EFFECTIVE AND AFFECTIVE VOCABULARY LEARNING THROUGH GAMES

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Abstract

Learning a foreign language is hard work. Learners must apply a lot of effort to understand, to repeat accurately, to manipulate newly understood language and to use the whole range of known language in language production (conversation or writing). They have to pay attention to proper pronunciation, correct language structures and their appropriate use. Attention and effort are required at every moment and must be maintained over a long period of time.

Games help and encourage learners to sustain their interest and work. Games also help the teacher to create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful. They bring real language into the classroom.

They encourage learning, cooperation, all types of communication (agreeing, arguing criticizing, explaining, etc.) they capture interest, increase motivation, very often develop thinking and logic, and bring enjoyment and fun into the classroom.

The enjoyment of games is not restricted by age. Some learners enjoy them more than others, but this does not depend on their age. It is usually related to the appropriateness and to the role of the player. But generally most learners welcome games and are even prepared to take part in games which they would consider a little juvenile or rather boring in their mother tongues.

The essential ingredient of a game is a challenge. This is not synonymous with competition. Older teenagers and adults might be reluctant to compete, being too shy or afraid of losing. All games must be carefully selected, modified to the learners’ socio – cultural background and the level of language, appropriately set, explained, carried out and evaluated.

The workshop will discuss the benefits of vocabulary games in general from the point of view of psychology. It will especially concentrate on their communicative aspects and provide the participants with a sample range of such games with an on-going discussion on their advantages and disadvantages for creating a communicative and effective English lesson.

Keywords: Foreign language vocabulary, effective teaching and learning, vocabulary games.

1 INTRODUCTION

Modern foreign language teaching and learning should be based on the following important principles [3]:

- We learn a language to communicate
- We should respect the individuality of our learner
- Learning should be a positive experience
- We should enable our learners to reach their full potential.

Looking at these principles, which should form our approach to our teaching, we understand that our lessons should be interesting, motivating, enjoyable and engaging. According to the basic methodology, we should practice all four communication skills, speaking, listening, writing and reading. With all this in our minds, do we pay enough attention to vocabulary learning and practice, while using modern communicative methods? Both the public and learners evaluate vocabulary knowledge very highly. Even advanced learners, when encountering a new vocabulary unit, they stop me, ask to repeat it, about its spelling and meaning, possible collocations, and sometimes write it down. That is because vocabulary is perceived to have a great communicative value and lexical errors impair communication to a greater extent than mistakes made in grammar or syntax.
Some linguists call vocabulary the designating part of the language, others define it as building material. Harmer [4] says: “If language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and the flesh.” Whatever the linguists call and explain vocabulary, they all agree that it is very important and learning, teaching and acquiring it is of the utmost importance. But it is also very difficult, sometimes learning active vocabulary is considered to be the most difficult part of learning a language. That is because vocabulary is mostly acquired by employing our verbal memory: logics, deduction, analysis and other operations.

And human memory is not perfect in its effectiveness and durability. It is affected by forgetting, which reveals itself in the loss of material, and its unavailability or radical changes in it. According to psychologists, it depends on many aspects: the way of learning and repeating, the kind of motivation, the structure of the material, perceived sense, time, health state of the learner and many others.

Teaching vocabulary is more than just presenting new words. It is a process, very much influenced by knowledge of psychology, which has certain justified stages and rules. The learner needs not only to learn a lot of words, but also to remember them. This is why the process of vocabulary acquisition employs both short-term and long-term memory and the aim is to place new words in long-term memory.

Long term-memory has an enormous capacity and its contents are durable over a long period of time. But if the vocabulary units are not properly ordered, related and stored, they easily vanish.

To ensure that the material moves into permanent long-term memory, a number of principles need to be observed. A new lexical unit has to be correctly presented, adequately practised in structures, collocations and different contexts, explained with its grammar and pronunciation, several times repeated and retrieved, and personally organised.

Language games usually involve comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language. “Retention depends on the elaborateness of the final decoding, with material more likely to be remembered when information is more deeply processed [6].

