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THE IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

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KeyWords

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to explore the importance of games in vocabulary retention and the effectiveness of games in vocabulary teaching and to seek for different authors' thoughts about fun and effective word games that generate context for language use and vocabulary memorization and expansion. This research focused on qualitative and quantitative data collection and it was chosen two instruments for data collection (a survey and a test on vocabulary). The participants of this study were seventeen first year undergraduate students of Public Relations and Executive Secretariat from CVPU- Cape Verde Public University (Pseudonym) in Cape Verde. There were 13 females and 4 male student participants, with an age range from 19 to 36 years old. The findings suggest that all the two instruments used pointed out students' positive attitudes toward the use of games in vocabulary instruction and also that games are a powerful and effective technique in vocabulary instruction.

Introduction

In the past educational researchers did not pay much attention to the significance of vocabulary in language teaching. Even the ESL and EFL teachers ignored the value of vocabulary teaching. Richards & Renandia (2002) stated that vocabulary teaching and learning were often given little priority in second language programs. Many teachers thought that through incidental exposure to vocabulary, students would internalize words and be able to communicate with others. They assumed that by teaching contents, they would set up the context and students would retain vocabulary. From their perspective teachers do not need to teach vocabulary systematically. They underestimated the implicit teaching of vocabulary.

Literature Review

This section of the paper will show existing insights about vocabulary instruction and it will also show how the combination of explicit and incidental vocabulary instruction worked in my 1st year undergraduate classroom. Literatures will be reviewed to show the effectiveness of games in vocabulary retention. The literature review will answer the following research questions: What is the role of vocabulary in the process of language acquisition? Should vocabulary instruction be incidental or explicit? What is the relationship between the use of games and vocabulary retention?

I. Historical background

James Coady &Thomas Huckin(1997), two authors that gave great contribution in the field of vocabulary teaching, stated: "The relative neglect of studies of vocabulary acquisition and related areas of lexical research in second language acquisition has been often commented on within the fields of language teaching and applied linguistics"(np). These authors went on to say that since the mid – 1980's there has been a renewed interest in the role of vocabulary in second language learning. From that time on ESL/EFL teachers, researchers, curriculum designers, theorists, methodologists paid more attention to the importance of vocabulary teaching in the process of language acquisition.

Zimmerman as cited in Coady, J. & Huckin (1997) presented the main four trends that approached vocabulary instruction throughout the history of second/foreign language teaching. The first trend was Grammar Translation Method. It was implemented in Prussia at the end of the eighteenth century with the purpose of preparing students to read and write classical materials and succeed in standardized exams. According to Zimmerman vocabulary instruction relied more on definition and etymology of Latin and Greek. Bilingual dictionaries were the main tools in vocabulary retention and students were supposed to memorize long lists of words with their equivalent in their mother tongue.

The second trend was called the Direct Method. It developed in the USA by the end of nineteenth century by Sauver and expanded by Berlitz. It considered interaction at the center of language acquisition. "Its proponents used target language as the language of instruction" (Coady & Huckin, 1997, p.8). The proponents of this trend criticized and reacted against grammar translation method because of its neglect of realistic oral language. They advocated the use of simple and familiar vocabulary without translation.

The third trend was known as Audio-Lingual Method or Structural Approach. It developed in the USA by structural linguists during Second World War. The founder of this trend was Fries. "With the structure or grammar as the starting point, the Audio-Lingual Method payed systematic attention to pronunciation and intensive oral drilling of basic sentence pattern"(Coady & Huckin, 1997,p.10). Highly influenced by Behaviorist theory, they thought that, by memorizing words through drills, students would develop their vocabulary skills and language proficiency.

The last main important trend is Communicative Language Teaching known also as Communicative Approach. The publication of Noam Chomsky's Syntactic Structures in 1957 was remarkable. The ideas of a universal grammar and that children are born with biological predisposition to acquire language changed the view of language acquisition and vocabulary instruction. Dell Hymes in 1972 introduced the concept of communicative competence. "He did not reject Chomsky's model but he gave greater emphasis to the sociolinguistic and pragmatic factors governing effective language use" (Coady& Huckin, 1997, p.12). Hymes theorized that grammar and vocabulary should be taught and learned through communication. From his perspective fluency is more important than accuracy. Thus, the teacher's role is to design effective communicative activities so that students can acquire vocabulary through communication.

