



Original Research Paper

Vol. 04 Issue 05 May - 2021

Manuscript ID: #0419

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LEARNING VOCABULARY THROUGH GAMES IN COMPARISON WITH THAT IN TRADITIONAL TECHNIQUE

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ABSTRACT

This research was conducted to compare the impacts of two vocabulary teaching techniques (through games and the traditional technique) on English vocabulary learning of a low proficiency group of the first students at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism. 60 subjects were divided in to two groups (an experimental group and a control group) comprising 30 students within the age range of 18-20. The subjects were assigned to two almost homogeneous groups, based on their scores on a general test which had been implemented before. All the students had the same level of English knowledge. The teacher as well as teaching materials was the same for the two groups. In the experimental group, the students were learned new words by memorizing word lists associated with their Vietnamese meanings. In the control group, the students were taught to learn new words through games. The data were collected from the similar tests of the pretest and posttest, which were administered to both groups. Each of them consisted of 40 multiple-choice items of vocabulary and a small post survey at the end of the sessions. The results of the study revealed that the students in the control group outperformed those in the experimental group. Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that games enhanced vocabulary development of the learners better than rote memorization of word-lists.

KEYWORDS

effectiveness, learning vocabulary, games, traditional technique, comparison.



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INTRODUCTION

It is recognized that in recent years, in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), researchers have been more interested in studying the learning process than the learning product and in the development of communicative competence than that of linguistic competence (Chen, 1990). For this tendency, the present study is intended to investigate into the effectiveness of learning vocabulary through games in comparison with that in traditional technique at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism based on the following reasons:

Firstly, in English study, vocabulary plays an important role. It can be considered as a major component of language learning. Laufer (1997) states that vocabulary learning is at the heart of language learning and language use. In fact, it is one element that links the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing all together. Without vocabulary, speakers cannot convey meaning and communicate with each other in a particular language. Scholars such as Allen (1983) and Bowen (1985) showed the importance of vocabulary in communication. According to them, learners with large vocabularies are more proficient learners than those with limited vocabularies. Luppescu & Day (1993) stated that one's level of language proficiency has a close connection with his/her knowledge of vocabulary.

What is more, there is an urgent need to improve students' lexical competence in addition to grammatical knowledge. Nowadays, English communicative skills have been considered to be a "ladder" to a successful career. Therefore, poor vocabulary knowledge of Vietnamese students after graduating is a matter of serious concern of parents and teachers. The reasons for this situation are that vocabulary was neglected in teaching – preparation programs. As Allen (1983) mentioned that there were three main reasons for that situation. Firstly, many felt that one must know how the words work together in English sentences; therefore, grammar should be emphasized more than vocabulary. Secondly, some methodologists believed that it was better to avoid teaching words because the meanings of them could not be adequately taught. Thirdly, some specialists were afraid that being exposed to too many words might lead the students to make mistakes in sentence construction. However, as a matter of fact, even when we have good knowledge of grammar, we often face up to interfere in communicating with a lot of unknown words. Therefore, a number of research studies recently conducted have dealt with lexical problems of language learners

Finally, the paper is implemented to find out effective methods in teaching and learning English as well as to investigate the effectiveness of applying games in teaching and learning English. There are various techniques and devices for teaching of vocabulary. As Hunt & Beglar (2000, cited in Richard & Renandya, 2002), there are three approaches to vocabulary teaching: indirect learning, direct instruction and independent strategy development. In connection with the first two approaches to vocabulary teaching/learning, one of techniques can make use of memorizing word lists. And while adopting the indirect approach, one can utilize games as a useful tool to teach and learn vocabulary.

In Vietnam, two approaches to vocabulary teaching/learning (direct and indirect) have been used popularly. However, the problem is whether the direct approach (rote memorization of word lists) is superior to the indirect approach (playing games to retain vocabulary) or not. The numerous studies were carried out to address the issue, but there is no consensus of opinions on the superiority of one approach over the other. In recent years, communicative language teaching (CLT) has been

applied in Vietnam, many teachers like using games in their vocabulary lessons because games help students be more active in real life situations through the means of individual, pair and group work activities. Thanks to games, students can practice the language they learnt in meaningful ways. The contrast with that, there exists several teachers love teaching English words in a traditional method such as the lists. Decarrico (2001) states that words should not be learnt separately or by memorization without understanding. With the use of games, the teacher can create various contexts in which students have to use the language to communicate, exchange information and express their own opinions (Wright, Betteridge and Buckby, 1984).

LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned above, a number of research studies have dealt with the effects of the direct and indirect approaches of vocabulary teaching/learning on learning vocabulary, in general, and on learning English vocabulary as a foreign or second language in particular. What follows is a brief review of the related literature on the topic in question.

