

Improving Vocabulary Learning Through Using Language Games at Academy of Policy and Development – An Action Research

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Abstract

The study was conducted to examine the effects of games in teaching vocabulary and to explore students' attitudes, expectations and progress in their process of learning vocabulary through games. To carry out this study, an action research (AR) was used. 50 first – year students at Academy of Policy and Development participated in this study. They were divided into two classes – an experimental class and a control class. In the experimental class, the word games were applied while the students in the control class were taught conventionally. The finding of the research concluded that using games in teaching vocabulary helped students improve their learning in many ways. First, games brought a new atmosphere with relaxation and fun to the lessons. Second, games involved friendly competition and they kept learners interested. These created the motivation for learners of English to get involved and participate actively in learning activities. Finally, games helped the students remember vocabulary better, as shown in their better results of the post- test compared with the pre-test.

Key words

vocabulary games, relaxation, motivation, remember better, better results

I. Introduction

Mastering rich vocabulary plays an important role in learning a foreign language. Large knowledge of lexis paves the way for language learning success. Vocabulary provides learners with materials in order to produce complete utterances. It is one element that links the four language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing all together.

Through observation in different vocabulary lessons at Academy of Policy and Development, where the researcher has worked for the last few years, the researcher has found that students usually feel bored in those lessons because of the traditional way of teaching and learning such as learning by heart a list of words through the teacher's explanations in the text book but not being able to use those words in different contexts or pronounce them correctly. As a result, the test results of lexical items were not high.

The question posed then is what the main causes of the problem are; Previous studies have shown that the main causes can be the students' passive learning style, students' involvement and motivation, students' limitations in features of input, background knowledge and cultural norms, teaching method and ways of managing class, etc. Among these factors, students' passive learning style, their involvement and motivation in learning vocabulary, and teaching methods can be identified as major causes in learning and teaching vocabulary.

To help students find language classes, especially vocabulary lessons more interesting, and to achieve higher learning results, the author conducted an action research to find out if using language games could help students learn vocabulary more effectively or not.

1. Previous studies on the effects of using games for teaching and learning English vocabulary

Commonly, the results of most studies support the use of games in English teaching and learning. The experimental researches conducted by Urberman (1998) and Dao Thi Thanh Mai (2004) have the similarities in which two types of techniques, word games and the traditional technique are given to two different groups and then these two groups are tested to assess the

effects. The test results in these two researches revealed that the experimental group (the group playing games) performs better than the other in recalling words.

Sharing the same opinion, Nguyen Thi Thanh Huyen & Khuat Thi Thu Nga, 2005 confirmed the effectiveness of learning vocabulary through games by conducting an action research. They have made a great effort in seeking evidences for the effectiveness of games in learning vocabulary such as observing other teachers' classes at HUFVS and interviewing both teachers and learners about students' reactions and feelings. However, the study has the same limitation as the one in Uberman (1998)- that is limited time , only in two weeks. It is Nguyen Thi Thanh Huyen & Khuat Thi Thu Nga (2005) who found that "it was hard to assess what our students had achieved because vocabulary learning is a cumulative process". Nguyen Phuong Hoai (2006) indicated relatively full proof of the effectiveness of using games. The results of the post-test at the end of the treatment and a daily record confirmed that students remembered word meaning due to playing games or doing exercises, not through other outside factors. She also emphasized the 'meeting' of words by revising them again and again through different games and exercises.

Hidayat (2016) conducted a study on students' vocabulary of grade seven in junior high school using word game. The results of this study showed that using word game can improve students' vocabulary mastery and it can be effective in teaching English. It helped students remember vocabulary easily, made them interested and motivated them in learning process.

2. Gaps in the previous studies

Although some research studies on the effects of using games for teaching and learning English vocabulary have been carried out, these studies were conducted in a limited time with small numbers of samples . To support those findings and limit the above-mentioned shortcomings, the researcher carried out an action research to explore students' attitudes, expectations and progress in their process of learning vocabulary through games with 50 freshmen at APD. After discovering the problem and causes of the students' weakness at vocabulary learning by the

pre- questionnaire and the pre- test, the author began her action research which included the application of games in her own class, together with post- questionnaire in order to elicit students' reactions, feelings and their assessment of the effectiveness of word games in learning vocabulary. Furthermore, a post- test was administered to acquire evidence of the use of games, the effectiveness of which is shown clearly in the students' higher motivation, more active engagement in vocabulary lessons, and most importantly their improved scores in the post- test.

