

## WORD GAMES AND VOCABULARY BUILDING

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*Language is an integral element of human civilization. Acquiring and learning languages is an age old practice. Vocabulary building is the key element of any language learning. It is really important to have a good vocabulary in one's repository. One of the major difficulties faced, in common, by Indian students while learning a foreign language is the difficulty of mastering the vocabulary. Language teachers always find it hard to teach vocabulary and English is no exception. Over emphasis on memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules makes English learning a burden to students. Even though there are many ways of improving English vocabulary, a more practical solution for learning English vocabulary is through vocabulary games or word games or language games.*

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Man is considered far superior than other living organisms due to his ability to think rationally and to use language for meaningful expression and communication. Thus language has an important role to play in the progress of mankind. Acquiring and learning languages is an age old practice. Acquiring mother tongue is a natural process whereas, learning a new language is a planned and deliberate activity. Learning English language is a difficult process. One has to learn all the aspects of language like phonemes, morphemes, vocabulary, syntax, and grammar. Language, in general, is a skilled subject. Exposure to language is essential to develop the four core language skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Vocabulary is the one link that connects the core skills of language. Hence it is considered as a key element of language learning.

Vocabulary is, in simple terms, a list of words. Vocabulary can be defined as the sum total of words used or understood by a particular person. According to Kamil and Hiebert, it is the knowledge of words and word meanings. Words are often described as the building blocks and life blood of language. Vocabulary of a person is different from that of another. Vocabulary is difficult to be fully mastered. It is expanded and deepened over the course of time. Usually, vocabulary is acquired incidentally through exposure to words and can be acquired intentionally by instructions in specific words and word-learning strategies. It is really important to have a good vocabulary in one's repository. It is more important than grammar as the foundation of language. Good vocabulary facilitates accurate expressions and develops power of communication. It helps to improve speed of reading and aids in quick reading comprehension. Adequate vocabulary also facilitates precise thinking. It is also a determining factor of the overall development of language proficiency.

There are different types of vocabulary. The prominent categorization among these is active vocabulary and passive vocabulary. Active vocabulary is the list of words one uses in his daily life to express oneself. It is also called expressive vocabulary. Passive vocabulary is a term used to refer to listening and reading vocabulary. It is the list of words which are not used in daily life but understood whenever they come across. It is also known as receptive vocabulary.

English language is one of the most widely used second languages in the world. It is the international lingua franca or the link language that connects the whole world. It, now, enjoys the status of the global language or the world language. It is the chief agent of globalization. English is elevated as the international language for employment, for commerce and trade, as well as for science and technology. According to F. G. French, in his book entitled ***Teaching English as an International Language***, English has become a world language.

English serves as the library language and plays a vital role in higher education because 80% of course books and reference books in colleges and universities are in English. Translating books in any regional language into English help to gain international recognition and wide readership. English has spread all over the globe. It is a window to connect us to the outside world. The aphoristic remark of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, “English is our major window on the world” emphasizes the same fact.

In India, English enjoys the status of Associative Official Language, second language and link language. Our constitution was written in English and most books on law were in English. The language used in High Courts and the Supreme Court is English. In education, particularly higher education, English acts as the medium of instruction. English is taught as one of the languages in the three language formula recommended by the Secondary Education Commission 1952. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru remarked, “...one hundred and fifty years of intimate contact has made English an integral part of our educational system and this cannot be changed without injury to the cause of education in India...” Kothari Commission also stressed the vital role English plays in educational scenario. Thus teaching or learning English is considered as an important academic process in India.

The English language has a very rich vocabulary. Because English has often borrowed words from different languages, mainly the languages of people who invaded England and settled there in the past and from languages of other countries which were invaded by English and in which Englishmen settled. The list of languages from which English has borrowed words includes Celtic languages, Germanic languages, Latin, French and even Malayalam. Other strategies of word formation include composition or compounding, clipping, blending, affixation, conversion etc.

One of the major difficulties faced, in common, by Indian students while learning a foreign language is the difficulty of mastering the vocabulary. The language teachers always find it hard to teach vocabulary. Limited knowledge of vocabulary and sentence structure is one of the major problems identified in foreign language learning. English is no exception. Over emphasis on memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules makes English learning a burden to students. Students are asked to memorize it without proper practice.

The best way for vocabulary expansion is extended reading i.e., reading books, newspaper, journals of the standard conforming to the student's level. Listening to simple speeches, radio broadcasts and telecasts also help to expand vocabulary. But the problem is that it cannot be practical in the real classroom situations. Students have to take extra effort to make it possible. While introducing new vocabulary items, teacher should present it in a graded pattern, more frequently used words should be taught first. She can teach content and structural words along. Words with derivatives should be included. Use denotation to teach words.

A more practical solution for learning English vocabulary is through vocabulary games or word games or language games. Because everyone would like to participate in games irrespective of their age. Playing makes the participants active and provides them a common experience of joy. This characteristic of game is utilized in vocabulary games. This play way method of grasping vocabulary helps to internalize words naturally or spontaneously. It gives way to the holistic development of the child at the same time. Moreover it is more student-centred and activity oriented learning technique compared to the traditional teacher-centred ones. But, unfortunately, most of the English language teachers do not explore the possibilities of word games in classes.

### **POPULAR WORD GAMES FOR VOCABULARY BUILDING**

There are a number of word games that are useful to teaching vocabulary. They are:

**Charades** – A student looks at a piece of paper with a word or title written on it, not to be seen by others. He makes gestures or actions to give clues to others who are to guess the word/title. Nouns, verbs, adjectives adverbs, etc can be taught using this method.

**Pictionary** – Instead of words used in charades, pictures are used in Pictionary. The students with picture card begin to draw it on the black board and others have to predict it within a few seconds.

