The Effects of Using Games on English Vocabulary Learning

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Abstract

One of the difficult parts of learning the target language for English language learners is the acquisition of vocabulary. Using educational games for teaching vocabulary has been very popular for several decades. Therefore, the present paper has reviewed the effects of using games on improving vocabulary learning in an English as foreign language or English as second language context. Different studies revealed that games are beneficial in vocabulary learning because they enhance students' ability to memorize words, encourage student's interaction, improve their communicative skills and enhance students' motivation. Games also can help the teachers to create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful. This study aimed to guide teachers and students towards a better understanding of vocabularies through educational games. This paper suggested game-based learning activities and techniques in the classroom. Hoping that educational games attract more attention and be applied in the classroom in order to learn and teach new vocabulary more effectively.

Keywords: educational game, game-based learning, motivation, meaningful context

INTRODUCTION

Learning vocabulary through games had attained a lot of attention. Donmus (2010) believed that "The value of educational games has been increasing in language education since they help to make language education entertaining "(p.1497). According to Kuzu and Ural findings (as cited in Donmus, 2010, p.1499) "when games and education are combined, it can be educative and education environments can be entertaining. The learners who learned with the use of games, gain positive attitudes and can be more motivated while learning".

This is a review of the effects of using games on learning vocabulary in English as a foreign language (EFL).Vocabulary in English is mostly taught out of context as isolated words, the main criticism of this way of teaching is that vocabulary cannot be learnt in isolation

(Al Neyadi, 2007). Activities which involve learners in thinking about the words, like using games allow learners to remember the target words more easily.

Learning vocabulary is a hard work, so attempt is required to understand, produce and manipulate the target words. Games help and encourage many learners to learn target language more easily. They also help teachers to create contexts in which the target words are useful and meaningful; they also bring fun for students, thus help them learn and retain new words more quickly. In other words, game-based learning can create a meaningful context for language learning process. After learning and practicing new vocabulary through games, students have the opportunity to use language in a non-stressful way (Uberman, 1998).

Games are advantageous and effective in learning vocabulary. They are motivating because they usually involve friendly competition and create cooperative learning environment, so students have an opportunity to work together. They improve students' communicative skills and they have a chance to use the target language (Sorayaie- Azar, 2012).Therefore, vocabulary games bring real world context into the classroom, and enhance students' use of English in a flexible, communicative way. The role of games in teaching and learning vocabulary cannot be denied.

However, in order to achieve the most from vocabulary games, it is essential that suitable games be chosen. Whenever a game is to be used, the proficiency level and cultural background of the students should be taken into account, and also it should be useful for students with lower language ability and should be easily applied in the class. Many experienced textbook and methodological manual writers have argued that games are not just time-filling activities but have a great educational value (Riahipour & Saba, 2012). This paper offers the rationale for implementing games as a stress-free tool of learning words. It is believed that games can have the potentiality to contextualize learning words.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The present paper intends to represent a few examples from the literature concerned with the use of vocabulary games in learning the target words. For example, Riahipour and Saba (2012) mentioned that traditional activities such as memorization of long vocabulary lists, derivations, repetition of words, translation, fill-in-the-blank exercises are boring for students. Scrivener (as cited in Riahipour & Saba 2012, p.1259) states that using long list of words and their translation items make no guarantee that remembering will take place. By using vocabulary games, learning process is going to be more valuable, this method can make vocabulary learning more enjoyable, so it can help students to retain target words more quickly.

Alternatively, Aghlara and Hadidi- Tamjid (2011) conducted a study onthe effects of using a digital computer game on improving Iranian children's vocabulary learning. The participants of their study were 40 six to seven year old girls with no prior knowledge of English which were divided into two groups of experimental and control; in the

experimental group, they used the SHAIEx digital game, whereas in the control group, English vocabulary was taught through traditional methods. At the end of the teaching period, they compared the participants' performances. The result of their research indicated that the mean score of the children in the experimental group was higher than that of the control group. This indicated the positive effect of using digital games in teaching English vocabulary to children; therefore, they suggested that "Using games in young learner's class smooths their learning because the games capture their attention and motivate them" (p.555).

