

A COMPARISON OF EFFECT OF PICTORIAL STORYTELLING AND PLAYING GAMES ON IRANIAN KINDERGARTNERS' VOCABULARY RECOGNITION

Fatemeh Hemmati¹ & Marsa Teimoori¹ & Manuchehr Jafarigohar²

Department of English Language, Tehran Payam-e-Noor University, Tehran, Iran

*Correspondence: Fatemeh Hemmati, Department of English Language, Tehran Payam-e-Noor
University, Tehran, 19395-3697, Iran. Tel: 98-912-378-9248.*

E-mail: fatemehhemmati2002@yahoo.co.uk

ABSTRACT

This study aimed at comparing the effects of two methods of storytelling and game playing on Iranian EFL kindergartner learners' vocabulary recognition as well as the methods' superiority over each other. 40 Iranian EFL kindergartner learners between the ages of 5 to 6 who were attending the kindergarten's pre-school classes were selected. They were assigned randomly into two experimental groups: storytelling and game playing. Each group received 8-sessions of treatment. Two point-to tests based on Jung's picture association test were used for the pretests and posttests. Based on the findings of a test of within subjects effects and an independent *t*-test, it was concluded that both the methods were effective and story-based group did slightly better. Implications are for kindergartner teachers, elementary level teachers, material developers, and parents who want to train bilingual children.

KEYWORDS: kindergartner, vocabulary recognition, storytelling, game playing

INTRODUCTION

In today's global community, the study of foreign languages is a necessity (Omari, 2001). According to Chou, Wang and Ching (2012), in its role as a global language, English has become one of the most important academic and professional tools. Recent studies have highlighted the advantages of an early start in second or foreign language learning (Blondin et al., 1998; Edelenbos & De Jung, 2004; Johnstone, 2000). Basically, children are potential in acquiring and learning a foreign language, and even they learn it more quickly than those who are learning the foreign language after puberty (Mc Laughlin, 1978). According to Omari (2007) in kindergarten certain methods of foreign language teaching are more suitable than others because these years bridge the gap between early childhood and first grade. Segers, Takke, and Verhoeven (2004) mention that storybook reading in kindergarten plays a significant role in children's language and literacy development. Repeated exposure to new words, either within the text of a single book or through repeated readings of the same book, facilitates children's learning of those words (Elley, 1989; Penno et al., 2002; Robbins & Ehri, 1994; Senechal, 1997). Gaming is also a characteristic of human nature (Demirbilek, Yilmaz, & Tamer, 2010). Wright, Betteridge and Buckby (2006)

review the advantages of games for learning English and find out that games help and encourage learners for language learning in order to sustain interest and work.

Children's First Language Acquisition and its Similarities with Second Language Acquisition and Learning

One remarkable thing about first language acquisition is the high degree of similarity in the early language of children all over the world (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). While more is known about how children learn their mother tongue, researchers are just beginning to understand the processes of children's second language learning. Some researchers argue that the processes of first and second language learning in children share some important similarities (Gordon, 2007). Some 2nd language researchers believe that there is a natural learning sequence in 2nd language acquisition, parallel to 1st language developmental sequences (Lightbown, 1985). Krashen (1985) and other authors see this natural development to be the product of the language acquisition device, assumed to operate in adulthood, allowing childlike internalizations of the rules underlying the target language. Other authors stress the role of universal grammar in constraining the developmental sequence (Healy & Eugene Bourne, 1998).

Critical Period

The idea of a "Critical Period" was first introduced by Penfield and Roberts (1959). According to them, a child's brain is more plastic compared with that of an adult, before the age of 9, a child is a specialist in learning to speak; he can learn 2-3 languages as easy as one. Lenneberg (1967) believes that after laterization (a process by which the two sides of the brain develop specialized functions), the brain loses plasticity. Lenneberg claims that laterization of the language function is normally completed at puberty, making post-adolescent language acquisition difficult. Ausubel (1969) considers that children may be better able to acquire an acceptable accent in a new language and that they have certain cognitive advantages, too. Chase (1997) adds that learning ability decreases after ages eleven and twelve. He mentions that it is developmentally appropriate to teach languages during early childhood and early elementary years because of children's natural ability to acquire language during this stage in life.

