

ONLINE VOCABULARY GAMES TO PROMOTE VOCABULARY
ACQUISITION AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

NUR FAIRUZ BINTIHJ AB. KADIR

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate how an online vocabulary game engages students and assists students to learn, acquire and increase vocabulary. A qualitative method was applied for this study. A total of seven Year 5 primary school students including two Year 5 primary school students for pilot study were chosen to participate in this study. They were from the same school located in Johor Bahru. Students were asked to learn vocabulary using the online vocabulary game and were being observed. They were also being requested to list all new vocabulary that they have learned from the use of online vocabulary game and were asked to participate in recorded interview sessions. Data from observations, vocabulary lists and recorded interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. It was discovered that students engaged, learned, acquired and increased their vocabulary in a conducive learning environment with the help of the online vocabulary game. The principal conclusion was that online vocabulary game promotes vocabulary acquisition among primary school students in a creative, innovative and interesting way. Some suggestions have been put forward to improve the implementation of the online vocabulary game for teaching and learning vocabulary.

ABSTRAK

Tujuan kajian ini dijalankan adalah untuk mengenalpasti bagaimana permainan per bendaharaan kata secara atastalian boleh mengekalkan keterlibatan pelajar dan bagaimana ia dapat membantu pelajar untuk belajar, mendapatkan dan menambahkan per bendaharaan kata baru mereka. Kaedah kualitatif telah digunakan untuk kajian ini. Seramai tujuh orang pelajar tahun 5 sekolah rendah termasuklah 2 orang murid tahun 5 sekolah rendah yang terlibat dengan kajian ini telah dipilih untuk menyertai kajian ini. Para pelajar yang terlibat adalah daripada sebuah sekolah rendah di Johor Bahru. Para pelajar diminta untuk melibatkannya dalam pembelajaran per bendaharaan kata dengan menggunakan permainan per bendaharaan kata secara atastalian dan aktiviti pembelajaran mereka diperhatikan. Setelah itu, mereka diminta untuk menyenaraikan semua per bendaharaan kata baru yang mereka telah pelajari melalui permainan per bendaharaan kata secara atastalian tersebut. Mereka juga telah diminta untuk terlibat dalam sesi rakanan temu ramah. Data daripada pemerhatian, senarai per bendaharaan kata dan rakaman temuramah telah dianalisis dengan menggunakan 'thematic analysis'. Dapat kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa keterlibatan pelajar adalah tinggi dan mereka belajar, mendapatkan dan menambahkan per bendaharaan kata mereka dalam persekitaran pembelajaran yang sesuai dengan bantuan permainan per bendaharaan kata secara atastalian tersebut. Kesimpulannya, permainan per bendaharaan atastalian telah merangsang pembelajaran per bendaharaan kata di kalangan pelajar sekolah rendah secara kreatif, inovatif dan menarik. Selain itu, terdapat cadangan penambahbaikan untuk mengaplikasikan permainan per bendaharaan kata secara atastalian ini di dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran per bendaharaan kata.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CALL	-	Computer Assisted Language Learning
ESL	-	English as a Second Language
ICT	-	Information and Communication Technology
KSSR	-	Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah
LAD	-	Language Acquisition Device
MT	-	Monitor Theory
SLA	-	Second Language Acquisition
UG	-	Universal Grammar

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Learning English as a second language needs learners to acquire the main skills such as listening, reading, speaking, writing as well as learning vocabulary. According to Hornby (1995), the total number of words in a language is called vocabulary. In order to be proficient in English, learners need to learn vocabulary. Not using the most appropriate words in our daily lives will give a negative impact on us as people might get our message wrongly thus making our lives difficult whether at our work place, at home or in public.

