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The Use of Customized Board Games for Vocabulary Learning

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Abstract

Vocabulary acquisition is one of the most challenging aspects of mastering a second language. Even though students may comprehend new vocabulary, they often struggle with retaining that information. The use of so-called shallow vocabulary learning strategies such as simple memorization and repetition drills can hinder vocabulary learning. This study investigates the use of a board game as a way to encourage independent vocabulary practice outside of the classroom and promote the use of complex strategies such as grouping and associations to help with word retention. Since motivation is a driving force behind successful learning, this study sought to examine whether the use of a board game Codenames could result in greater vocabulary learning and help to promote independent practice of the target vocabulary outside of class. This pilot study was conducted at a large Midwestern university with intermediate level ESL students of listening and reading classes. The game was anticipated to help the students go beyond simple memorization when practicing course vocabulary. The findings showed that although the use of the game did not result in greater vocabulary learning, it did result in increased motivation and enjoyment of vocabulary practice. Possible ways of adapting the game concept for course specific vocabulary practice are also discussed.

Keywords: *ESL/EFL Instruction, ESL/EFL Vocabulary Learning, Vocabulary Board Games*

Introduction

Vocabulary learning plays a crucial role in mastering a second language. Nevertheless, studies demonstrate that the process of vocabulary acquisition is challenging for many students. Lack of exposure to new material, the use of shallow memorization techniques instead of complex strategies, and low motivation are a few factors responsible for hindrance in vocabulary learning.

Limited class time restricts the number of words that can be taught explicitly during formal instruction, making independent practice outside of class important for mastering new vocabulary. Since multiple exposures and high-quality repetition contribute to the process of word retention, this paper aims to examine a board game as a way to promote independent vocabulary practice outside of class. Games are widely implemented in ESL classrooms to motivate, engage, and actively involve students in a learning process. They help to reduce anxiety and promote language use for communication. Since previous research has demonstrated successful implementation of games during in-class instruction, we wanted to see whether students could benefit from using games for independent vocabulary practice outside of class.

Historically, teaching methods did not emphasize vocabulary instruction, so this area remained undervalued for many decades (Schmitt, 2000). More recent trends in language teaching regard vocabulary instruction as an important aspect of successful language learning. According to Read (2004), “the focus has been on research with relatively direct applications to the language classroom, but there is a great deal more work that is advancing our understanding of vocabulary acquisition processes and of the nature of vocabulary itself” (p.156). Today, lots of questions related to the area of second language vocabulary acquisition are still unanswered.

One of the biggest concerns is word retention. Schmitt (2000) discusses the fact that even though students may comprehend new vocabulary, they often struggle with retaining that information. He points out that the use of appropriate vocabulary learning strategies and multiple exposures to the target words are the key elements for vocabulary mastery. Unfortunately, students often favor shallow vocabulary learning techniques due to their simplicity and ease of use. According to Schmitt, simple memorization, repetition, and taking notes on vocabulary are the most commonly used shallow strategies. Research by Moir and Nation (2002) demonstrates that learners tend to quickly study their target words before test days and forget them shortly after such practice. That is perhaps one of the reasons why students find the process of learning new words quite boring and frustrating (Huyen & Nga, 2003). Even frequent use of simple repetition drills does not facilitate retention. “The idea is that the mere quantity of vocabulary learning strategies is not sufficient in its own right,” argue Tseng and Schmitt (2008, p.387). Studies demonstrate that the use of complex strategies, which activate deep processing of the new information, leads to enhanced retention. Among them are the use of grouping, imagery and associations. The benefits of associations, multiple noticing, and thoughtful processing of word meaning are emphasized by Nation (2006). Since vocabulary learning is incremental, Webb (2007) points out that new words require multiple exposures and quality repetition to facilitate retention. Tseng and Schmitt distinguish two important stages in vocabulary learning with the first one controlling the choice and frequency of the strategies used, and the second stage controlling mastery of these strategies.

In addition, motivation and interest are important conditions for noticing and uptake of new information. Tseng and Schmitt (2008) regard motivation as a critical determinant of success in vocabulary learning. They argue that “Motivation appears to be involved in all stages of learning (instigating, sustaining, and evaluating), thus permeating the whole process” (p.383). However, the researchers point out that due to its dynamic nature, motivation has to be sustained and nurtured

throughout the learning process. Ushioda (2008) notes that it is important to encourage motivation as it leads to autonomy. A recent study by Alrabai (2016) reports positive effects of teachers' motivational strategies on learners' motivation and achievement in English language classrooms in Saudi Arabia. A significant increase in learners' motivation observed in the experimental group also led to higher achievement.

