

Effectiveness of Language Games as a Vocabulary Teaching Strategy in a Rural ESL Classroom

Sujay Kumar and Smriti Singh

Abstract

Vocabulary is an important component that determines the pace of learners' language learning process. Various procedures are available on how to teach and learn vocabulary in second language classrooms. In the context of non-English medium schools, learners often depend on teachers and their explanations of vocabulary which they try to memorize. It has been observed that vocabulary learnt in teacher-centric classrooms with the help of a bilingual word list helps to enrich passive vocabulary but it is not retained for a long period (Holden, 1999). This calls for exploration of alternative ways of teaching vocabulary. Nguyen & Khuat (2003) suggest that learning vocabulary in a relaxed environment through games can be a productive experience for learners. The researchers who are also teachers aimed to investigate effectiveness of language games in enrichment and retention of vocabulary within the action research framework. The paper discusses the effectiveness of language games that help to not only motivate the learners to participate in class activities but also enrich and retain vocabulary.

Keywords: vocabulary, action research, language games, enrichment, enhancement, retention

Introduction

In the context of second language learning, vocabulary is an important component which links the language skills together. There are many vocabulary teaching and learning strategies which can be used in second

language classrooms, and the selection of appropriate strategies should be determined by learners' academic and sociocultural backgrounds. In recent years, use of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches has paved the way for use of language games in the classroom. Learners prefer to learn vocabulary in a relaxed environment through games (Nguyen & Khuat, 2003). Games lead children towards behavioural, affective and cognitive development. Concept of playing games outside the classroom can be integrated into classroom teaching. Language games have been found to improve motivation, communicative competence and socialization (Bado & Franklin, 2014).

Research Context

The difference between theoretical knowledge and real classroom practices is clearly visible in most second language classrooms in India but it varies from place to place. This kind of difference is evident especially in non-English medium schools where classrooms are large and heterogeneous in nature. In ESL classrooms in Bengali medium schools in West Bengal, the learners depend on teachers for vocabulary. They try to memorize the word along with their meanings. It has been observed that vocabulary learnt in teacher-centric classrooms using bilingual word list helps to enrich passive vocabulary but it is not retained for a long period (Holden, 1999). To speak a language, learners need to enrich their active vocabulary and this does not happen in traditional classrooms. Teachers and learners of non-English medium schools in India get only 40-50 minutes to make ESL teaching-learning process effective and during this limited time, learners do not get much opportunity to use the language learnt in a real context, inside or outside the classroom. Teachers are not teaching English as a language, rather they consider it as a subject like mathematics, science, etc. The common scenario in Bengali medium schools, especially in rural areas with technologically underequipped classrooms, is that learners after spending ten years studying English as a second language master reading and writing skills with correct grammatical knowledge but are not able to communicate in English and are unable to use appropriate words when needed. This situation urges teachers and researchers to rethink about the pedagogy of language teaching in ESL classrooms. For this study, Bhasaipakar School, a Bengali medium school, was selected as our research context which is technologically underequipped and

situated in a rural area of Murshidabad district in West Bengal. This school has more than seven hundred enrolments in Class VI and only one section of Class VI was selected to conduct the study with more than ninety students' enrolment which is heterogeneous in nature with multi-socio-economic background.

Literature Review

The importance of vocabulary in speaking has been stressed by various researchers (Cameron 2001; Thornbury 2002; Linse, 2005). Language games are an interesting way of teaching vocabulary to the learners. Rixon (1981) defines games as goal-defined, rule-governed activity for children carried out cooperatively or competitively. Kapoor (2007) points out the importance of games in cognitive, social, emotional, psycho-motor, language and moral development, and tries to erase the misconception that play/games method is a waste of time. Kiron et al. (2019) have established that games create a space for learners which facilitate learning from each other through their study using a peer-quizzing game, Tower of Questions (TOQ).

