



Teaching Vocabulary through Games in the EFL Classroom: A Case Study

Zhanar Baimbetova¹

PhD student, Turkey¹

Abstract

Teaching a foreign language to very young children has been an increasingly dominant trend in this rapidly globalizing world. The most common foreign language in Turkey is English which in public schools is taught from 2nd grade. However English is taught as a main subject in private kindergartens and elementary schools of Turkey. Like any other children around the world Turkish students accept new foreign languages easily, but they get bored very fast if the teacher is teaching them using the old traditional methods and techniques. The study overviews the teaching of English vocabulary through games to young learners in this case to kindergarten students. This will be a report of an observation conducted at a Private kindergarten in Ankara. The participants for this study were one teacher and fifteen students. The result of this research will be useful for teachers of the kindergarten level in the EFL context to help them improve their performance in teaching and eliminate the stress factor from classrooms in learning foreign languages at a very young age.

Keywords: *vocabulary teaching and learning, vocabulary games, kindergarten.*

1. Introduction

Children start kindergarten at the age of 3-6 before they enter a primary school in Turkey, in Kazakhstan, and in many other countries. At these ages, they are naturally curious and enthusiastic to explore the world around them. They like to be active and have a lot of energy which make kindergarten best time to benefit from physical activities to teach a language. Most children are keen to gain new experiences including learning a new language. English is considered as a foreign language for the Turkish children, which is learnt from kindergarten level until University level. English is completely different from Turkish language being look at from the system of structure, pronunciation and vocabulary. The teacher should give the materials through an interesting technique in order to make the learners enjoy the teaching-learning process. At an early age foreign language should be taught in a playful way and full of physical movement with varied activities (do not give them the same activities day by day) so that they are not aware that they are learning language. By playing children have a chance to explore, find out, express their feelings. Thus, this study will begin with defining the concept of kindergarten, further continue with the literature review section in which studies on teaching vocabulary to young learners will be discussed, finally it will accentuate on examining the effectiveness of using some sample of games which are described in Table 1 below as the best techniques in learning and revising vocabulary. The study is aimed at answering the following questions: 1. Do vocabulary games attract the students' attention in learning? 2. How well vocabulary games encourage the kindergarten students' vocabulary mastery?

2. Kindergarten

Kindergarten is an educational institution for young children, usually between ages 4 and 6. Even though the goals of Kindergarten may vary nationally and by each individual school, typically it is aimed in helping the young children in social, emotional, and academic development. It also includes the use of language, the development of an initial understanding of mathematics. In addition to math and language arts, which are a major focus of kindergarten, children also learn science, art, music, health and safety, and physical education. Even though not every child is obliged to attend a kindergarten, it marks the start of a child's academic career, which will help children to develop their knowledge, creativity, through their activities in the school. The aforementioned definition of Kindergarten alligns with what Friedrich Froebel is the first educator who opened the first kindergarten in Germany in 1837 said about kindergarten. He considered that children should be given chances to learn about their self ability, talent, and their environment before they enter the public school. Froebel described children as plants and teachers as gardeners, the term kindergarten emerged, kinder meaning child and garten meaning garden (Headley, 1965). In his school, Froebel (1974) emphasized



play, which started with simple activities and later progressed to more complex games. He felt that children should learn through play.

3. Literature Review

Teaching Vocabulary to Young Learners

Vocabulary is one of the main aspects of any language that plays an important role in building the four skills in English. Oxford (1990) claims that vocabulary is the most sizeable and unmanageable component in learning of any language, whether a foreign or one's mother tongue, because of tens of thousands of different meanings. Developing vocabulary will be great if it can be started from a young age. According to research it is more effective if children start to experience and hear the language when they are small. In general, it is agreed upon that children learn languages faster and easier than adults because their language center of the brain is still developing and they do not have any worries or responsibilities. Also, they are better at learning any language when they are exposed to it naturally for a long-term. They are great word learners. They have some special characteristics that can make them easier in learning vocabulary. Children cannot learn by themselves, they need a good teacher to facilitate them in learning. Nation (1974) claims that teachers should facilitate vocabulary learning by teaching learners useful words and by helping learners figure out meanings on their own. He also states that learners perceive the form of the words by dint of three different senses; visually, tactilely, and aurally. Playing games is a useful and enjoyable method to teach vocabulary to children because they are hyper, physically active. Games help children learn vocabulary effectively without boredom and acquire the lessons easily. According to Allen (1983), games are important in teaching vocabulary because they highlight the necessary and important words to achieve the objectives of the game. Huyen Ang Nga, (2003) and Uberman, (1998) agreed that games create a fun and relaxed atmosphere where young learners could learn fast and retain words better. For example, children benefit most from games which require moving around, imitating a model, competing between groups and the like (Siek-Piskozub, 1994, p.38). The statements above mean, vocabulary is important to teach and teachers must try to find the most effective games to teach vocabulary that help to avoid lack of motivation or interest in class and children's reluctance to participate in class activities. If games are chosen and used properly, with well-defined aims, they can be an amazing tool in the language teachers' hands. Many games for children are played to reach or revise a certain vocabulary or language structures. Some games are indoor and some outdoor, some quiet and some noisy, and it can be moving, sitting, or standing. But the main aim of using games should be to set an atmosphere in class in which students can have fun, but most of all an atmosphere in which they will participate willingly and do not realize that they have learnt something. For them, the learning process should happen incidentally in which children can enjoy their favorite activities and learn a new language at the same time. Children will find them more enjoyable, be more motivated and remember the language better. Moreover, teachers should remember that children are learners who love to play and learn best when they are enjoying themselves. The writer conducts the study to examine how effective the sample of games below in teaching vocabulary.

