

# Using Games as a Tool in Teaching Vocabulary to Young Learners

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## Abstract

Over the last few decades, teaching English become a phenomenon in Saudi Arabia, especially to young learners. English is taught as a main subject in kindergarten and elementary schools. Like any other children, Saudis accept new foreign languages easily, but they get bored very fast if the teacher is teaching them using the old conventional methods and techniques. The aim of this paper is to prove that games are effective tools when devised to explain vocabularies and they make it easier to remember their meanings. This paper deals with a literature review of teaching English vocabulary to young learners using games. Then it discusses the importance of using games in teaching vocabulary and in what way using them is helpful. After that it investigates the practical implications of using games to teach vocabulary that includes the implementation of vocabulary games and some examples of games that could be used to teach vocabulary to children. And finally it examines challenges teachers face when teaching vocabulary using games to young learners.

**Keywords:** young learners, games, vocabulary, practical challenges, practical implications

## 1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, teaching English become a phenomenon in Saudi Arabia, especially to young learners. English is taught as a main subject in kindergarten and elementary schools. Like any other children, Saudis accept new foreign languages easily, but they get bored very fast if the teacher is teaching them using the old conventional methods and techniques. Teachers are responsible for finding out interesting and attractive ways to teach and motivate their students. According to Harmer (2008), teachers of young learners should spend plenty of time examining and understanding how their students operate and think.

Teaching young learners is very difficult compared with teaching teenagers or adults because young learners get distracted very fast. Children love to have fun and play, so teachers should choose suitable teaching methods that cater to children's nature. Games are one of the methods that could be used in order to avoid boredom in the classroom. They have a special role in any foreign language teaching. Both students and teachers will benefit from including games during class time. Furthermore, teachers may achieve all the educational outcomes through applying the use of games especially when teaching vocabulary.

Although language structure is considered "the skeleton of the language," it agreed that vocabulary is "the vital organs and flesh" (Harmer, 1991). Vocabulary is the basic part and a key element to learn any language. Teaching vocabulary through the use of games has become crucially important for English language learners because they sustain enjoyment and interest in learning and encourage using the language in a fearless and creative manner.

This paper is divided into four parts. The first part deals with a literature review of teaching English vocabulary to young learners using games. The second part discusses the importance of using games in teaching vocabulary and in what way using them is helpful. The third part investigates the practical implications of using games to teach vocabulary that includes the implementation of vocabulary games and some examples of games that could be used to teach vocabulary to children. The fourth part examines challenges teachers face when teaching vocabulary using games to young learners.

The main reason for choosing this topic is personal interest. Having a son, nieces, and nephews in the elementary level sparked my interest in finding fun and interesting ways to teach them vocabulary. Games proved to be an effective tool when devised to explain vocabularies and they make it easier to remember their meanings.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Teaching Young Learners

In the following section, young learners will be defined and factors that might influence their maturity will be briefly mentioned. Characteristics of young learners and some points to be consider when teaching young learners will be discussed as well. After that, teaching English to young learners and the reasons for teaching the language at elementary level will be mentioned.

#### 2.1.1 Who Are Young Learners?

Young learners are agreed to be children from five or six years old who are in the first year of elementary schooling to twelve years old of age. However, the age of children is not necessarily an indicator of how mature they are. Philips (1993) stated that there are several factors influencing the maturity of children. These factors include their culture, sex, environment (city or rural), and parents. Also, their development should be taken into consideration. Some children develop very fast, and others might need more time. A good teacher of young learners should be aware of all their differences because understanding them can help teachers deciding on activities to be used in their teaching processes. In other words, teachers' decision must be influenced by his or her knowledge of the children's attitudes, interests, and circumstances instead of their physical age.

The focus in this essay is on children ageing from five to seven years old who are considered to be at the beginner level of schooling. According to Halliwell (1992), young learners posses good meaning interpretation skills without understanding the actual meaning of individual words. They use the limited vocabulary they know creatively and learn indirectly, as opposed to directly. In addition, their imagination is always ready. They take great pleasure and delight creating fun in what they do and say.