Similarly, Aslanabadi and Rasouli (2013) conducted a study on the effect of games on improvement of Iranian EFL vocabulary knowledge in kindergartens. The aim of their study was to find a way to help young EFL learners fix the novel vocabulary in their minds. The study was conducted at two kindergartens. They divided the students into the experimental and control group. The experimental group gives an online language teaching game and the control group gives regular teaching. The result of their study revealed that Games not only bring fun for learners to the class, but they also motivate learners and improve their confidence. Moreover, Yip and Kwan (as cited in Aghlara & Hadidi- Tamjid, 2011, p.558) suggested that students who used games for their learning became more successful in learning new words compared to those who learned the same vocabulary through traditional method.

DeHaan, Reed and Kuwada (2010) investigated the effect of interactivity with a music video game on second language vocabulary recall. The participants of their study were divided into two groups; one of them played an English-language music video game for 20 minutes, while the other group watched the game simultaneously on another monitor. After playing the game, a vocabulary recall test, an experience questionnaire, and a two week delayed vocabulary recall test were administered. The results of their study showed that both the players and the watchers of the video game recalled vocabulary from the game, but the players recalled less vocabulary than the watchers. DeHaan et al. (2010) argued that although a video game that contains target language vocabulary can be enjoyable, its interactivity can prevent language acquisition process because of this players were unable to recall the game's vocabulary as well as watchers. They also argued that" players of the video game were asked to play the game and attend to the vocabulary simultaneously and these multiple foci of attention prevented them from noticing and recalling more vocabulary items than the watchers" (p.85).Their findings do not reveal that vocabulary can be acquired more effectively through non-interactive approach than interactive one, for these players.

Zheng, Young, Brewer and Wagner (as cited in DeHaanet al., 2010, p.74) found that "language learners' attitude and self-efficacy towards their second language improved through the use of tools to communicate with native speakers to complete quests in a game-like virtual world".

Vahdat and Rasti- Behbahani (2013) investigated the effect of video games on Iranian EFL students' vocabulary learning. The participants of their study were 40 intermediate EFL learners, both male and female, they chose their participants through a TOEFL proficiency test. They divided them into two groups (10 males and 10 females in each): a control group and an experimental group. The control group studied vocabulary in traditional classes, but the experimental group experienced vocabulary learning (the same words) via a video game called "*Runaway: A Road Adventure"*. The findings of their study revealed that learning vocabulary via video games was advantageous, and it was shown that males were more disposed toward video-game learning than females. They argued that there is a positive correlation between gender and learning vocabulary through video games.

Schlimme (as cited in Vahdat&Rasti- Behbahani, 2013, p.62) believes that "video games provide a context in which participants can discuss scenarios and outcomes in order to facilitate their understanding of other concepts and can improve children's reading, spelling, and spatial abilities and critical-analyzing techniques". Schlimme also indicates that some kind of video games present learners with novel target words; therefore, the learners' vocabulary levels may increase.

Alternatively, DeHaan (as cited in Vahdat & Rasti- Behbahani, 2013, p.63) conducted a study to find the effect of video games in improving listening and reading skills on Japanese students. Results of his study reveal that video games can enhance learner's language acquisition. It was also reported that playing video games increases learners' ability in listening and reading comprehension. Finally, DeHaan found that a video game's repetition have a positive effects on language learning.

Dolati and Mikaili (2011) examined the effects of instructional games on facilitating of students' vocabulary learning. The purpose of their study was to gain information about the role of the games in the level of vocabulary learning among students. The participants of their study were 70 female students in the age of 12- 13 years old which were selected from one of the Iranian primary schools in Iran. To conduct this study they use pretest and posttest. by analyzing the pre-test and post-test they found that applying games has the important role in teaching vocabularies to the language learners, they also found that " Game has its potential as an educational tool for literary training; and can motivate and engage learners especially the quiet and passive ones in the whole learning process"(p.1218).

