

Enhancing EFL Vocabulary Acquisition Through Gamification: Addressing Challenges and Boosting Retention

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Abstract

Vocabulary acquisition is a fundamental aspect of mastering a foreign language, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. However, many students face significant challenges in building their vocabulary, which hinders their ability to communicate effectively. Traditional teaching methods, such as L1 translation, memorization, and contextual guessing, are often inadequate, especially for beginners, as they fail to sustain long-term retention and engagement. This paper explores the limitations of these approaches and proposes the integration of games as an effective solution for vocabulary teaching. Games provide an engaging, interactive, and student-centered learning environment that fosters intrinsic motivation, encourages communication in real-life contexts, and reduces learner anxiety. The study highlights the benefits of using games to address the challenges in vocabulary acquisition, emphasizing their potential to create memorable learning experiences, enhance student participation, and promote sustained language development. By analyzing existing literature and the researchers' teaching experience, this paper underscores the importance of innovative strategies to motivate EFL learners and improve their vocabulary acquisition.

Keywords: *Vocabulary Acquisition, EFL Learners, Gamified Learning, Teaching Strategies*

INTRODUCTION

Due to its importance and use in communication, vocabulary is one of the core language elements that English foreign learners must understand. Because English is the most widely spoken language on the planet, it is essential to communicate in it. Those who are capable of doing so will benefit not only in terms of their knowledge and abilities, but also in terms of finding work. Furthermore, when traveling, children will have no trouble communicating and interacting with people from all over the world. (Dewi et al., 2017).

The researchers discovered that pupils suffer many challenges and difficulties when speaking English, such as a limited vocabulary. This situation prompted them to consider how they could assist the students in expanding their vocabulary, as it would be difficult

for them to improve their language skills without it. In order to learn a foreign language, you must first learn vocabulary (N. Schmitt & Carter, 2000). According to several academics, meaningful communication results from appropriate and adequate vocabulary development rather than just knowing grammar rules (Zou et al., 2021). On the other hand, the majority of EFL students state that they understand the new vocabulary during the lesson, but that they forget it after a short period of time. This could be because they haven't had the chance to use these words in conversation. (Khan et al., 2018a) advocate for implementing strategy training in EFL programs to help students learn more vocabulary and improve their spoken communication in and out of the classroom. According to Isma & Blanca (2018), learners of a foreign language who have a limited vocabulary require more time to acquire new words, have greater difficulty understanding texts, and participate less actively in conversations with their peers. As a result, such students are more likely to do badly on language acquisition exams and may be categorized as learning disabled. Khan et al. (2018b) have lately indicated that EFL vocabulary training is gaining the attention of many studies these days.

When it came to teaching language, teachers encountered numerous obstacles. One of the most challenging skills to master is vocabulary. Not only teachers but also students have difficulty learning English vocabulary. Because of the educational methods, most students are disinclined to learn the language. Some students experience fear and are hesitant to speak in front of the class. Teachers must use approaches and activities to reduce difficulties when teaching and acquiring vocabulary. Teachers must guarantee that students have the opportunity to talk in class during vocabulary sessions so they can utilize a communicative approach that focuses on genuine dialogue (Harmer, 2007). Rather than focusing on the language structure, teachers should concentrate on its function (Harmer, 2007). Still, the instructor must be able to hold the students' attention by engaging them in exciting and activities that are interesting for them and encourage them to talk up in class (Harmer, 2007).

One of the solutions to instructors' issues in teaching vocabulary is to use games. Instead of focusing just on the language structure, teachers might employ games to assist students with communicating in English in real-life circumstances. Games can guarantee full participation of students in the classroom because they are enjoyable and allow them to learn while having fun (Mahmoud & Tanni, 2014). Everyone enjoys winning, thus the game can provide a healthy competitive environment for kids to practice their English. They must convey and understand people's points in English and perform actions by saying

or acting in English to win or accomplish the mission (Nakajima & Nakajima, 2014). As a result, games assist students in practicing all significant language abilities, all phases of teaching and learning, and a wide range of vocabulary (Koeltzsch & Stadler-Heer, 2021). Without recognizing it, games encourage learners to think imaginatively. According to psychologist (Piaget, 2003), movement produces 'thinking,' which commences the learning process, and action, not consciousness, is the responsible joint that builds up the cognitive frame. The term "linguistic game" refers to a combination of language and play (Kaur & Aziz, 2020). Through games, passive learners can gain the opportunity to communicate in the classroom. Low-proficiency learners would benefit from games since they will not feel pressured while enjoyably learning English. As a result, they are calmer and open to the teacher's suggestions. As a result, they are motivated to acquire English as a second language (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013).

