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Research Article

Teaching Vocabulary through Games: A Comparative Study of the 4th and the 7th Grades*

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Abstract

Having the essential role of games in vocabulary teaching in mind, the study focused on the effectiveness of games. Thus, the present study aimed to find out whether there is a difference between the 4th grades and the 7th grades in terms of teaching vocabulary through games. A comparative research design was applied within the study. Pre- tests, post- tests, course-books, workbooks, games and worksheets were used as instruments. The experimental groups were taught through games and the control groups were taught through current-curriculum methods. After the implementation process, the pre and post-tests' scores were calculated. According to the results, vocabulary instruction through games was found to be more efficient than the current-curriculum methods for the 4th grades, no significant difference was found within the groups of the 7th grades, and using games to teach vocabulary in the 4th grades was found to be more effective compared to using games to teach vocabulary in the 7th grades. Studying the previous research, it has been seen that there is no comparison between primary and secondary school students' vocabulary learning levels through games. Therefore, the results of the study are expected to shed light on this lack in the field.

Key Words

Vocabulary teaching • Games in vocabulary teaching • Young learners • Adolescent learners

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Vocabulary has been defined as words and phrases to indicate the things about a concept (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2015) and used for special purposes while telling something precise (Oxforddictionaries, 2018) in a foreign language (Ur, 1996). It can also be stated that vocabulary is more than just a single word and each vocabulary piece should be called an "item" rather than a "word" (Ur, 2012, p. 60).

The importance of vocabulary has been stated within the lines, "a powerful carrier of meaning" (Scrivener, 1994, p. 73), since the words, the vocabulary items are what make the language a meaningful whole. Similarly, Scrivener (1994) mentioned an important point that a person who says "I wonder if you could lend me your…" may not be able to have an effective communication without the word "calculator" despite it is sometimes enough to say only the word "Calculator?" (p. 73). Therefore, rich vocabulary knowledge might be asserted as the key for an effective communication.

Some linguists claim that vocabulary is the key element of language acquisition without thinking the kind of language -first, second or foreign. (Decarrico, 2001). Some linguists even think that vocabulary instruction should be the first step in foreign language teaching and learning process as it is necessary to succeed in a healthy communication (Coady & Huckin, 1997) because "feeling inadequate in choosing the right vocabulary items makes the speaker angry and breaks the communication" (Wallace, 1982, p. 9). It has been understood that the vocabulary knowledge is as important as the other parts of the language because it is clear that without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, a meaningful and proper communication cannot be mentioned (McCarthy, 1990) even when grammar is learnt well and the sounds are controlled successfully.

Vocabulary has not always been in the same place ever before. Vocabulary teaching used to be the least important and even neglected part of language teaching for a long time (Allen, 1983; Carter, 1998; Richards, 1985). Gradually, traditional methods gave place to modern methods and teaching/learning vocabulary has become one of the crucial parts of language teaching. As vocabulary has got its just reward in recent years (Thornbury, 2004), educators and students have become in search for techniques, strategies and methods for an effective teaching/learning vocabulary.

As learning a language is a hard work and even it may sometimes be annoying (Ersöz, 2000; Kim, 1995), to overcome the problems of learning and teaching a language, and to make the lessons effective, many studies have been conducted by linguists, academicians and researchers. As a result, in modern language teaching approaches, games are used to minimize the problems as they help to struggle against the difficulties (Kim, 1995), and depending on students, make the language learning process easy, and create a free, relaxing, and motivating atmosphere.

Games are thought to have many advantages in the teaching/learning process. First, games are asserted to present a wide range of opportunities for context. Languages can better be learnt through experiences, and may offer conditions to use the language in a meaningful way (Lee, 1965), and a "meaningful context" is a really essential element for the instructors (Chen, 2005; Derakhshan & Khatir, 2015, p. 39; Ersöz, 2000; Hadfield, 1990, p. vii; Kim, 1995, p. 35; Masri & Najar, 2014, p. 144; Wright, Betteridge & Buckby, 1984, p. 1) by bringing "real world" into the classroom in a flexible and communicative way (Ajibade & Ndububa, 2008, p. 31; Derakhshan & Khatir, 2015, p. 40).