Yetenberg (1990) characterized young learners as having some problems distinguishing the real world from an imaginary one that could make it difficult for their teacher to understand their reality perception and cope with it. Young learners do not like to work alone, but to be accompanied by others especially when playing or working. They use their language skills before they are aware of them. Also, they learn by using body movement, mimics, and gestures. Furthermore, children have a very short attention span, so teachers need to keep this in mind when designing and choosing activities for their young students to be engaged in. It is imperative to praise young learners because they become motivated when their teacher support their enthusiasm.

Phillips (1993) assumed that younger children are going to be holistic learners if they are taught in a very young age. They respond to the meaning that underlie the language used without worrying about individual words or sentences. When teaching young learners, Philips stressed that teachers should simplify the activities for them to understand what the teacher expects from them. The tasks teachers choose must be amusing in away that young learners could easily reach the goals set for them. Also, the tasks must be motivating and stimulating so that young learners could feel satisfied with what they have done.

Furthermore, Slattery (2001) highlighted some characteristics young learners have. They are learners who are curious, imaginative, and playful. They develop as individuals very quickly and enjoy routines and repetitions. The learn by listening, imitating, watching, and doing things. Due to their short attention span, they need variety of activities. Also, they talk about what they did and understand in their mother tongue which helps them to learn.

#### 2.1.2 Teaching English to Young Learners

In order for children to acquire English, they have to experience and hear the language when they are small. In general, it is agreed upon that they learn languages better than adults because children have more time for learning, and 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.

English is taught to young learners at elementary (primary) level for several reasons. According to Brumfit, Moon and Tongue (1991), children need to be exposed to the language and its culture from an early age in order to grow up with tolerance and understanding for others.

Cameron (2001) stated that there are four things teachers need to keep in mind while teaching English to young learners beside knowledge and skills. Teachers must be conscious of how their students learn and think. Also, they must be able to find out what children are interested in and utilize it for language teaching. In addition, teachers should be equipped to teach their young student literacy in English and deliver the whole lesson orally. Last, but not least, teacher should identify problems and difficulties while teaching the language.

According to Brown (2001), teachers must take into consideration the characteristics and intellectuality of their

young learners in order to be successful in learning the language.

## 2.2 Teaching vocabulary

Young learners need to pay attention to some elements of English language such as pronunciation, spelling, structure, and vocabulary. To master English skills, students must know the vocabulary of the language i.e. a list of words with their meaning because it supports their skills' improvement (Linse, 2005). In order to speak and write English, children need to learn one to two thousand words (Cameron, 2001). In this section, how vocabulary is learned will be discussed briefly and some methods and approaches of how to teach them will be put forth.

### 2.2.1 How Is Vocabulary Learned?

The linguist, David Wilkins, stated that "Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed." Young learners usually use labeling when they first start to learn to speak then categorizing skills (Thornbury, 2002). Thornbury stated that young learners develop a network building in which they construct complex ideas. They realize that there are other words such as synonyms and antonyms and others during this process.

There are several approaches and methods that could be used to teach English vocabulary to young learners. Using real objects that children could visualize later is a good way to learn vocabularies of the language. They need to listen to their teaching using the word and repeat it as well. Another method is the direct method where there is no translation and using the mother tongue is prohibited. The complete sentences in the target language are the only thing used in the classroom. Another method is the Total Physical Response (TPR) which is used a lot by teachers because children are hyper, physically active and could not concentrate for a long time. However, using this method that includes games and a variety of activities will allow young learners to learn vocabularies of the language very fast. In addition, teachers of young learners encourage their students to communicate by using Communicative Language Approach (CLT) where they stress language meaning in context.

### 2.3 Teaching Vocabulary Using Games

Halliwell (1991) argued that due to the creative language skill young learners bring into the classroom, teachers have to provide them with a communicative atmosphere where they could express themselves. Also, because the language used in any activity is unpredictable, teachers have to encourage them to actively construct language for themselves. That is why games are important and useful. Not only they are fun, but also they create the desire to communicate and create predictability.

Using games when teaching vocabulary to young learners require trained teachers who involve children in playing and mastered the linguistic part of the language. Rixon (1981) stated that understanding games will help teachers in finding and creating games that make their students learn while they play.

In this section, a definition of the word game will be explained and reasons for using games when teaching young learners will be presented. Advantages and disadvantages of using games in teaching the vocabulary of the language will be put forth as well.