Nguyen & Khuat (2003) lay stress on the fun part of games and suggest that vocabulary games can be implemented in any classroom but it is essential to choose games according to the age of learners and their language proficiency. Simpson (2011) shows how games help learners not only in recognizing shapes and spelling but also in learning a new vocabulary in elementary stage EFL classrooms. Avinash and Samson (2016) highlight a series of games which help learners to work and employ their linguistic and grammatical skills to gain knowledge about target language. Affect refers to non-linguistic variables such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety, which will affect acquisition. However, activities like games lower down affective filter to make learning meaningful and playful (Krashen, 1985). The teacher must prioritize the low stress and non-threatening classroom environment which encourages risk-taking and offers training in affective strategies to help the student to manage anxiety and improve performance (Oxford & Crookall, 1989). Chik (2011) claimed that use of digital games in the classroom helps to develop the learner's autonomy. This autonomy tries to erase the linguistic barriers among the players to learn new vocabulary by playing games.

There are various studies outlining the importance of games in learning vocabulary, most of them are conducted in the EFL context. Again, most studies outline strategies of vocabulary retention, instead of focusing on games for vocabulary and the effect of these games on active vocabulary learning. There is lack of full-length work in the ESL context particularly focusing on enrichment and retention of vocabulary in Indian ESL classrooms particularly focusing on Bengali medium schools. This research is an attempt to study the effectiveness of the language games on enrichment and retention of active vocabulary in the Indian ESL context.

Methodology

Research Questions

The research aimed to answer the following research questions:

- Does the use of language games help to enrich the vocabulary of learners in the Indian ESL classroom?
- Does the use of language games create a learner-centric atmosphere in the Indian ESL classroom?

Research Methodology

Exploratory Action Research (EAR) has been used for this research work. EAR is a methodology usually used by practitioners and researchers to explore, understand and improve classroom practices. It involves close exploration of the classroom situation and teaching-learning practices. Action Research is a form of investigation designed for practitioners to attempt to solve problems and improve their classroom practices. It involves systematic observation and data collection which can then be used by the practitioner–researcher for reflection, decision-making and the development of more effective classroom strategies. (Parsons & Brown, 2002).

Steps Involved in Exploratory Action Research



Data Collection Tools

For this exploratory study, various tools have been used to ensure accuracy of results. Teacher journal has been used as a tool to make notes of classroom observation. This observation includes the exploration

of the context by identifying the problems in traditional teaching procedures and reflection on the effect of use of games for vocabulary learning in the classroom. Student feedback on their participation and their own experiences in participating in games has been collected using questionnaires based on five-point Likert scale questions along with some open-ended questions (see Appendix 1). Audio-visual devices have been used to record the participation of students in different activities. In the pre-study phase, a standardized diagnostic test was conducted to diagnose the problem in language class and measure the vocabulary level of the learners and in the post-study phase, a standardized achievement test was conducted to measure the development in terms of vocabulary.

Sample for the Study

Students of Class VI were selected as a research sample but only one section from Class VI was targeted for the action research study. There are more than ninety enrolments and about sixty students regularly attend the classes. The language level of the students was between A1 and A2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2018 which is a framework to describe the learners' language learning ability and the level of proficiency allows learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning on a lifelong basis.

Based on classroom observation, it has been noticed that the students can form their own opinion about their learning experiences. Learners of this level have been chosen considering their intrinsic motivation towards games. Learners of primary classes are also interested in games but they were not considered because in Bengali medium schools, the language level of learners at the primary section is below the Pre-A1 level (CEFR 2018) and implementation of language games may not be fruitful in terms of classroom management.