Early Bilingualism, and two methods of children tutoring: Story-telling and Game-playing

There is a considerable body of research, as is assured by Lightbown et al. (2006, p.25), on children's ability to learn more than one language in their earliest years. The theory of bilingual facilitation is based on the framework proposed by Ben-Zeev (1977) and elaborated by Hakuta and Diaz (1985). Hakuta and Diaz characterized bilinguals as having enhanced "cognitive flexibility." Their essential idea is that bilinguals show a greater readiness to reorganize linguistic input and impute linguistic structure.

Teaching a language to young learners brings a number of challenges most of which stem from the characteristics of young learners that are different from those of older learners (Cameron, 2003); hence, taking these characteristics into account while determining the language instruction is of utmost importance. Young learners tend to learn implicitly rather than explicitly (Cameron, 2001; Halliwell, 1992; Kedde, 1997; Pinter, 2006; Scatterly & Willis, 2001). They can understand meaningful messages, but cannot analyze the language as a system yet. Children are good observers and they make use of such contextual clues like movements (body language),

intonation, mimics and gestures, actions and messages in order to understand and interpret the language itself (Brewster et al., 2002; Cabrera & Martinez, 2001; Halliwell, 1992; Scatterly and Willis, 2001). A further characteristic is that young learners enjoy fantasy and imagination (Pinter, 2006). Games and cartoons suit well in fostering young learners' imagination and fantasy. Cameron (2001) believes that learning characteristics of children need to be reflected in the design of teaching curricula. According to Semonsky and Spielberg (2004) the kindergarten and first grade teachers use many manipulative things in their teaching that appeal to the children's senses. Children are encouraged to hear, touch, smell, taste and see the actual objects they are using in their foreign language.

Young learners are quick to learn vocabulary, slower to learn structures (Demircioglu, 2010) and The primary role words play in language is to convey meaning (Balota, 1990). De Groot (2010) believes that from the viewpoint of a beginning learner vocabulary knowledge may be considered the most crucial language component: the chances of getting one's basic needs fulfilled in a foreign language environment are substantially better if the learner possesses some well-chosen basic vocabulary in the language concerned than when, instead, he or she masters the language's grammar flawlessly. Jane Feber (2008) believes that vocabulary instruction is important and although there may be no single right way to teach vocabulary to children, some common conditions do need to be met. For example, children need multiple exposures to vocabulary words taught with a variety of direct and indirect instructional methods. These include exposing children to a wide variety of books that appeal to their interests, introducing words in context, and utilizing mnemonic devices. she adds that students need to be actively involved in learning vocabulary which means that students need to see, touch, and feel the words to work with them actively. Since games and activities appeal to students, these seemed like a logical way to help them acquire vocabulary. Creating a classroom atmosphere in which words are fun, and playing with words is encouraged can be a powerful antidote to the very natural fear of making mistakes that can so easily inhibit learning (Thornbury, 2002).

Justice, Meier, and Walpole (2005) believe that the theoretical perspectives of vocabulary development are first, Incidental exposure to novel words is a critical mechanism for word learning; second, word learning is a gradual process, and third, adult input variations can influence the rate of novel word learning. Justice et al. (2005) also mention that although successful vocabulary instruction in elementary classrooms should emphasize explicit teaching of those words needed to access and succeed in the general curriculum, vocabulary instruction should also foster incidental learning opportunities. For younger children who are not reading, incidental exposure to new words occurs through conversations with others, overhearing words spoken in one's environment, and by being read to. Indeed, adult-child storybook reading interactions provide highly contextualized exposures to novel words in a routine that is authentic, familiar, and often motivating to young children (Roth, 2002). New words can be learned with the help of pictures, too. Al-Seghayer (2001) claims that the contribution of visual stimuli to vocabulary learning can also be attributed to a specific process which links vocabulary system of human beings to their imagery system, and this process is closely related with the organization of linguistic knowledge and imagery system in our minds.

Storybook reading is an important factor in vocabulary growth (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995), both at home and in the school environment. Reilly and Ward (2000, as cited in Tavit & Soylemez, 2008) believe that stories have lots of repetition which reinforce the acquisition of language items in the classroom and they build up the child's confidence as the language classroom atmosphere is non-threatening. Stories are also useful tools to enhance comprehension by visuals, touching and seeing things. Reilly and Ward also mention that Good picture books are a rich source for understanding new vocabulary and actually understanding the meaning of a story even if one doesn't understand each word.