Traditionally, vocabulary has not been a particular subject for students to learn, but has been taught within lessons of speaking, listening, reading and writing. It used to be offered to learners in the form lists. Students have to learn by heart the meaning, pronunciation, spelling, and grammatical functions of the words through the teacher's explanations, classmates or bilingual dictionaries. The meaning of new words is remembered in their mother tongue without any real context practice. That is the reason why the lessons of vocabulary are very boring and not useful. According to Huyen, Nguyen and Nga, Khuat (learning vocabulary through games, 2003, Asian EFL journal), there are four factors for the way of learning vocabulary passively of Vietnamese students. Firstly, learners depend so much on the teacher's explanations. Therefore, during the vocabulary lesson, language learners have nothing to do but to listen to their teacher. Secondly, students only learn the primary meaning of new words. They do not interest in all other functions of the words. Thirdly, students usually only acquire new vocabulary through new words in their textbooks or when given by teachers during classroom lessons. Finally, many Vietnamese learners do not want to take risks in applying what they have learnt. Students may recognize a word in a written or spoken form and think that they already "know the word", but they may not be able to use that word properly in different context or pronounce it correctly.

Unlike the traditional method of learning and teaching, in a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, games have been considered as one of the most effective methods to improve learner's vocabulary building skills. With games, learners are required to take part in a number of meaningful activities with different tasks. Through real life situations with various kinds of activities in pair and group work or role play, learners can understand the uses of words in different contexts, in particular, their pronunciation can be better thanks to the help of classmates or teacher. Therefore, it can be acceptable that games motivate students to learn, help students participate in the lesson actively.

Ianacone (1993) argues that vocabulary lists are isolated and isolating. They are artificially constructed lists which lack context and are not capable of inspiring motivation to learn. Based on his teaching experience and the specific approach which he adopted, he suggests that words should be

learned in a context in which students are actively engaged in guessing word meanings as they appear in natural contexts such as activities of games.

Gnoinska (1998:12). Research and publications have shown that learning vocabulary by memorizing is not a very effective way to study. Decarrico (2001) states that words should not be learnt separately or by memorization without understanding. Therefore, learning words by looking and remember seems to be not useful for the learners of the English language.

Many experts of language teaching methodology agreed that playing games is a good way to learn vocabulary, especially in CLT class. Newton (2001) refers to this approach as a way that can enable learners to manage their vocabulary meaning and develop their communicative skills at the same time. Wright, Betteridge and Buckby (1984), for instance, stated that with the use of games, the teacher can create various contexts in which students have to use the language to communicate, exchange information and express their own opinions. Huang (1996: 1) came to a conclusion that "learning through games could encourage the operation of certain psychological and intellectual factors which could facilitate communication heightened self-esteem, motivation and spontaneity, reinforcing learning, improving intonation and building confidence".

From the results of the researches of many scholars presented in this section, one can come to the point that, in general, the majority of the studies (e.g. Ianacone, Gnoinska, Newton, Wright, Betteridge and Buckby, Huang) provide support for the superiority of indirect technique (vocabulary games) over direct instruction (rote memorization of word lists). Games motivate students and nowadays, motivation is found to be an important factor in learning everything, particularly in foreign language. Hence, there is a great need for research in to the vocabulary teaching methods to guide us toward the most effective one.

METHODOLOGY

The subjects of this study were 60 students with low level of English at the age range of 18-20 at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism. These students belonged to two groups, one experimental group (learning vocabulary by memorizing) and one control group (playing games for learning vocabulary). Each consists of 30 students which were volunteer chosen. The groups met for two hours a day, two days a week and lasted four weeks. All students learnt English at the school but the knowledge of English was not good.

In this study, two vocabulary tests were constructed based on the vocabulary items presented to students in the first eight units of the course book "Lifeline elementary" used at the school. The pretest was administered to the participants both to see if they were homogeneous enough to start the study and the post-test to measure the difference between the achievements of the two groups with respect to the type of vocabulary teaching technique employed in each group. The whole research project took place in 15 weeks. During this process, the new words of each unit were presented to the students through two methods of playing games and memorizing the word lists in the course book "Lifeline elementary"

As the above mentioned, the purpose of the study is to investigate the effectiveness of two vocabulary teaching techniques at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism. To achieve the goal, I focused on the perception and attitudes of my students as well as what students gained

