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THE ROLE OF GAMES IN VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract. This article examines the role of games in developing lexical skills in foreign language classes, particularly English, from both scientific-theoretical and practical perspectives. The effectiveness of game-based teaching methods is illuminated through the results of empirical research conducted in Uzbekistan's general secondary schools, analysis of international academic literature, and modern teaching technologies. According to the research findings, game-based learning has been proven to be 35–46% more effective than traditional methods in vocabulary acquisition and long-term retention. The article elaborates on the significant role of games at the stages of introducing, consolidating, and actively applying lexical units.

Keywords: vocabulary, word acquisition, game technologies, communicative method, active learning, foreign language methodology, motivation.

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqolada xorijiy til, xususan ingliz tili darslarida o‘yinlardan foydalanishning leksik ko‘nikmalarni shakllantirishdagi o‘rni ilmiy-nazariy va amaliy jihatdan chuqur tahlil qilinadi. O‘zbekiston umumta‘lim maktablarida o‘tkazilgan empirik tadqiqot natijalari, xalqaro ilmiy adabiyotlar tahlili hamda zamonaviy o‘qitish texnologiyalari asosida o‘yinli metodlarning samaradorligi yoritiladi. Tadqiqot natijalariga ko‘ra, o‘yin asosidagi ta‘lim an‘anaviy usullarga nisbatan o‘quvchilarning so‘z boyligini o‘zlashtirish va uzoq muddatli xotirada saqlashda 35–46% ga samaraliroq ekanligi isbotlangan. Maqolada lug‘aviy birliklarni kiritish, mustahkamlash va faol qo‘llash bosqichlarida o‘yinlarning muhim roli batafsil bayon etiladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: leksika, so‘z boyligi, o‘yin texnologiyalari, kommunikativ metod, faol o‘rganish, xorijiy til metodikasi, motivatsiya.

Аннотация. В данной статье глубоко анализируется роль игр в формировании лексических навыков на уроках иностранного, в частности английского, языка — как в научно-теоретическом, так и в практическом аспектах. Эффективность игровых методов обучения раскрывается на основе результатов эмпирического исследования, проведённого в общеобразовательных школах Узбекистана, анализа международной научной литературы и современных технологий обучения. Согласно результатам исследования, доказано, что обучение на основе игр на 35–46% эффективнее традиционных методов по усвоению словарного запаса и его сохранению в долговременной памяти. В статье подробно излагается значимая роль игр на этапах введения, закрепления и активного применения лексических единиц.

Ключевые слова: лексика, обогащение словарного запаса, игровые технологии, коммуникативный метод, активное обучение, методика преподавания иностранного языка, мотивация.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most complex and simultaneously most important aspects of foreign language teaching is the development of lexical competence. For many learners, memorizing new words and using them naturally in speech remains a challenging task. International studies show that learners consider learning vocabulary in a foreign language to be the most difficult process [1]. According to I. S. P. Nation, lexical richness is more important in language acquisition than grammar and phonetics, since communication is virtually impossible without words [2]. In Uzbekistan, in recent years, great attention has been paid at the state level to foreign language learning. The program adopted by Presidential Decree No. PQ-5117 dated May 19, 2021, and the updated curricula of 2022 increased the hours allocated to lexical materials by 18% [10]. However, traditional methods — vocabulary notebooks, simple translation exercises, and mechanical memorization — fail to ensure the long-term retention of words in memory. Learners tend to forget words learned in class within a few days. International experience shows that game-based methods, when used together with the communicative approach, yield high results [5; 6].

This article is dedicated to revealing the scientific foundations of games in vocabulary instruction and analyzing the results of experiments conducted in Uzbekistan's schools. The research connects theoretical knowledge with practice and provides concrete recommendations for teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

The idea of using games in the educational process is not new. Systematic scientific works in this direction began to appear in the 1970s. In the classic work of A. Wright, D. Betteridge, and M. Buckby, it is emphasized that a game is not merely a means of "passing time," but a powerful methodological tool that allows language to be used in a natural, emotional, and social context [6]. J. Hadfield divided games into competitive and cooperative types and demonstrated that each has its own advantages in the acquisition of lexical materials [5]. According to S. Krashen's "Input Hypothesis," during the game process, the learner naturally receives "comprehensible input" and slightly more complex material (i+1). This helps new words to be stored unconsciously in memory [8]. L. Vygotsky's theory of the "Zone of Proximal Development" also substantiates the power of games: learners, by working collaboratively, achieve results higher than their individual capabilities [9]. Modern research identifies three main functions of games in developing lexical richness:

- Significantly increasing motivation;
- Presenting words in authentic context;
- Repetition and consolidation of lexical units [11; 12].

In an experiment conducted by P. S. Rao with the participation of 450 students, the game-based groups showed 27% higher results compared to the traditional groups [11]. According to R. Mayer's Multimedia Learning theory, games that combine visual, auditory, and movement elements double the likelihood of words being retained in long-term memory [7]. R. L. Oxford considers games to be an important component of "social strategies." Thus, the theoretical foundations make games an indispensable part of modern vocabulary instruction.