Findings

Findings from the Exploration Stage

It is necessary to verify the authenticity of the assumption before starting a particular study. Real classroom has been explored to check the authenticity related to the classroom situation in the selected ESL classroom for the research work. Teaching and learning practices have been carefully observed by noting down. This helped the researchers to identify the problem and need of students using classroom observation

and pre-study questionnaire. It has been found through observation that there was no difference between our assumptions before starting the study and real classroom situation. Teaching and learning practices in the English class are similar to non-language subjects. In the teaching and learning process, the teachers just provide explanation of stories or poems in English by translating it into students' mother tongue. There is no initiative on the part of the teachers to develop language skills of the learners. Reading and writing activities are the most focused and practised skill in this classroom. To identify proficiency level and problems of the students, we conducted a pre-study test which was designed to check learners' proficiency levels in all four language skills. The result of the pre-study test is presented in the following Figure 1:

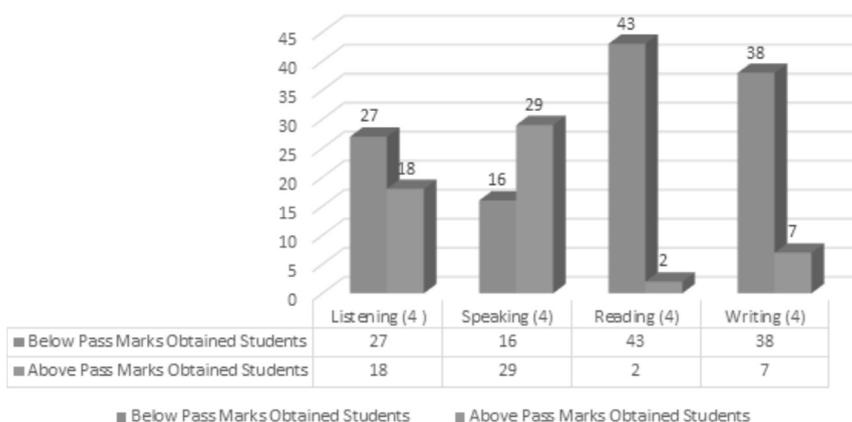


Figure 1: Result of Pre-Study Test

It is evident from the result presented in Figure 1 that the performance of learners was good in reading and above average in writing but performance of students was very poor in listening and speaking. While conducting the pre-study test, we observed that students frequently asked for word meaning. This tendency of students indicated that learners were not only lacking in speaking and listening skills but they were also lacking in vocabulary, and they tend to soon forgot the word and its meaning.

Findings from the Action Stage

Findings of the exploration stage helped us to shape and modify the teaching strategies in classrooms. There is a need of learner-centric activities in classrooms; this not only intrinsically motivates the learners

to participate by removing shyness, fear of humiliation but also facilitates learning of vocabulary. In this study, one of the most innovative and interesting activities, games for learning and practising vocabulary was used as classroom activities. As practitioners-cum-researchers, we planned to conduct the lessons for vocabulary learning and practice using games in which learners are interested. This study was conducted in one EAR cycle of two-months duration by changing teaching procedures into games-based teaching learning procedures.

In the first initial weeks, we primarily used easy vocabulary games in the language class. Primary focus of these lessons was to decrease shyness, fear, hesitation and ensure active participation. Learners were encouraged to be risk takers and errors were seen as part of the organic learning process. Procedure and rules of the games were clearly explained to the learners using their mother tongue. Teachers provided constant scaffolding during the process. These games were mainly selected from an authentic book *Games for language learning* (Wright et al., 2006) and *Five minutes' activities* (Ur & Wright, 1982). The following are some of the games which were used in English classrooms during the intervention study.

Crosswords

Procedure: The teacher will instruct the learners to write a word of their choice with five letters or the teacher will write a word on behalf of the students, i.e. "school". The teacher will instruct the student to think of a word which has at least a common word with the word provided on the board. The teacher will provide clues related to different words like "A place where we like to live". If someone guesses the word home or house, the student will write down the word so that it crosses the first word which shares a letter with it.

Brainstorm Round a Word

Procedure: The teacher will initiate by writing a familiar word on the board. The student will think and provide a word associated or related to the word written on the board. The teacher will write the words or ideas on the board in a circular way so that the sun rays effect is created.

Where Did it Come From?

Procedure: The teacher will write the name of an artefact on the board and ask the students to describe the materials with which it is made of.