Brown [2] presented that: “Although research is inconclusive about left- and right-hemisphere participation in language acquisition, a number of empirical and observational studies indicate that adults might benefit from a healthy dose of right-brain-oriented activities in the foreign language classroom”. Steve Lever stated at the ATE conference in 2006 that: “The brain never forgets which is encoded with emotions and context”.

And this is where vocabulary games could be used. This is their justified position. Thinking about words, visualising them, seeing and saying them, playing with them. “Games are a vital part of a teacher’s equipment, not only for the language practice they provide, but also for the therapeutic effect they have” [4]. But all games must be carefully selected, modified to the learner’s socio – cultural background, level of language and teaching targets, appropriately set, explained, carried out and evaluated.

2 METHODOLOGY

We all suppose that games bring real language, context and emotions to the classroom, they can be used at any stage of a lesson, any level of language knowledge, for any age, or group size, even in precisely targeted courses, they are related to fun and enjoyment and they help our students learn.

But are they really as interesting, enjoyable, motivating and inspiring as we would expect? Do our learners enjoy them? And do they consider them beneficial or just a relief and relaxation from the usual routine? Do adult learners or university students appreciate the pains their preparation takes?

In our last session in the semester, I practiced 5 different vocabulary games and later asked my students about their evaluation and preferences. The participants were the students of our Faculty of Social and Economic Studies at the Jan Evangelista Purkyne University in Usti nad Labem in the Czech Republic.

We have three different study specializations, Economics and Management, Regional Development and Social Work. The students in question were those from Economics and Management, who have chosen English as their first foreign language. They were at that time in their first class of their studies, the second semester. They have already completed some introductory courses in economics and some of them also attended a voluntary English course of general English. And they all, of course, have experience in learning a foreign language at primary and secondary schools. Now they have to
study English for specific purposes, related to their subject of studies, so they learn professional expressions and structures used in economic English.

As I already mentioned, I prepared 5 vocabulary games of different types. They were all modified to teach and repeat economic English and to suit the level my students are, but they were of a different kind. And I watched the students closely, while performing the designated tasks.

2.1 Game number 1 – Find someone who

This is a very communicative game, when students go around the class and ask other students questions about their habits and experiences related to studies. The aim is to find one person, who positively responds to one question, a different person for each question. Even if the students repeat one question several times and it is a sort of a drill, they enjoyed walking, contacting other students and the informal atmosphere. On the other hand, there is a great danger of using their first language and passively participating, just looking around and catching the replies of others, which some students did.

2.2 Game number 2 – Divide these terms

In this game, the students are given a set of professional vocabulary and their task is to divide them into two groups, related to microeconomics and macroeconomics. Even though they were given the possibility to cooperate with their neighbours, all of them performed the task on their own.

2.3 Game number 3 – Solve the half-crossword

This is a communicative game. Each student has a crossword, but with only a half of the expressions filled in. He or she has to ask about the rest of the words in this manner: What is 5 across? And the second student has to explain the word without using it. They can use different strategies, similar expressions, antonyms, collocations, definitions and so on. The game is won when both students have all expressions.

As far as I can say, the students enjoyed it and each pair wanted to finish it.

2.4 Game number 4 – Match the pictures with their names

This game took students fancy at first sight; some of them started working on it even without being given instructions. It presents different types of graphs and other visuals, used in presentations and talks about business and they should join the pictures and their names. Students again were quite reluctant to discuss it and to cooperate; they quickly completed it on their own and then compared the results.

2.5 Game number 5 – Logical problem

This is a kind of riddle you often encounter together with crosswords and other puzzles in different journals. I prepared it myself. The participants are given partial information about the type of businesses, their owners, location and type of business and they have to elicit and deduce the missing part. I watched the students doing it and I dare to say that just about 60 percent of them moved ahead logically, listing all names, towns, subjects of business and then joined the corresponding parts, crossing out the remaining ones. The rest just randomly wrote the pieces of information. Only 30 percent of the participants got the correct results. And they again refused the possibility to work together and to discuss it. What surprised me most was that all of them worked on their own.

We spent about an hour playing those games. It always included an explanation, answering possible questions, doing it and checking the results. Even if I deliberately did not ask about the success or failure, I was mostly able to see their reactions and satisfaction, if they succeeded.