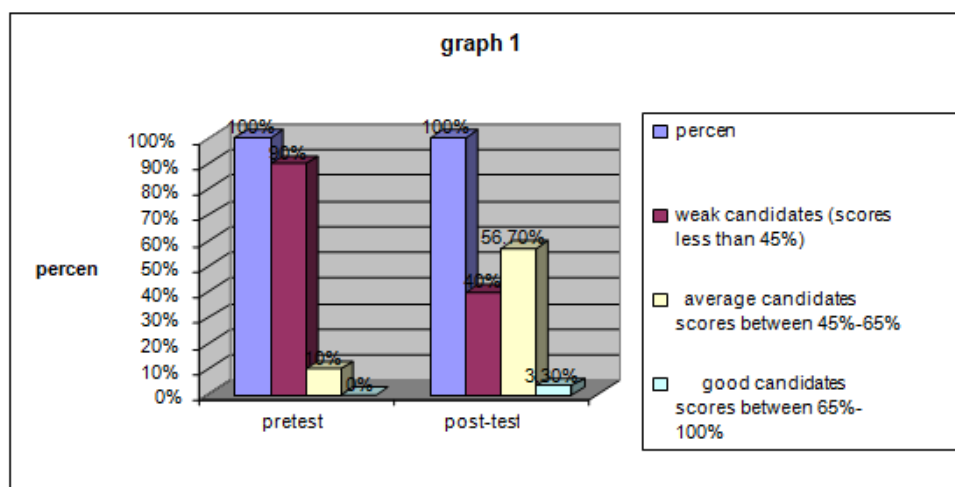
through their learning with two techniques. By observing the classes and the findings discovered in the small post survey through interviewing, I can know the students' reflection and feeling to the vocabulary lessons. What is more, the comparison of the scores of two tests, pretest and post-test, I could learn the students' progress after the lessons with two techniques.

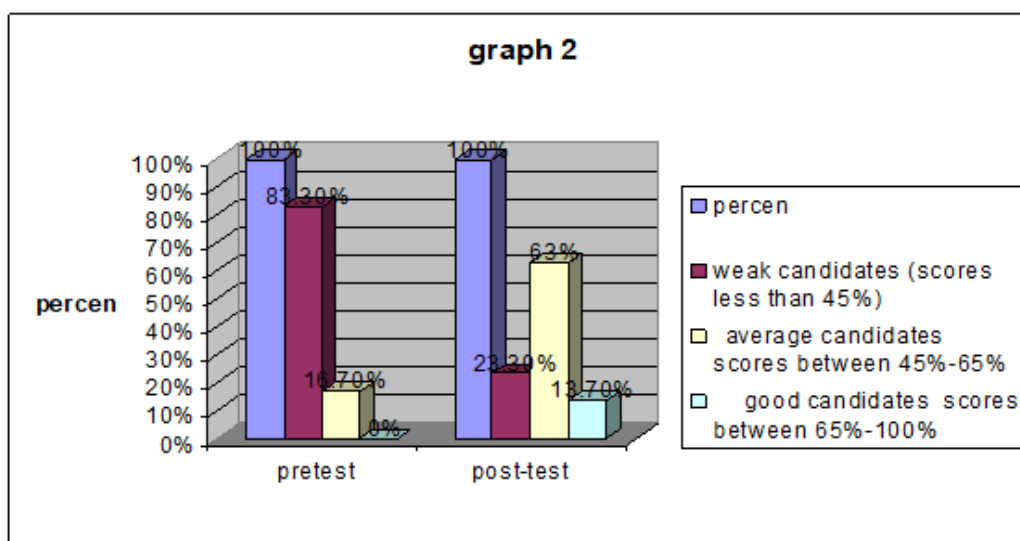
First, the general test consisting of 50 multiple-choice items (the correct answer to each item received two points and there was no penalty for false response) was administered to 80 students in 60 minutes to choose 60 students with the homogeneous English level. 60 students were divided in to two groups each consisting of 30 male learners. One of the groups served as the experimental group in which students tried to learn the vocabulary items through rote memorization of word lists and the other served as the control group in which students worked on vocabulary games. Then, the vocabulary pretest with forty multiple-choice items (the correct answer to each item received 2.5 points and there was no penalty for false response) was administered to two groups in forty-five minutes to know the students' level of vocabulary before starting the research. In the process of teaching, the students in the control group taught new words through games and the students in the experimental one taught vocabulary through translation. The type of questions asked had the following general formats: "What does '.....' mean in Vietnamese?", "What does '.....' mean in English?", "What is a synonym for '.....' in English?", and "What is an antonym for '.....' in English?". Finally, the post-test (the sample size was the same as the pretest) was administered to two groups to measure the vocabulary development of the participants in two groups. At the same time, the researcher gave a small post-survey through interviewing to get information for the students' responses to both two methods.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