Each time the teacher or any student will write down their ideas as they suggest something on the board and then repeat the question.

These games are flexible enough to modify according to the proficiency level of the learners. A few activities from the textbook by adding game mechanics to it, were also used in EAR cycle. The lessons were conducted in the English class using these games; we started with simple games to remove their fear in participation and then moved on to vocabulary games. Participation of learners in classroom work was recorded during the study and transcription of these recordings was used as an evidence of change in the study. We administered the same questionnaire twice, first time during the pre-study phase and second time during the post-study phase, for collecting their opinions about their experiences in the ESL classroom during the EAR cycle.

In the post-study phase, a standardized achievement test was conducted using a question paper which included contextual fill in the blanks, matching and picture dictionary with different types of pictures without any level were provided to them. Students have to write the title of each image. The result of the achievement test clearly shows the changes which are presented in Figure 2.

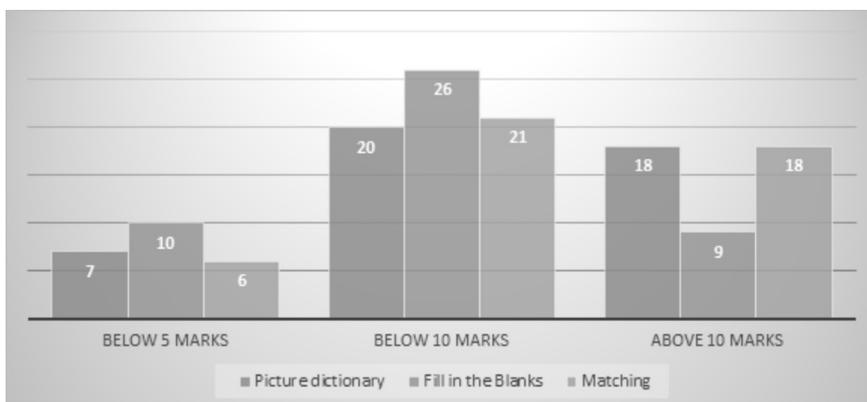


Figure 2: Result of Post Test

Impact of Games

To evaluate the impact of games in the language class in terms of vocabulary enrichment and retention, recording of classroom work was transcribed and some transcriptions are presented as evidence of change in learning. Positive impact of games in the language classroom

was visible in the responses of the learners which have been presented in transcriptions 1 and 2. Responses of students provided in the questionnaire present a clear view of a drastic change in the student's perception. Most of the students felt that participating in a game helped them to learn new vocabulary.

Transcription 1

Teacher	Student	Class
Dress	School	Discipline
Textbook	Routine	Tiffin
		Midday Meal

(Transcription of the performance of the students while taking part in a brainstorm game)

Transcription 2

Teacher: Write down the word *Eagle*

Student 1: Girl (mane balika)

Student 2: Lion

Student 3: Next

Student 4: Six (choi) I study in Class six.

Student 5: Ship..(jahaz) I have

Student 6: pen (kalam) I have a pen.

Student 5: Elephant

Student 7: I have an elephant. This is an elephant.

Student 8: This is a big elephant.

Student : Home (bari) I go home.

Student 5: Man (manus)

(Transcription of the performance of the students while performing in a crossword game)

Responses to the questionnaire provided by the students in the pre- and post- study phase, have shown a positive line of change in terms of learning and classroom atmosphere. While answering the statement on frequency of learning new words, most of the students have changed their opinion from never or rarely in the pre-study stage to often and always in the post-study phase as it is visible in Figure 3 below.