There are two things to be explored in this study. To begin, some teaching and learning practices are provided which are believed to be ineffective for teaching vocabulary in the researchers' context, it will be followed by the usage of games as a strategy for increasing students' motivation to acquire new language.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method to explore the challenges faced by EFL students in vocabulary learning and the effectiveness of using games as a strategy to enhance their vocabulary acquisition. The researchers analyzed existing literature, teaching practices, and personal teaching experiences to identify common issues in vocabulary learning, such as reliance on L1 translation, memorization, and contextual guessing. Additionally, the study draws on classroom observations and the researchers' reflections on students' responses to these methods. By synthesizing theoretical perspectives and practical observations, the paper proposes the use of games as an innovative and engaging solution to address the identified challenges and motivate students to expand their vocabulary in a meaningful and enjoyable way.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Challenges in Teaching Vocabulary in the EFL Classroom

1.1 Using L1 Translation to Teach and Learn New Vocabulary.

One of the quickest ways to introduce the meaning of a word is through L1 translation (Nation, 2005). Similarly, Thornbury (2002) claims that using L1 translation can help students understand meaning faster because it is assumed that the translation will be closer to the target language's meaning. These statements are true based on the researchers' experience as a learner and a teacher, as they found it easier to use a word if they knew the translation from their first language (L1). In addition, their former students were more satisfied when they told them the translation of the words directly.

However, it appeared that this method was ineffective in improving the vocabulary of their former students. It was demonstrated by their inability to remember words for long periods of time and their proclivity to forget words they have recently learned. The reason for this could be that they could easily access the meaning of the word without having to think about it too hard, or that the words they tried to learn were less memorable, preventing them from memorizing it for a long time (Thornbury, 2002).

Also, according to Thornbury, using L1 translation to teach and learn vocabulary may harm students' learning development because they are more likely to use the target language after finding an equivalent meaning in their L1 (2005, p.77). This case was related to the researchers' context because, rather than directly accessing the target language, their students appeared to access the target language based on the translation from their L1, making the sentence sound unnatural.

EFL students, according to Thornbury, should stop relying on L1 translation as a method of learning new vocabulary (2002). Nation argues that there are three reasons for not using L1 translation as a means of communicating or teaching meaning (1990, p.52). For starters, there is usually no exact correspondence between languages (1990, p.53). Second, due to the indirect nature of L1 translation (1990, p.53). Finally, rather than using L1 translation, it is more efficient to spend the time using the target language directly (1990, p.53). These three reasons are true based on the researchers' experience as both a teacher and a learner; therefore, another method that is more memorable and effective, particularly in terms of increasing students' vocabulary, is required.

1.2. Learning New Vocabulary through Memorisation.

Learning a large vocabulary is essential for studying the target language since pupils cannot say anything unless they have a large vocabulary. As a result, pupils must learn and recall many terms (Thornbury, 2002).

Memorization is one of the methods for learning new words. The majority of the researchers' former students had used this method. Some people could do it well, while

others couldn't. According to Nation (1990), students must work hard in order to make the words memorable. It means that students who were able to memorize the words for a long time put in more effort than those who were unable to do so.

Furthermore, according to some research, human memory is divided into three systems: short-term memory, working memory, and long-term memory (Thornbury, 2002, p.23). Short-term memory can only hold a limited amount of information for a few seconds, whereas long-term memory can hold a large amount of information for a long time or, on the other hand, it is long-lasting (Thornbury, 2002, p.23-24). However, in order to succeed in learning new vocabulary, students must not only remember the words, but also use their "working memory" by applying the words to specific activities (Thornbury, 2002).

In the researchers' case, the issue was that their students might simply memorize the words and their meaning without attempting to use the words, such as "making a sentence." As a result, memorizing new vocabulary cannot be used as the sole method of learning. It should be incorporated into another activity that allows students to practice their language skills. Furthermore, as Nation (1990) suggests, it is preferable if students put forth more effort when learning vocabulary so that the words they have learned become more memorable.