II. The Importance of Vocabulary Teaching

The importance of vocabulary teaching cannot be denied. Vocabulary plays a significant role in language learning. It is the foundation of language acquisition. That is, there is no language without vocabulary. It is the building blocks of every language. Wilkins, an outstanding methodologist in the field of vocabulary instruction argued that "without grammar little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (Thonbury, 2002, p.13). The author's intention is not to underestimate the role of Grammar in language learning but to show the prominence that vocabulary has in the process of language acquisition. This means that even if we do not master grammar we can say some words, but without vocabulary we cannot express ourselves.

Therefore, ESL (English as Second Language) and EFL (English as Foreign Language) teachers should never underestimate the value of vocabulary in their instruction. Wilkins' statement shows how essential vocabulary is in every language. Even to explain grammar rules, teachers need vocabulary. They cannot explain grammar terminologies without vocabulary.

Branum et al. (2009) stated that "**V**ocabulary is essential for understanding the meaning of spoken and written language. The more words known, the better prepared students will be for using and understanding languages"(p.897). Therefore, if English teachers neglect vocabulary instruction, their students will not be able to master oral and written language. When the students do not master vocabulary, they struggle to understand the assignments. They have problems in reading comprehension. A student that has vocabulary problems is not able to comprehend a text fully. According to Dalton & Grisham (2011) to understand a text, one must understand the words that represent the ideas or concepts. If students' vocabulary is poor they will fail to understand the central and supporting ideas of the text.

Some researchers found correlations between vocabulary skills and reading comprehension. Their findings suggest that there is a direct relationship between vocabulary skills and reading comprehension.

Students who begin school with more vocabulary knowledge tend to comprehend the texts they read and, as their reading comprehension increases, their vocabulary knowledge expands accordingly. Conversely, students who begin school with limited vocabulary knowledge may struggle with reading comprehension and that struggle will limit their vocabulary growth (Jalongo, M., & Sobolak, M., 2011, p.423).

When ESL and EFL students know a lot of words, it is easier for them to understand and interpret the text. Good reading skills help them acquire new words and expand their vocabulary. Additionally, vocabulary helps students develop language skills. "Vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how will learners speak, listen, read and write" (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p.255). ESL and EFL learners cannot speak fluently or write well if they do not master vocabulary. Lack of vocabulary will jeopardize their listening skills and reading comprehension development. For instance, without basic vocabulary they will not be able to communicate with others, give their opinions and participate in the class. When they listen to songs or watch movies they will not understand. They will struggle to write essays. Without vocabulary they will not develop these macro skills and without them, their level of language proficiency will be very low.

The opposite is also true because when ESL and EFL learners master vocabulary, their language skills become strong as well. They will be capable of interacting with their teachers and colleagues in English. They will be better prepared to analyze movies, songs, speeches and lectures and write responses about them.

Lack of vocabulary can be a demotivating factor. It can prevent students from reaching their full potential in the language acquisition. "Without an extensive vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new vocabulary , learners often achieve less than their potential and may be discouraged from making use of language learning opportunities around them" (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p.255). Lack of vocabulary prevents them from   doing their assignments and participating in class. As a result, they become anxious and frustrated. Anxiety and frustration lead to demotivation and demotivation leads to low academic performance.

III. Incidental versus Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

For long period of time methodologists argued if vocabulary instruction should be incidental or explicit. Some methodologists and researchers advocated that vocabulary should not be taught explicitly. They believed that students acquire vocabulary in reading comprehension, grammar activities, listening, speaking, and writing activities.

Nation, quoted by Richards & Renandya (2002), opposed this view and argued for a systematic rather than an incidental approach to the teaching of vocabulary. That is, teachers should include vocabulary instruction in their lesson plans. They should teach it deliberately and explicitly. From his perspective, second language learners are often not capable to take advantage from incidental vocabulary acquisition through reading because they have limited vocabularies. He contradicted the main stream theorists that advocated vocabulary teaching within contexts and wrote: "There is an assumption that all vocabulary learning should be in context. Considerable research shows that explicit decontextualized study of vocabulary is an effective way of rapidly increasing learners' vocabulary size"(p.271). In his view the deliberate learning of vocabulary may contribute directly to implicit knowledge if the words learned are not difficult and if the learning is meaningful.

Dalton & Grisham (2011) supported a balanced view. These authors considered that direct vocabulary instruction was essential. However, they stated that students with well-developed vocabulary learn many more words indirectly through reading than from instruction. Sonbul & Schmitt (2010) went further to state that "In practice, teachers of English in many foreign language contexts combine explicit and incidental approaches, and with good reason, as research has shown that this combination is effective"(p.253).

My personal experience as a teacher of EFL students   supports more this latter view of vocabulary instruction. That is, when I used games to teach specific words, my 11th grade students succeeded in retaining them. When I applied games to teach grammar, students were able to memorize important words, meanings and concepts. A balanced view of vocabulary instruction was extremely efficient in my classroom.