#### 2.3.1 What Is a Game?

Jones (1980) stated that one or more players could play in a game to compete or co-operate according to a set of rules. Rogers (1981) said that gaming is goal-defined, rule-governed and competitive that has a closure and engage the students. Gibbs (1981) defined games as an activity carried out by cooperating or competing decision-makers who want to achieve their objectives following a set of rules. Games are closed activities that have a beginning and an end with a winner who defines the end of the game (Rixon, 1981).

Games require cooperation with other members and competition against another team or players. While playing, young learners need to use the language and repeat patterns which will help in developing and improving their skills. Player could communicate with words, mime, use body movements, and gestures among many which guarantee fun and unpredictability (Rixon, 1981).

#### 2.3.2 Why Using Games in Teaching Young Learners?

Games are used to assist young learners during their language learning. They make classes entertaining and sustain effort and interest. They create an atmosphere of meaningful communication where young learners communicate before, during, and after the game (Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 2005). This atmosphere help in forming comprehensible input including what they understood as they listen and read (Krashen, 1985) and comprehensible output including writing and speaking (Swain, 1993). Also, games give a rise to emotions when language instruction becomes serious and dry (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000 and Ersoz, 2000). They help

to decrease their nervousness (Richard-Amato, 1988) and shyness especially if the game is played in small groups (Uberman, 1998). Furthermore, games could involve all four language skills, speaking, writing, listening, and reading (Lee, 1995).

Games give students an active role when playing promoting student-centered activities. When played in small groups, students could develop their skills of disagreeing in a polite way, asking for help, and working with others (Jacobs & Kline Liu, 1996). They encourage cooperation, team spirit, competition, and turn taking (Ersoz, 2000 and Orlick, 2006). Gardner (1999) stated that games encompass a number of intelligences such as visual intelligence when games involve drawing, interpersonal intelligence when they include playing with others, and kinesthetic intelligence when they provides hands-on elements like cards

### **3. The importance of games in teaching vocabulary to young learners**

Lewis (1999) argued that games are popular among children because they like to play. Through games, young learners could interact, discover, and experiment with their surroundings. Using games not only enhances students' motivation, but also provide an incentive and stimulus to use the language.

Harmer (2008) stated that in order to have the ability to speak English fluently, young learners need to have the ability to know the language features and to process information immediately. Therefore, young learners must practice through variety and appropriate techniques that aid their information process and simultaneous operations of the language.

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. Vernon (2009) argued that games are an effective tool to teach vocabulary to young learners. Children participate and pay more attention because they enjoy themselves and the classroom and feel and do better during and after the game. Repetition will be less boring and fun for children to which consolidates their learning of new words.

Furthermore, by involving physical-movements in games, young learners will be alert and stimulated. Young learners often get impatient and bored very quickly if they attend lessons for a long period, so involving physical movements every now and the will guarantee their participation. Vernon (2009) stated that games that involve learners to take part in a healthy competition could help them in learning more without forcing their participation. Thus, choosing the right game can support healthy competition in the classroom.

### **4. Practical Implications of Using Games to Teach Vocabulary**

#### *4.1 The Implementations of Teaching Vocabulary Using Games*

There are two steps that must be kept in mind when implementing games to teach vocabulary to young learner by their teacher, grouping the students and giving explanation and instruction about the game. This section will briefly mention those steps.

##### **4.1.1 Grouping the Students**

Scott & Ytreberg (2004) stressed the importance of making young learners sit together in a group because they like to have other peers around them. Sitting the students together encourage cooperation, but this does not mean that they have to be in groups all the time while they are working. Phillips (1993) noted that having a group of more than five students will result in counter-productivity where chaos might emerge. Teachers could ask their students to count one until two in a sequence manner and students with the same number will gather in the same group on the floor. Next, young learners could be asked to choose a name for their group to be written on the white board to record their scores. If there is an uneven number of student e.g. five students, one group could have 3 students and the other two. Grouping techniques of this kind will help in create a cooperative and competitive atmosphere among the members of the groups.

##### **4.1.2 Giving Explanation and Instruction about the Game**

It is important to explain the game to young learners in order to achieve the desired outcome and fulfill the goal behind its implementation. Teachers have an integral part in the classroom when implementing games because they have to give clear explanations and instructions about them so that students understand how to play and practice the list of vocabularies intended to be learned.