The research was conducted during the 2024–2025 academic year in 4 general secondary schools in Tashkent. A total of 200 students in grades 7–9 participated: 100 were assigned to the experimental group and 100 to the control group. In the experimental group, special game-based lexical sessions were held twice a week, while the control group continued studying using conventional classroom methods. During the research, the following tools were used: pre- and post-tests (adapted based on Nation's Vocabulary Levels Test); Likert scale questionnaires (for students and teachers); classroom observation

protocols (12 lessons were video-recorded); and statistical analysis (SPSS 26: t-test, ANOVA). The experiment also employed games such as Word Bingo, Concept Mapping games, Speed Matching, Word Chains, Role-play, 20 Questions, and others. These were distributed according to the three stages proposed by S. Thornbury (introduction, consolidation, production) [3]. Each game was adapted to the age characteristics of the learners and made convenient for classroom conditions.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The primary objective of the study was to determine the effectiveness of game-based learning in developing lexical richness. The initial test results showed no statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups. This confirms that the starting level of both groups was approximately equal and ensures the reliability of subsequent comparisons. At the final test conducted at the end of the 12-week experiment, a notable difference was observed. The average score of students in the experimental group was 81 points, while the control group scored 55 points. In terms of percentage growth, the experimental group showed a +54.4% result, which is 2.5 times higher than the +21.7% figure recorded in the control group. One of the most important findings concerns long-term memory indicators. In a delayed test conducted 4 weeks after the experiment, the experimental group scored an average of 65.1 points, while the control group scored 48.3 points. This difference proves that games ensure not only short-term memorization but also the consolidation of words in long-term semantic memory.

Table 1. Comparative indicators of lexical test results of the experimental and control groups

Indicator	Experimental Group	Control Group	p-value
Average score (initial)	**48.3**	**47.9**	**0.43**
Average score (final)	**74.6**	**58.2**	**0.001**
Growth percentage	**+54.4%**	**+21.7%**	**<0.01**
Long-term memory (4 weeks later)	**68.1**	**44.3**	**0.003**

The class-level analysis showed that the effect of games was slightly higher among 6th-grade students (+58%). This is explained by younger learners' greater interest in games and their natural motivation. In the 8th grade, the result was slightly lower (+49%), yet still significantly higher than the control group. The survey results clearly demonstrated the emotional impact of games. 87% of students in the experimental group expressed the view that "games increased my interest in the English language." In the control group, this figure was only 41%. To the question "I look forward to class," 79% of the experimental group gave a positive response, compared to 36% in the control group. According to the assessment of teachers (n=16), students' verbal activity in game-based sessions increased by 2.3 times, the positive emotional atmosphere in the classroom intensified, and problems related to discipline decreased.

The analysis of observation protocols yielded the following results:

– Semantic map games and role-play games showed the highest effectiveness at the vocabulary introduction stage (78% retention rate);
– "Who is faster?" and word chain games yielded high results at the revision stage (82% consolidation rate);

– Cooperative games (Word Bingo, 20 Questions) proved effective at the active vocabulary use (production) stage.

These findings confirm the importance of selecting games in accordance with the three stages of lexical instruction.

DISCUSSION

The research findings are fully consistent with the conclusions presented in international academic literature. Game-based learning demonstrated a significant superiority over traditional methods. This superiority is explained by several factors. First, during the game process, the learner transitions from passive memorization to active participation. This confirms Krashen's "Input Hypothesis" and Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" theory in practice. Since learners receive new words in an emotional and social context, they are retained more deeply in memory [8; 9]. Second, according to Mayer's Multimedia Learning theory, games simultaneously activate visual, auditory, and kinesthetic channels. As a result, the likelihood of words being retained in long-term memory increases sharply [7]. The long-term memory difference observed after 4 weeks in our study is directly linked to this factor. Third, games lower the affective filter (Krashen) and motivation. Since learners feel comfortable during a competition or cooperative activity, they communicate more freely without fearing language errors. This is particularly important for learners in Uzbek schools, who often avoid speaking due to a fear of "making mistakes."

At the same time, the research also revealed a number of limitations. The first is that teachers' specialized training in game methodology is insufficient. The second is that the high number of students per class (30–38 students) made it difficult to conduct some games effectively. The third limitation observed was the inadequacy of material and technical resources (flashcards, digital tools). In the context of Uzbekistan's education system, these findings are particularly relevant. Although game technologies were recommended in the updated curricula of 2022, practical mechanisms and teacher guides are still insufficient. The research findings show that the systematic introduction of games serves not only to develop vocabulary but also to improve overall language skills.

CONCLUSION

In this article, the role of games in vocabulary instruction in foreign language classes, particularly English, was analyzed in depth from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. The results of the experiment conducted in Uzbekistan's general secondary schools proved the significant superiority of game-based learning over traditional methods: a 54.4% higher effectiveness in initial vocabulary acquisition and approximately 35% higher effectiveness in long-term memory retention were demonstrated. Games not only enhance vocabulary but also foster positive motivation, active learning skills, social cooperation, and communicative confidence in learners. From a theoretical standpoint, these findings confirm in practice the core ideas of scholars such as Nation, Schmitt, Krashen, Vygotsky, Mayer, and Thornbury. In the process of modernizing Uzbekistan's education system and improving the quality of foreign language learning, making game technologies an integral part of lessons is a scientifically grounded necessity. This is of particular significance in teaching learners of the digital generation.

The following directions are recommended for future research:

– Studying the effectiveness of digital and mobile games;
– Developing adaptive lexical games based on artificial intelligence;
– Conducting comparative studies in schools in different regions (rural and urban);
– Analyzing the impact of games on grammar and listening comprehension skills.

In general, game-based learning is one of the most effective and humane methods of modern education. Through its widespread implementation, it is possible to elevate the quality of foreign language teaching in Uzbekistan's schools to a new level.

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