The Use of Word Games for Vocabulary Learning

Teachers use various strategies to capture the attention of, motivate, and engage their learners during class time. Games are one of them. They have become a great tool to enhance classroom instruction and promote positive attitudes towards learning. Students learn while having fun. The research findings by Nguyen and Khuat (2003) demonstrate advantages and effectiveness of games for word learning, which lead to higher retention of the target vocabulary. Moreover, Schultz (1988) points out that learning through play helps to create an anxiety-free atmosphere for communication in a target language. A competitive aspect of games adds to the benefits.

The problem is that class time is not sufficient to teach students all the words they need to know to reach second language mastery. According to Stahl and Fairbanks (1986), only approximately 400 words can effectively be taught explicitly per year. Lack of autonomous vocabulary practice outside of class hinders vocabulary learning. Since new words require multiple exposures and quality repetition to facilitate retention (Webb, 2007), word board games can provide ESL students with a useful way to practice new vocabulary independently outside of class. A board game Codenames is one of them. It promotes associative learning, multiple noticing, and negotiation of word meaning. In addition, since social context enhances motivation, this type of board game can prepare students for cooperative learning, creative thinking, and team work.

Game Overview

Students of any age and any skill level can participate in this game. In Codenames, two rival teams of 'spies' try to uncover all of their 'secret agents' located on the board under code names. The game challenges the team leaders to find close associations catered to their teammates. The 'key card,' seen by team leaders only, shows the agents' location on the board. Team leaders, called spymasters, take turns giving clues to their teammates to help them pick specific word cards from the board.



Figure 1. The Layout of the Board Game Codenames

The color grid in *Figure 1*. shows that the word “tooth”, located on the second line in the top right corner on the board, belongs to the red team. To help the teammates guess this word, a possible clue could be “chew 1”, where “1” indicates a number of words on the board matching the clue “chew”.

The biggest benefit of the game is that in order to win, students have to focus their attention on the word cards for the entire duration of the game. Both spymasters and their teammates have to go over the same words multiple times while considering appropriate associations and negotiating word meanings.

Methods

This pilot study aimed to investigate the use of a board game as a motivating way to engage ESL students in autonomous vocabulary practice outside of class to help them go beyond simple memorization when learning new course vocabulary.

The research questions were as follows:

- 1). Will practice with Codenames result in greater vocabulary learning than traditional classroom instruction?
- 2). Will students have a positive reaction to the use of Codenames for vocabulary practice?

Participants

The study was conducted with intermediate level ESL students of listening and reading classes of an intensive English language program at a large Midwestern university. Four classes, eighteen students in total, were observed during two weeks of classes, each week equaling a unit of instruction. The study included both male and female participants who were mostly native Arabic and Mandarin speakers in their early twenties.

Procedure

Vocabulary pre-tests and post-tests were conducted to measure students' vocabulary knowledge at the beginning and at the end of each week. Each test required students to give definitions, finish cloze sentences, list synonyms, and use the target words in sentences for a maximum of nine points. During the first week, regular instruction took place and participants' knowledge of the target vocabulary was measured at the beginning and at the end of the week. This served as the control condition. Then, a YouTube video with the game instructions was assigned as homework prior to in-class game introduction. It was accompanied by a worksheet to check students' comprehension of the video content. At the beginning of the second week, the game was introduced in class. Each student was given a game set to take home for independent vocabulary practice. The game sets were customized to unit-specific vocabulary by covering the existing words on the cards with the target vocabulary items. The game sets were accompanied by word lists containing the target words, definitions, and synonyms. The word lists were expected to serve as references during game play. In addition to pre-tests and post-tests, the students filled out a brief survey about their experience with using Codenames.

Results and discussion

Table 1 shows means and standard deviations for students' scores on the pretests and posttests in both the first and second week.

Table 1. Means (M) and standard deviations (SD) for students' scores on pretest and posttest

	Test	Mean	SD
Week 1	Pre-test	4.28	2.986
	Post-test	5.89	3.160
Week 2	Pre-test	3.11	1.231
	Post-test	4.78	2.625

In the control condition in the first week the students improved from a mean of 4.28 ($SD = 2.99$) to a mean of 5.89 ($SD = 3.16$). This change was statistically significant, $t(17) = 3.27$, $p = 0.005$, and showed a large effect size, $d = 0.773$ as shown in Table 2 below. In the second week, the students improved from a mean of 3.11 ($SD = 1.23$) to a mean of 4.78 ($SD = 2.62$). This change was also statistically significant, $t(17) = 2.98$, $p = 0.008$ with a large effect size, $d = 0.807$.

