

## THE EFFECT OF GAMES ON IRANIAN YOUNG EFL LEARNERS' VOCABULARY LEARNING

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**ABSTRACT:** *English vocabularies, particularly at the beginning stage of language learning process, are simply forgotten. Without an adequate repertoire of words, language users cannot understand others or express their own ideas. Vocabulary is vital across the core curriculum from “arts and social studies” to “mathematics and science”. It is commonly accepted that educational games are games that are intended to assist people to learn about particular subjects, expand concepts, reinforce development, understand a historical event or culture, or assist them in learning a skill during playing .Thus the present quasi-experimental study aimed at investigating the effect of game on Iranian young EFL learners’ vocabulary learning. Sixty male learners at elementary level participated in the study which lasted one academic semester. There were two groups –one experimental and the other control- with 30 learners in each. The collected data was analyzed by means of SPSS. The findings of the study provided strong support for the effectiveness of the games in word acquisition that might be due to their role in making a relaxed, less stressful, cheerful and enjoyable atmosphere for learning.*

**KEYWORDS:** Game, vocabulary learning, Iranian EFL learners

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### INTRODUCTION

“If language structure makes up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and flesh,” (Harmer, 1991, p. 153). Horwitz (1988) has discovered that a considerable number of the ESL learners completing her questionnaire-ranging between 25% and 39%- either agreed or strongly agreed that the most vital part of learning a foreign language is vocabulary learning. Vocabulary learning has gained much interest in the field of second language acquisition, thus the important point here is how words are learned. In late 1980s and 1990s so many studies were developed in this area and researchers tried to find the meaning of effective and efficient in short term and long term vocabulary learning (Cartner & Nunan, 2002). Some researchers (Harley, 1996; Yoshii, & Flaitz, 2002) identified vocabulary learning as a vital part of each student’s life, while other researchers though accept the importance of vocabulary acquisition in language

proficiency and academic achievement; their ideas about how vocabulary should be learned have varied widely. In early 1930s, it was found that there is association between English word knowledge and success in life. Achievement in earning and management was closely associated with vocabulary scores. When the vocabulary knowledge is not adequate, people experience difficulty in expressing their thoughts and ideas and this usually results in physical aggressiveness. In acquiring a second/foreign language, different areas such as motivation, learners' needs, learning environment, learning strategies and language awareness are involved. It becomes more and more difficult to close the eyes to second/foreign language learning strategies. Anyhow, learning strategies are, defined by Chamot and Kupper (1989) as "techniques which students use to comprehend, store, and remember information and skills" (p.9). Games present an exclusive arrangement to set off traditional teaching strategies and pervade teaching with liveliness glimmer, innovative thinking and provide mixture in teaching techniques. Games make learning concepts more pleasant for learners and provide learners with a platform for their inspired thoughts to bounce around. Games encourage creative performance and divergent thinking, and are exceptional" ice breakers" (Fuszard, 2001).

## **REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE**

### **Vocabulary**

The field of second language acquisition has seen the re-shining of interest in one area of vocabulary learning in the last 25 years (Meara, 1980). Vocabulary knowledge is commonly viewed as a critical tool for second language learners since an inadequate vocabulary in a second language impedes effective communication. On the importance of vocabulary acquisition, Schmitt (2000) emphasizes that "lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language" p. 55). On the importance of vocabulary, Krashen (1989) states that "a large vocabulary is of course, essential for mastery language"(as cited in Schmitt 2010,p.4). Rubin and Thompson (1994) point to the role of vocabulary in communication: "One cannot speak, read or write a foreign language without knowing a lot of words. Vocabulary is at the heart of mastering a foreign language". Alderson (1984) on the importance of vocabulary knowledge in language use states: "what would appear to show is that the size of one`s vocabulary is relevant to one`s performance on any language tests ,in other words, that language ability is to quite a large extent a function of vocabulary size" (as cited in Schmitt, 2010,p.5). In process of communication MWUs (multi-word units) are of great importance for native speakers and surely for second / foreign language learners. Pawley and Syder (1983) state that; native speakers are fluent because of having the knowledge of MWUs (or pre-formulated / Formulas / Lexical phrases) (as cited in Nation & Meara, 2002, p .36). According to Blachowicz (2007) there are principles for an effective vocabulary instruction, one of which is that: "vocabulary learning takes place when students are impressed in words", students learn words more effectively when they are read to and

