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LEARNING VOCABULARY THROUGH GAMES: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

For decades linguists have been interested in doing research on English vocabulary and vocabulary teaching. In the article Learning Vocabulary through Games published in the Asian EFL Journal, Huyen and Nga investigate the benefits of using games for their students' vocabulary learning. They argue that games are helpful for students to enrich their English vocabulary acquisition. As of May 2021, the article has been quite influential and cited for 381 times by scholars and students around the world. This paper presents a critical review of the aforementioned article. The discussion is mainly centred on the relation between the research and communicative language teaching, strengths and weaknesses of the research, and reflection of the research findings on the authors' learning and teaching experience.

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1. Research Background

For decades linguists have been interested in conducting research on English vocabulary and vocabulary teaching. [1] Wehmeier, S., McIntosh, C., Turnbull, J., & Ashby,(2005) define vocabulary as "all the words in a particular language". [2]Neuman, S. B., & Dwyer, 2009 p. 385 define vocabulary as "words we must know to communicate effectively; words in speaking (expressive vocabulary) and words in listening (receptive vocabulary)". Furthermore, [3]Diamond (2006) state that vocabulary is "the knowledge of words and word meanings". From these definitions, it can be inferred that vocabulary is the number of words we need to master in order to effectively communicate with others, expressing our ideas, thoughts, and feeling, as well as comprehending what other people say to us.

[4]Dellar, H. & Hocking, 2000 believe that learning vocabulary plays an important role in the success of language learning. They argue that learners of English will see their improvement when they learn English words and expressions rather than when they focus more on learning English grammar. Some studies confirm that vocabulary knowledge is important in language learning as it gives students a greater ability to generate well-organized writings and assists them to understand utterances [5]–[7].

For foreign language learners, learning vocabulary poses some challenges. [8]Thornbury, 2007 points out two challenges for EFL learners in learning vocabulary. First, learners of English find it hard to relate the form of words and their meaning correctly. For example, English learners must be able to differentiate meanings of closely related words such as the words lush and plush. The second issue is using the correct forms of words when they produce the language (e.g. rise not raise, nose not noise, bought not brought). In addition to the two challenges, students also find it hard to choose correct words in their language production. Take for example students might be confused whether they have to choose the word use or wear to complete the sentence "I ____ glasses" (the proper sentence is "I wear glasses").

In the context of English language teaching, [9] C. L. Furneaux 1999 [9]asserts that vocabulary teaching pertains to "the selection and presentation of words (lexis) for learners". The purpose of vocabulary teaching is, therefore, to facilitate students to comprehend the concepts of unfamiliar words, acquire a significant number of new words, and use the words acquired to communicate with others effectively [10]. There have been numerous studies and notions discussing the techniques of teaching vocabulary which are proposed by prominent scholars such as [8], [11]–[15]Brewster, J., Ellis, G. and Girard, 2003; Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, D., and Anderson, 2011; Takac, 2008; Thornbury, 2007. When teachers want to introduce new words, for example, there is a chance that some students might know some of the words. Teachers are, therefore, encouraged to do elicitation to activate the students' prior knowledge of the vocabulary introduced.

In relation to vocabulary teaching in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), [16]Huyen, N.T.T. & Nga (2003) published their article entitled "Learning Vocabulary through Games" in the Asian EFL Journal in December 2003. As of May 2021, the article has been quite influential and cited for 381 times by scholars and students around the world. For that particular reason and personal research interest, the present authors are interested in critically reviewing the article. The critical review is mainly centred on the relation between the research and communicative language teaching, strengths and weaknesses of the research, and reflection of the research findings on the authors' learning and teaching experience.

2. Relation between the Research and the Language Theory

In the background of their article, [16]Huyen, N.T.T. & Nga (2003) point out some reasons why Vietnamese students tend to have a negative attitude toward learning vocabulary although they are aware of its importance in learning English. Having explained about the effective application of communicative language teaching (CLT) in Vietnam, they claim that vocabulary games are suitable in a CLT classroom since the games give a meaningful activity as well as an opportunity to students to apply their language skills. Furthermore, they end their research background by raising a question of whether the games effectively improve the students' vocabulary skills or not and in what ways the games are effective.

In the literature review, the two researchers compare the way vocabulary is taught using a traditional method and a CLT approach. In the traditional way, the students learn vocabulary through memorization of a list of words given by a teacher without applying those words contextually. According to the researchers, this technique is unsuccessful as students easily forget the words they have memorised. They also support this argument by stating other experts' opinion showing the ineffective use of memorization in learning vocabulary. Conversely, in the CLT approach, the learners are involved in various meaningful activities and tasks in order to increase their communicative competence. Then, highlighting Newton's (2001) CLT point of view, they discuss previous researchers' statements dealing with the use of vocabulary games, their advantages, and role in vocabulary learning. The discussion leads to the researchers' argument that game is a powerful means in teaching vocabulary.