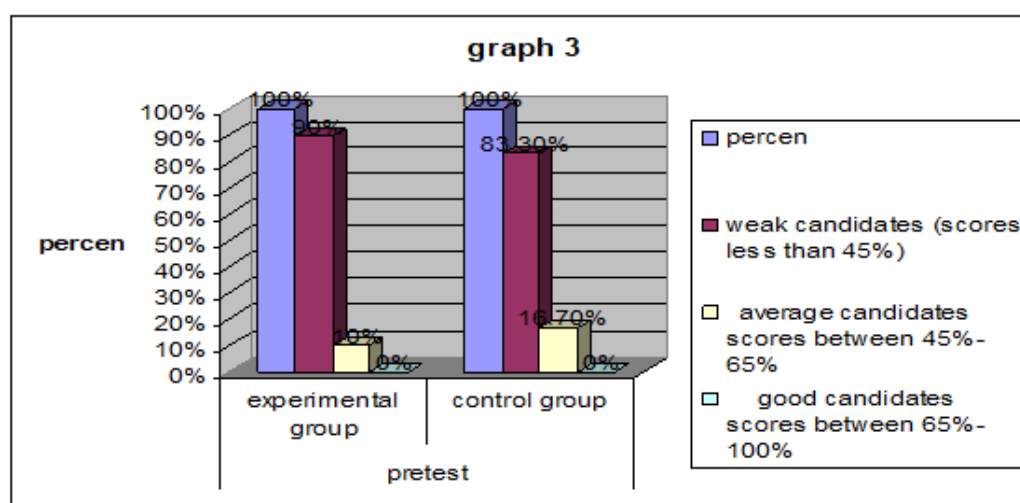
The paper tests at the beginning and at the end of the study were administered to 60 participants both. 120 copies were collected back. Besides, 115 replies were collected back in which 100 ones were found statistically valid from a small post survey.

Graph 1: Descriptive statistics of the students' progress in the experimental group.



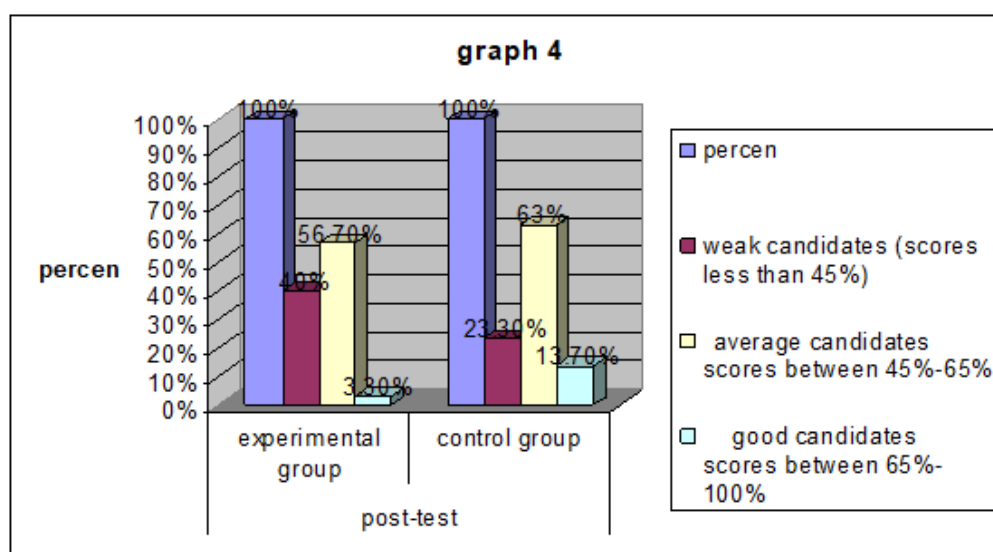
Graph 2 : Descriptive statistics of the students' progress in the control group.

The statistic results of the graph 1 and the graph 2 revealed that the vocabulary knowledge of students in both of two groups improved better than that before the study. The weak candidates reduced the average candidates and the good candidates increased significantly.