Current language learning theories follow the premise that children learn best through discovery and experimentation and being motivated to learn in a playful and relaxed context (Griva, et al., 2010). Language learning can be linked with natural activities such as play, since young children can learn languages as naturally as they learn to run, jump and play (Baker, 2000, as stated in Griva, et al., 2010). One of the numerous benefits that come with using games to help students develop and improve in their oral skills is that they engage children in cooperative and team learning (Ersoz, 2000). Lee (1995) believes that teaching vocabulary through games encourage children's interaction and provide opportunities for real communication by bridging the gap between the classroom and the real world. Lee also mentions that games are highly motivating and help students to make learning fun and relaxed. They make the lesson less monotonous, since they maintain students' attention and interest in the language without getting bored and sustain their effort of learning. There is a competitive element that enhances effective learning as games keep learners interested in winning (Nguyen & Khuat, 2003, as stated in Griva, et al., 2010)

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

We seldom stop to marvel at the speed and ease with which children learn their first language. The phenomenon is nothing short of a miracle. All normally developing children master the complexity of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary of their first language with first four or five years of their lives. While their first language facility surprises no body, we often marvel at how quickly children learn a second language; like the case of immigrant children who speak English without a trace of an accent after having been in an English-speaking environment for a relatively short time. As it was argued by a lot of authors and researchers in the literature, this ability of the children has got a time-limit. So, the researcher's main motive and purpose for doing this research is to reap the benefits of this time-limited capability by using two of the most appropriate methods for the children i.e. story-telling and playing vocabulary games. The researcher wants to examine which of these techniques will give a better answer. This study can thus lead to development of certain guidelines for teachers who are teaching English at the kindergartens to five-six year old kids.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Based on the above-mentioned literature, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. Has pictorial story-telling got any significant effect on kindergartners' foreign language vocabulary recognition?

2. Have physical activities through games got any significant effect on kindergartners' foreign language vocabulary recognition?
3. Is there any significant superiority in using pictorial story-telling method to teach foreign language vocabulary at the recognition level over playing vocabulary games method, or vice versa?

Based on the above questions, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

1. Pictorial story-telling has not got any significant effect on kindergartners' foreign language vocabulary recognition.
2. Physical activities through games have not got any significant effect on kindergartners' foreign language vocabulary recognition.
3. There is no significant superiority in using pictorial story-telling method to teach foreign language vocabulary at the recognition level over playing vocabulary games method, or vice versa.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of this study were 60 Iranian kindergartners between the ages of 5 to 6 and a half. They were chosen from Bojnourd, Naghme-ye-Shadi kindergarten. They were divided into two groups. There were 11 girls and 19 boys in story-telling group, and 12 girls and 18 boys in game-playing one; thus, among 60 participants, there were 23 girls and 37 boys. They hadn't passed any English courses before.

Sampling Procedures

The study was a pretest-posttest as well as a comparison-group one. It was quasi-experimental because the convenience sampling was used as the kindergarten in which the study was done had got two classes each containing about thirty 5 to 6-year-old kindergartners. However, they were randomly assigned into two experimental groups called story-telling and game-playing. Thus, there were two independent variables named story-telling group and game-playing-group as well as one dependent variable named vocabulary recognition. Each of the groups consisted of 30 participants totaled 60. Both groups were taught by the researcher herself.

Instrumentation

In order to achieve the goals of this study, a point-to test is used by the researcher. This test is something like Jung's picture association test. Association tests are methods for discovering complexes by measuring the reaction time and interpreting the answers to given stimulus words or pictures (Routledge, 1979). Picture association tests involve the presentation of a series of stimulus pictures to a respondent who is asked to quickly supply the word that first comes to his mind after seeing the stimulus picture. Presumably the respondent would give the word that he most closely associates with the stimulus picture (Gupta, 2004). The researcher's reason to choose Jung's test was that the participants in the study were kindergartners, so, they were not literate in either their mother tongue or the target language. According to Tavil, Muge, and Soylemez (2008), kindergartners are children who have not started compulsory schooling and

have not started yet to read and write. In this test they heard the words read by the researcher and were just needed to point to the right picture on the flashcards set in front of them and got a 'one' or a 'zero.' Two point-to tests were done during the study, a pretest at the first session, to assure that the participants are homogeneous, and hadn't known any of the chosen vocabulary, and a posttest which aimed to measure and compare the amount of grasp of vocabulary by each group. The aim of this research was to test the respondents at the recognition level, so the researcher just asked the pupils to point to the picture as they heard the related word, without saying anything.