If the teacher did not explain the rules and instructions of the game, choosing games as a method to explain vocabulary to young learners will be a waste of class time. There will be no outcomes if the students did not know what to do and they will get bored very fast.

#### 4.2 Five Games That Can Be Used in Teaching Vocabulary to Young Learners

Games, as stated before, are interesting methods to teach young learners vocabulary. They help students in learning their vocabulary effectively without boredom and they will acquire the lessons easily. For the reason of space, the games that will be discussed in this section are Hot Potatoes, Memory Challenge, Last One Standing, Pictionary, and Bingo.

The first game is called '*Hot Potatoes*.' The class is divided into group A and B with both teams sitting on the opposite sides of the classrooms. Two chairs will be placed in the middle of the class so that whoever sits on the chair will face her/his team and the board must be behind the them. Then, their teacher writes a word on the board, but the student on the chair will not see it. Each team will have one minute after signaling the beginning of the game. The other students are allowed to use verbs so that their seated teammate can guess the word written on the board. They should not say the exact word written on the board.

'*Memory Challenge*' is another game that could be used to teach vocabularies to young learners. Students have to sit in pairs or form small groups. Each group is given three minutes to write down as many words as they can remember from their previous lesson e.g. animals. The group that recalls most words will win the game.

The third game is '*Last One Standing*' where a topic is given to the children e.g. fruit. They have to stand up in a circle and the teacher count to three and give out the topic. After that, the first student in the circle will have to give a word related to the topic and so on. The students who can not say a new word or repeat the words of the last student has to take a seat. The last student standing will be declared the winner.

'*Pictionary*' is the fourth example of games that could be used to teach vocabulary to young learners. The class have to be divided into two teams. Each team will sit on the opposite side of the classroom. One student from both teams will be asked to come to the board where the teacher will give out a word or phrase for the student to be drawn on the board as a clue. The team who can guess the word will get the point.

The last game to be discussed is called '*Bingo*.' In this game, the teacher writes 10 words on the board and every student choose five words and write them down. After that, the teacher selects one word in a random way without saying it and give the students its definition or synonym. If a student guessed the right word, he or she should shout BINGO! and wins the round.

#### 5. Practical Challenges of Implementing Games in Teaching Vocabulary to Young Learner

Although games proved to be a successful method when teaching vocabulary to young learners, they give rise to some challenges for the teacher and the students. The first challenge is the noise and unorganized classroom. Children sometimes move a lot and talk too much when they are excited which makes it hard to control them. In order to manage the class, Brown (2001) stated that the teacher must understand the students' characteristics in order to create a good environment for learning.

Teachers of young learners need to choose a variety of creative games to sustain young learners' attention instead of being occupied with something else. Harmer (2001) stated that children are not expected to sit down or do the same activity for a long time because they lose interest after several minutes. Moreover, as stated before, young learners have a short attention span, so activities should be as engaging as possible because they lose interest after ten minutes. Creativity is an important aspect when choosing or designing games to teach vocabulary to young learners.

Another challenge teachers may face is that students sometimes want to speak in their mother tongue during the class and game to communicate with each other and their teachers. Teachers have to respond in English, even if the student is asking the teacher something in their native language. From my own point of view, teachers should use young learners' native language from now and then to encourage the students to speak and participate in the lesson.

Teachers might have a little time after doing the game to drill the vocabularies they gave their students. The students might not have the time to repeat and practice saying the words. The result may be students making wrong guesses about the pictures showed by their teachers.

There should be a balance between the type of game, number of vocabularies, time, effort, and the use of the students' native language. Experienced teachers will have no problem balancing all these challenges while using games in teaching vocabulary to their young learners.

#### 6. Conclusion

When teaching young learners vocabulary using games, teachers must be patient in finding new and interesting ways so that students enjoy learning. Games can help young learners to learn their vocabulary effectively. As

explained above, there are five games amongst many to be used to teach vocabulary e.g. Hot Potatoes, Memory Challenge, Last One Standing, Pictionary, and Bingo. Teacher should consider time and materials when designing or choosing the game. Although games have advantages and disadvantages when used to teach vocabularies, using them will enable young learners to acquire the lesson with fun where they can remember all the vocabulary easily.

Though games are very popular among young learners, they should not be overused. They should be chosen appropriately to students' level, interest, and context. Furthermore, it must be concerned with the presented topic and vocabularies. Any game can be effective when it is used suitably to the topic and is controlled by wise and skilled teacher.

