

Effects of Clash of Clans Online Game on Iranian Students' Vocabulary Learning: A Case Study



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Abstract

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Online games can be effective tools in vocabulary learning. *Clash of Clans* is one of these games which is investigated in this research. Three Iranian, male pre-intermediate participants were cases of this study who played for ten to thirty minutes every day and were randomly chosen among 19 available subjects. This game consists of 60 words and about 70 sentences and the process of learning ranged from 3 to 6 months for different learners. Data collected through an interview and checklist showed that *Clash of Clans* online game helps pre-intermediate EFL learners acquire several vocabulary items without being exposed to any direct instruction and can be applied as a means of improving vocabulary among pre-intermediate EFL learners. Furthermore, the findings might be constructive for materials developers, i.e. helping them to prepare appropriate texts in terms of textual integrity and readability, in line with the needs and levels of EFL learners.

Introduction

Vocabulary is one of the basic elements of any language. To communicate properly with speakers of each language, a good number of vocabulary is required. It is claimed that knowing vocabulary is even more important than knowing the grammar of a language (Aslanabadi & Rasouli, 2013).

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Due to its fundamental role in language learning, vocabulary has been the focus of excessive studies and various methods have been applied and tested to find effective ways of vocabulary learning. Many people all over the world allocate plentiful time and energy to learning various languages especially English.

According to Harmer (1991), if language structure performs the role of a skeleton, vocabulary is its flesh and main organs. The inadequate vocabulary results in the incapability of learners to communicate (Jafari et al., 2013). Nowadays, with the emergence of computers, the Internet, and their related games, students devote a considerable part of their leisure time to working or playing with the computer or the Internet. Recently, these devices are widely applied in education and are going to make a revolution in different fields and EFL is not an exception.

However, some teachers have a negative attitude towards applying these types of games as educational tools, especially for young learners. Therefore, studying their impact on English learning seems essential. Recently, language games are regarded as one of the best ways of language teaching. Based on information processing theory, although reciting something leads to its understanding and recalling, this learning method may result in anxiety, distraction, and exhaustion (Wei et al., 2018). According to Vlachopoulos and Makri (2017), recently, online or digital games have contributed to effective learning. They also mentioned that in the realm of online instruction researching the effects of online and video games has attracted the attention of the majority of experts such as instructors, students, and game developers. Language games consist of some elements such as rules, competition, comfort, and learning (Salehi, 2017). Providing the students with a fun environment for learning is the characteristic of language games (Valipour & Assadi Aidinlou, 2014). Vocabulary acquisition seems to occur in a relaxed, motivating, and enjoyable atmosphere where learners can concentrate on new words and their contextual usage (Ashraf et al., 2014). Some aids such as games, drawings, illustrations, and humorous behaviors can make the learning environment fun and enjoyable (Ashraf et al., 2014). Games remove the emotional barriers of the learners' minds and offer them enough motivation and instant force to use the target language (Vossoughi & Clair, 1994). Games make the learners more active, autonomous, and familiar with the environment and the world (Eskandari et al., 2014).

Among different games, *Clash of Clans* has gained high popularity among Iranian teenagers. *Clash of Clans* is a freemium mobile massively multiplayer online video game made and published

by supercell. The game was developed for iPhone OS which is a mobile operating system created and developed by Apple Inc in August 2012, and Google Play for Android in October 2013. In this game, the players build their villages using the resources gained from attacking other players through the game fighting features. The main resources are gold, elixir, and dark elixir. Players can join to create clans, groups of up to fifty people who can then partake in clan wars together, donate and receive troops and talk together (Djawa, 2018). Despite studying English for several years before going to the university, most Iranian students perform poorly in English and especially in vocabulary. Their books are reading-oriented and teaching methods are often boring to them. They may also recognize a word in a written or spoken form and consider it an acquired word while they may be unable to use it appropriately.

Problem

Learning should take place in an enjoyable setting. However, due to the time limitations and curriculum requirements, it is difficult to establish such an amazing, challenging, and exciting situation in classrooms as the *Clash of Clans* online game does. Parents and curriculum developers prefer textbook-oriented syllabi and teaching through an online game is not regarded as a means of instruction in Iran. This study shows that it seems necessary for the curriculum designers and instructors to allocate some parts of their class times to play this game or perhaps some other similar online games and to try to shift the attention of the whole society from merely formal textbook-oriented instruction to a combination of game-based and textbook-based instruction.