Graph 3 : Statistics of the pretest in two groups

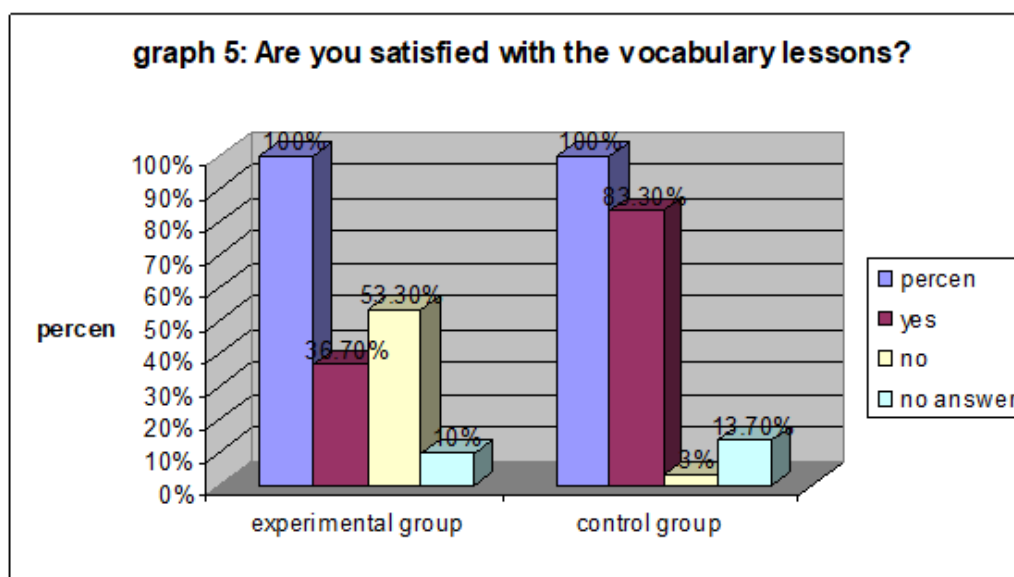
The pretest was administered to the participants both to measure the vocabulary knowledge of the subjects before starting the research. The scores obtained (see graph 3) helped me come to a conclusion that most of the students had the weak knowledge of vocabulary.

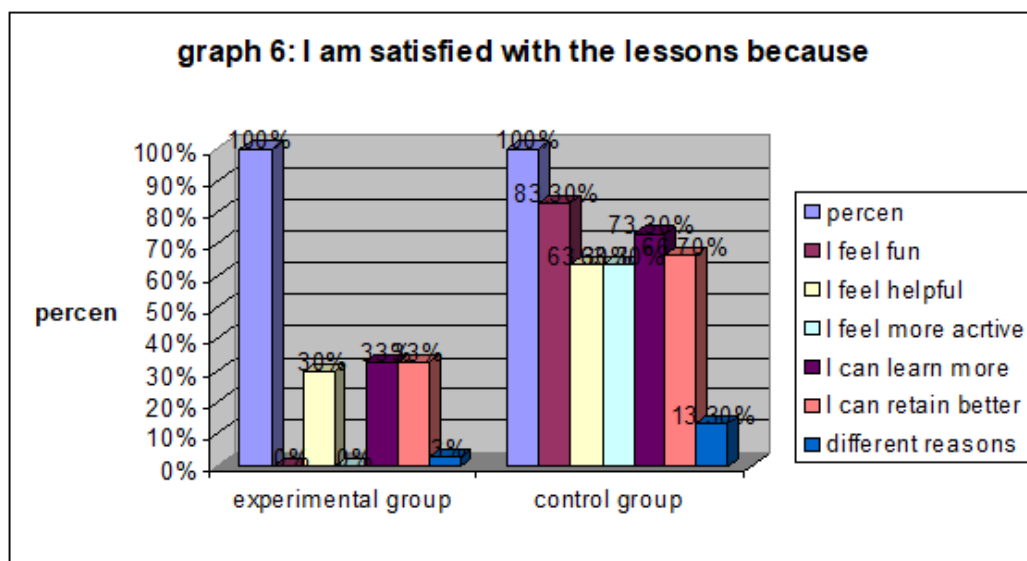
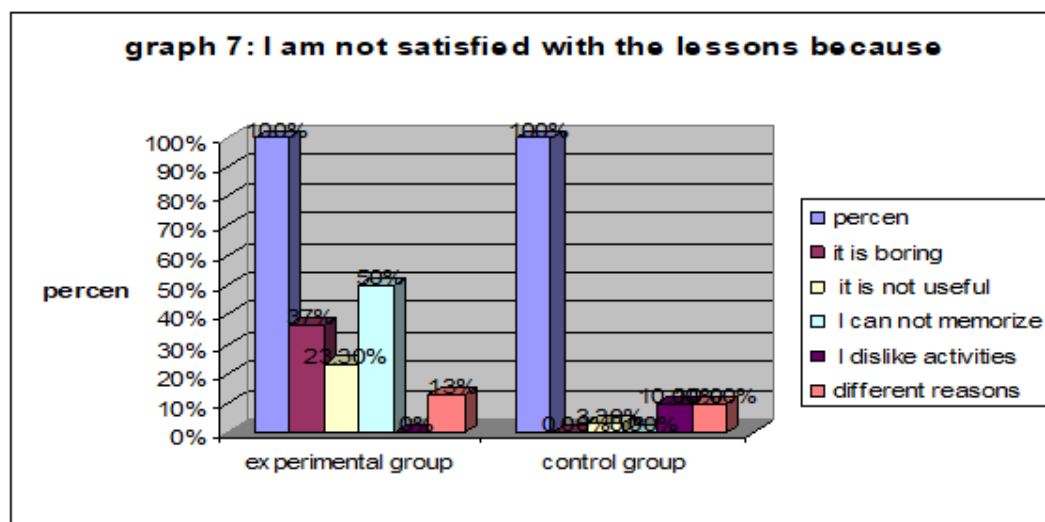
Graph 4: Descriptive statistics of the post-test in two groups