Procedure

The participants in both treatment groups named the story-based and game-playing groups had two classes each week totaled 8 sessions during 4 weeks. Each class session lasted about 30 minutes to avoid the kindergartners' boredom. 8 stories were selected from the book *First Friends*, class book 1, by Susan Lannuzzi for the 8 sessions of the class with story-based group. And the games selected for the game-playing group were "Chinese whisper," "What's missing," "Draw it relay," and "Balloon toss." The participants took the pretest at the first session and the posttest in session 9. Two points should be noted: (1) No student took the tests (pre- and post-test) twice, and (2) both groups were taught by the researcher herself. The sampling method used in this study was convenience sampling. However, random assignment to groups was used by the researcher. As Mackey and Gass (2005) argued, to assess the feasibility and usefulness of the data collection methods and make the necessary revisions, the whole study was piloted before the beginning of the main study.

Story-based Group

The participants of the story-based group were required to listen to 8 stories accompanied by related pictures during 8 sessions; each session, 1 story. The stories were chosen from a book named 'First Friends' class book no. 1, by Susan Lanuzzi. The researcher first showed the participants the flashcards of the vocabulary to be taught and said the words loudly and asked the pupils to repeat them. The repetition's aim was to absorb the pupils' attention to the words and not to prepare them for those words' production. At the next step she gave them pages with the story's comic strips, and asked them to look at comic strips. The pictures of the comic strips were big, colorful, and easy to follow. The researcher then told the story of the comic strips with a loud voice. Her voice was louder than usual to take the pupils' attention, because they were so excited and energetic, and some of them were really naughty. And also the loud voice had a dominant role, too, for the kids to take the orders. As the researcher explained the story, she pointed to the pictures and sometimes did some gestures for better understanding. The story was told twice; the first time the teacher just explained it, and the second time she wanted the students to participate and repeat some parts. At the end of the session the researcher again repeated the vocabulary with the flashcards. And finally she gathered the pages in order to prevent any extra work on the vocabulary at the participants' homes and any derangement in the course of study. At the ninth session, the researcher took the point-to test to assess the grasped knowledge of the participants.

Game-based Group

For the game-based group four games were selected; two of them were played at each session during the eight sessions of the treatment. At the beginning of the sessions the same vocabulary as

the story-based group were worked accompanied by flashcards; the researcher showed the flashcards and said the words loudly and asked the students to repeat. Again The repetition was to absorb pupils' attention to the words and not to prepare them for those words' production.

The games were done with the aid of the flashcards. The pupils were sat in two rows so for "Chinese whisper", the researcher showed one of the flashcards to the first student of each of the rows and asked him or her to whisper it to his or her classmate, sitting next to him or her, and this process continued till the last member of the row. The group had won, if the last member would have shouted the word sooner than the other squad. The next game was "What's missing". The researcher set the cards on a table in front of the class and asked the participants to gather in front of the table and look at the cards, then asked them to close their eyes. The researcher promptly hid one of the cards, asked the pupils to open their eyes and guess the missing card. At "Draw it relay", the children were divided to two groups; the researcher told two different words to the groups and asked them to rush to the board and draw it. The team, who was speedier, was the winner. In "Balloon toss" game, the researcher used a soft ball and tossed it to different children, showed them the flashcards, and asked them to say the words.

DATA ANALYSES AND RESULTS

The Normality Tests

The assumption of normality is empirically tested through one sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. As shown in Table 1, by considering the fact that $0.848 > 0.05$, the researcher came to this conclusion that the data did enjoy normal distribution.

Table 1: One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

Pretest	Posttest	
40	40	N
1.6250	11.9000	Mean
1.67466	2.50947	Std. Deviation
.184	.134	Absolute
.184	.134	Positive
-.166	-.099	Negative
1.164	.848	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z
.133	.468	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)

The assumption of homogeneity of variances has proved through Levene's Test for Equality of Variances.

Independent T-Test Pretest

Based on the results displayed in Table 2, It could be concluded that story-based group did not differ significantly from game-based group ($p=0.926$, $df=38$, $t=0.093$). The calculated p-value is equal to 0.926 which is more than 0.05.