II. Games For Language Teaching And Learning

A. What are language games?

In brief, games can be defined as an activity involving many factors as rules, competition, cooperation, relaxation and learning (Rixon, 1981; Hadfiel, 1990, Saricoban & Metin,2000)

B. Types of games

According to Rixon, there are two types of language games: code – control games and communication games.

Code- control games

When using code- control games, players have to procedure correct language or demonstrate that they have interpreted a particular piece of language correctly (Rixon,1981).

In these games, Rixon suggests that correct repetition of a limited range of language is the important thing. In this way, they are similar in their function to drills. Just as with drill, someone must judge the correctness of responses. The teacher is usually the only person with sufficient command of the target language to do this, so the teacher plays an important role in leading or controlling these code- control games. The teacher also is the person who awards credit for correct answer and rejects incorrect ones.

Code- control games also require players to say something correctly, sometimes to practice a structure, or to extend vocabulary and challenge memory as in 'list' game like "I went shopping". Ways of winning and ways of organizing students may vary in these games, but their underlying principle is the same: players must get things right in order to win.

Communication games

In this type of games, the emphasis is not so much on correctness as in code- control game, but mainly on the communicative effectiveness. This does not mean that communication games do not improve correctness. Rixon (1981) states that "firstly, language that is too distorted by mistakes will fail to communicate anything, and secondly, the range of language needed in many of these games can be limited so that students are repeating structures many times".

Although there are some differences between these two types of games, there is no conflict between them. Each has its place on a teaching program. It should be noted that students will be able to use the correct language promoted by the code-control games in the flexible and effective way encouraged by communication games (Rixon, 1981, p.32). In the context of this study, the author aims to have students achieve both correctness and communicative effectiveness.

C. The advantages of using games in language teaching

Many experts of language teaching methodology have argued that

games are not just time-filling activities but a great educational value, especially in communicative language teaching class.

Games provides meaningful practice

Games are considered as a way to help students not only enjoy and entertain with the language they learn, but also provide intensive and meaningful practice of language. With the use of meaningful practice as games, the teacher can create various contexts in which students have to use language to communicate, exchange information and express their own opinions. (Wright, Brett ridge & Becky,1984).

Games creates motivation

Games are highly motivating and entertaining, and they can "lower anxiety", give shy students more opportunity to express their opinions and feelings (Nguyen Thi Hue Linh,2009). Therefore, learners can perform what they know, what they are familiar with and what they are able to produce. From the researches of Uberman (1998), Nguyen Thi Thanh Huyen & Khuat Thi Thu Nga (2005), we can see the enthusiasm of their students in learning through games.

Games promote participation and cooperation

The reason games are more popular in language classes now is that games encourage student's participation and cooperation and can remove the inhibitions of those who feel intimidated by formal classroom situations (Carrier, 1990).

Games provide active learner-centered learning

To reach the objective of the game, students have to work in pairs, in groups or in teams. It means that there is communication between individuals. Students have to discuss together, share information or express their own points of view before their group has a final result. In this way games bring learners chances to communicate or to work by themselves. The teacher only keeps the role of an observer or an instructor. The teacher no longer controls what learners have to say. Rixon (1981) asserts that teachers should be there as "a source of information" to give suggestions or rephrase something to make it clearer to other players. In other words, games are part of general movement away from a teacher-dominated classroom and promote active learner- centered learning.

Games provide immediate feedback

After teachers present any new language items, they want to know how much knowledge their students have achieved and how much they have missed. The popular way of checking students' acquisition is by testing. However, tests usually take time. By using games, teachers can receive information about their teaching, but in a quicker way. To explain this, David and Hollowell (1989) stated "Most overburdened teachers have experienced the problem of waiting too long to hand back students papers, to be effective, feedback must follow performance. Most games provide almost immediate feedback to students since in most cases winning and losing will depend on how well the students perform" (David & Hollowell, 1989, p.4)

In summary, games are useful and effective tools that should be applied in vocabulary lessons. The use of games is a way to make the lessons more interesting, enjoyable and effective.