IV. Techniques for Vocabulary Instruction

There are many traditional techniques for vocabulary presentation. Some of them require the use of visual aids; whereas others require bilingual dictionaries and are supported by grammar translation approach. Gairns and Redman (1986), cited by Uberman (1998), suggested the following types of vocabulary presentation techniques:

- Visual techniques that refers to visual memory that is considered particularly helpful with vocabulary retention. The authors specified that learners are much more able to remember the material that has been presented with visual aids. They help students associate presented material in a meaningful way and incorporate it into their system of language values.

- Verbal explanation that refers to to the use of illustrative situations, synonymy, opposites, scales definition and categories.
- Use of dictionaries to find out meanings of unfamiliar words and expressions. Students can make use of a variety of dictionaries: bilingual, monolingual, pictorial, and thesauri.

V. Effectiveness of Educational Games in Teaching Vocabulary

For some researchers in the field of vocabulary teaching games are more efficient than the traditional techniques suggested by Gairns and Redman. They see games as a powerful tool to teach vocabulary. For instance, Uberman (1998) who conducted a primary study in the field of vocabulary teaching came up with the following conclusion: "My research has produced some evidence which shows that games are useful and more successful than other methods of vocabulary presentation and revision. Having such evidence at hand, I wish to recommend the wide use of games with vocabulary work as a successful way of acquiring language competence (p.10)."

She chose two groups of third form students. With one of them she used a presentation game and with the other group she used translation and context guessing. In both groups, the abilities of the students varied, ranging from those whose command of English was very good, able to communicate easily using a wide variety of vocabulary and grammatical structures, and those who found it difficult to communicate. The analysis of the results suggests that the first group got an average mark of 3.9 as compared to 3.4 obtained by the second group. In other words, the group which had learned vocabulary through games performed significantly better.

Su Kim (1995) stated that games encourage students to interact and to communicate create meaningful context for language use and provide language practice in the various skills – speaking, writing, listening and reading. These macro skills are useful in the implicit vocabulary learning. When they listen and read they acquire vocabulary. When they speak and write they practice vocabulary. This helps them strengthen their vocabulary skills.

The interaction in the course of the game provides the students with opportunity to use vocabulary. The context generated by games is useful for vocabulary retention. The students have more opportunity to practice the language. They are not afraid of making mistakes because they use the language in an amusing way. Nguyen T. T. Huyen & Khuat T.T.Nga (2003) went even beyond to argue that the roles of games in teaching and learning vocabulary cannot be denied since they help students to learn and retain new words more easily, by bringing real world context in the classroom and by improving the students' use of English in a flexible, communicative way. Thus, games provide an amusing and relaxed atmosphere which makes students remember words and memorize them faster.

They conducted an action research in Vietnam in a CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) class. The class was composed by twenty secondary school students. The objective of the study was to prove the effectiveness of games in vocabulary retention and students' reaction toward the use of games. The researchers used different kinds of games in their lessons .Over a period of two weeks they applied many games in their classes at the Distance Education Center (DEC) to learn from the reactions of the learners whether they liked games or not and if games could help to improve their existing vocabulary. The games that were implemented were: Hangman (guessing words that belong to the topic of jobs), animal squares (words puzzle) and advertisement poster competition (making an advertisement for a travel tour), and so on. Another way for them to gather data was to interview their learners at DEC orally to understand their expectations, problems and progress in their process of learning vocabulary. In addition, they observed the classes of CLT teachers.

A small post-class survey was also conducted by them to elicit the feelings of the students and their own experiences in learning vocabulary. They designed a simple questionnaire in advance as a way to help students comprehend clearly the purpose of the survey. For the purpose of data triangulation the researchers interviewed a graduate student who had conducted a similar research one year before.

The study's results suggested that most of the learners (17 out of 20) were willing to join their games in groups and they tried their best to be the winners. The students especially liked such games as "Hangman", animal squares and advertisement poster competition. Students collaborated quite actively in games that required group work, even the quiet students. They progressed a lot in English vocabulary and games helped them learn new words and phrases that appeared in the games and recall their existing vocabulary at the same time. The researchers applied a posttest to assess the effectiveness of game in vocabulary retention. They chose the game "Hangman" with the topic of jobs to check students' memory of the vocabulary introduced in previous lessons. All the twenty students got eleven correct answers out of twelve job cards which were passed out.

"If it is accepted that games can provide intense and meaningful practice of language, then they must be regarded as central to a language teacher's repertoire and not merely a way of passing the time"(Wright, Betteridge &Buckby, 1984,p.2). My professional experience has proved that whenever games are used at the core of vocabulary instruction students memorize words better. Therefore, I highly suggest their use for the purpose of teaching vocabulary for L2 and L3 English students.