1.3 Learning New Vocabulary by Guessing Words in Context

The most important and useful strategy for learning vocabulary is to guess words in context (Nation, 1990; Thornbury, 2002). This method, according to Thornbury, could be used both inside and outside the classroom (2002). In addition, students are likely to have used this method unconsciously in their daily lives, particularly when dealing with unfamiliar words from their native tongue (Thornbury, 2002). As a result, he believes that this method could be easily applied to the teaching of vocabulary.

According to the researchers' experience as a teacher, using this strategy to teach vocabulary takes a long time. Nation, on the other hand, discovered that devoting a significant amount of class time to implementing this strategy for learning vocabulary is worthwhile because it is the most effective way of dealing with unfamiliar words (1990, p.6). This method appears to be more effective when used with students who have a sufficient English vocabulary, but in my experience as a researchers, it was extremely difficult to implement because their students' English proficiency level was beginner, and they didn't even know the most basic English vocabulary, such as vocabulary used to express daily activities. As a result, implementing this method will waste a significant

amount of class time, as the teacher will be expected to teach not only new vocabulary but also at least one of the other language skills.

This could also explain why the strategy failed because the researchers' students lacked sufficient vocabulary. According to Nation, students must know at least two or three thousand words in order to guess words based on context (1990). Similarly, Coady claims that guessing from context to learn new vocabulary is necessary if students have good reading skills; otherwise, they will lose interest in learning (1997). As a result, increasing students' vocabulary by guessing from context may only be beneficial to students with higher levels of ability, such as intermediate and advanced students.

The success of implementing this method appears to be influenced by the students' confidence. Students who had a poor command of the English language, for example, were less confident in their guesses than those who had a better command of the language. As a result, they were unable to learn new words as a result of the context. This argument is backed up by Thornbury, who claims that this strategy would be difficult to implement for students with low self-esteem (2002). As a teacher, the researchers then attempted to come up with another activity that would boost the students' confidence and encourage them to continue learning new vocabulary.

2. Addressing the Challenges in Teaching Vocabulary in EFL Classroom

2.1 Using Games to Motivate the EFL Students to Learn Vocabulary

One of the most critical components of developing pupils' language abilities and systems is vocabulary (Nation, 2013; N. Schmitt, 2008;). On the other hand, creating a large vocabulary is not an easy undertaking. Students are typically required to memorize lists of terms from a reading book, along with their definitions in L1. This is similar to the grammar-translation approach. Students may find this technique tedious, and they may only learn the words in part. Students inadvertently expose themselves to vocabulary and cope with new terms in real scenarios due to digitalization and integration of information and communications technology (ICT) tools in the learning/teaching process, as well as the desire for a student-centered approach. Because vocabulary is regarded as the foundation that connects the four language skills (Sinatra, 2018; T.-T. Wu & Huang, 2017), obtaining adequate vocabulary improves understandable communication (Noora, 2019; Salavati & Salehi, 2016; Sinatra, 2018; Wallace & Cote, 2021).

In order to improve students' vocabulary, they need to have intrinsic motivation otherwise the teaching and learning process will be ineffective for the students. Pillai (2013, pp.86-87) also stated that:

“multiple researches in the field of vocabulary teaching have shown that students do not feel interested in attending vocabulary classes because of the low interest levels due to traditional and non-innovative methods of teaching vocabulary”.

Moreover, the acquisition of new vocabulary for English as a foreign language (EFL) learning can be challenging (Hao et al., 2019). As a result, vocabulary learning tactics should be used in the classroom to help pupils improve their vocabulary (Noora, 2019).

Games are defined as "an organized activity that usually has the following properties: a defined job or aim, a set of regulations, an inter-player rivalry, and communication between players by spoken or written language," according to the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics. Using games in EFL instruction provides a natural environment for language learning (Bin-Hady, 2021). It is thought that employing games to teach vocabulary may be viewed as a novel technique to improve students' English abilities to promote the acquisition process (Thompson & von Gillern, 2020). As a result, games may provide real-world context for students to apply the language in the classroom (Bin-Hady, 2021) and prevent negative evaluation because students focus on the gameplay and interactions rather than the language itself (Wulanjani & Indriani, 2021).

2.2 Advantages of Using Games in Teaching New Vocabulary

Several studies have highlighted the benefits of using games in teaching vocabulary. Celce-Murcia and Macintosh (1979, as cited in Alemi, 2010) argue that incorporating games into vocabulary instruction allows students to transition seamlessly from the real world to the classroom. Games enable teachers to create diverse contexts tailored to students' needs and interests, making the learning process more communicative and flexible, as also noted by Huyen and Nga (2003).