III. Methodology

A. Subjects

The subjects involved in the research were 50 first - year students at Academy of Policy and Development (APD). By the time the research was conducted, they were in the second semester and had just finished the first semester of the English course. Those students were taught by the author. There were 34 males and 16 female and their ages range from 18 to 20.

B. Research questions

The study was designed to explore the following questions:

1. Does the use of games help students learn vocabulary more effectively?
2. What are the students' feeling and attitudes to learning English vocabulary through games?

C. Data collection instruments

In the study, the author used Pre-questionnaire, Post- questionnaire, Pre-test and Post-test to collect necessary information.

1. Questionnaires

The pre-questionnaire was adapted from the questionnaires that Nguyen Thi Chuc Ha (2009) used in her study to investigate the students' conventional attitudes towards English vocabulary learning.

The post-questionnaire was adapted from the questionnaires that Nguyen Thi Hue Linh (2009) used in order to investigate the students' feeling towards the games played in the class, their belief on the effect of word and their personal opinions about using games in learning vocabulary in the next terms.

2. Pre-test and Post-test

In this research, two vocabulary tests were administered before and after the trial: pre-test and post- test. The levels of

difficulty and the formats of these two tests were similar. The author adapted tests from Key English Test (KET), published by University of Cambridge in 2003 and Vinh Ba (2020) to obtain the reliability and validity of the two tests and to meet the English level requirement A2 (according to The Common European Framework of Reference for Language) for the first- year students at APD. The tests were designed in the form of multiple choices including 40 items with 4 parts: part 1- Complete the following sentences using the words from the box. There are more words than needed. (2.5 marks); part 2 – Odd one out (2.5 marks); part 3- Match the word or phrases in A with their meanings in B. (2.5 marks); part 4- Choose the best answer. (2.5 marks)

Each test takes 45 minutes to complete. The scores on each test range from 0 to 10 and are grouped into levels of performance as follows:

- * 9-10: very good * 7-8: good * 5-6: average
* 3-4: weak * 0-2: very poor

D. Action research procedure

Based on the principles and procedures of AR demonstrated, the following stages were done one after another.

1. Identifying the problem (weeks 1- 2)
2. Collecting initial data (week 3)
3. Analyzing data (week 4)
4. Planning action (week 5)
5. Implementing the action plan (week 6 to week 14)
6. Collecting post-data (week 15)
7. Analyzing post data (week 16-17)

IV. Research Results

A. The results of the pre- questionnaire

The results from the pre- questionnaire are illustrated in Table 1 as follows:

Table 1: The results from the pre- questionnaire

1. <i>Do you think English vocabulary is necessary for your language learning?</i>		Yes	No
		98%	2 %
2. <i>Why do/ don't you think English vocabulary is necessary for your language learning?</i>			
a. English vocabulary helps combine words into sentences to express ideas, feelings...		Agree	Disagree
		96%	4%
b. English vocabulary assists the learners in memorizing and using the language appropriately in communication.		Agree	Disagree
		88%	12%
c. English vocabulary is essential in developing various language skills to reach the aim of communication.		Agree	Disagree
		94%	6%
d. English vocabulary helps develop the learner's self- confidence in using language.		Agree	Disagree
		92%	8%
e. Others, please specify: <i>No other ideas.</i>			
3. <i>Do you enjoy learning English vocabulary?</i>		Yes	No
		6%	94%
4. <i>If you talk about your learning English vocabulary at your school, which of the following words most reflect your impression:</i>			
boring	interesting	stressful	relaxing
98%	2%	96%	0%
enjoyable			
2%			
Others, please specify: <i>No other ideas</i>			