Methodology

This study has as its purpose is to discover if educational games are effective in vocabulary instruction and learning. Thus, with the purpose of expanding students' vocabulary in English vocabulary games were used to achieve this goal. It was used the same games used by Nguyen T. T. Huyen & Khuat T.T.Nga mentioned in the previous chapter. However, they were adapted to the students' reality.

I. Sample Population

The sample of this study was composed by Seventeen first year undergraduate students of Public Relations and Executive Secretariat from CVPU- Cape Verde Public University (Pseudonym) in Cape Verde. There were 13 females and 4 male student participants, with an age range from 19 to 36 years old. The social status of the student participants is poor. The reason why this classroom was selected is because of their lack of comfort to express themselves in English due to their low level of language proficiency and the lack of fundamental vocabulary which was hindering them from acquiring the language skills. The fact of being the researcher the English professor facilitated the process in terms of data collection.

II. Procedures for Data Analysis

The method for data gathering is mixed: qualitative and quantitative data collection. With the purpose to obtain the information necessary to answer the research questions it was chosen two data collection instrument as a way to avoid doubts arising during the data collection phase and to ensure the clarity of the data: a survey and a test on vocabulary. The purpose of the survey was used to gather data related to students' opinions and attitudes toward vocabulary teaching and learning and the test on vocabulary was used to quantify the data of students' performance.

The test was divided in four parts. The first part dealt with reading comprehension. The second part was related to vocabulary development. The third part was grammar and the last one was written production. It was paid a closer attention to the second part because it was about vocabulary. However, the students were also tested in the first and last parts of the test. The purpose was to assess the learning of implicit vocabulary instruction through reading and writing. The test was taken at the end of the first semester. The students were informed beforehand and they were given topics and objectives that were going to be assessed in the test.

To score the first instrument (survey) it was built a three-column table (see appendix I). The first column has the questions surveyed. The second one has the raw number of students' responses. The last one has the percentage of each response for each question. The data were analyzed through anecdotes. To score the test on vocabulary it was used a correction grid (see appendix III). It was used both qualitative and quantitative marks. That is, from zero to nine point four is Fair (F). From nine point five to eleven is satisfactory (D). From Eleven to thirteen is good (C). From fourteen to sixteen is very good and from seventeen to twenty is excellent.

This study was valid and internally reliable. It may lack external reliability because it was chosen a small sample size. However, a longitudinal study is recommended for the purpose of this study generalization.

Data Analysis

This chapter is a discussion of proposed data using two instruments, one qualitative and one quantitative. The purpose is to analyze the effectiveness of educational games in vocabulary teaching.

Instrument I: Survey Analysis Table

The students were surveyed to find out their attitudes and feelings regarding the effectiveness of games in vocabulary instruction. The questions 1 and 2 were related to students' attitudes toward vocabulary instruction. The questions 3 and 4 dealt with their attitudes toward the use of traditional techniques such as grammar translation and long lists of words in vocabulary teaching. The questions 5 to 7 were to test their attitudes towards the use of games in vocabulary instruction. After surveying the students the data were put together as shown in the table below:

	Positive attitudes	Negative attitudes	Neuter
Vocabulary instruction	15	0	2
Translation and use of long lists of vocabulary	3	13	1
Use of games in vocabulary	15	0	2

The table above shows that a great amount of students appreciates vocabulary teaching. Fifteen students have positive attitudes toward vocabulary instruction. The same number of students has positive attitudes toward the use of games in vocabulary instruction. This represents 88.2% of students surveyed. There is rejection of traditional methods for vocabulary instruction on the part of the students surveyed. That is, only three of them have positive attitudes toward grammar translation and use of long lists of vocabularies.

Instrument II: Test on Vocabulary

The students took the test on vocabulary at the end of the first semester. The purpose was to assess their level of vocabulary skills and the effectiveness of games in vocabulary instruction. In Cape Verdean Educational system the grade scale goes from 0 to 20 points. From 0 to 9.4 is F; from 9.5 to 10.5 is D; from 11-13 is C; from 14 to 16 is B and from 17 to 20 is A. The results were very satisfactory. One student got 17, four students got 18, five students scored 19 and 7 students scored 20. The result of the test on vocabulary reflects the effectiveness of games in vocabulary instruction.

Conclusion

All the two instruments used pointed out students' positive attitudes toward the use of games in vocabulary instruction. Eighty eight point two percent of students voiced that they like and learn best vocabulary through games. The test on vocabulary in particular showed a very significant increase in their vocabulary level. To sum up, the results achieved in this research suggest that games are a powerful and effective technique in vocabulary instruction.