Table 2: Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pretest	Equal variances assumed	.142	.709	.093	38	.926	.05000	.53644	-1.03596	1.13596
	Equal variances not assumed			.093	37.228	.926	.05000	.53644	-1.03670	1.13670

The first two Research Questions

Based on the results displayed in Tables 3 and 4, it could be concluded that the effects of the within-subjects is significant ($p=0.0005$, $F(1,38)=476.257$). The effect was significant because $F=476.257 > 251.1$, and $p=0.0005 < 0.05$. Thus, the null-hypotheses as pictorial story-telling has not got any significant effect on kindergartners' foreign language vocabulary recognition and physical activities through games have not got any significant effect on kindergartners' foreign language vocabulary recognition were rejected.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics

Group		Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Pretest	Game based	1.6500	1.81442	20
	Story based	1.6000	1.56945	20
	Total	1.6250	1.67466	40
Posttest	Game based	11.2000	2.16673	20
	Story based	12.6000	2.68328	20
	Total	11.9000	2.50947	40

Table 4: Tests of Within-Subjects Effects

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Power ^a	
Testperiods	Sphericity Assumed	2111.512	1	2111.512	476.257	.000	.926	476.257	1.000
	Greenhouse-Geisser	2111.512	1.000	2111.512	476.257	.000	.926	476.257	1.000
	Huynh-Feldt	2111.512	1.000	2111.512	476.257	.000	.926	476.257	1.000
	Lower-bound	2111.512	1.000	2111.512	476.257	.000	.926	476.257	1.000
Testperiods * Group	Sphericity Assumed	10.512	1	10.512	2.371	.132	.059	2.371	.323
	Greenhouse-Geisser	10.512	1.000	10.512	2.371	.132	.059	2.371	.323
	Huynh-Feldt	10.512	1.000	10.512	2.371	.132	.059	2.371	.323
	Lower-bound	10.512	1.000	10.512	2.371	.132	.059	2.371	.323
Error(Test periods)	Sphericity Assumed	168.475	38	4.434					
	Greenhouse-Geisser	168.475	38.000	4.434					
	Huynh-Feldt	168.475	38.000	4.434					
	Lower-bound	168.475	38.000	4.434					

Also, as it can be seen in figure 1, both the story-based and game-based groups have got improvements from pretest to posttest.

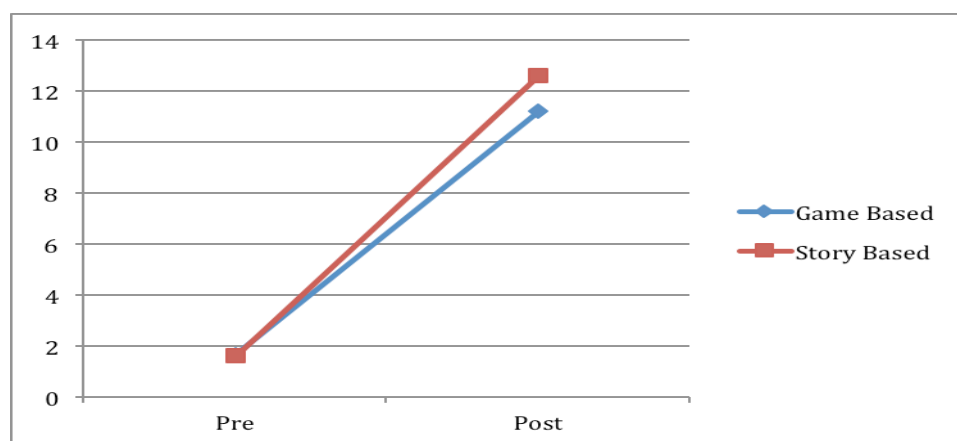


Figure 1: Pretest and Posttest of the Means of Both Groups

The third Research Question

Based on the results displayed in Table 5, it could be concluded that the story-based group outperformed the game-based group ($t = -1.81$, $df = 38$, $p = 0.077$). The p-value is equal to 0.077 which is slightly bigger than 0.05, thus the third null hypothesis as There is no significant superiority in using pictorial story-telling method to teach foreign language vocabulary at the recognition level over playing vocabulary games method, or vice versa was rejected.