As learning vocabulary is very important, therefore it is crucial for learners to find effective ways to learn vocabulary. One of the ways is learning vocabulary through games. Games can be defined as “an organized activity that usually has a particular task or objective, a set of rules, competition between players and communication between players by spoken or written language” (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1995). As referred to Hadfield (1984), activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun are specified as games. For children of age seven to ten, they always have interest in recognizing and knowing new words and repeat new words so that they can memorize them. This is based on Piaget’s theory, cited in Wadsworth (2003). As games are very close to children’s nature, where they like to play and learn, using vocabulary games to learn vocabulary is applicable. Based on numerous scholars (Chan & Lin, 2000; Jiang, 2008; Kuo, 2008; Robinson, 1960; Zeng, 2008), games are believed to be useful in strengthening children’s motivation and self-confidence in learning English.

In this era of globalization, cutting edge technology is useful to managing our lives in so many aspects including education. With the fast moving technology that we have in the world, internet is not to be missed. There are many online education applications that being used by learners to learn. This is where online vocabulary games take place in assisting students to learn English vocabulary.

1.2 BackgroundoftheStudy

Learning vocabulary is very important for primary school children. One of the ways to attract children to learn vocabulary is through educational games. Game is an activity that you do to have some fun(Hornby, 1995). There are many advantages in learning vocabulary through educational games. Firstly, children love to learn vocabulary through educational games as children do not feel that they are forced to learn and they will be more focused in learning. Richard-Amato (1988) mentioned that games can lower learner's anxiety and help the acquisition of input. According to Hansen (1994), games are motivating, entertaining and promoting a better learning environment that learners can express their feelings and opinion. Secondly, learning vocabulary through games will make the learning experience far more enjoyable, interesting and effective. This is agreed byUberman (1998) in herobservation where learners are more interested to learn and they practise the language incidentally.

Through playing computer games also, students will learn to think critically, to solve problem, to be creative and innovative to finish the game. Next, computer games also gave space for students to communicate and collaborate with their friends and fellow players. Finally,through computer game, they can learn career and lifelong learning skills such as flexibility, adaptability, initiative, self-direction, leadership and responsibility. These advantages will lead the learners to be competent in the future which they have to face many challenges especially in the era of digital technology.

In the 21st century, internet connection is available almost everywhere and learning vocabulary through online games is more favourable to learners. This will add up the benefits of using online games in learning vocabulary. Learners can learn vocabulary anywhere, anytime and at their own pace. Besides that, they will have the autonomy where they have the full control of the learning process. They can choose the right level of the challenge and this will make the vocabulary learning more effective. By using new technology gadget, learners will be more engaged when learning and learners feel that they are being given an individual attention. Learners will feel more comfortable learning vocabulary without pressure from teacher or peers. This will also complement the classroom learning where giving learners an individual attention from a teacher who has to control a whole class is a challenge. These show that using online games is an effective and efficient way in learning vocabulary due to the current situations where internet is available to help us in many ways including education.

Computer game potentials are not limited to motivation and engagement factors. In today's world, the integration of computer games in the education system is much more significant since it has opened up various opportunities for students to gain knowledge and at the same time, learn multiple skills. Prensky (2010) in his work asserts that in the near future, computer games will be an important skill for students to acquire in the 21st century. According to Prensky (2006), computer game is a powerful tool that allows students to develop complex 21st century skills which the conventional teaching and learning process cannot achieve.

1.3 Statement of Problem

Nguyen & Khuat (2003) stated that learning English vocabulary for children in primary school has been detected as a boring activity in the classroom. Even though learning vocabulary is so important, but the problem is children do not like vocabulary practices because they feel bored because learners need to memorize words and complete all exercises given by the teacher. Teachers usually do drilling activity so that learners will have strong memory on the vocabulary or new words being introduced. Having that in mind, learners will not really understand the words they learn as they just memorize them and they tend to lose interest in learning the vocabulary. The children also feel that learning vocabulary is unimportant as they just use the language in the English class and not outside the classroom. Students nowadays need activities that are more challenging, creative, fun and student-centred.

There are factors that affect students' achievement in learning that can be referred to a framework by Haveman and Wolfe (1995). It conceptualizes the production of children's educational achievement. As referred to Aikens & Barbarin (2008), children with low achievement in language acquisition come from low socio-economic status. In Malaysia, students studying in primary schools come from different background of socio-economic status. The socio-economic factor that varies among primary school children will make a difference on students' level of language skills, vocabulary and also their self-confidence as well as their self-esteem.