In a similar line of inquiry, Kalaycioglu (2011) investigated the effectiveness of the educational games on the preschool-level English vocabulary learning of four years olds. The participants of his study were 33 preschool children who were four years old. They were including 17 females and 16 males. Over a four-week period, 24vocabulary items were presented with picture cards by using Total Physical Response Method to both groups. In the experimental group, picture vocabulary games were used, but the control group did not receive picture vocabulary games. The results of his study indicated a

significant difference in English vocabulary achievement in favor of the experimental group which was taught by the picture vocabulary games with a large effect size. Also the gender effect on learning vocabularies of English with picture vocabulary games in the experimental group and without picture vocabulary games in the control group was investigated. At the end of the research, no significant gender effect was found for both experimental and control groups in learning English vocabulary. Kalaycioglu (2011) suggested that:

> Among foreign language teaching techniques, educational games are seen as appropriate and powerful for very young children because the nature of the games fits the nature of the children. Games are fun for children and they include interaction, physical and cognitive activity, socialization, competition and cooperation. Moreover, children learn individual and group work, their motivation and interest increase in games. Also, games are child- centered, they can be adjusted according to the educational aims and the age levels of the children. (p.11)

Shaffer, Squire, Halverson and Gee (as cited in Demirbilek, Yilmaz& Tamer, 2010, p.718) argued that "video games are creating new social and cultural environment and by combining thinking, social communication and technology it also facilitates learning".

By the same token, Cornillie, Clarebout and Desmet (2012) examined the cognitive benefits of the genre of digital role-playing games for foreign language learning, with specific attention to the role of focus-on-form approaches and language-directed feedback. They argued that digital games create opportunities to investigate how technology mediates the language learning process in ways which may have not been conceived of in traditional language learning environments. Similarly, Segers and Verhoeven (as cited in Aghlara & Hadidi-Tamjid, 2011, p.555) conducted a study on vocabulary training by computer games in kindergarten. The participants of their study were 67 native and immigrant children in the first and second years of kindergarten who played vocabulary games on the computer twice a week for a period of 15 minutes over 15 weeks. The results of their study showed the positive effects of learning vocabulary through computer games.

In a similar vein, Efendi (2013) conducted a study on the use of games to improve vocabulary mastery. The aim of his research was to describing the way of "got it game" and "back to the board game" in improving vocabulary mastery of the seventh grade students. His research was a kind of classroom action research (CAR) in which the researcher acts as the teacher who leads teaching activity. In order to collect data he use observation checklist, field note and a test .The participants of his study were 29 students of seventh grade students. His study consists of four major steps: planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting. The findings of the study showed that "the use of "Got It Game" and "Back to the Board Game" with the topics vocabulary of daily English communication, people's occupation, and personal care and appearance can improve students' vocabulary mastery achievement."(p.78).

According to Baturay, Yildirim & Daloglu studies (as cited in Donmus, 2010, p.1499) "using computers and web in language teaching provides more effective learning compared traditional methods, increases the motivation of the learner, develops positive attitudes in students, and increases the retention process ".

Turgut and İrgin (2009) investigated young learners' language learning via computer games. They conducted their research in the Internet cafe. The participants of their study were10 primary and secondary school students, they were at the age of 10-14. They collected data through observations and semi-structured interviews. They observed their participants three times each lasting two hours in the Internet cafes while they were playing online games. During the observations, the participants were playing the Knight Online World version, Counter-Strike, Grand Theft Auto: Vice City, Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos, and FIFA 08 .According to (Turgut & İrgin, 2009) online computer games show potential in promoting learning, they also suggested that young learners' who playing online games can promotes their language learning and especially vocabulary skills.

Moreover, Saffarian and Gorjian (2012) investigated the role of computer-based video games on facilitating children's cognitive learning. Their study investigated the effect of the varied types of instructional delivery strategies on children's learning achievement. The subjects of their study comprised of 418 EFL teachers and learners dealing with EFL in Iranian institute. The students' receive two different instructional treatments: (1) traditional computer-assisted instruction (CAI) programs; and (2) a computer-based video game. The results of their research revealed that "the experimental group who used computer games outperformed the control group who did not use it as a teaching aid in foreign language classroom In other words computer games exchanges can play a facilitative role in teaching and learning second language"(p.44).

Vocabulary learning is often boring for language learners, especially for those who grew up in the digital age. In this digital age, Internet has opened up a world of possibilities for improving learning target vocabularies of learners. By using online games, teachers and parents can ensure that their learners are prepared for the exciting experience of reading and writing. (Turgut & İrgin, 2009).

Demirbilek, Yilmaz and Tamer (2010) found out second language instructors' perspectives about the use of educational games in second language learning at the graduate level. Data were collected through semi-constructed interviews. The participants of their study were 11 instructors from the School of Foreign Languages at a university located on the South West of Turkey. Data analysis revealed that "the use of computer games as an instructional support tool may affect the way how computer games are employed in the lectures, the features of the game, in-class hardware and software infrastructure, and the perceptions and attitudes of instructors and students towards the computer games."(p. 720).