when teacher involves them in discussions (p.1). Secondly “vocabulary learning takes place when students are active in discovering ways in which words are related to experiences and to one another”, research shows that when learner can make a network of meaning for a new word in her/his own way, she/he would learn better, that is, when they are active in learning process they are so successful (p.2). Third one is that “vocabulary learning takes place when students personalize word learning”. When learners use their past experiences for learning new words, they learn more successfully (p.3). The fourth principle is “vocabulary learning builds on multiple source of information”, when students should learn specific words, they need to use various sources of information (p.4). Fifth principle is that “vocabulary learning takes place when students gain control over their own learning”, research shows that when students select vocabulary themselves, they may learn better (p.4). The sixth one is that “vocabulary learning takes place when students are aided in developing independent strategies”, by independent strategies she means using context and using dictionary, it can be said that when learners read the words in context, their general vocabulary is also developed (p.4). The last principle according to Blachowicz(2007) is “vocabulary leaning is long lasting when students use words in meaningful ways”, when learners are exposed to new words with different types of instruction, different depths and types of learning may have been resulted (p.5).

### **Games and Language Learning**

As cited in Aslanabdi and Rasouli (2013), according to Bardley *et al* (2010), games are of important advantages as follows:

“First, games engage all students in the learning process. When students play games in pairs or groups, they have the opportunity to recognize and appreciate the contributions of others and use team-building skills. Some classroom games focus on individuals working to win against all other peers in the class. This type of game works well with students who are highly motivated and competitive.

Second, games provide an opportunity for collaboration and/or cooperation. Classroom games provide an opportunity for students to collaborate and cooperate with each other, while working towards a common goal - winning. In some games, students are paired or grouped, which may lead to peer tutoring and the use of cooperative skills in order to win. They may not realize that they are actually learning, but they are working together towards a common goal.

Third, games provide an enjoyable learning experience. Creating a fun and enjoyable learning environment is a large first step toward motivating students. Research indicates that classroom games are effective strategies that facilitate learning.

Finally, games help engage all students, provide an opportunity for collaboration and/or cooperation, and provide an enjoyable learning experience". (p.3)

Gairns and Redman (1986) believe that there are three techniques applied in the presenting new vocabulary items. The first one is visual techniques including mime, gestures, and Visual such as flash cards, Photographs, black board drawings, wall charts, and regalia. The second one is verbal techniques: (1) use of illustrative situation, (2) use of synonym and definition, (3) contrasts and opposites, (4) scales, and (5) examples of the type. The last one is translation. It is considered a quick, easy, and effective way of conveying the meaning of vocabulary. (Cited in Tuan, 2012). Gaming is an attribute of human nature, therefore it can be maintained that the narration of gaming goes back to the beginning of the history of human being (Demirbilek *et al*, 2010).

Schlimme (2002) considers that video games provide a context in which applicants can discuss themes and results in order to facilitate their understanding of other notions and can develop children's reading, spelling, and spatial abilities and critical-analyzing techniques. Schlimme also continues her claims and states that some simulation video games provide players with unfamiliar words which are required with the purpose of succeed in the game, and, consequently, the players' vocabulary levels may increase.

Segers and Verhoeven (2003) have experienced teaching through computers in kindergartens. Intensive vocabulary teaching by computer was carried out in a two-year kindergarten program in the Netherlands. In the intervention, 67 local and migrant children in the first and second years of kindergarten have fun of vocabulary games on the computer two times a week for 15 minutes over 15 weeks. A control group of 97 kindergartners pursued the ordinary curriculum. In a pre-test/post-test design, it was concluded that games are of significant effect on word acquisition. Chuang and Chen (2007) also are amongst the researchers who have investigated the effect of games. They worked on the effect of digital games on children's cognitive achievement. Thus they examined whether digital games ease children's cognitive achievement in comparison to traditional computer-assisted instruction. One hundred and fifteen third-graders from a middle/high socio-economic standard school district in Tainan City, Taiwan partook in that study. Results clarified that playing digital game not only develops participants' recall processes, but also develops problem-solving skills through identifying "multiple solutions" for problems.

Ashraf et al (2014) also studied the effect of online games on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning. They reported that online games might be helpful in vocabulary acquisition. They found that "online games, due to creating an interactive and motivating context where learners can easily and subconsciously share their information, and also due to the requirements and obligations encountered by them during playing, are effective in vocabulary acquisition. The subjects acquire the new words via the games because they are willing to be the winner. They compete and cooperate with each other in an enjoyable environment" (p.290).