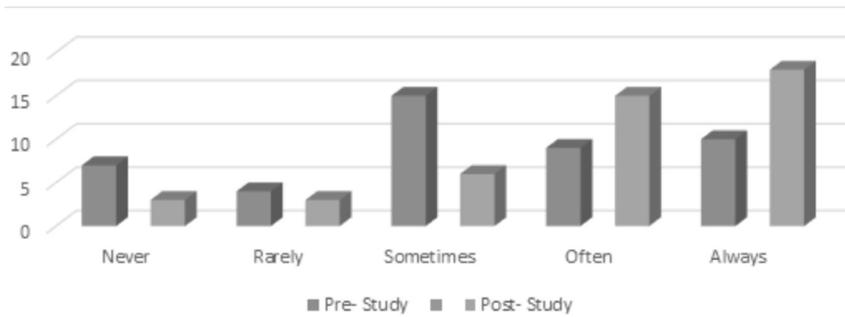


Figure 3: I have learnt more new vocabulary in the English class.

Use of games in the classroom helps learners to learn new vocabulary more easily than in the traditional classroom. It provides enough space for practice and helps them to remember the learnt vocabulary as it is evident in responses of learners provided in the questionnaire that has changed in the post-study stage as compared to the pre-study stage. This change can be observed in Figure 4 below.

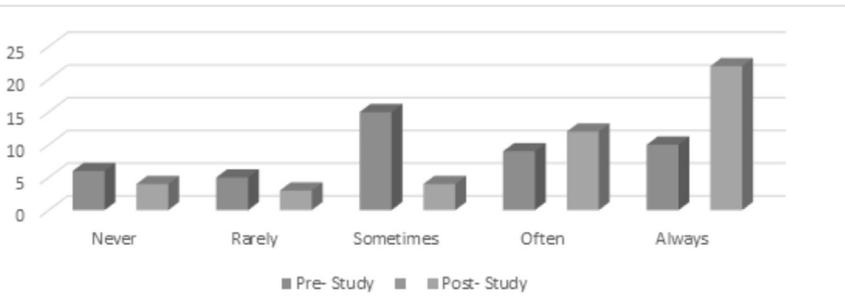


Figure 4: It is easy to learn and remember words in the English class during these days.

Lessons during this intervention study became interesting for the students. They got the opportunity to play in the classroom which they did not get earlier. Use of games intrinsically motivates the learners towards classroom procedures that is evident in their responses to the statement in the questionnaires. Now students can play and learn new words without any fear by participating in classroom activities. Figure 5 shows the change in opinions of learners on how classroom work became more interesting for them and their participation increased.

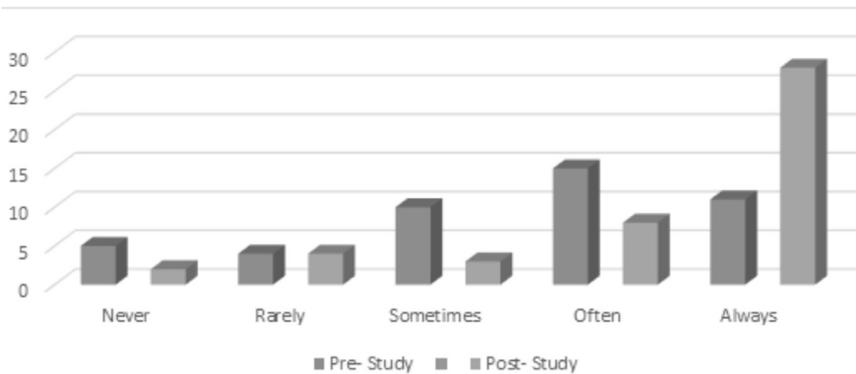


Figure 5: It is interesting to participate in classroom activities.

Learners who participated in the intervention study think that use of games in the language class creates more scope for learners to learn new vocabulary and practise them in an easy and relaxed environment. They think that use of games in the classroom helped them to practise and retain the vocabulary. Result of the change in the teaching procedure in the action research study is visible in the result of the post-study test. While conducting the pre-study test it has been observed that learners frequently ask the teacher for the meaning of simple words. But in the post-study test designed particularly focusing on vocabulary, it has been observed that frequency of their query for word meaning has decreased. Their answers are based on their own knowledge. Their opinion in this respect has changed during the course of the study as it is evident in Figure 6 below.

