

Teaching Vocabulary in EFL Classrooms: A Tried-Out Technique

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Abstract

One of the complaints made by EFL learners is that when it comes to the instruction of the linguistic sub-skills, i.e., grammar and vocabulary, the class tends to become boring. In many classes, there is as of yet no collaborative activities to facilitate the learning of these two important sub-skills. Most of EFL classes are reminiscent of the bad old days of mechanical repetition and drills which were in vogue long ago. The purpose of this article is to delineate how a simple game can be incorporated into EFL classrooms and add an element of variety.

Keywords: Cards Game, Grammar, Vocabulary

1. Introduction

Facilitating reading is far and away the most important thing a teacher can do to improve ESL students' vocabulary (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Krashen, 1993; Nagy, 1988). Therefore, the best strategy teachers should utilize to enhance their students' vocabulary growth is to provide them with as much time to read for themselves as possible and to integrate reading activities into curricula so that students experience words in a variety of contexts.

Although research has demonstrated that one's knowledge of vocabulary plays a critical role in students' literacy development, many teachers dedicate little of their class time to vocabulary instruction (Scott, Jamieson-Noel, & Asselin, 2003). Some students react better to flashcards, while others may have a preference for collaborative discussions. Teachers who devote time to vocabulary instruction often use strategies that fail to increase students' vocabulary and comprehension abilities (see reviews in Blachowicz & Fisher, 2002; Nagy, 1988). Basically, it seems that many EFL teachers are at a loss about what techniques to use to enhance their students' involvement in the process of learning.

While traditional memorization drills continue to dominate vocabulary teaching, Graves (Graves, 2000; Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002) advocates broader classroom vocabulary programs for students. ESL teachers who want to improve students' vocabularies realize that they have to foster classrooms that accommodate multiple learning intelligences. The goal of this article is to expand the scope of vocabulary instructional strategies discussed in previous research (Brassell, 2003; Brassell & Flood, 2004) to include some classroom-proven, time-efficient methods for teachers to use to enhance their ESL students' vocabulary knowledge.

Games have always been recognized as important tools that can dramatically change the atmosphere of the class. As such, they can conceivably be used in EFL classes to make vocabulary and grammar learning more interesting. Below, we introduce a game that we have made use of in our classes when teaching grammar and vocabulary.

2. A practical enjoyable technique: Cards game

The game is played in teams of 2. Each of the new words for the upcoming session is written on one side of a card. Before the game starts, the teams with the help of the teacher go over the words to get an idea of what the words are and how they can act when they are into the game. After the rehearsal is done the teams get started one after the other. Each of the two members of the team stands on one side of the teacher: one in the front and one behind the teacher. One of the other students in the class is assigned or volunteers to take on the responsibility of keeping track of the time available for each team. Each team is given one minute. Another one of the students

not involved in the game takes on the responsibility of counting the number of the words that each team gets right. Once the student in charge of the time says to start, the student in front of the teacher is supposed to give synonyms, definitions or whatever other linguistic device to inform his teammate of the word which is on the card. Once his teammate gets the item right, they can go on to the next word. In case the student in front of the teacher does not know what the word means, or is unable to get it across to his teammate, he can simply say things like skip or next to go on to the next item. The teacher can at times intervene, giving each team the same number of clues to lead the student behind him to guess what word is on the card. Once the time is over, the student in charge of keeping track of the time says time is over, and the student in charge of counting the number of words tells the rest how many items the first group has got right.

2.1 The Pros of the Game:

The important point about this game is that there is the element of information gap between the teammates. Another positive point about it is that the students who are somewhat introvert and not so much for the idea of taking up the floor get to shoot their minds off. There is also the element of competitiveness involved between and among the different teams in the game. Also, it is not that only the two players involved in the task are focused. Rather every one of the students acting as spectators is engaged in the idea of how they will act when their turn is due.

In the event that the teacher intends to use the game in teaching grammar, on each of the cards one sentence could be written. The sentence must contain the newly taught grammatical structures and it must be either right or wrong in terms of the structure used. The task of each of the students in the game now somehow changes and becomes one of figuring out, via consultation with their teammate, whether the sentence exemplifying the new structure is right or wrong. In this way, an element of collaboration and cooperation is added to the competitive atmosphere already present. Peer work combined with the effort to outdo the other teams is one of the things that set this game apart from others.

2.2 The Cons of the Game:

One of the downsides of the game is that some of the students may get content merely with the supply of synonyms and may never make their way up to more complicated structures. One way to get around the issue is that the students who go for more complex structures can be given some kind of bonus time or extra points. To make the competition more exciting music can also be incorporated into the game. At the end, a reward of some kind, though small, can be given to the students to motivate them for the next time around.

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