Many researchers, linguists and educators agree on the idea that games are motivating (Bakhsh, 2016; Chen, 2005; Ersöz, 2000; Kim, 1995; Lengeling & Malarcher, 1997; Masri & Najar, 2014) as well. "Physical-movements in games" help to make young learners alerted and stimulated, prevent them from being bored (Bakhsh, 2016, p. 123). Games help to prepare a positive environment for the learners (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2015) as most of the games provide competition in a friendly way (Chen, 2005; Derakhshan & Khatir, 2015), which is an effective factor in increasing motivation. Games can provide the feeling of necessity which is a good stimulator for learning as students must master necessary vocabulary items to be successful in the games (Allen, 1983).

In addition to its motivating effect, a game can decrease the level of anxiety (Ajibade & Ndububa, 2008; Chen, 2005; Masri & Najar, 2014). This is an important point as anxiety can make the students feel stressed and disturbed, which might have a negative influence on the learning process, and develop barriers to learning.

Lee (1965) mentions the value of fun in language education for an effective teaching process. Especially young learners are eager learners (Cameron, 2002) and the games can meet the needs of the learners by making the lessons amusing and attracting the interests of the learners (Bakhsh, 2016). Bringing amusement to the classrooms helps to provide a long-lasting teaching and learning process in an easy and funny way (Masri & Najar, 2014). Offering relaxing and funny ways (Chen, 2005; Lengeling & Malarcher, 1997), games defeat boredom (Bakhsh, 2016) especially while learning and teaching language (Kim, 1995).

Games are also useful to revise vocabulary items (Lengeling & Malarcher, 1997), and they usually have a concept enabling to teach and learn the target vocabulary items in a meaningful context with an unlimited chance for repetition. The repetition may be fun when they are taught using games (Bakhsh, 2016).

A healthy communication is needed to be successful in a game as players need to understand each other (Rixon, 1981). With the same purpose, a game is of great importance to teach the social skills such as cooperation and obeying rules (Reilly& Ward, 2000) because a game includes, encourages and increases competition, cooperation, collaboration and rules at the same time and in positive ways (Ajibade & Ndububa, 2008; Chen, 2005; Derakhshan & Khatir, 2015; Ersöz, 2000; Kim, 1995; Lee, 1965; Lengeling & Malarcher, 1997; Masri & Najar, 2014).

Getting the critical part of teaching language, the study focused on teaching vocabulary through games. Studying the previous research, the importance of using games in teaching vocabulary has been detected but without any comparison between primary and secondary school students' vocabulary learning levels through games. Therefore, the study focused on this need in the field.

Method

Research Model

The study aimed to investigate whether there was a difference between the 4th graders and the 7th graders in terms of teaching vocabulary through games, and employed a quantitative research design searching for the effect of games in teaching vocabulary.

This study examined the empirical evidence for the supposed superiority of the games over the current-curriculum methods with three research questions:

1. Is there a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the 4th graders in terms of vocabulary learning through games?

2. Is there a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the 7th graders in terms of vocabulary learning through games?

3. Is there a significant difference between the scores of the 4th and the 7th graders in terms of their improvement ?

The study was approved by Social and Humanities Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Necmettin Erbakan University, and Ministry of Education on 06.04.2017 with 83688308-605.99-E.4735254.

Study Group

The study was conducted in 2016-2017 academic year at a primary and a secondary state school in a district of Konya. Within the comparative research design, the study was carried out with two experimental and control groups of 115 students in total. As the subjects within the curriculum are organized as spiral in 5th and 6th grades, and considering the fact that there were TEOG (transition from primary to secondary education) exam in 8th grades and the diversity of the subject was more clear in the 7th grade; the 7th graders were chosen as participants in the secondary school part of the study. The 4th graders were chosen for the primary school part of the study as it was the only grade that a written test could be applied - there was no chance of having written exam with 1st, 2nd or 3rd grades. Moreover, throughout the literature and previous studies reviews, no comparative study of the 4th and the 7th grades was detected. With this lack in the field, the research and the participant groups were designed. The study was conducted with 52 primary school students at the 4th grade (27-experimental group/ 25-control group) and 63 secondary school students at the 7th grade (31-experimental /32-control).