As seen in both the background and the literature review, [16]Huyen, N.T.T. & Nga (2003) mention the term communicative language teaching (CLT) as an approach that is applied in the Vietnam curriculum. In the field of language teaching, CLT has been around as an influential approach for more than two decades. The concept is basically generated from Hymes' idea, in which he defines language teaching as efforts aimed at developing "communicative competence". Competence in Hymes' view was a response to the model of language competence and performance proposed by Chomsky, which many linguists considered it too narrow a concept. To broaden this, Hymes suggests that language competence should encompass both linguistic and social aspects and that the ultimate goal of language teaching should be providing learners with all skills needed to be communicatively competent in a speech community [17] p. 159. In CLT practices, the activities should involve real communication and meaningful tasks. Therefore, the use of authentic materials is recommended.

[16]Huyen, N.T.T. & Nga (2003) discuss games as a means of teaching vocabulary in a communicative way. This technique matches with Canale, 1983 five guiding principle of communicative competence, i.e., coverage of competence areas, communication needs, meaningful and realistic interaction, the learner's native language skills, and curriculum-wide approach. Games can meet the first principle because while playing the games, learners are making real communication. Regarding the second principle, games can fulfil the students' need for a new and communicative way of learning vocabulary. It is an alternative solution to replace the boring traditional method such as memorization. In relation to the third principle, games are meaningful because they can put a real-life topic into practice. Concerning the fourth principle, games are not a new activity for the students. They learn their mother tongue through playing games on words as well. Finally, games go with the curriculum-wide approach

because this kind of activity provides the students with information as well as practice.

It should be noted that communicative language teaching as an approach is not always compatible with certain contexts [19], [20]. In several countries with EFL contexts, even though the implementation was supported by governments and institutional authorities, the implementation of communicative language teaching is often stressful for both the teachers and the students who were non-native speakers of English [19], [21], [30], [31], [22]–[29]. Many researchers argue that cultural differences in diverse teaching and learning communities are problematic for communicative language teaching practices as national language policies [25], [26], [32]–[34].

3. Research Aim, Method, Results, and Conclusion

After presenting the research background and literature review, [16]Huyen, N.T.T. & Nga (2003) describe the research aim, method, results, and conclusion. The researchers clearly state their aim of the study that is to find out whether the use of vocabulary games can effectively assist the students to learn vocabulary. In order to achieve their objective, an action research is conducted. The data is collected through a series of appropriate methods including trying out different kinds of games in real classes at the Distance Education Centre (DEC), observing some experienced teacher's classes at of Hanoi University of Foreign Studies (HUFS), reviewing teachers' lesson plans for games, interviewing teachers and students, conducting post-class survey and triangulation with another researcher who conducted a similar study.

The study reveals some results which are divided into three parts: students' expectations and attitudes, students' progress, and unanticipated problems. They describe each of the results sufficiently. In addition, they also present limitation of the study as well as the assumption made. The limitation of the study consists of the length of time in conducting the study, the place where the study is conducted, and the number of participants involved. Furthermore, the researchers assume that the students will not encounter any problems if the vocabulary learning becomes more active. In fact, this assumption is not completely right since the result shows that both the teacher and the students encounter some problems in playing the games.

In the research conclusion, [16]Huyen, N.T.T. & Nga (2003) report that students demand a new vocabulary teaching technique to replace the boring traditional method. Moreover, games positively correspond to vocabulary learning because they possess three characteristics. Firstly, games create a stress-free atmosphere in the classroom which helps the students to study well. Secondly, friendly competition among the students during the games can sustain their motivation in learning vocabulary. Thirdly, games bring a real-world context into the students' activity in the classroom.

4. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Research

This article generally provides valuable information for EFL teachers especially regarding the use of games in teaching vocabulary. [16]Huyen, N.T.T. & Nga (2003) convince the readers that vocabulary games are useful in increasing students' communicative competence and should not be considered only as a fun activity. To support their ideas, they provide some arguments in accordance with the effectiveness of vocabulary games. Furthermore, they also reveal some factors that can hinder the success of games in the teaching-learning activity. This information is crucial for the EFL teachers because they can learn and plan a certain game well in order to prevent problems faced in applying it in a classroom. They eventually suggest some considerations in choosing kinds of games used in the classroom.

Despite the strengths mentioned above, there are some weaknesses in this article. The weaknesses are mainly related to the methodology used in conducting the study. Regardless of the appropriateness of data collection, Huyen and Nga's explanation in this section lacks clarity in the areas of research participants, frequency of action research, the kinds of games applied, and the use of triangulation technique and review on lesson plans. The other weakness is the limited time of conducting the research.

