by the Government school students studying in Telugu medium?

4. Methodology:

4.1. Subjects of the Study:

Forty students from Grade-6, ranging 11-12 years old, were chosen as the participants of this study. All those students were studying in Telugu medium in a remote rural government school located in Jagtial district of Telangana state. At the initial stages of the process, a level specific test on vocabulary was administered to 50 students of the same standard. From those 50 students, 40 were taken based on their score for the purpose of this study and they were divided into two groups - a controlled group and an experimental group. Each group comprises 20 students. The duration of the study was five weeks.

4.2. Instruments:

Pre-test: Both the controlled group and experimental group were asked to take a pre-test that contained 25 questions (Multiple choice questions - 10, Fill in the blanks with appropriate word - 10, Using the given word in own sentence - 5)

Post-test: A post-test, based on the new words taught during the five weeks, was conducted to the students of both the groups. The pattern of the test and number of questions were the same here as in the pre-test.

The pattern of the pre-test, including the maximum marks and number of questions, was retained for the post-test.

4.3. Process:

After the pre-test, the students were divided into two groups - controlled group and experimental groups. The students in the controlled group were not presented with any language games and they were taught vocabulary using the traditional method - translating into mother tongue, giving bilingual word lists etc. On the other hand, five vocabulary-based games were selected and presented to the students of the experimental group for five weeks - one game per week. The names of those five games are -

1. Word Bingo
2. Many words from One Word
3. Draw a Word
4. Clues
5. Scribble

The principal aims of these language games are to make the students identify and understand the different words as well as to make them use words contextually and meaningfully.

Prior to conducting language games in the classroom, the researcher explained the rules of the game and demonstrated the game with the help of two or three learners. Then, the instructions and rules related to the language game were written on the board. Afterwards, a few students were asked to have a trial game. Finally, the students were made to play the game.

After five weeks, the students in both the groups took a post test, which was based on vocabulary. A total number of 25 questions were asked (Multiple choice questions - 10, Fill in the blanks with appropriate word - 10, Using the given word in own sentence - 5).

5. Findings and Results:

By comparing the scores obtained by both the groups in the Pre-test and Post-test, we may show the significance of language games on learning vocabulary.

Table-1: Comparison of Controlled Group's Pre-test and Post-test Scores

Student	Pre-test Score	Post-test Score	Difference
Student-1	9	10	1
Student-2	10	12	2
Student-3	12	12	0
Student-4	9	10	1
Student-5	12	12	0
Student-6	11	11	0
Student-7	8	10	2
Student-8	12	11	-1
Student-9	10	12	2
Student-10	13	13	0
Student-11	12	9	1
Student-12	12	14	2
Student-13	10	10	0
Student-14	12	11	-1
Student-15	10	10	0
Student-16	14	15	1
Student-17	12	13	1
Student-18	11	11	0
Student-19	10	11	1
Student-20	11	12	1
Mean	11	11.45	
Standard Deviations	**1.48**	1.50	
T = -0.97588		P Value= .16757	

As shown in Table-1, the mean value of the control group in the pre-test is 11 and the mean value of the same group's post-test is 11.45. The only difference between the two tests is 0.45 and hence the P value, which is calculated using the t-test can help us in understanding the effectiveness of the language games. The P value is .16757 and the result is *not* significant at $p < .05$.

Table-2: Comparison of Experimental Group's Pre-test and Post-test Scores

Student	Pre-test Score	Post-test Score	Difference
Student-1	10	14	4

Student-2	10	13	3
Student-3	9	15	6
Student-4	10	14	4
Student-5	12	15	3
Student-6	12	17	5
Student-7	10	13	3
Student-8	10	12	2
Student-9	11	16	5
Student-10	13	14	1
Student-11	12	17	5
Student-12	12	14	2
Student-13	10	12	2
Student-14	12	13	1
Student-15	9	11	2
Student-16	13	14	1
Student-17	13	14	1
Student-18	10	15	5
Student-19	12	17	5
Student-20	10	13	3
Mean	11	14.15	
Standard Deviations	**1.34**	**1.69**	
t = -6.5254		P Value= .00001	

Analysis of Table-2 reveals that the mean value of the control group in the pre-test is 11 and the mean value of the same group's post-test is 14.15. The difference between the two tests is 3.5 and the P value can help us in understanding the effectiveness of the language games. There is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the students in experimental group.

As shown in Table-2, the results of the students in the experimental group's post test (SD=1.69, M=14.15) have surpassed the students of the controlled group ((SD=1.50, M=11.45). The difference has strengthened the researcher's hypothesis that language games have a significant influence on learning vocabulary. These tests revealed that there is a significant impact of language games on the government school children's vocabulary learning.

5.1. Limitations of the Study:

There are plenty of language games to strengthen the vocabulary of students but the researcher has chosen five games only which suit the context of teaching. During the presentation of language games, the vocabulary has been chosen from students' textbooks. Added to that, very limited themes have been chosen to introduce vocabulary. This study is confined to the students studying in the medium of Telugu in the rural government schools.

6.Conclusions and Recommendations:

The evidence from this study shows that language games are very effective for improving vocabulary at the primary stages of learning English as a second language. These games not only develop learners' knowledge of vocabulary but also motivates them by creating interest. There were

plenty of games to improve vocabulary of learners, hence care should be taken in selecting the appropriate language game. Another important aspect is that the teacher should anticipate the problems and plan accordingly.

Our research suggests that teachers need to change their traditional way of teaching vocabulary. They should assist the students learn vocabulary meaningfully and contextually in a joyful and exciting manner. Based on the findings of the current study, it is recomended that the curricula designers should include language games in the syllabus at the primary level to strengthen and to enlarge the learners' vocabulary.

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