Then I distributed a questionnaire in English, in which I asked the students to indicate their preferences about foreign language games and information about their personal characteristics. They replied anonymously even if it probably did not play any role.

In the second part of the questionnaire they evaluated different games from 5 points of view. They graded their features: interesting, enjoyable, beneficial, motivating and difficult, on a scale of 1 – 5, where the higher number of points meant the stronger quality. They did that with real pleasure, I could feel their absorption in it and interest.
3 RESULTS

The following table shows, how the students responded to the initial questions, whether they like foreign language games, if they consider themselves competitive and whether they prefer working and solving tasks in team or individually.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liking games</td>
<td>84,37 %</td>
<td>6,25 %</td>
<td>9,38 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive person</td>
<td>37,50 %</td>
<td>12,50 %</td>
<td>50,00 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work In team</td>
<td>43,75 %</td>
<td>6,25 %</td>
<td>50,00 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1 Opinion on the use of games and personalities

The overwhelming majority of the tested students like games, even if they are university students aged 19 and more. They regard them highly, think they are enjoyable, interesting, they are a good way of learning, different from usual lessons, and bring about fun. They also mentioned the following aspects: Games help me with comprehension, they are more effective than “normal” studying, I speak more with other students, I learn more words, and I improve my English.

Only 3 students, which makes less than 10 percent, do not like language games. They think they are boring, they do not teach them anything and 1 student could not think about the language and game at the same time in her opinion.

Concerning the next question, whether they consider themselves to be competitive, an exact half is not competitive. The second half is divided into two groups. Slightly more than 10 percent are sometimes competitive and slightly less than 40 % do not like competition and are not competitive at all.

Interesting, and for me surprising, was the result of replies to the question about working individually or in team. An exact half of them are individualists, they deliberately do not use the opportunity of sharing knowledge, discussing the methods for solutions and helping each other. Even if the seating arrangement is according to their preferences, and they sit next to their friends and usually also next to their classmates from secondary schools, they are not willing to work together, which would probably result in better performance. When asked, they explained that they are individualists and are used to working alone.

What was also interesting but not so surprising were their preferences about in which parts of a session they prefer games. The results are shown in the following figure:

![Figure 1. Part of a lesson for games](image)

As you can see, more than three quarters of students would like to have games towards the end of sessions. The reasons for this may be different: After more relaxing activities it is difficult to concentrate again, a game at the end means a pleasant termination and so on. But in spite of that, about 10 percent like games in the middle of a lesson and nearly the same number at the beginning.
3.2 Evaluating different games

In the second part of the questionnaire they evaluated the different games according to the above mentioned criteria. The first one, *Find someone who*, was found not very beneficial and motivating and of course the least difficult. Even if it was very relaxing and included movement around the class, it only got third place in its enjoyment. But the loser among them was game number two, dividing vocabulary under two umbrella terms. It was found to be the least interesting, the least enjoyable and the least motivating as well.

On the opposite top of the scale, which surprised me and made me happy, was to solve the logical problem. It got the highest rate for its interest, enjoyment and motivation and it was of course considered to be the most difficult. But concerning the benefit for students learning, it received the last but one position. The least interesting game, game number 2 – dividing terms, was found to be, at the same time, the most beneficial for students’ studies.

What was positive was the fact that students highly evaluated games number three and five, the games which required a lot of talking in the first case and thinking in the second.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Inventive teachers can possibly think up a lot of games to suit their teaching purposes and the learning purposes of their students. Games have a justified position in language teaching, they substantially increase motivation and interest, help students learn and pay attention. Moreover, vocabulary games help to fight against the natural process of forgetting, which is a weak point of the human memory.

And as my research proved, even university students appreciate games and game-like activities during their studies. Games could be tailored to any purpose and subject of studies. And what is more, students prefer games that require various logical operations, analysing, deducing, and formulating ideas, explaining, listening and talking.

The results allow us to claim that half of them or more are individualists, prefer to work on their own and do not chose to work in teams.

They do acknowledge and value the possibility of repeating, organising and practicing foreign language vocabulary, which vocabulary games bring about, together with fun and enjoyment. Nearly 90 % of them like them and would love them included in the language tuition, usually at the end of a language lesson.

REFERENCES