Alemi (2010) investigated the role of using word games in expanding the learner's vocabulary. In so doing, she used five word games, named (Twenty Questions, Charades,

Definition Game's, Passwords, and Crossword Puzzles). She selected the participants randomly from a male/ female group of third grade junior high school students and also randomly divided them into two groups: experimental and control. Control group were taught words using traditional methods; however, the experimental group received word games as a treatment at the end of each session. Finally, a vocabulary test was administered to both groups to determine the differences between them. The score confirming the positive effect of word games on expanding learners' vocabulary.

Yildirim (as cited in Donmus, 2010, p.1498) suggested that "Educational games are activities that provide students the opportunity to reinforce the previous knowledge by repeating it in a more comfortable environment". Moreover, Song (as cited in Demirbilek et al., 2010, p.718) investigated how educational games should be designed in order to improve the writing skills of language learners. The findings of his study showed that open-mindedness, systematicity, inquisitiveness and low interaction are the critical thinking disposition characteristics of second language learning.

Donmus (2010) has done a research to gain information about using educational games with the support of social networks in foreign language education, the result of his study showed that students continuously interacting in Facebook benefited from educational games for their learning. Games played through social networks motivate students and help them to construct their own leaning. In a similar view, Kuzu and Ural (as cited in Donmus, 2010, p.1499) believe that "when games and education are combined, it can be educative and education environments can be entertaining. The learners who learned with the use of games, gain positive attitudes and can be more motivated while learning".

Peterson (as cited in Demirbilek et al., 2010, p.718) investigated the psycholinguistic and socio-cultural constructs of games and simulations in computer-assisted language learning. The findings of his research revealed that simulations and games present valuable opportunities for effective language learning. Moreover, Donmus (2010) believed that "The value of educational games has been increasing in language education since they help to make language education entertaining "(p.1497). Alternatively, Gass and Selinker(as cited in Demirbiek et al. ,2010, p.763) indicated that repetition that occurs through games allows a learner to be exposed to the learning target language and creates more opportunities for acquisition to occur.

Donmus (2010) indicates that games can develop individuals' physical and mental capacities, and also can hold the attention of participants all the time and puts them in a race with themselves and also with others in order to obtain certain objectives. According to many studies conducted to investigate the effects of games in language learning, it is seen that these entire studies highlight that game-based learning method can bring competition, motivation and relaxed or stress-free atmosphere in language learning environment, so students can learn and retain target vocabulary more quickly. Game-based learning can make learners become the center of learning, make the learning process easier, more interesting and effective (Cheng & Su, 2012).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper has some implications for students and teachers to use educational games in order to improve language learning. It is suggested that teachers should seek for methods that engage their students in a creative language use. By using vocabulary games, students can use the language more communicatively.

Methods such as using games are very occasionally used to teach and learn vocabulary. They are only used for a limited time. Games can help the teachers to create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful. Wright, Betteridge and Buck (as cited in Rohani & Pourgharib, 2013, p. 3541) believe that "With the use of games, the teacher can create various contexts in which students have to use the language to communicate, exchange information and express their own opinions".

To effectively promote learning, games must include ways for students to reflect on and explain what is happening. In fact, learning may not occur without time for reflection. Teachers should encourage students to take advantage of games in their learning process. They also need to monitor their students' use of these vocabulary games to make sure that the structure and rules of the game do not take higher rank over learning. Learning vocabulary through games is one of the effective and interesting ways that can be applied in classrooms. This paper is in line with the following quotation from Gillespie (as cited in Kalaycioglu, 2011, p.43):

> Educational games are used frequently due to their benefits. They give students responsibility and the opportunity of being active physically and mentally, they are student-centered rather than teacher-centered, they easily grab children's attention, increase their interaction and are fun to play in the formal academic process, and socialize students. In addition, students gain or develop many skills such as taking turns, working individually and working with others as a team toward a common goal.

Finally, it should be noted that a new strand of research is to implement more games into language classes so that learning is facilitated. The effect of learning concrete and abstract words through different games can be considered as another line for research. Mobile-assisted language learning applications can help learners to improve their domain of vocabulary, so it is a good area of research to find out the effect of different mobile applications on vocabulary learning.

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