Appendix

Appendix I: Students' survey
The purpose of this survey is to find out students' opinions and attitudes toward the use of games in vocabulary instruction. Read all the questions carefully and provide reliable information. You are required only to put a cross(X) in front of the best option. Thank you for your collaboration.

1. How do you find learning vocabulary in English?	
Easy	
Difficult	
I don't know	

2. Do you like your vocabulary class?	
Yes	
No	
sometimes	
I don't know.	

3. How do you feel when your English teacher gives you long lists of vocabulary to memorize?	
Bored	
Excited	
Demotivated	
Motivated	

4. How do you feel when your English teacher gives you a lot of words to translate?	
Bored	
Excited	
Demotivated	
Motivated	

5. How do you feel when your English teacher used games to teach you vocabulary?	
Bored	
Excited	
Demotivated	
Motivated	

6. When did you learn more words in English?	
When your teacher asked you to translate words from Portuguese to English	
When you went through dictionary to find out the meaning of words	
When your teacher used interesting games to teach you vocabulary	

7. Are vocabulary classes more enjoyable now than in the first trimester?	

Much more enjoyable	
A bit more enjoyable	
The same	
I don't see any difference	
Less enjoyable	

Appendix II- Survey Analysis Table

1. How do you find learning vocabulary in English?		
	Raw number	Percentage
Easy		
Difficult		
I don't know		

2. Do you like your vocabulary class?		
	Raw number	Percentage
Yes		
No		
Sometimes		
I don't know.		

3. How do you feel when your English teacher gives you long lists of vocabulary to memorize?		
	Raw number	Percentage
Bored		
Excited		
Demotivated		
Motivated		

4. How do you feel when your English teacher gives you a lot of words to translate?		
	Raw number	Percentage
Bored		
Excited		
Demotivated		
Motivated		

5. How do you feel when your English teacher used games to teach you vocabulary?		
	Raw number	Percentage
Bored		
Excited		
Demotivated		
Motivated		

6. When did you learn more words in English?		
	Raw number	Percentage
When your teacher asked you to translate words from Portuguese to English		
When you went through dictionary to find out the meaning of words		
When your teacher used interesting games to teach you vocabulary		

7. Are vocabulary classes more enjoyable now than in the first trimester?		
	Raw number	Percentage
Much more enjoyable		
A bit more enjoyable		
The same		
I don't see any difference		

Less enjoyable		

Appendix III - Correction Grid

1. Answer the following questions about the text.
a) Existing research shows that young people are stimulated to participate in these sites to maintain strong relations with friends, to build ties with new friends, and to meet new people online.
b) The dangers that young people may be exposed when connected by online social networks are: Unsafe disclosure of information, cyber bullying, addiction, risky behavior and contacting dangerous communities.

2. **Decide whether the following sentences are TRUE or FALSE. Correct the false ones.**

	True	False
a). In the past, critics believed that Internet would decrease alienation from society and public life.		
In the past, critics believed internet would increase alienation from society and public life.		X
b). Some psychologists and neuroscientists believe that social networking sites have more disadvantages than advantages.	X	
c). Facebook makes young people very other-centered.		X
Facebook makes young people very selfish.		
d). Social networking websites are causing tremendous changes in the brains of young users.		
	X	

3. "A growing number of psychologists and neuroscientists believe social networking sites may be doing more bad than good." Do you agree with them? Justify. (2 points)
N/b: Students' opinions

II. Vocabulary Development

4. a) Complete the following table according to the knowledge you have about British and American English. (0.5 X 16= 8points)

American English	British English	Portuguese
Elevator	lift	elevador
sidewalk	Pavement	passadeira
candies	Sweets	drops
French fries	chips	batatas fritas
schedule	timetable	horario
apartment	flat	apartamento
sneakers	trainers	sapatilha
cookies	Biscuits	bolachas

b) Choose the right option – (*a, b,* or *c*) for each sentence. ------- (1X6= 6points)
1-c
2-b
3-a
4- a
5-c
6-b

III. Grammar
5-Transform the following sentences from Active to Passive Voice.
a) The king's castle was built by these men.
b) Strawberry juice will be drunk by Peter tomorrow.
c) Basketball had been played by our children before.
d) A nice car is going to be bought by my sister.
6-Underline, in each case, the most suitable adjective.
a) Excited b) amazing c) boring d) amazing

7- Assessment Criteria (4 points):
- Clarity of speech
- Command of English Vocabulary
- Organization of ideas

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