Data Collection Tools

Pre-tests, post-tests, course books, workbooks, games and worksheets were used as instruments within the study. 10th units in “Middle School English Route 7 Students Book and Workbook”, and “İlkokul Sunshine 4 Students’ Book and Workbook” were used for the study. Board games, matching games, memory games, word games and outside games were used only for the experimental groups in the study. The games were chosen, developed or rearranged to be served for the study by the researcher consulting language and educational experts, and considering views of the colleagues. The target words were the focus of the games. Dictionary use activities, gap-filling activities, matching activities in the forms of worksheets were used for the control groups

in the study, and the target words were the focus of these activities. For each level, the last units in the curriculum were chosen not to interrupt the planned period by the teachers of the classes. 50 words and phrases were chosen from unit 10 for the 4th grades and 45 words and phrases were chosen from unit 10 for the 7th grades for the vocabulary test to be used as a pre-test/post-test. Vocabulary tests were used as a pre-test/post-test after the pilot studies for reliability and validity.

Data Analysis

It is useful to examine each week to make the data collection procedure clear. The process lasted for 7 weeks. The pilot tests were carried out on the very first week on 274 students at the 4th and the 5th grades, and 271 of the 6th,7th , and 8th grades studying at other schools. The pre-tests were applied on the second week. The pre-tests for the 4th and the 7th grades included 25 multiple choice questions that were reliable and valid items of the pilot tests and involved target vocabulary items (Cr.Alpha 0.81-4th grade/ Cr. Alpha 0.87-7th grade). The implementation sessions were carried out on the following four weeks. The control groups were taught through current curriculum methods and the experimental groups were taught through games chosen, developed or rearranged to be served for the study by the researcher by consulting language and educational experts and the views of the colleagues were also taken into consideration. At the end of the implementation process carried out by the researcher, the post-tests were conducted. Having completed the data collection, data analysis was done through SPSS.

Findings

The pre-test was used to test the equivalence of the experimental and the control groups; and also to compare the results of the post-tests to examine the improvement within and between the groups.

Table 1

Pre-test Scores – 4th Grades- Experimental and Control Groups- Independent Samples T-Test Analysis

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Level of Significance
Experimental	27	10.2593	4.27509	0.344	p>0.05 (p=0.624)
Control	25	9.8000	4.34933		

Table 1 shows the average scores of the experimental group as 10.2593, and that of the control group as 9.8000 with the t value being 0.344 at the 0.624 level of significance. As p value being > 0.05, it was found that there was no significant difference between the experimental and the control groups. As a result, it can be stated that both groups were found to be equal in terms of their prior vocabulary knowledge.

Table 2

Pre-test Scores 7th Grades - Experimental and Control Groups- Independent Samples T-Test Analysis

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Level of Significance
Experimental	31	13.5806	4.34951	0.301	p>0.05 (p=0.765)
Control	32	13.2581	4.313898		

In Table 2, experimental group's average scores are seen to be calculated as 13.5806, and as 13.2581 for the control group with the t value being 0.301 at the 0.765 level of significance. As p value being >0.05, no significant difference between the experimental and the control groups was found. As a result, it can be stated that both groups were found to be equal in terms of their prior vocabulary knowledge.

Table 3

Post-test Scores 4th Grades - Experimental and Control Groups- Independent Samples T-Test Analysis

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Level of Significance
Experimental	27	19.6667	5.64006	4.009	p<0.05 (p=0.001)
Control	25	13.8000	4.02078		

The aim of the post-test was to compare the enhancement of the experimental and the control groups. Table 3 indicates the average scores of the experimental group as 19.6667, and that of the control group as 13.8000 with the t value being 4.009 at the 0.001 level of significance. As p value being < 0.05, a statistically significant difference was found between the experimental and the control groups in favour of the experimental group.

Table 4

Post-test Scores 7th Grades - Experimental and Control Group- Independent Samples T-Test Analysis

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Level of Significance
Experimental	31	19.6129	3.86518	1.210	p>0.05 (p=0.236)
Control	32	18.3548	3.36203		

Table 4 presents the average scores of the experimental group as 19.6129, and the control group as 18.3548 with the t value being 1.210 at the 0.236 level of significance. As p value being > 0.05, it was seen that there was no significant difference between the experimental and the control groups.

Table 5

Comparison of the Pre-test with Post-test Results within the Experimental Group – 4th Grades- Dependent T-Test Analysis

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Level of Significance
Pre-test	27	10.2593	4.27509	6.985	p<0.05 (p=0.001)
Post-test	27	19.6667	5.54006		

According to Table 5, the average scores of the experimental group's pre-test were calculated as 10.2593 and the post-test as 19.6667 with the t value being 6.985 at the 0.001 level of significance. As p value being < 0.05, it was found that there is statistically significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test scores of the experimental group of the 4th grades.