So as to answer the question: "Is playing games more effective than rote memorization of word lists in teaching vocabulary to Vietnamese students?", the post-test was administered to the participants both at the end of the sessions. The statistic results in the graph 4 indicated that learning vocabulary through games is more effective than that in the lists. The percentage of the average and good candidates in the control group was prior than those in the experimental group. On the contrary, the percentage of the weak candidates in the control was less than that in the experimental group.

Graph 5: Descriptive statistics of the students' attitudes



Graph 6: Why are you satisfied with the vocabulary lessons?**Graph 7: Why are not you satisfied with the vocabulary lessons?**

A small post survey at the end of the sessions to assess the students' attitude to the lessons with the respect to each technique. The statistic results showed that most of the students in the control group had the positive reflection to the lessons. Conversely, 53.3% students in the experimental group was not satisfied with the lessons (see graph 5). The reasons for their answers were very various. Most of the students in the control group stated that games were not only fun, useful but also helped them retain vocabulary better. Only a small part of them did not like participate in the activities. About 33.3% students in the experimental group thought that the words list in bilingual form helped them retain more effectively. However, the majority was not satisfied with the lessons because they were not interesting and not helpful to retain words for a long time (see graph 6&7).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from observing the classes, interviewing and comparing the scores of two tests, pretest and post-test indicated some results, as follows:

Students' attitudes

The results of the above data analysis from a small post survey at the end of the sessions revealed that the responses to the student's evaluation in the control group were quite favorable, with 83.3% agreement that playing games motivate to learn. According to them, games were not only interesting but also very useful to develop their vocabulary building skills. Some wrote that games helped them learn different uses of words in real context practice and improve their English communication skill: "I like vocabulary games because they helped me confident in communicating in English through the increased opportunities to produce words and sentences for myself".

With the respect to the experimental group, the results obtained indicated that the majority of participants (53.3%) disliked the vocabulary lessons in the traditional way. The only 36.7% thought that the bilingual word lists was helpful to memorize. The 10% agreed that they could learn by heart new words but the lessons in the word lists were boring. In general, most of the students in the experimental group were not satisfied with the lessons.

Observing the atmosphere of two classes also gave me the same results. The students in the control group were willing to take part in the class activities as pair work, group work and tried the best to be the winners even they had prepared new words for the lesson at home. The students especially liked such games as guessing words that belong to the topic of them, words puzzle, noughts and crosses, survey, bingo pachinko, slap the board, selling and buying, in particular, lucky number (the topic suggested). Students collaborated quite actively in games that required group work, even the quiet. After explaining the game's rules to students and gave some examples, the students quickly rearranged their seats and grouped as instructed. The classes became noisy because of the students' discussion. In the shortest time as possible, students in a group tried to use many phrases and words they had learnt to guess the word with the respect to the number they chose. They were very happy when opened the lucky number because they would get one point without answering. The others were also very eager to watch, wait for the turn and tried to get point when a group had wrong answer. The teacher would help if all groups did not correct answer. The winners were proud of their success. After the games, some wanted to play more as they felt fun and helpful. However, there were usually one or two students who seemed to isolate themselves from the activities. When asked to join their classmates, they were reluctant to move or said that they did not like to play the games. Generally, most of the students showed pleasant feelings and positive attitudes towards learning vocabulary through games.

Inversely, the students in the experimental class were very passive. They depended so much on the teacher's explanations for meaning, pronunciation, spelling or grammatical functions. Even when the teacher asked them to find and underline new words appearing in the lessons, they were not eager to do or did them as the forced missions. Some of the students expressed the tiredness. The atmosphere of the class was often boring.