A relaxed environment in the classroom is a great challenge to create. In Malaysia, students need to learn six years of English in primary school but they are still incompetent in using the language. According to Maesin (2009), language environment that is not conducive would have less opportunity for students to use the language.

Children like to learn using many kinds of materials and activities which are colourful, attractive and interesting to them. Due to the teaching scenario in Malaysia that teachers are answerable and responsible for so many works including administrative jobs, teachers might not have enough time to prepare and bring all

those materials to the classroom. So, children usually learn through boring activities and using the same materials when learning in the classroom.

As referred to Krashen's Theory, the Affective Filter Hypothesis states that the important affective variables are student's motivation to learn the language, a low anxiety learning environment, self-confidence and self-esteem. To promote vocabulary learning, we must make sure that the affective filter is low, so that the acquisition will occur. If the affective filter is high, the learning process will be blocked. By using online vocabulary games, children will not feel that they are forced to learn and they will be more focused in learning. This is agreed by Richard-Amato (1988) that mentioned games can lower learner's anxiety and help the acquisition of input.

Therefore, to alleviate the problems stated above, we can use the help of online vocabulary games to engage learners to learn vocabulary more effectively. Schultz & Fisher (1988) agreed on this. Online games have multimedia features which are interactive and colourful. Learners nowadays love edutainment which gives more impact to their learning. They have the autonomy when learning through online vocabulary games. This is important as stated in the Input Hypothesis which claims that for acquisition to take place, learners must be presented with comprehensible input, for example the language they can understand, just slightly beyond their current level of competency ($i+1$). In this case, learners will not have pressure from the teacher or peers. This conducive environment where the learners can have at school, home or on the go will make the learners comfortable in learning English vocabulary.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate how an online vocabulary game engages students and assists students to learn, acquire and increase vocabulary. The technology advancement around the world which assists the vocabulary learning is viewed to be worthwhile. In Malaysia, the industry of educational game is still at the early stage but it is progressing. According to Roslina and Azizah (2009), studies in educational games design, development and effectiveness of usage in Malaysia need to be done in generating knowledge that tailored for Malaysian students. Hence, research and development in the area of integrating information and communication technology (ICT) in education is need to be done aggressively in order to be well equipped for Vision 2020 (Lubis, 2009).

Using online vocabulary game as a tool to enhance vocabulary learning is one way of integrating ICT in education. It is indeed an interesting way to learn vocabulary where students are more engaged in vocabulary learning when using online vocabulary games than traditionally learning vocabulary in the classroom. Wood (2001) agreed that using learning games are more effective than using textbooks in attracting students to learn. Therefore the feasibility of using online vocabulary game to assist vocabulary learning and increase vocabulary should be investigated further.

1.5 Research Objectives

The objectives of the research are:

- i. To investigate how an online vocabulary game engages students to learn vocabulary.
- ii. To investigate how an online vocabulary game assists students to learn, acquire and increase vocabulary.

1.6 Research Questions

This research seeks answers to the following questions:

- i. How does an online vocabulary game engage students to learn vocabulary?
- ii. How does an online vocabulary game assist students to learn, acquire and increase vocabulary?

1.7 Significance of the Research

The significance of the research is to find new ways or new methods that are innovative, creative, fun, interesting and can contribute to pedagogical implications. Learning vocabulary is essential to all and it is best to learn vocabulary since young. As vocabulary is the foundation of the language, learners are expected to master at least the most common words used in everyday usage which are called the high frequency words. When one has enough vocabulary, it is easier for him or her to master the language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing.

In the context of Malaysia, the Malaysian education system is based on the national curriculum and caters for all public schools in Malaysia. Students in primary schools are guided by the syllabus according to the subjects that they learn. Now, the new curriculum for primary school is gradually changing to the new syllabus which is the *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* (KSSR). Based on the syllabus, students are focusing on listening, speaking, reading, writing, language arts and they need to master all the words in the word list provided in the syllabus. This is the standard that they need to achieve in primary school before entering secondary school. So, students are expected to take an initiative in acquiring the language as efficient as possible.