Table 6

Comparison of the Pre-test with Post-test Results within the Control Group – 4th Grades- Dependent T-Test Analysis

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Level of Significance
Pre-test	25	9.8000	4.34933	3.377	p<0.05 (p=0.001)
Post-test	25	13.8000	4.02078		

Table 6 indicates the average scores of the control group's pre-test as 9.8000 and the post-test as 13.800. with the t value being 3.377 at the 0.001 level of significance. As p value being < 0.05, a statistically significant difference was found between pre-test and post-test scores of the control group of the 4th grades.

Table 7

Comparison of the Post-test with Post-test Results within the Experimental and Control Groups – 4th Grades- Independent T-Test Analysis

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Level of Significance
Experimental Group Post-test	27	9.4074	4.49152	3.377	p<0.05 (p=0.001)
Control Group Post-test	25	4.0000	3.78594		

The average scores of the experimental and the control group's post-tests were calculated as 9.4074 and 4.0000 successively with the t value being 3.377 at the 0.001 level of significance. As p value being < 0.05, it was found that there was statistically significant difference between post-test results of the experimental and control groups of the 4th grades in favour of the experimental group.

Table 8

Comparison of the Pre-test with Post-test Results within the Experimental Group – 7th Grades- Dependent T-Test Analysis

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Level of Significance
Pre-test	31	13.5806	4.34951	5.774	p<0.05 (p=0.001)
Post-test	31	19.6129	3.86158		

In Table 8, experimental group's pre-test average scores are seen to be 13.5806 and that of the post-test as 19.6129 with the t value being 5.774 at the 0.001 level of significance. As p value being < 0.05, it was found that there was statistically significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group of the 7th grades.

Table 9

Comparison of the Pre-test with Post-test Results within the Control Group – 7th Grades- Dependent T-Test Analysis

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Level of Significance
Pre-test	32	13.0313	4.26905	5.564	p<0.05 (p=0.001)
Post-test	32	18.3438	3.30795		

The average scores of the control group's pre-test were calculated as 13.0313 and the post-test was calculated as 18.3438 with the t value being 5.564 at the 0.001 level of significance. As p value being < 0.05, it was found that there was statistically significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores of the control group of the 7th grades.

Table 10

Comparison of the Post-test with Post-test Results within the Experimental and Control Groups – 7th Grades- Independent T-Test Analysis

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Level of Significance
Experimental Group Post-test	31	6.0323	2.58823	0.905	p> 0.05 (p=0.369)
Control Group Post-test	32	5.3125	3.62284		

Table 10 shows the average scores of the experimental group's post-test as 6.0323 and that of the control group as 5.3125 with the t value being 0.905 at the 0.369 level of significance. As p value being > 0.05, it was found that there was statistically no significant difference between post-test results of the experimental and the control groups of the 7th grades.

Table 11

Achievement Table

	Pre-test	Post-test	Difference between experimental and control groups of post-test results of 4th & 7th grades	Difference between post- test results of the final scores of 4th & 7th grades
4th grade experimental group	10.2593	19.6667	5.8667	4.6086
4th grade control group	9.8000	13.8000		
7th grade experimental group	13.5806	19.6129	1.2581	
7th grade control group	13.2581	18.3548		

According to Table 11, the mean scores of the 4th grade experimental group for the pre-test were calculated as 10.2593, and for the post-test as 19.6667. In the same way, the mean scores of the 4th grade control group for the pre-test were calculated as 9.8000, and for the post-test as 13.8000. Therefore, an achievement score of

5.8667 was computed between mean scores of the 4th grade experimental and the control groups. As for the 7th grades, the mean scores of the experimental group for the pre-test and post test results were calculated as 13.5806 and 19.6129 successively. The mean scores of the 7th grade control group for the pre-test were calculated as 13.2581, and for the post-test as 18.3548. The achievement score of 1.2581 was computed between mean scores of the 7th grade experimental and the control groups. The difference between post- test results of the final scores for the 4th & 7th grades was found to be 4.6086.

Discussion

The present study investigated a significant difference between the pre and post- test scores of the 4th graders in terms of vocabulary learning through games; a significant difference between the pre and post-test scores of the 7th graders in terms of vocabulary learning through games; and a significant difference between the scores of the 4th and the 7th graders in terms of their improvement.