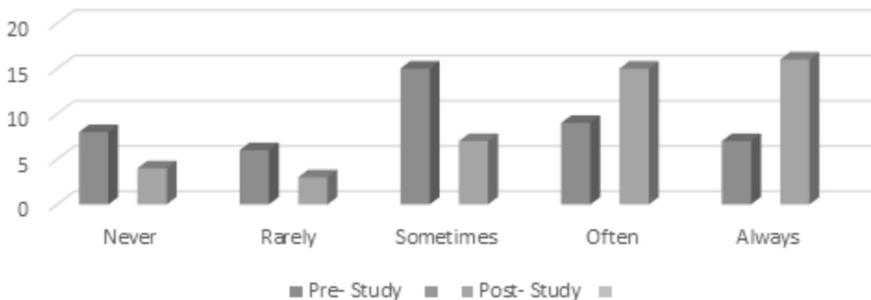


Figure 6: It provides scope for retention of vocabulary by participating in games.

Discussion

We observed every class conducted during the EAR cycle for two months using games and took notes in the teachers' journal. Each lesson was conducted with various types of vocabulary games matching the learners' need and interests. Initially the classes seemed chaotic due to a sudden shift from teacher-centric to learner-centric classroom environment. We felt that it would not be possible to conduct classes smoothly in this manner. But it is true that chaotic nature of the class does not indicate the negative aspect of the class, but it shows the energy of learners to participate in activities. The nature of the classroom soon transformed, and the learners started participating in classroom activities freely and actively. While participating in games they tried to learn new words from each other, this facilitated peer learning. The learners got opportunities in class to learn and practise the learnt vocabulary. The summarization of opinions that are presented using graphical figures, shows how the use of games has changed learners' perceptions about learning and practising vocabulary in the post-study phase compared to the pre-study phase. Responses collected using the questionnaire presents a brief picture of their experiences in the classroom.

Conclusion

In the context of language teaching, vocabulary is an important component but sometimes its teaching is limited to mere copying and memorizing. In this research, it has been observed that vocabulary teaching using games is more effective than the traditional way of teaching. It also changes the learning environment in class from teacher-centric to a more relaxed learner-centric environment. Games provide students with a platform to learn, practise and review vocabulary. The result of this study shows that games are used in the classroom not only to provide fun to the students but also to engage the students in learning vocabulary in a way that they can retain it. Transcriptions of classroom activities provides ample evidence of vocabulary enrichment which is further established by the learners' feedback. The idea of practitioner, teacher, researcher and learner has been embraced in this study to implement the selected language games in the classroom to enrich their vocabulary. Procedures used in this study helps the teacher to scaffold the learners with patient and persistent ways.

This study was limited in scope in that it was conducted in a rural setting and the school had technologically under-equipped classrooms. Future researchers can undertake action research projects in their classroom settings to study variations across contexts.

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Appendix

Students' Questionnaire

Dear students:

I am researching in the area of game-based language learning with special focus on vocabulary development. This questionnaire is important for my research. Only the necessary details related to the work will be used.

Please provide a tick mark on any response of your choice to each statement.

Statements:

It is interesting to participate in classroom activities.

1. Never 2. Rarely 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Always

I feel comfortable to participate in classroom activities.

1. Never 2. Rarely 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Always

How do you feel while participating in classroom work in English during these days?

1. Nervous 2. Very nervous 3. Depends on the situation 4. Confident 5. Very confident

How do you describe the atmosphere of your class during these days?

1. Boring 2. Very boring 3. Depends on the situation 4. Interesting 5. Very interesting

I have learnt more new vocabulary in the English class.

1. Never 2. Rarely 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Always

It is easy to learn words in the English class.

1. Never 2. Rarely 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Always

It is easy to remember words in the English class.

1. Never 2. Rarely 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Always

Sujay Kumar Saha is a PhD Scholar in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, Patna.

sujoy.eflu@gmail.com; sujay.phs15@iitp.ac.in

Smriti Singh is an Associate Professor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Patna.

smritichotu@gmail.com; smriti@iitp.ac.in