Students' progress

With respect to the results obtained from the analysis of data pertaining to the pre- and post-test, one can conclude that although there were the differences of the results between two groups, the vocabulary knowledge of students was improved better before starting the study. The percentage of weak candidates in both decreased and the percentage of average as well as good candidates increased significantly (see graph 1&2)

However, The statistic results of the post-test and in comparison with the pretest indicated that the control group outperformed the experimental group. The percentage of the average and good candidates in the control group was superior to that in the experimental group. On the contrary, the percentage of the weak candidates in the control was less than that in the experimental group. That proved that the students in the control group retained and used words more effective than the students in the experimental group (see graph 4)

CONCLUSION

In the preceding section, the obtained data from the performance of the control and the experimental group was analyzed. Based on the findings, particularly the comparison between two tests (pretest and post-test), I could come to a conclusion that playing games group performed better than the rest group. Therefore, the researcher can claim that using games in teaching vocabulary (indirect technique of vocabulary teaching) is more effective than rote memorization of word lists in the traditional way (direct technique of vocabulary teaching) and can play an important role in teaching vocabulary items to Vietnamese students learning at the school.

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APPENDICES.

Pretest & Posttest of Vocabulary

Vocabulary test (Pretest)

Student's Name:

Choose the best answer.

- 1. “_____” old is Joe?” “He is twenty.”**
A. How B. Who C. Why D. What
 - 2. This is my _____. He is Hung.**
A. sister B. brother C. niece D. daughter
 - 3. Jane comes from Lon Don. She is _____ .**
A. American B. English C. Mexican D. Chinese
 - 4. I have a toothache. I will see my _____ tomorrow.**
A. doctor B. nurse C. dentist D. teacher
 - 5. I like to sing. I want to be a _____ in the future.**
A. musician B. composer C. scientist D. singer
 - 6. My father is watching TV in the _____ .**
A. bathroom B. living room C. classroom D. kitchen
 - 7. There are a lot of books on the _____ .**
A. cupboard B. fridge C. bookcase D. table
 - 8. Sushi is a _____ dish.**
A. Chinese B. Vietnamese C. Laotian D. Japanese
 - 9. A _____ fights fires.**
A. fireman B. farmer C. police D. plumber
 - 10. My mother gave me a _____. It wrote very well.**
A. pen B. battery C. watch D. telephone
 - 11. It is raining. Take an _____ .**
A. raincoat B. umbrella C. hat D. bag
 - 12. We use _____ to keep our teeth clean.**
A. toothbrushes B. toothbrush C. teeth brush D. towels
 - 13. The teacher writes on the _____ .**
A. notebook B. black board C. chalk D. book
 - 14. His father usually has _____ , cheese, and tea for breakfast.**
A. bread B. pepper C. sugar D. salt
 - 15. There are four _____ in the flat: a living room, a bed room, a kitchen, a bath room.**
A. rooms B. tables C. houses D. ladders
 - 16. Kate is playing the _____ in the room.**
A. book B. guitar C. pen D. glasses
 - 17. I am interested in cooking but I am not a good _____.**
A. mother B. wife C. baby sister D. cook
 - 18. She works in a hospital. She is a _____ .**
A. teacher B. worker C. nurse D. farmer
 - 19. A _____ is where people pay games and win prizes.**
A. soap opera B. cookery program C. news program D. game show
 - 20. The man who serves you in a restaurant is the _____.**
A. waitress B. waiter C. cook D. receptionist
 - 21. After you finish your meal, you ask for the _____.**
A. starter B. desert C. main course D. menu

- 22. He is hungry. Give him some _____ to eat.**
 A. milk B. coffee C. whiskey D. bread
- 23. She is short-sighted. She is wearing her _____ .**
 A. bag B. glasses C. watch D. knife
- 24. “would you like to go for a walk?” “No, thanks. I’d like to stay at _____ .**
 A. home B. restaurant C. cinema D. house
- 25. Many people drink _____ in the morning with milk or cream.**
 A. salad B. sandwiches C. coffee D. tea
- 26. The man is wearing a nice _____ .**
 A. sack B. blouse C. shirt D. dress
- 27. Pregnant women should not drink _____ .**
 A. milk B. alcohol C. fruit juice D. lemonade
- 28. If you want to have a good health, you should do _____ .**
 A. tennis B. yoga C. football D. badminton
- 29. Could you _____ me the way to the railway station?**
 A. explain B. say C. point D. tell
- 30. A _____ looks after young children.**
 A. wife B. baby sister C. doctor D. nurse
- 31. Bordeaux is a famous _____ wine.**
 A. Mexican B. English C. French D. American
- 32. Jame can not ride a _____ .**
 A. bicycle B. ball C. desk D. chair
- 33. Kate is writing a _____ for her friend.**
 A. stamp B. letter C. post D. envelop
- 34. My sister can _____ a car.**
 A. study B. work C. run D. drive
- 35. A _____ is a large strong car for carrying things.**
 A. taxi B. motorbike C. lorry D. bicycle
- 36. Let’s go to the _____ to see a film.**
 A. restaurant B. zoo C. park D. cinema
- 37. Put your shirts and sweater in the _____. We will go on a holiday tomorrow.**
 A. suitcase B. dresser C. washing machine D. wardrobe
- 38. It is very dark. Have you got a _____ ?**
 A. watch B. torch C. glasses D. battery
- 39. “where is the book?” “ It is on the _____.”**
 A. room B. living room C. table D. bed room
- 40. “ _____ you like to drink a cup of tea?”**
 A. Could B. Can C. Should D. Would