Table 5: Independent Samples T-Test

			Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
			F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper	
Posttest	Equal variances assumed		1.580	.216	-1.815	38	.077	-1.40000	.77119	-2.96120	.16120
	Equal variances not assumed				-1.815	36.386	.078	-1.40000	.77119	-2.96347	.16347

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research questions in this study were concerned with effectiveness of using stories or games on foreign language vocabulary recognition of children, without producing the words to learn. And also they were concerned with the significance of difference in the effect of these two methods. The analyses indicated that both groups, story-telling and game-playing, were effective, and the story-based group did slightly better. The findings of this study support the scholars' claim that story-telling and game-playing promotes learning a foreign language. The results of this study, regarding the participants' improvement seen at the posttest, supports the positive effects of story-telling in young learners' language development. This supports the scholars' claims cited in the literature part, such as Grave (1990), Wright (1997), Elley (1989), Seedhouse and Li (2010). There were a lot of story books for beginners in the market, but the researcher tried to find something which was meaningful, interesting, exciting and funny; because, according to Gerngross and Puchta (2009), the content of what the children are offered in the new language is of crucial importance in motivating them to work out the meaning of what they hear. On the other hand, as it was supported in previous studies such as Krashen (1986) and Linse (2005), the researcher tried to find pictorial stories to provide comprehensible input. The findings of this study support the scholars' claim that storybook reading is an important factor especially in vocabulary growth. This was supported in previous studies such as Bus et al. (1995), Brett et al. (1996), Robbins et al. (1990), Penno et al. (2002), Reilly et al. (2000, as cited in Tavid et al. 2008). According to Ur(1996), children in general learn well when they are active and when action is channeled into an enjoyable game. Some researchers like Alcorn(2003) believed that

games require participation, competing in order to achieve certain goals and have special goals. Thus, the games in this study were all competing, and this competition added a lot of excitement to the class. And also the goals of the games used in this study were simple and obtainable. Children learn best through discovery and experimentation and being motivated to learn in a playful and relaxed context as is cited in Griva, et al. (2010). All the games used in this study put the children in a pending position in this way motivated them. In Chinese whisper, all the participants were awaiting their turn to become aware of the words through whispering. In What's missing, children were awaiting with eyes closed, shivering with excitement, while the researcher chose one of the flashcards and hid it. Then, they compete with their classmates in guessing the missed card. In Draw it relay, the participants were awaiting to hear their group's word, then rush to the board and draw the related picture, while others in the group shouting and trying to help them to draw it better. In Balloon toss, children were awaiting their turn all playtime long, the ball might hit them at each second. So, the researcher used the pending element to motivate and excite the participants more. All the four games engaged children in cooperative and team learning (Eroz, 2000) and they had a competitive element that enhanced effective learning as they kept learners interested in winning (Nguyen and Khuat, 2003; as stated in Griva, et al., 2010). Ur (1996), as is stated in the literature, believes that an instructor should not confuse using games as method of teaching a language with a situation where the language learning activity is called a "game" which conveys the message that it is just fun not to be taken too seriously. The researcher felt to some extent that using mere games as a language teaching method was likely to lead on this anti-educational and demoralizing situation mentioned by Ur; although, the researcher tried to use some games in which the emphasis was on vocabulary. After this research was done, the researcher came to conclusion that games are better to be considered as an assisting power for the main method.

IMPLICATIONS

After attending the classes for at least ten sessions, the researcher was sure that story-based group would pass the post-test with better results because that group revealed a deeper understanding during the class time. As the researcher experienced, pupils of story-based group were more attentive to the vocabulary's meaning, while at the next group, game-playing, children were more cautious about winning a contest. But the researcher's expectancy did not happen and both groups took the test with tiny difference. If the researcher was to choose between these two methods the better one, she believed story-telling would work better; although, their combination could be the best choice. With story-telling pupils can gain a better understanding of the sense of the words meanwhile game-playing can add variety and excitement to the learning procedure.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Like any study, this research faced a number of limitations which have to be taken into consideration while attempting to generalize its findings. First, in each of the two classes, which were attended by the researcher, there were thirty children which the researcher kept 20 of them as a pilot group, and there was no opportunity for the researcher to module up the groups into smaller squads. In the case of smaller groups, with more supervision, the results may be changed.

Second, during the main study the pilot group were attending the classes too. There was no opportunity for the researcher to isolate them, because the classes should pass their regular way with all the classmates together. Third, the research is done in just one kindergarten with children coming of almost the same level of society; thus, the results may not be necessarily generalizable to children of all societal levels.

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