**Synonym and Antonym cards** – In this game, cards with two words which are synonyms and card with two words which are antonyms are prepared. The player looking at a card speaks one word; the other players are to give its synonym/antonym as the case may be.

**Just a Minute** – In this game, a student speaks for 60 seconds exactly, trying to define a word without hesitation or repetition. The other students sit listening as judges. If the speaker speaks according to the rule, he wins a credit.

**Labelling** – A picture is given or shown to the students with some objects numbered in it. The students write the words corresponding to the number. The student who writes more words correctly is the winner.

**Spotting the Difference** – Students play this game in pairs. Student 1 has a picture. And student 2 has a blank paper. The first one gives clue to draw the picture and the second one draws it. At the end the two pictures will be compared.

**Recollection** – Pictures, a number of objects or a tray containing a number of objects say twenty is shown to the students for a limited time, say one minute and the pictures/ tray will be hidden from the students. The students are tried to write the names of the maximum number of objects.

**Classification** – A considerably large list of nouns, adjectives, adverbs, etc is given in jumbled way. The students may be asked to classify. Name of vegetables, fruits or animals and birds etc can be given too.

**Word Bingo** – The students draw a square divided into 9 or 16 small squares. They are asked to write terms connected to a particular theme like classroom. Then the teacher says words connected with the theme. Each time if the teacher's term occurs in a square that term is marked with a (X) mark. The student whose all terms or maximum terms are crossed wins.

**Cross Word Puzzles** – It can be of varying difficulty levels. So this should be framed from simple to complex ones according to the level of the students. It is the game of filling out the empty boxes as the answers to the questions horizontally and vertically.

**Matching Words** – Matching words and their meanings or words and their synonyms or words and their antonyms will be taken as a game. It can be used to any other classes of words.

**Riddles** – It is an interesting game. A word or idea is described as clues and the students have to guess the word from the clues.

**Rhyming Word** - Divide the class into 4 to 5 groups and provide each group with a word written on it. The students must come up with rhyming words. The group with longest list will be the winner.

**Word Maker** – Divide the class into manageable groups. Give each group a strip of paper containing a long word. Ask students to find out as many words as possible embedded in that long word. The group with more number of words wins.

**Word Run** – Ask a student to say a word and let him write it on the black board. The next student picks up the last letter of that word and comes up with another word made with the last letter.

**Associative Words** – The teacher starts the game by saying a word, such as “home”. Each student in turn comes up with a word associated with home.

**Jumble/ Unscramble** – It is word game where a set of letters are given to the player in jumbled order. The letters are to be arranged to form a meaningful word. It is an effective way to teach spelling.

**Guess-Who?** – A student gives some superficial clues about something, for instance nature and mannerisms of a student. Let the class guess who that student is. While giving clues anyone should not be hurt.

**Newspaper Article** – Give students a newspaper article. Let them select five words at random and write five new sentences using these words. Ask them read the sentences aloud to the class.

**Word Count** – Divide the class into two groups. Choose a long word and write it on both sides of the blackboard. Ask the students to write words starting with the letters from the long word. Set up a time limit. At the end count the words. The group with more words wins the game. Quick thinking is valued in this game.

English has a very rich vocabulary and learning it properly is a Herculean task. Traditional vocabulary learning techniques like drill and repetition, memorization etc proved ineffective and it has made the language learning rather a mechanical process. Language learning must be an active as well a lively process. Because it, in general, is a skill subject which has to be practised and perfected. Thus alternative methods for vocabulary learning should be utilized to serve the purpose. Word games may serve the purpose as one of the alternatives and its effectiveness should be verified. Improving English vocabulary can be effectively carried out during the secondary school level, because students at secondary school level gets ample opportunity for using and improving their vocabulary.

There were a handful of studies conducted on this area. A study appeared in the Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research Volume 2, Issue 3, 2015, pp. 39-47 entitled “The Effects of Using Games on English Vocabulary Learning” conducted by Ali Derakhshan (Assistant Professor, Golestan University, Department of English Language & Literature, Gorgan, Iran) and Elham Davoodi Khatir (MA Student of English Language Teaching, Gorgan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Gorgan, Iran, & Golestan Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Gorgan, Iran) recommends the use of vocabulary games in second language learning. It revealed that games are beneficial in vocabulary learning because they enhance students’ ability to memorize words, encourage student’s interaction, improve their communicative skills and enhance students’ motivation. According to the study, “Games also can help the teachers to create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful”. It suggested including game-based learning activities and techniques in the classroom hoping that educational games attract more attention and be applied in the classroom in order to learn and teach new vocabulary more effectively.

A research synthesis published in 2010 by NRTAC (National Reading Technical Assistance Centre, USA) under the title “A Review of the Current Research on Vocabulary Instruction”, compiled, written, and edited by Shari Butler, Kelsi Urrutia, Annetta Buenger, Nina Gonzalez, Marla Hunt, and Corinne Eisenhart showed that active vocabulary instruction should permeate a classroom and contain rich and interesting information.

“Vocabulary instruction should follow a graded pattern covering many words carefully chosen to reduce vocabulary gaps and improve students’ abilities to apply word knowledge to the task of comprehension. The three major areas of the studies are the effectiveness of frequent exposure to targeted vocabulary words effectiveness of explicit instruction of targeted vocabulary and the effectiveness of questioning and language engagement.

Language, being a window to the outside world, is an essential asset to be mastered over. And childhood is the best time to learn languages. Language teachers must take good efforts to make the learning as student friendly as possible so that they actively participate in the process of acquiring the language. Word games are an effective way of helping the students to build up English vocabulary. Unlike the traditional methods like drills, dictation and all, it is more activity-oriented and contributes to the holistic development of the child.

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