5. What factors do you think may influence your attitudes towards vocabulary learning?				
a. The difficulty of the English vocabulary.	Agree	Disagree		
	88%	12%		
b. The suitability of the syllabus.	Agree	Disagree		
	44%	56%		
c. Teachers' knowledge and proficiency	Agree	Disagree		
	88%	12%		
d. Teaching method	Agree	Disagree		
	100%	0%		
e. Others, please specify: <i>No other ideas</i>				
6. What do you think about the teaching English vocabulary at your school?				
a. suitable	Agree	Disagree		
	32%	68%		
b. motivating	Agree	Disagree		
	14%	86%		
c. effective	Agree	Disagree		
	22%	78%		
e. Others, please specify: <i>No other ideas</i>				
7. How do your teachers present new English vocabulary and how frequently do they use these techniques?				
a. Give meaning and explain the rules of new vocabulary in Vietnamese.	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
	98%	4%	0%	0%
b. Explain the rules of new English vocabulary in English.	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
	0%	0%	0%	100%
c. Give examples of new vocabulary	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
	0%	0%	74%	26%
d. Give situations in which the vocabulary is used	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
	0%	0%	4%	96%
e. Use the vocabulary to talk about the real situation in the classroom or Ss' life.	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
	0%	0%	4%	96%
e. Others, please specify: <i>No other ideas</i>				
8. What activities do you get involved in class to practice new vocabulary and how frequently do you do them?				
a. Do written vocabulary exercises in textbook.	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
	100%	0%	0%	0%
b. Do written vocabulary exercises in textbook and workbook.	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
	94%	6%	0%	0%
c. Do written vocabulary exercises outside textbook and workbook.	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
	0%	0%	0%	0%
d. Do vocabulary practice orally.	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
	0%	0%	0%	0%
e. Others, please specify: <i>No other ideas</i>				
9. Would you feel happy if your teacher changes the teaching methods and techniques in presenting and practicing new vocabulary?		Yes	No	
		96%	4%	
10. What changes in teaching methods and techniques do you expect from your teacher in vocabulary lessons? Please, specify:				
Games should be introduced: 88% Group- works were necessary: 22%				
Pair- works should be used: 80% Videos were useful: 12%				

As can be seen from Table 1, most students (98%) stated English vocabulary was necessary for their language learning and the majority of them (from 88% to 96%) understood the reasons why. However, a large number of students (94%) said they did not like learning English vocabulary because they found learning English vocabulary at school very boring (98%) and stressful (96%). Students' opinions on the factors that influence their attitudes towards vocabulary learning varied.

It is no surprise that all students agreed good teaching methods had great influence on students' attitudes towards vocabulary learning. 88% of the students stated that English teachers' proficiency and rich knowledge as well as the difficulty of the English vocabulary also influenced the students' attitudes towards vocabulary learning. More than half of the students (56%) disagreed that the suitability of the syllabus might influence their attitudes towards vocabulary learning. Nearly half of them (44%) agreed with this idea. None of them had any other opinions.

When being asked about their opinions about English vocabulary teaching at school, more than two halves of the students did not think that the teaching English vocabulary at their school was motivating, suitable and effective. Only 14 % of the students found that it was motivating and 22% of them thought it was effective. None of them had any other ideas.

The findings from question 7 indicated that a large number of students (98%) reported that their teachers often gave meaning and explained the use of new vocabulary in Vietnamese. 100% of the students said their teachers never explained the use of new English vocabulary in English. 74% of the students revealed that they were rarely given examples of new vocabulary. It is no surprise to know that 96% of the students said their teachers never applied the two techniques "give situations in which the vocabulary is used" and "use vocabulary to talk about the real situation in the classroom or students' life". None of them had any other opinions.

The results from question 8 reveals the activities the students got involved in class to practice new vocabulary and the frequency of doing them. All the students said they often did written vocabulary exercises in textbook. 94% of the students reported they often did written vocabulary exercises in textbook or workbook. Only 6% of the students reported they sometimes did this activity. None of the students stated they did written vocabulary exercises outside textbook and workbook or did vocabulary practice orally.

The results of questions 9 and 10 showed that 96% of the students would feel happy if the teachers changed the teaching methods and techniques in presenting and practicing new vocabulary. They suggested some ways to improve teaching methods and techniques, including games (88%), pair – works (80%), group – works (22%) and video (12%). From these figures, we realized that the students wanted their vocabulary lessons to be more exciting and relaxing.