Table 2. Vocabulary Games for learning and revising vocabulary.

Name of Game	Description	Skill /Language Areas	Number of Players	Age Group
1. Switch your places	Students are divided into pairs, they are given the same flashcard with the keyword. Four students stand on the left, four students stand on the right facing each other. (2 meters distance at least). When teacher calls out the word students having the same flashcards representing that word running and changing their places. Speed can be increased to have more fun.	Cooperation; Vocabulary Learning; Pronunciation.	Best played with 8 students	4-5



2. Bowling	The flashcards representing the keywords are tacked to the skittles. Students are given the balls and they should roll the ball towards the word called out by a teacher.	Motor skills; Vocabulary Learning; Pronunciation.	Any number	4-5
3. Run to me	Flashcards are fastened to students clothes when teacher calls out the word the student who has that flashcard is running towards the teacher and hits her/his hands. Speed can be increased to have more fun.	Vocabulary Learning; Pronunciation	Best played with 4 students	4-5
4. Pull the Rope	Flashcards are taped in the middle of the ropes and placed on the ground facing up. E.g. 4 flashcards *4 ropes. Two chairs for each flashcard. Students are turning around while music is playing and when a teacher pauses the music she/he calls out the word and the student who sits on the chair and pulls it first under the chair is a winner.	Vocabulary Learning Pronunciation	Best played with 2 students	4-5
5. Mingle, Mingle.	Students make a line in a straight row and each given a flashcard faced up on the ground. One commander student is standing faced back to them and says mingle several times at that time students are changing their places when the student standing faced back says stop and calling out one of the keywords, the student who has that flashcard joins the commander student and etc. The game finishes when there is one student left, that student is a winner.	Vocabulary revision;	Best played with 6 students	4-5

4. Method

This study is conducted in the form of a survey. It is descriptive in nature. To describe how vocabulary games work in teaching vocabulary, an observation sheet which focused on the number of correct and incorrect answers provided by children during a vocabulary revision game, checklist to answer each question in the research question were used. Non-participant observation technique was used in the study that is the writer did not take part in teaching-learning activities but only observed the teacher and the students.

5. Participants

The participants of the study were fifteen students and two English language teachers of the kindergarten. Learners were at age of five or six. Children have seven hours of English language lesson every week which are taught by two different teachers who are coded as Teacher 1 and Teacher 2. All the participants started their English classes at age of three, so they have been learning it for two years. All children had no contact with English outside classroom. There were no children with special educational needs.

6. Procedure

The writer and Teacher 1 acted as observers while Teacher 2 employed games in teaching vocabulary. Before starting to teach children's knowledge of the 8 keywords to be learned was assessed by representing the pictures of the new keywords. If the child knew the English equivalent of any of the keywords, they were asked to say it out loud. If students did not know it, they were asked to indicate that by saying "I do not know". None of the children recognized/translated correctly English equivalents of the keywords to be learned. Afterwards, the teacher represented the children an image of each word, and asked them to say in Turkish what it represented. The pictures were represented in a different order than the previously represented keywords. All students were able to identify correctly and say the Turkish word for the pictures represented by the teacher. After that Teacher 2 started to present the new keywords. The picture of each keyword was represented and the correct pronunciation of the English keyword was sounded out. All words were presented 3 times each. Then



teacher started to teach four keywords via vocabulary games for two sessions. Thereafter, she employed a vocabulary revision game to assess how well students learnt the new keywords. The following two sessions she taught the other four keywords via vocabulary games, then again she played a vocabulary revision game to assess how well students learnt them. Teacher 1, who observed the learning process and students' behaviors was given a checklist which is given below in Table 2.

Table 2. Checklist for Teachers about Vocabulary Games.