## **Research Question and Hypothesis**

### **Research question 1:**

Do games have any effect on Iranian young EFL learners' vocabulary learning?

### **Research question 2:**

Does using Games as instructional tools result in improving Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning?

### **Null hypothesis:**

There is no significant difference in using games at Iranian young EFL learners' vocabulary learning.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Design of the study**

The design of the current research is quasi-experimental, that is without true randomization. There were pre-test and post-test in both groups of experimental and control. The independent variable of the study was applying online language games and the dependent variable was vocabulary learning.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study were all bilingual males with proficiency level of elementary- that is Azeri and Farsi speaking learners- in *Tabriz, Iran*. Their age range was 9 - 12.

### **Instruments**

With the intention of gathering quantifiable data the researcher utilized the following materials:

One language proficiency test (Cambridge mover tests) of which was run before starting the program was run. The mentioned test includes Listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The mover listening paper has five parts with 25 questions. The reading and writing has 6 parts, and there are 40 questions. It is worth mentioning that Movers' speaking has four parts. A pre-test which was on subjects' word knowledge was conducted too. All of the words were chosen from the particular language learning games. The words were all appropriate for the proficiency level of the participants (regarding the source book of the learners). Online language Games also were used for teaching vocabulary in experimental group. The *New Parade* was the source book of the participants which was used occasionally. And a post-test of which was for measuring the effectiveness of the applying online language games.

### Procedures

Before starting the program the researchers in order to assuring the proficiency level of the subjects conducted a language proficiency test (Cambridge mover tests) on the participants listening, speaking, reading and writing. Afterward one pre-test on learners' word knowledge was performed. Then the program was started. During a 15 sessions - three times a week- pupils in the experimental group were taught English vocabulary consisting of the names of different objects, family members, colors and numbers using online games while those in the control group didn't receive any treatment were taught lessons using the traditional instruction. At the end of the investigational period, final vocabulary test was undertaken by both groups of the learners. The results of the post- test in both groups were compared. It is worth to mention that the Significance was set as  $p < 0.05$ .

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first question of the study was loaded question and the answer is: definitely yes. The researchers pointed out one basic research question and tried to find out whether games affect the vocabulary learning of Iranian young EFL learners. The researchers sought to find a logical answer for that. The results of their findings are discussed below:

**Table 4.1. Paired Samples Statistics-Experimental Group**

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 Posttest	16.7333	30	.73968	.13505
Pretest	12.1667	30	1.17688	.21487

Indicated in the Table, the experimental group of the study had a mean score of 12.16 ( $SD=1.17$ ) in the Vocabulary pretest. The group, however, scored higher ( $M=16.73$ ,  $SD=0.73$ ) in the Vocabulary posttest. It is safe to argue that there was a statistically significant increase in the Vocabulary scores from Pretest to Posttest following the treatment sessions.

**Table 4.2. Paired Samples Test-Experimental Group**

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 Posttest Pretest	4.56667	1.00630	.18372	4.19091	4.94243	24.856	29	.000

Table 4.2 depicts that the mean increase in Vocabulary scores was 4.56 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 4.19 to 4.94. It is also indicated that the mean increase in the vocabulary posttest was statistically significant ( $t = (29) = 24.85, P = .000$ ). Therefore, the Null Hypothesis is rejected and the Alternative hypothesis is supported.

**Table 4.3. Paired Samples Statistics-Control Group**

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 2 Posttest	12.8333	30	.91287	.16667
Pretest	12.0333	30	1.06620	.19466

Table 4.3 shows the descriptive statistics for the control group. By a brief look, it can be noticed that there was not a statistically significant increase in the Vocabulary scores from Pretest ( $M = 12.03, SD = 1.06$ ) to Posttest ( $M = 12.83, SD = 0.91$ ).

**Table 4.4. Paired Samples Test-Control Group**

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 Posttest - Pretest	.80000	.40684	.07428	.64808	.95192	10.770	29	.000

According to the Table, the mean increase in Vocabulary scores was 0.80 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.64 to 0.95. The mean increase in the vocabulary posttest was statistically significant ( $t = (29) = 10.77, P = .000$ ). In comparison with the experimental group, the control group performed much poorly in the Vocabulary posttest though.