Moreover, games contribute to a more positive classroom environment, enhancing students' enjoyment of lessons and increasing their motivation to learn new vocabulary (Huyen & Nga, 2003; Aslanabadi & Rasouli, 2013). This enjoyment is particularly valuable as it encourages students to engage more enthusiastically with the material.

Additionally, games provide opportunities for interaction among students, which fosters better retention of vocabulary. Aslanabadi and Rasouli (2013) highlight this interactive aspect, while Huyen and Nga (2003) found through interviews with junior students at HUFs that games help learners remember new words more quickly and retain them for longer periods. Similarly, interviews conducted by Huyen and Nga (2003) with a

Vietnamese EFL teacher revealed that games create a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere, enabling students to learn vocabulary more effectively and efficiently.

Given the benefits discussed above, it appears that this method is one of the most effective strategies that can be used in beginner classes and when students have low intrinsic motivation. Students will be more relaxed and comfortable while learning if this method is used, and they will be more encouraged or motivated to learn new words.

Furthermore, the use of games in vocabulary instruction may provide additional benefits to students. First, learning becomes more memorable because many games require students to complete an activity in a group or peer setting, allowing them to engage in more interactions. Nga and Huyen (2003). Second, a fun activity can boost students' confidence, allowing them to be less concerned about making mistakes and more actively participate in learning new words (Huang, 1996 in Huyen and Nga, 2003). Finally, games could be used in any language class situation because teachers can adapt the activity to fit the class time, students' needs, interests, age, and level.

2.3 Types of Games

There are many different types of games that teachers can use to teach new vocabulary. Teachers should be able to choose and modify the activity to fit the students' learning environment in order for this strategy to be effective for their vocabulary expansion (Rohani and Pourgharib, 2013; Al-Shawl, 2014). One of the most commonly cited games in EFL teaching is Hangman, which serves as an engaging tool for vocabulary practice. Nabilah (2021) discusses how the Hangman game can effectively help learners master vocabulary by providing a fun and interactive way to reinforce word recognition and spelling. This aligns with the findings of Alharbi (Alharbi, 2020), who emphasizes that games create a relaxed atmosphere conducive to learning, allowing students to acquire essential vocabulary in a non-threatening environment.

Another effective game is Crossword Puzzles, which can be tailored to fit various vocabulary themes. Wu (2023) highlights the role of tailored crossword puzzles in promoting peer participation and critical thinking among students. This game not only reinforces vocabulary but also encourages collaborative learning, making it a valuable addition to EFL classrooms.

Sociodramatic games are also noteworthy, as they significantly enhance speaking skills among learners. Nuraini (2023) illustrates how these games provide students with opportunities to practice English in contextualized scenarios, thereby improving their

speaking proficiency. This type of game fosters creativity and encourages students to express themselves in English, which is crucial for language development.

Mobile games have gained traction in EFL education, with applications designed specifically for vocabulary learning. Alharbi (2020) and Hwang et al. (2015) both advocate for the integration of mobile game applications, noting their effectiveness in engaging students and enhancing their language skills in a dynamic learning environment. These games often incorporate situational contexts that allow learners to practice listening and speaking skills in a more interactive manner.

Interactive spelling games are another effective tool for vocabulary acquisition. Sumafta (2023) discusses the design of spelling games that not only make learning enjoyable but also help students improve their spelling and vocabulary retention. Such games can be integrated into lessons to break the monotony of traditional teaching methods, thereby increasing student interest and participation.

In summary, a range of games, such as Hangman, crossword puzzles, sociodramatic activities, mobile games, and interactive spelling exercises, have demonstrated their effectiveness in EFL classrooms. These games not only facilitate vocabulary acquisition but also cultivate an engaging and interactive learning environment, thereby enhancing language proficiency among EFL learners.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the challenges EFL students often face in vocabulary acquisition, including over-reliance on rote memorization, lack of meaningful context, and difficulties in retaining learned vocabulary. To address these issues, the study underscores the effectiveness of integrating games into the learning process as an innovative and engaging strategy. Games not only foster a fun and interactive learning environment but also promote active participation, meaningful context, and long-term retention of vocabulary. By bridging theoretical insights with practical classroom application, this approach demonstrates how gamification can significantly enhance students' motivation and engagement, ultimately supporting their vocabulary development. Future studies are encouraged to explore the long-term impact of games on vocabulary learning and adapt game-based strategies to various EFL contexts to maximize their potential.

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