One of the efforts that students can take is by integrating their English vocabulary learning with games. Randel (1992) mentioned that educational games that are subject oriented are more effective than other types of educational games. This integration can be done as information and communication technology is no longer a hindrance. Internet based applications can be used for free and students nowadays are exposed to the usage of computers. Based on five schools in Malaysia, 92% of students have experienced playing computer games and this is proven by Rubijesmin (2007) in his study.

Since learning vocabulary can be a boring activity in a traditional classroom, children need to find an innovative way of learning a language. One of the ways is using online vocabulary games that can capture children's attention and focus on the vocabulary learning for a longer period of time. This will definitely avoid pressure from teachers and parents who usually force them to learn vocabulary in order to master English Language. This is very important as kids especially during primary school years are interested to learn while playing. They love to learn through educational games and nowadays, edutainment is one of the famous ways for children to learn.

Computer games allow learners to learn vocabulary at their own pace by choosing the level of the activity as they have the autonomy. They can check their answers on the spot and the learning process is faster. Learners will become motivated every time they get the right answer. The special features of the online vocabulary games such as the colourful buttons and pages with sounds and animation will definitely attract learners to learn. Learners also can learn anytime and anywhere they like as long as there is an internet connection to their computer or gadget.

Through online vocabulary games, learners are hoped to be more confident and interested in learning vocabulary since it reduces anxiety through fun and active learning which eventually enhance their English vocabulary. With the help of online vocabulary games, learners will spend more time to learn English vocabulary as if they have a personal tutor to teach and guide them.

Therefore, it is hoped that this research will provide ideas, additional and alternative to the traditional way of learning vocabulary in the classroom. Everyone should play an important role in achieving the learning success. Teachers, parents and learners themselves are hoped to be informed by this research and work hand in hand for the success of vocabulary learning among children. Considering the importance of online vocabulary games in learning vocabulary among children, this research is worth further investigation.

1.8 Scope of the Study

In this research, 5 students of Year 5 primary school students whose grades from grade A to E took part. Apart from that, they were chosen based on their online computer technical know-how. The participants knew how to operate a computer with internet connection and they had basic skills of using the computer devices such as central processing unit, monitor, keyboard and mouse. As they were ICT Club members, they have been assessed earlier through the ICT Club activity. Refer Appendix B.

This research focused on how the online vocabulary game engaged students to learn vocabulary and how the online vocabulary game assisted students to learn, acquire and increase vocabulary. As a qualitative research, the students went through data collection procedures such as observation, listing the vocabulary learnt and recorded interview sessions.

For this research, the online vocabulary game selected was *Word Confusion* (Figure 1.1) as it is available online at <http://www.funbrain.com/whichword/>. There are many reasons for choosing this particular game. Apart from having fun and interesting essence in the game, some of the reasons are it is user-friendly, it can be played online for free, it has the interactive and multimedia features such as buttons, immediate feedback and impromptu checking that shows correct or incorrect answer (Figure 1.2 & 1.3). It also has features of stating the score (Figure 1.4) as well as the total number of correct and incorrect answers (Figure 1.5). It gives reward for correct answer in the forms of

fresh salad bowl, star and praise. It is attractive with colours, it has colourful pictures, it has instructions (Figure 1.1), it has levels (Figure 1.1) and it also states date and time for self-monitoring (Figure 1.4).

After the game was chosen, a pilot study commenced. One grade A student and one grade E student participated in this pilot study. They started learning vocabulary using the selected online vocabulary game. Then, the participants went through observations, preparing list of vocabulary learned from the usage of the online vocabulary game and participating in recorded interview sessions. For the observation, the researcher jotted down what she observed pertaining to students' reactions including their behaviour and facial expressions when they played the online vocabulary game. Refer Appendix C. After each session of the game, students were asked to create a list of vocabulary (Appendix D) that they learnt through that particular session of playing online vocabulary game. Then, the participants were being interviewed by the researcher and the interview sessions were recorded. Refer Appendix E). The researcher investigated the strengths and weaknesses through this experiment and has addressed them before the actual research commenced.