Vocabulary test (Post-test)**Student's Name:****Choose the best answer.****1. David Beckham is a _____ footballer.**

- A. American B. English C. Spanish D. Mexican

2. Spring roll is a typical _____ dish.

- A. Chinese B. Japanese C. Vietnamese D. Thai

3. A _____ checks the teeth and keeps them clean and white.

- A. doctor B. dentist C. baby sister D. nurse

4. David is in the _____. He is washing himself.

- A. garden B. bed room C. living room D. bath room

5. The woman who serves you in a restaurant is the _____.

- A. waiter B. waitress C. receptionist D. manager

6. Smith usually drink _____ with milk in the morning.

- A. lemonade B. fruit juice C. tea D. coffee

7. His mother is cooking dinner in the _____.

- A. dining room B. bed room C. kitchen D. bath room

8. I wear a _____ when it is cold.

- A. sweater B. raincoat C. glasses D. umbrella

9. I have got a robot. He can play the _____ .

- A. homework B. piano C. bicycle D. skiing

10. There is a _____ in the bath room.

- A. bed B. coffee maker C. washing machine D. stove

11. A _____ teaches people how to cook.

- A. documentary B. cookery program C. wildlife program D. game show

12. A _____ tells you what happens recently

- A. news programme B. soap opera C. documentary D. drama

13. _____ you tell me the way to the post-office?

- A. Would B. Should C. Could D. Do

14. The principal part of the meal is the _____ .

- A. main course B. starter C. dessert D. menu

15. I can _____ when there is snow.

- A. ski B. cook C. sunbath D. sail

16. Alice's father can fly a _____ .

- A. car B. boat C. train D. airplane

17. A _____ is a place where two roads meet and the drivers should stop at it.

- A. crossroads B. street C. one way D. railway

18. I want to buy a sandwich, but I haven't got any _____.

- A. food B. drink C. money D. clothes

19. Peter works in a factory. He is an _____ .

- A. doctor B. teacher C. engineer D. worker

20. I want to have new clothes. I shall go to a _____ .

- A. chemist's B. florist's C. newsagent's D. . tailor's

21. A car that carries sick people to the hospital is an _____ .

- A. taxi B. ambulance C. van D. lorry

22. I have got a _____. Aren't you hungry?

- A. bread B. sandwich C. rice D. sugar
- 23. Alice is a _____. She looks after sick people.**
A. mother B. baby sister C. nurse D. waiter
- 24. There are a lot of cars on the _____.
A. street B. road C. crossroads D. dead-end**
- 25. Would you _____ to eat something?**
A. want B. love C. enjoy D. like
- 26. Go straight along this road then _____ the first left.**
A. go B. run C. turn D. ride
- 27. I have a sore throat. I would like to check my _____.
A. lung B. heart C. eye D. ear**
- 28. I am _____ in reading about new medical invention.**
A. fond B. interested C. keen D. bored
- 29. Everybody _____ sleep for 7 to 8 hours a day.**
A. would B. like C. should D. hate
- 30. The body temperature is higher than normal. It means that you have a _____.
A. cold B. fever C. headache D. hot**
- 31. You feel like vomiting. You have a _____.
A. sore throat B. dizzy C. nausea D. itchy**
- 32. He will go to a _____ to buy a dozen of red roses.**
A. greengrocer's B. stationery shop C. florist's D. baker's
- 33. How many _____ did you buy?**
A. milk B. sugar C. pepper D. books
- 34. Yesterday I _____ shopping with my friends and we spent a lot of money.**
A. did B. went C. made D. took
- 35. Last Monday I did not feel well so I decided to go to see the _____.
A. teacher B. dentist C. doctor D. nurse**
- 36. These are some _____ of my family in which I stood behind my brother.**
A. pictures B. stamps C. postcards D. envelops
- 37. There is not much _____ in the living room.**
A. table B. chair C. dresser D. furniture
- 38. There is a _____ on the wall.**
A. watch B. clock C. book D. computer
- 39. I live on the _____ floor.**
A. bottom B. side C. top D. middle
- 40. He _____ playing computer games so he spends 5 hours a day with his computer.**
A. dislikes B. hates C. likes D. detests