B. The results of the post- questionnaire

The results from the post- questionnaire are illustrated in Table 2 as follows:

Table 2: The results from the post- questionnaire

I. Your feeling about word games				
(You can tick more than one option)				
Question1. Learning words through games is.....				
A. amusing 82%	B. competitive 86%	C. interesting 88%	D. useful 70%	
Others (please specify): No other ideas				
Question 2. Learning words through games make you feel.....				
A. confident 84%	B. comfortable 90%	C. motivated 86%	D. satisfied 88%	
Others (please specify): No other ideas				
Question 3. Do you like the following word games?				
(Put a tick (V) in the column you choose)				
Lessons	Games	Like	Like a bit	Dislike
Unit 3. Listening	Game 1	84%	10%	6%
Unit 4. Speaking	Chain game			
Unit 5. Reading	Game 2	82%	14%	4%
Unit 7. Speaking	Kim's game			
Unit 1. Reading	Game 3	88%	8%	4%
Unit 4. Reading	Lucky numbers			
Unit 3. Reading	Game 4	90%	8%	2%
Unit 4. Writing	Hot seat			

Unit 5. Speaking	Game 5	76%	20%	14%
Unit 7. Reading	Categories			
Unit 1. Writing	Game 6	96%	4%	0%
Unit 2. Reading	Guessing game			
Unit 2. Listening	Game 7	88%	10%	2%
Unit 6. Reading	Noughts & Crosses			
Unit 3. Writing	Game 8	66%	24%	10%
Unit 6. Listening	Net work			

II. Your belief on the effect of word games

(You are required to rate each statement on a 4-point scale by circling one of the responses (1,2,3,4) to indicate your belief about statement.

1.Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Agree 4. Strongly agree

* Question 4: Word games

No	Content	1	2	3	4
1	Word games help you remember vocabulary meaning better	6%	10%	62%	22%
2	Word games help you remember vocabulary meaning faster	8%	10%	62%	20%
3	Word games help you concentrate on the lesson	10%	10%	60%	20%
4	Word games encourage you to learn vocabulary	8%	6%	74%	12%
5	Word games bring new learning atmosphere	4%	8%	10%	78%
6	Word games give you more energy to study	8%	8%	74%	10%
7	In studying games help you improve cooperativeness	8%	4%	80%	8%
8	In studying games help you improve creativeness	8%	8%	74%	10%
9	In studying games help you improve activeness	4%	4%	84%	8%

III. This section offers you to give your opinions on word games.

(Please express yourself in your own words. Your views will be valuable to the research)

Question 5. Do you think word games should be used for lessons in the next term?

(Please tick the appropriate answer)

Yes 94%	No idea 0%	No 6%
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a) If your answer is Yes:

* Give your reasons (please specify within 5 sentences)

- new atmosphere, competitiveness, excitement, cooperativeness and effectiveness.

* In your opinion, the frequency of using games for vocabulary teaching should be:

Always 6%	Often 86%	Sometimes 8%
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b) If your answer is No, give your reason (please specify within 5 sentences)

- not useful, noisy

It was revealed from the post-questionnaire data in part I that the students appeared to reflect positively on the word games. For statement 1, the majority of the students asserted that learning vocabulary through games was amusing (82%), competitive (86%), interesting (88%), and useful (70%). The results of question 2 confirmed learning words through games made most of the students feel confident (84%), comfortable (90%), motivated (86%) and satisfied (88%).

It can be seen from the results of question 3 that there were eight

games conducted during the four months. With regard to words games, 96% of the students liked game 6. 90% enjoyed game 4. Game 3 and game 7 were loved by 88% of the students. 84% of the students were fond of game 1 and game 2. 80% of the students enjoyed game 5. 66% of the students enjoyed game 8. Only 10% of the students disliked game 8 and game 5. 6% of the students did not like game 1 and 4% were not fond of game 2 and game 3. 2% of the students were not interested in game 4 and game 7. The rest of the students (from 4% to 24%) liked these games a bit.

Based on the results of part I, it is possible to conclude that the students had a very positive feelings towards games and they did like using games in learning vocabulary.

Part II of the questionnaire which focuses on the students' belief about the effect of word games includes 9 statements. The figures suggest that Most of the students believed in the effect of word games. A large number of the students agreed studying games helped them improve activeness (84%), cooperativeness (80%) and creativeness (74%). Nearly two halves of the students (62%) thought word games helped them remember vocabulary meaning better and faster. 60% of the students believed word games helped them concentrate on the lesson. It is interesting that 78% of the students strongly agreed that word games brought them a new learning atmosphere. Only from 12% to 20% did not really see the effects of word games because they thought these games were not useful and they were noisy. Clearly, most of the students found word games effective, so they believed word games should be frequently used for lessons in the next term.