No	Statement	All of the Students	Most of the Students	Half of the Students	Few Students	None of the Students
1	Students are having fun while playing a vocabulary game.	v				
2	Students actively participate in playing a vocabulary game.		v			
3	Students look bored while playing a vocabulary game.					x
4	Students follow the vocabulary game while their friends are playing.	v				
5	Students display more understanding of vocabulary when they learn through vocabulary games.	v				
6	Students raise their hands to participate in playing the vocabulary game.		v			
7	Students actively comment about the vocabulary game.		v			
8	Students complain while they are playing the vocabulary game.					x
9	Students have memorized all the new vocabulary taught via the vocabulary game.		v			
10	Students are quiet and do not participate in the vocabulary game.				v just one	
11	Students are relaxed with the teacher while playing a vocabulary game.	v				
12	Students want to participate in playing vocabulary games several times.		v			

7. The Research Outcome

According to the results from observation checklist, Teacher 1 thinks that the used vocabulary games could attract the students' attention in learning activity, only one student was quiet because he is introverted in nature. It could be seen from Table 2, that the atmosphere in teaching and learning is getting more active while playing games. Table 2 indicates that most of the students were eager to participate in playing vocabulary games. According to the results from observation sheet, during a vocabulary revision game 13 learners provided correct responses and 2 learners provided incorrect responses.



8. Discussion

Observation of the class with fifteen learners showed that Teacher 2 did not employ the use of mother tongue in teaching vocabulary and giving instructions about how to play a vocabulary game. Teacher 2 provided explanation of the game in the target language and students displayed understanding because first she demonstrated herself how to play the vocabulary game. Teacher 1 believes that while playing vocabulary games all students were having fun. The answer given by Teacher 1 proved that all students actively participated in playing a vocabulary game and none of them was bored. Moreover, all students were following the procedure of the game while they were waiting for their turn to play. Students displayed understanding of the keywords and most of them were commenting about the game. Furthermore, all students were relaxed with their teacher while playing however, there was one student who was quiet and did not raise his hand to play the vocabulary game. Table 2 shows that most of the students could memorize the keywords.

9. Conclusion

Playing vocabulary games provide an enjoyable, comfortable atmosphere so that it works on students successfully. The result of this research showed that the games which have been employed by the teacher could improve very young learners' achievement in vocabulary learning. Therefore, five sample of games which have been employed to teach vocabulary in this study are possible to be applied again. For instance in teaching young learners aged 5 years old vocabulary games can be played without using a mother tongue. There is misconception like using vocabulary games a lot can only make students feel hyperactive, thus, they do not learn anything. In the case of very young learners playing games can increase students' concentration. As long as the teacher knows the aims and objectives of the game it is considered as a valuable pedagogical tool in learning vocabulary. The important point to be considered by the teacher is whether or not particular games are appropriate for his or her students, how children react to a particular game. Nation (1928:27) states that a good vocabulary teaching technique has the following things: a) it interests the learners; b) it makes the learners give attention to the form meaning or use of the words; c) it gives a chance for repetition. In fact, the results of the study obtained showed that teaching vocabulary via games was entertaining and effective. However, the study had its own particular weaknesses, the data obtained cannot be used as a fully reliable source of reference because of its limited character. It can, though, be used as a background and an incentive for further exploration of this thematic area modifying the conditions of research which might generate more reliable results.

References

- [1] Allen, V. F. "Techniques in Teaching Vocabulary". Oxford University Press 1983.
- [2] Asher, J., & Ben, S. P. "The learning strategy of Total Physical Response: Some Age Differences". *Child Development*, 38(4),1967, 1219-1227.
- [3] Butler Y.G. Teaching English to young learners: The influence of global and local factors. In J. Enever, J. Moon, & U. Raman (Eds.), "Young learner English language policy and implementation: International perspectives" 2009. pp. 23–29. Reading, UK: Garnet Education. pp.88-89
- [4] Cameron, L. "Teaching languages to young learners". Cambridge: Cambridge University 2001
- [5] Froebel, F. "Outline of a plan for founding and developing a kindergarten". In I. M. 1967a.
- [6] Headley, N. "The kindergarten: Its place in the program of education". (3rd ed.). New York: The Center for Applied Research in Education 1965.
- [7] Huyen, N., & Nga, K. "Learning Vocabulary Through Games". *Asian EFL Journal* 2003.
- [8] Lilley I.M (Ed.), Friedrich Froebel "A selection from his writing". Cambridge University Press; Reissue edition March 11, 2010.
- [9] Nation, I.S.P. "Techniques for teaching vocabulary". *English Teaching Forum* 12, 3. 1974 pp.18-21.
- [10] Oxford, R. L. "Language Learning Strategies. What Every Teacher should know". Boston: Heinle and 323 Heinle. 1990.
- [11] Siek-Piskozub, T. *Vocabulary Teaching Games*. Warsaw. WSIP. 1994.
- [12] Uberman, A. "The use of games for vocabulary presentation and revision". *Forum*, 36(1), 1998. pp.20-27.