The researcher found challenges on the timing. The students had only one hour per session as English period was one hour daily. They did not have enough time if they play *Word Confusion* game for an hour solely as proposed earlier by the researcher. The reason was there were two more procedures which were the vocabulary listing and recorded interviews that needed to be done after they played *Word Confusion* game. After amendments on the timing had been made, the students were asked to play *Word Confusion* game for eleven minutes. After that, they were asked to list the new vocabulary that they learned after each session of learning through *Word Confusion* game and then they were asked to go through recorded interview sessions.



Figure 1.1: Screenshot of Word Confusion game with instructions.

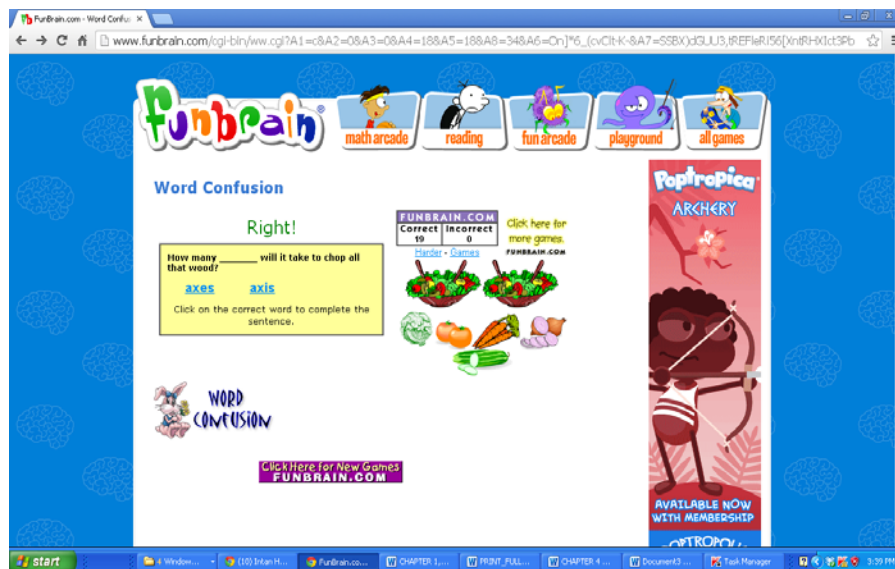


Figure 1.2: Screenshot of immediate feedback of right answer and fresh salad bowl reward.



Figure 1.3: Screenshot of immediate feedback of wrong answer.



Figure 1.4: Screenshot of score, date and time.



Figure 1.5: Screenshot of total number of correct and incorrect answers.

1.9 Definition of terms

1.9.1 Online vocabulary game

Online vocabulary game refers to *Word Confusion* game which can be downloaded for free from the website: <http://www.funbrain.com/whichword/>. Internet must be connected to their computer, laptop, i pad or any gadgets. It is interactive, interesting, attractive, fun, enjoyable and educational yet entertaining. It gives players the experience of learning and it gives feedback right after the game ends.

1.9.2 Multimedia

Multimedia refers to media and content which combines text, still images, audio, video, interactive features and animation in many ways in the online vocabulary game. This is possible with the technology advancement that uses computer and electronic devices.

1.9.3 Engagement

Engagement refers to the duration of attentiveness and positive reactions that sustain when learners learn vocabulary using *Word Confusion* game.

1.10 Conclusion

This chapter denotes the fundamental ideas of this study. Some of the important ideas are the background of vocabulary learning, the problems of the vocabulary learning, the purpose of doing this study, the objectives of this study, the significance of doing this study, the scope of this study and the definition of terms used in this study. In Chapter 2, we will look into the literature review that is related to this study.

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APPENDIX A