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## Appendix One:

### Vocabulary game: Hidden pictures

This activity is a kind of vocabulary game in which the learner's attention is focused mainly on words. It provides vocabulary practice and improves the memory.

This game can be used as an out-of-class activity, because it requires more spatial conditions. The classroom may not be very suitable because of the lack of places for hiding things.

The activity may be linked with arts, it depends on the teacher, if he/she wants to spend one whole lesson only with drawing pictures or he/she ask the art teacher to have an extra lesson, where children will draw pictures for the English game.

### Lesson plan

**Level:** beginners

**Length of the lesson:** 45 minutes

**New lexis:** vocabulary: House

**Materials:** pictures that were made by children

### Skills to be practiced:

- Writing – children write definition of the pictures on other cards
- Reading – proves the knowledge of vocabulary
- Speaking – children need to ask their partners for the proper picture or definition

### Aims:

- Vocabulary practice
- Developing communicative skills

### The main activity:

Some days in a year you can diversify an educational process with some kind of out-of-class activity. Children

enjoy surprise and change and they will not expect it. The only thing you need are the pictures that children drew in their arts class.

This activity demands teacher's preparation before you start an activity. You need to go to the nature or the place you will carry out the activity and hide the pictures and definitions at different places. Then bring children to the place and let them find all the cards. They can be divided into small groups or work in pairs. Each group or pair finds different pictures with different definitions.

Now tell the children to find the correct definition for each picture. The group who will collect the most card-pairs is the winner. Learners are supposed to practice common phrases, e.g. What's in your picture? What word do you have?

**Variation:**

You can extend the activity by letting children describe pictures to their classmates so that they can guess the correct answer.

## Appendix Two

### Vocabulary game: The washing line

This kind of listen-and-find activity requires a lot of physical movement and enough space in the classroom. It is designed to provide physically active listening practice, which can be used as a pre-activity before some other following speaking activity. Or it can be used as an end-of-class activity for revising new vocabulary.

#### Lesson plan

**Level:** elementary

**Length of the lesson:** 45 minutes

**New lexis:** clothes

colours

**Materials:**

- Rope
- Two boxes or bags
- Different items of clothes
- Clothes pegs
- Numbered pictures – on each of them there is an item of clothes

**Skills to be practiced:**

- Vocabulary
- Pronunciation
- Listening

**Aims:** to provide vocabulary practice and exciting body-movement activity

**Pre-activity:**

It is essential to pre-check the children's knowledge of new vocabulary even if they had learned it previous lesson. You can do it as following: Take the cards of clothes and show them to pupils one after another and always pronounce the clothes term. For example there is a skirt in the picture and you say: *Blue skirt!* And show the picture to children. You can repeat it two times. After revising all vocabulary, stick the pictures on the board and number them.

Now you can either say the numbers and children should guess the word or you can say the term again and children write the appropriate letter. Do it in any order you like but do not forget to write the correct order on a piece of paper so that you remember it and you can check it after the activity.

**Variations:**

You can use pictures made by children. When the children draw the picture, it helps them to remember the items and terms better. With this kind of activity you can revise almost all kinds of vocabulary (parts of the body, days in a week, directions as well as verbs and so on).



**Main activity:**

Get two children at the front of the class who will hold the rope. Divide the class into two teams and each team should choose a representative. Now ask for an item: *Could you bring me a yellow sock?* The two representatives search in the bags or boxes for the clothes item and the one who chooses the right thing should hang it on the line. The first who hangs all the clothes items is the winner. Then another two children are going to compete. The game is over, when one team has their line full of clothes.

**Variants:**

With more skilled children you can do the activity to practice the writing skills. Try to make it similar to bingo: each child draws his/her own washing line with four or five things hanging on it. So that drawing does not take a long time, they can just draw four squares and write e.g. 'blue skirt' in it. Teacher reads out a list of items (I have a pink T-shirt and green sock here. I also have blue trousers and brown jumper...). If somebody crosses off all his/her items on the line, he/she is the winner of the game.

**Evaluation:**

This activity is more suitable for practicing separate vocabulary rather than the whole phrases. If you do not have the possibility to use real objects you can just compensate it with two sets of pictures or word cards.

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