Considering the data gained, the experimental groups and the control groups resulted to be equal in terms of prior knowledge of vocabulary at the beginning of the study, and all the groups in the 4th and the 7th grades were found to be suitable to conduct the study (see Table 1 and Table 2). After the implementation process and at the end of the statistical calculations, it was concluded that within the 4th graders both the experimental group and the control group improved in terms of their vocabulary knowledge (see Table 5 and Table 6). However, the experimental group's students scored better than that of the control group, and the experimental group was found to be more successful, which means instructing through games was found to be more efficient than teaching through current-curriculum methods (see Table 7). According to the data about the 7th grades, it can be stated that both the experimental and the control group improved their vocabulary knowledge (see Table 8 and Table 9) but there was no significant difference between them (see Table 10). It can be stated that they improved in a close level. As there was found to be no significant difference within the post-test scores of the experimental and control groups, it can't be stated that teaching vocabulary through games surpassed the current-curriculum method instruction for the 7th graders.

Studying the pre-test and post-test scores of the 4th grades and the 7th grades in detail (see Table 11) and making a comparison of the differences between experimental and control groups' post- test results of the 4th & 7th grades and also considering the significant differences in terms of grades within experimental vs. control groups, and finally the difference between post- test results of the final scores of the 4th & 7th grades, it might be concluded that using games to teach vocabulary in the 4th grades was found to be more effective than using games to teach vocabulary in the 7th grades.

Through the review of the previous research, many studies were found conducted on teaching vocabulary or other language skills through games within a kindergarten context (Aslanabadi, 2013), primary school context (Chou, 2012; Cimcim, 2008; Griva, Semoglou & Geladari, 2010; Masri & Najar, 2014) secondary school context (Gülsoy, 2013; Jalali & Dousti, 2012; Özkiraz, 2015; Pirrie, 2017; Şenol, 2007; Tuan, 2012), high school context (Çiftçi, 2010) and adults (Ashraf, Motlagh & Salami, 2014; Dervişoğulları, 2008; Öztürk 2004; Yip & Kwan, 2007) in a quasi-experimental way; and the results of these studies go in line with the results of the present study as the findings indicated positive correlations between using games to teach, to present or to recollect the vocabulary and improvement in learning.

There were also studies on the effects of teaching vocabulary or language skills through games on the attitudes or motivation within kindergarten context (Asfuroğlu, 2013), primary school context (Fırat, 2007; Griva, Semoglou & Geladari, 2010; Wang, Shang & Briody, 2011), secondary school context (Gülsoy, 2013; Jalali & Dousti, 2012; Özkiraz, 2015; Şenol, 2007) and adults (Dervişoğulları, 2008; Şenergüç, 2007). The findings of the studies showed that games were useful to motivate learners and to create positive attitudes. Results of the present study also showed that learners can learn best when they are motivated, excited and having fun. Playing games in teaching and learning vocabulary can adequately supply the need for motivation, excitement and fun. Teaching and learning new vocabulary items and repeating them are necessary for productive and receptive skills. When students feel themselves relaxed, the effective filters of the learners are lowered so they focus on the activity and can do their best. Games help to supply an enjoyable and exciting atmosphere while lowering anxiety. While playing games, learners need to communicate and cooperate so it can be said that games are useful to develop social skills, as well. The learners have responsibilities while playing games and this helps them to be responsible individuals while learning the language. Games are good sources of significant repetition and context. Therefore, regarding the results of the study, the following pedagogical implications might be suggested:

•Considering the age, more game activities should be arranged for the young learners. •The games should be interesting, motivating and exciting. Otherwise they don't draw learners' attention and this can cause reluctance. •The time and the activities should be planned very well. The problem of noise should be controlled. • The games can be used as a source of fun in the lessons. However, educational value of the games shouldn't be ignored. The games should be a part of course designs not the course itself. • Games should be a part of teaching for the teenagers, as well considering their age, likes and dislikes.

It may also be useful to add some suggestions for further studies. In this study, the 4th and the 7th grade students were the participants. Therefore, the effects of using games can be explored at high school or tertiary level. Moreover, while vocabulary recognition was the main focus of this study, vocabulary production can be investigated in detail within further studies.

Ethics Approval

I declare that the research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. There is no conflict of interest in the research. The study was approved by Social and Humanities Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Necmettin Erbakan University with 2020/19. The authors received no financial support for the authorship, research, and/or publication of this article.

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