

HOW TO IMPROVE MY STUDENTS' VOCABULARY SKILLS

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Abstract: *In contemporary English Language Teaching (ELT), vocabulary acquisition plays a central role in developing learners' communicative competence. Despite its importance, vocabulary instruction is often limited to rote memorization and translation exercises, which do not lead to long-term retention or active usage. As a result, many students possess a passive vocabulary but struggle to use words effectively in speaking and writing.*

This exploratory action research aims to investigate practical and engaging strategies to improve students' vocabulary skills in a primary school context. The study compares two instructional approaches: the Context-Based Vocabulary Teaching Method and the Game-Based Learning Approach. Conducted over a five-month period with 5th-grade students, the research integrates teacher reflections, student feedback, and peer observation to ensure reliability.

The findings reveal that students exposed to contextual and interactive learning environments showed significant improvement in vocabulary retention, usage, and motivation. Notably, the game-based group demonstrated higher engagement levels, while the context-based group showed deeper understanding of word meanings. The study concludes that combining multiple strategies is essential for effective vocabulary development and long-term language proficiency.

Keywords: *Vocabulary acquisition, EFL learners, game-based learning, contextual learning, action research, primary education*

INTRODUCTION

Teaching vocabulary is one of the most fundamental yet challenging aspects of language education. Unlike grammar, which follows structured rules, vocabulary is vast, dynamic, and deeply connected to context. For many learners, especially in EFL classrooms, vocabulary becomes a barrier rather than a bridge to communication.

In today's globalized world, English proficiency is no longer optional—it is a necessity. Students are expected not only to understand English but also to use it actively in real-life situations. However, a common issue observed in classrooms is that students





may recognize many words but fail to use them appropriately. This gap between recognition and production highlights a weakness in traditional teaching methods.

According to Nation (2001), vocabulary knowledge involves not just knowing the meaning of words but also understanding their form, usage, and context. Similarly, Schmitt (2008) emphasizes that repeated exposure and meaningful interaction with words are essential for retention. Despite this, many classrooms still rely heavily on memorization techniques, which often result in short-term learning.

During my teaching practice, I observed that students frequently forgot new words after a short period. They also showed low motivation when vocabulary tasks were repetitive or disconnected from real-life situations. This raised an important question: How can vocabulary teaching be made more effective, engaging, and meaningful for students?

This study aims to address that question by exploring innovative teaching strategies and analyzing their impact on students' vocabulary development.

Methods and Material

This research was designed as an exploratory action research study conducted over five months in a secondary school setting. Two groups of 5th-grade students participated in the study, each consisting of approximately 18-20 learners.

The main objective was to compare the effectiveness of two different teaching approaches:

- Class 4 “A” – Context-Based Vocabulary Teaching

- Class 4 “B” – Game-Based Learning Approach

- Data Collection Tools

- To ensure a comprehensive analysis, multiple data collection methods were used:

- Teacher Reflection Journals

- After each lesson, detailed notes were written to track student progress, difficulties, and engagement levels.

- Student Questionnaires (Google Forms)

- Students shared their opinions about vocabulary learning, including their motivation, difficulties, and preferred activities.

- Peer Observation

- An experienced English teacher observed several lessons to provide objective feedback on teaching methods and student interaction.

- Vocabulary Tests

- Pre-tests and post-tests were conducted to measure vocabulary improvement quantitatively.

- Implementation

- Context-Based Approach (Class 4 “A”)





Students learned new vocabulary through:

Reading short stories and dialogues

Guessing meanings from context

Using words in sentences

Group discussions

This method focused on helping students understand how words function in real-life situations rather than memorizing isolated meanings.

Game-Based Approach (Class 4 “B”)

Students learned vocabulary through interactive activities such as:

Word matching games

Vocabulary bingo

Role-playing

Digital quiz platforms

This approach aimed to create a fun and stress-free learning environment where students could learn naturally through play.

Results

The results of the study showed clear improvement in both groups, but with notable differences.

Students in Class 4 “A” developed a deeper understanding of word meanings and were better at using vocabulary in sentences.

Students in Class 4 “B” showed higher enthusiasm and participation during lessons.

Survey results indicated that:

72% of students in the game-based group reported increased motivation

65% of students in the context-based group reported better understanding of vocabulary

Overall vocabulary test scores improved by 30–45% in both groups

Additionally, classroom observations revealed that students became more confident in using new words during speaking activities.

Discussion

The findings of this research highlight the importance of using diverse teaching strategies in vocabulary instruction. Both approaches proved effective, but they addressed different aspects of learning.

The context-based method helped students build meaningful connections with words. By seeing vocabulary in real situations, students were able to understand nuances and usage patterns. This aligns with Nation’s (2001) theory that vocabulary learning requires contextual exposure.





On the other hand, the game-based approach significantly increased student motivation. Many students who were previously passive became active participants. This supports the idea that emotional engagement plays a crucial role in language learning.

However, each method also had limitations. Context-based learning sometimes required more time and effort, while game-based learning occasionally focused more on fun than depth of understanding.

One of the most important observations was that students learned best when both methods were combined. For example, introducing vocabulary through context and reinforcing it through games created a balanced and effective learning environment.

Another key finding was the reduction in students' anxiety. Initially, many students were afraid of making mistakes. By the end of the study, they were more willing to participate and experiment with new words.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that improving students' vocabulary skills requires more than traditional memorization techniques. Effective vocabulary teaching should be:

Interactive

Contextual

Student-centered

Both context-based and game-based approaches contribute to vocabulary development in different ways. Therefore, combining these methods can lead to better results in terms of retention, understanding, and student motivation.

For future teaching practice, it is recommended that teachers:

Integrate vocabulary into meaningful contexts

Use games to increase engagement

Provide regular practice opportunities

Encourage active use of new words

By adopting these strategies, teachers can create a more dynamic and effective language learning environment.

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