C. A comparison of the results between pre-test and post-test

The results of the post- test were compared with the results of the pre-test to see if there was improvement in students' vocabulary learning results. Chart1 summarized the results of the pre- and post- tests.

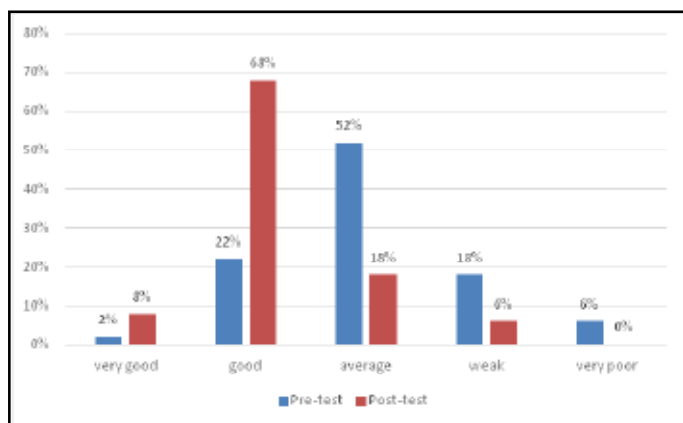


Chart 1: The results of the pre- test and post-test.

As can be seen from the chart, the number of the students getting very good mark increased from 1 in the pre-test to 4 in the post test (accounting for 2%). Only 11 students (accounting for 22%) were at good level in the pre-test, meanwhile the number of the students at this level increased sharply to 34 (accounting for 68%) in the post- test. It is interesting that in the post- test, the number of the students from the average level to very poor one went down considerably. Specifically, in the pre- test, the number of the students at the average level was the highest (26 students, 52%) while in the post-test this number decreased more than half to 18% (9 students). The number of the students at weak level reduced from 9(18%) in the pre- test to 3 in the post- test (6%). Especially, in the post-test, there was no student getting very poor marks.

In general, from the above data, it is possible to conclude that the students made considerable progress in learning. In other words, the use of games seemed to be effective in the sense that it helped the students learn vocabulary better.

V. Conclusion And Recommendations

The study helped the researcher confirm the facts that the students

were weak at remembering lexical items, which led to the bad results in the pre- test. The causes of this problem were in the way the teacher presented and practiced the lexical items as well as the way the students were involved in learning. Then, the solution-using games in teaching vocabulary – was implemented. This solution helped to improve the students' learning in many ways. First, games brought a new atmosphere with relaxation and fun to the lessons. Second, games involved friendly competition and they kept learners interested. These created the motivation for learners of English to get involved and participate actively in learning activities. Finally, games helped the students remember vocabulary better, as shown in their better results of the post- test compared with the pre-test.

In short, the role of games in teaching and learning vocabulary cannot be denied. However, to make games work effectively, to achieve the most from the word games, there should be some adjustments of their organization.

First, the teacher should improve the classroom management by certain rules while a game is organized in order to control the noise and mess from over-excited students. Another thing should be paid attention to is that the teacher should give the instructions as clearly as possible to make sure that everyone understands exactly how to play

Second, the teacher should encourage even students who are shy and slow to participate in the games. It is advisable for the teacher to group the students equally so that they can share ideas or solve their problems in the best way. Each group has both quick-minded or talkative and slow or shy number of students, so that they have more chances to show their information and ideas. Besides the teacher should also pay attention to the students who are not interested in word games to find the reasons whether it is their learning style, interest or other things. The teacher should tell them the advantages of using games. MacIntyre and Noels (1996) supplied evidence that learner's belief and attitude about language can influence their language learning. Learners with positive beliefs and attitudes towards English learning use more effort, utilize more learning strategies.

Third, it is advisable for the teacher to choose the suitable games or activities that place responsibility for action and progress upon each individual rather equally, thus members in groups cannot get rid of participating in games and completing the given tasks. William & Burden (1997) reveals that the learning process is made more dynamic and enjoyable by working with fellow- students, so it is better to promote collaborative rather than competitive learning in the class by encouraging students to share ideas.

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