**Table 4.5. Descriptive Statistics-Pretest**

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest Experimental	30	12.1667	1.17688	.21487
Control	30	12.0333	1.06620	.19466

Table 4.5 depicts the descriptive statistics for the Vocabulary pretest. The experimental and control groups of the study had a mean score of 12.16 ( $SD=1.17$ ) and 12.03 ( $SD=1.06$ ) respectively. That is to say, the two groups did not perform differently in the pretest and they were homogeneous in terms of their vocabulary performance.



**Table 4.6. Independent Samples Test-Pretest**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pretest	Equal variances assumed	.057	.812	.460	58	.647	.13333	.28993	-.44703	.71370
	Equal variances not assumed			.460	5.744	.647	.13333	.28993	-.44715	.71382

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the statistics scores of experimental and control groups in the Vocabulary pretest. The mean difference in statistics scores was 0.13 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -.44 to .71. The results revealed no significant difference between the mean scores of experimental and control groups in the Vocabulary pretest  $t(58) = .460, p = .647$ . Therefore, the two groups performed homogeneously in the Vocabulary pretest.

**Table 4.7. Descriptive Statistics-Posttest**

Groups		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	Experimental	30	16.7333	.73968	.13505
	Control	30	12.8333	.91287	.16667

According to the descriptive statistics shown in the Table, the experimental group performed much better than the control group in the Vocabulary posttest. The mean score for the former was 16.73 ( $SD=0.73$ ) whereas for the latter the mean score is 12.83 ( $SD= 0.91$ ).

**Table 4.8. Independent Samples Test-Posttest**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Posttest	Equal variances assumed	2.845	.097	18.181	58	.000	3.90000	.21451	3.47061	4.32939
	Equal variances not assumed			18.181	55.610	.000	3.90000	.21451	3.47021	4.32979

Another independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the statistics scores of the two groups in the Vocabulary posttest. The mean difference in statistics scores was 3.90 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 3.47 to 4.32. The results revealed significant difference between the mean scores of experimental and control groups in the Vocabulary pretest  $t(58) = 18.181, p = .000$ . Therefore, the Null hypothesis is rejected and the Alternative hypothesis is supported. It is safe to claim that the findings of the present study are in line with the studies which provided supports for the effectiveness of the games in word acquisition. For instance the findings are in agreement with that of Segers and Verhoeven (2003), and Chuang and Chen (2007) who reported strong supports for the role of games in word acquisition. The findings also support the study of Rohani and Pourgharib 2013. They also have found that games affect the process of vocabulary learning in seriously positive manner. Tuan (2012) also came to the same conclusions on the

efficacy of games in word learning. Aghlara and Hadidi Tamjid (2011) have found the similar points regarding games and word learning. The current study also support the work of Aslanabadi and Rasouli(2013).They reported that games affected the kindergarten children's vocabulary learning and memorizing of the second language vocabularies. Generally speaking the number of studies on the effectiveness of games on word acquisition are extremely limited but the existing ones all testimony the constructive role of the games. The reports of Ashraf et al (2014) also are supported in the current study, namely using games as instructional tools, create a meaningful and useful language learning context. In the present study too Games are found as challenging and motivating tools. The participants of the current study found that games decrease anxiety in significant manner.

## **IMPLICATION**

The present research study has some points that are to be taken into consideration by text book writers, syllabus designers and teachers and educators. This study recommends applying games as instructional tools for some rational reasons. Firstly in the present study the researchers have found that games make the teaching materials interesting for learners, that is make uninteresting materials interesting for pupils. Secondly Games result in diversity and variety and consequently lower the anxiety. This idea has been stated clearly by Richard-Amato (1988). The next point is regarding the team- working facet of games that promotes cooperation and constructs team courage. This view is also stated by Ersoz (2000). The last point was that playing games lead to arising emotions, and this factor make the learning environment as enjoyable and as live as possible.

## **LIMITATION**

Like any other study the present one also has of some limitations that make the task of generalizing the results somehow problematic. Thus the educators who plan to make use of the findings are to do it with caution. The first issue definitely is the number of the subjects that is not adequate for a sample of a large population. The next point is the gender issue, since the participants were all male. The other point is time on task which put a serious obstacle on teaching different aspects of words.

## **SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER STUDY**

It is crucially vital that the limitations of the present study would be bases for further studies in this field. This study suggests working on larger populations of different proficiency levels, with different age ranges by including female learners. There are also some other points that should be taken into account for other studies. The current study was on the effect of games on vocabulary

learning, other research studies on the effect of games on different skills are required. Longitudinal studies are needed in order to measure the long-term effects of games on different language areas.

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