The first unclear point is the participants involved in the study. [16]Huyen, N.T.T. & Nga (2003) state that the study involved students in their classes at the DEC and teachers at HUFS. Unfortunately, they do not give further explanation about the number of classes where they conducted the action research, as well as the exact number of students in each of those classes. In the method section, [16]Huyen, N.T.T. & Nga (2003) says '…we tried to apply as many games as possible in our classes [underlined by the writer] at the Distance education Centre…' (p.4). On the contrary, in the result they write "Most of the learners (17 out of 20) …' (p.5), we wonder whether the stated number is the total number of students in all classes or in each class. We also need more information concerning the level of the students' English proficiency. To our knowledge, this piece of information is necessary in order to show whether vocabulary games are appropriate for beginner levels or higher levels since we believe that vocabulary games work effectively only with beginner and low intermediate level students. Some studies have confirmed the effectiveness of games in teaching vocabulary to these levels of students [35]–[40]. Moreover, a brief explanation on terms as DEC and HUFS should be provided so that the readers know the difference between the two institutions. In addition, they should have mentioned the reason why they chose different places to conduct the action research and classroom observation.

The second point related to lack of clarity is the frequency of conducting the action research. It is stated that

the study was conducted in two weeks. Yet, there is no clarification on how many days and hours or sessions that the action research was conducted. The frequency of vocabulary games carried out may significantly determine the result of the study. In our opinion, if the students are given the games too frequently, they will also get bored. The third unclear point is the kinds of games applied in the action research. We think the types of games determine the success of the games themselves. They only present facts that games may fail and give some suggestion on factors taken into consideration in selecting games, without evidently mentioning the kinds of games applied in the action research.

The last weakness in the area of lack of clarity is the use of the triangulation technique and review of the other teachers' lesson plans. It is mentioned that the researchers interview another researcher who has conducted a similar study in the previous year. Unfortunately, in the discussion, [16]Huyen, N.T.T. & Nga (2003) only talk about the results which are based mainly on the interview with students and teachers, post-class survey, and observed lesson. It seems that the interview with the previous researcher and review of other teachers' lesson plans do not clearly contribute to the findings.

The other weakness is the length of time the research performed. [16]Huyen, N.T.T. & Nga (2003) only conducted the research in two weeks. In our opinion, two weeks is not sufficient enough to measure the students' progress in vocabulary. It would be better if the research was conducted in few months or even in one semester to get more acceptable results. In fact, they admit that it is difficult to evaluate the students' improvement due to the short period of time.

5. Reflection of the Research Findings on Our Learning and Teaching Experience

As described in the background of the study, English students in Vietnam feel bored with the way vocabulary is taught. We also experienced the same feeling when we learned vocabulary in junior high school. The vocabulary was taught separately from the context. The teacher gave the students a list of words that had to be memorized in the classroom. On that list, the teacher wrote down the words in English and gave their equivalence in Indonesian. Later, the teacher checked our mastery of those words orally. This technique was boring, frightening and meaningless. We could not store the words for a long time because there were many new words to remember and we rarely practice those words. We believe the condition happened because the objective of the teaching and learning process was not communication but grammar.

When we had our teaching practice in a senior high school, we observed that the teacher's teaching technique was different. The application of communicative language teaching had the teacher give more opportunities to the students to communicate more actively. Activities such as role-play, games on vocabulary, grammar, and reading as well as group discussion took place in classrooms. The students seemed to enjoy the activities although there were a few students reluctant to participate. In the research article, [16]Huyen, N.T.T. & Nga (2003) also find the same situation where not all students engage in the game activity.

As English teachers we also use vocabulary games as one of the classroom activities. However, we only employ it in a small class consisting of around 15 students. We never use games in a big class with 40 students because it is difficult to manage. In carrying out vocabulary games, we also come across the unanticipated problems mentioned by the researchers. Sometimes the game does not work as expected due to the students' unfamiliarity with the games and students' hesitation. From that experience, we learn that a teacher must give a clear and comprehensible instruction of the game rules and give students more time to understand the rules. There is no need to rush the game.

We agree with the researchers' observation that the use of students' mother tongue often takes place during the game. In our teaching experience, when we set up a group vocabulary game, we walked around the groups to check and frequently reminded our students to use English instead of Indonesian. We also agree with the researchers' argument that teacher plays an important role and that selecting and planning games are crucial in achieving lesson aims.

6. Conclusion

The article, Learning Vocabulary through Games, is useful for EFL teachers to understand the important role of games in learning vocabulary and communicative language teaching. This article lacks clarity in describing the research participants, frequency of action research, and kinds of games applied as well as having the drawback of the short period of time in conducting the research. Despite those weaknesses, on a positive note, this article supports the fact that using games as interesting classroom activities is meaningful for students' vocabulary acquisition. English teachers, therefore, should choose the games carefully and plan on how to use the games effectively in order to improve students' communicative competence.

We believe that further action researches investigating the effectiveness of using games in learning vocabulary or other language components need to be carried out. It is also necessary to conduct this kind of vocabulary research in a bigger class rather than in a small one. In doing so, future researchers could investigate the effectiveness of using games and students' collaborative work to improve students' vocabulary. This could be done through the integrated teaching of receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing) which focus on students' vocabulary acquisition.

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