Table 2. The results of students' improvement and the effect size

	t	df	p	d
Week 1	-3.270	17	0.005	0.773
Week 2	-2.976	17	0.008	0.807

A comparison between the gain scores in the two weeks showed a non-significant difference in the amount of vocabulary gains, $t(34) = 0.07$, $p = 0.941$. Together, these results demonstrate that students improved significantly from the pre-test to the post-test similarly in both weeks, both with using the games and without them. Thus, the use of the games seems to have neither helped nor hindered students' learning of the target vocabulary.

Student survey results

The experiment demonstrated that the participants generally expressed a positive attitude towards the game use for vocabulary practice and felt that it helped them with learning new words (see Figure 2). In-class observations confirmed students' interest and engagement with the game. Students reported using the game several times during the second week, although the answers varied among the participants.

Even though not all the participants played the game every day outside of class (average 2.8 out of 5, $SD=1.4$), the majority of the students reported that they enjoyed playing Codenames (average 4.6 out of 5, $SD=0.7$). In addition, the students felt that the game helped them learn new words (average 4.4 out of 5, $SD=0.8$), and synonyms (average 4.2 out of 5, $SD=1.0$). However, the students did not feel as strongly that the game helped with spelling (3.8 out of 5, $SD=1.2$).

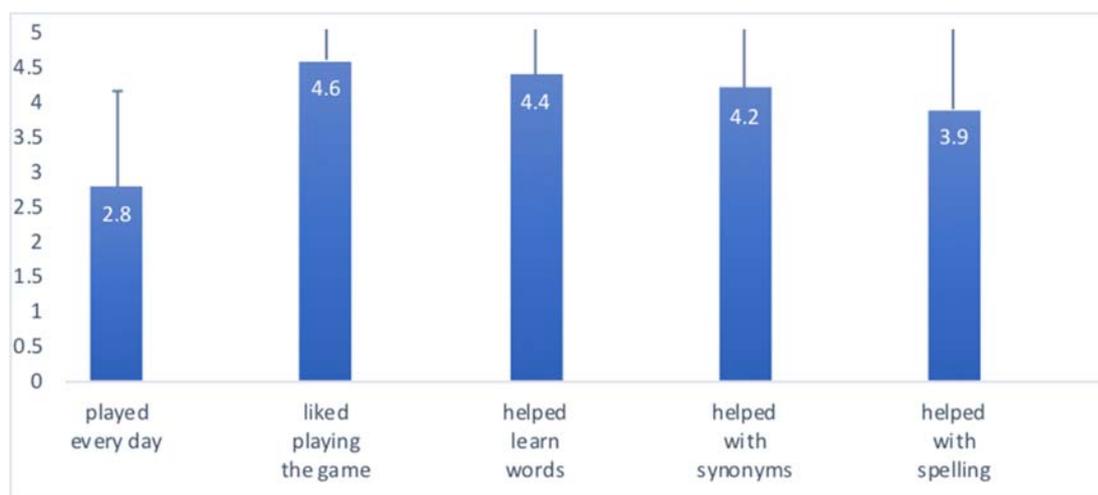


Figure 2. The Results of the Student Surveys

As for the research questions, the findings did not show that using Codenames resulted in greater vocabulary learning than traditional instruction, but they also did not show less learning either. Since the game promoted a positive attitude and an increased interest towards vocabulary learning without resulting in decreased vocabulary learning, it indicates that the game may be a useful tool to promote independent vocabulary practice outside of class. Due to incremental nature of second language vocabulary acquisition, one week may not have been sufficient to register any differential progress in vocabulary learning. Even though the limited data do not give a definitive answer on whether the game is beneficial for vocabulary learning, the initial results are promising.

Implications and suggestions for future research

The findings of this pilot study can have the following implications:

First, the game can potentially be used as a way to encourage independent vocabulary practice outside of class without resulting in a decrease in vocabulary learning. Second, further use of and research on other board games is necessary. For example, ESL or EFL programs could experiment with other board games, in addition to Codenames. Perhaps board game clubs can be established to promote independent vocabulary practice and language learning outside of class. Such activities could help ESL students to become familiar with a variety of word board games and learn possible ways to customize the game sets for course specific vocabulary practice. In addition, since social context enhances motivation, the games can promote the use of the target language outside of class. Since research findings demonstrate successful implementation of games during class instruction, it is useful to investigate the ways to utilize them outside of class to engage students in independent vocabulary practice. Additional research is needed to explore these possibilities.

Limitations of the Study

The study has a number of limitations that need to be considered while interpreting the results. First, this pilot study had a small number of participants, so future research should include a larger number. Second, the implementation of the game was done only over a one-week period, which may have been insufficient to observe gains. Last, the level of students' commitment was somewhat uncertain. As students' commitment and the use of the game is essential, future research should monitor more closely the games use outside of class.

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