Literature Review

In this part, previous studies related to this research will be discussed under the two main categories of theoretical and empirical backgrounds.

Theoretical Background

According to Hays, Wolf, and Wolfe (1996), vocabulary learning never stops and demands a continuous effort. This aim cannot be achieved in a short period. To get a good mastery of vocabulary, solely looking up the words in dictionaries and applying them in sentences does not suffice. One vocabulary may consist of several complex meanings; therefore, contexts of other words in sentences and paragraphs of texts are required. Not only are the student's responsibility to know the meaning of a vocabulary in a text, but also the text itself should help learners to

decipher the meaning of that word. Written contexts provide the learners with a plentiful number of vocabulary while it is not the case with oral contexts (Hays et al., 1996).

Regardless of being a first, second, or foreign language, vocabulary learning plays a crucial role in all languages. Although it is not considered a primary concern of language teaching, vocabulary learning has been the subject of abundant research, and willingness to investigate this skill has grown rapidly. Researchers, teachers, and students are seeking more appropriate ways of vocabulary learning. Nowadays, language specialists have globally accepted that lexical competence is the core of communicative competence, the ability to do successful communication (Cody & Huckins, 1997).

Vocabulary learning requires five steps: having a source for encountering new words, learning forms of new words, getting their meaning, consolidating the form and meaning of the word, and applying the word (Hatch & Brown 1995).

In explicit vocabulary learning, learners' activities are intentionally programmed to attract their attention to vocabulary. Sokmen (1997) identified several features of vocabulary learning namely:

- recognizing a large number of vocabularies
- replacing the old vocabularies with the new ones
- providing some exposure to the words
- persuading to the more profound processing
- applying imagination and other techniques
- persuading self-governing learning.

Jenkins (2012) defined explicit instruction as teaching based on an outlined aim for learners and expressing transparent unambiguous explanation of teaching materials and the offered information, whereas implicit learning means instruction in which there is no outline for such purposes. Furthermore, instead of explaining overtly, it is done rather simply.

Definition and role of games in education

It is difficult to define the term "game". All presented definitions deal with common characteristics of games: whenever an activity is amusing and entertaining it can be labeled as a game. Based on Griffiths and Clyne (1995), the word diversion implies the feature of enjoyability in a game. A game may be defined as an enjoyable diversion in which the players' skill, strength, and chance are tested. Allery (2004) describes a game as " a competitive activity with a prescribed setting,

constrained by rules and procedures. Learning results from playing the games (for example, interactions and behaviors exhibited) and not from the academic content or specialist subject matter" (p.504).

According to Shie (2003), classifying language games is not as easy as it seems. Every researcher categorizes language games differently due to their functions, language skills, teachers, and organizations.

Based on Littlewood (1981) and Hadfield (1985), there are two types of games: communicative and pre-communicative. Communicative games refer to the games with the aim of communication regardless of grammatical accuracy. Several communicative functions consisting of greeting, request, invitation, description, and narration are practiced in these games. Contrary to this type of game, the focus of pre-communicative games is on accuracy. Pre-communicative games are explicitly defined as grammar games (Steinberg, 1991; Ur, 1988) and structural games (Hadfield, 1985). Structural-based games are intended to enhance linguistic ability in terms of specific syntactic patterns.

Games provide the students with teamwork and collaboration to achieve a common goal. This collaborative work is not restricted only to group work. It increases the symbiotic relationship among the learners. Students have to find the most appropriate responses and provide justification for their choices, listen to the other members' answers, and select the best ones. Therefore, collaborative work results in a spontaneous speech about the task, better pronunciation, and comprehension, and more participation, all while the students are thinking quickly. Students practice trust and self-esteem as well. They trust their teammates and their abilities and rationale to find answers. Their self-esteem also improves as their teammates pay attention, evaluate, and rely on their responses. During the game, the learners are repeating, reinforcing, retention, and transfer (El-Shamy, 2001). As there is a particular learning goal in each game, in each student's turn the same material is practiced differently. Hence, students who do not learn in their turns, have opportunities of learning from other members' turns.

Furthermore, students themselves are responsible for their learning and practicing and it is willingly accepted by them.

Active learning and educational games

Games provide effective learning opportunities to satisfy learners' needs during an active learning process (Allery, 2004; Anderson, 1998; Thatcher, 1990). Holler (1996) investigated the relationship between recall and learning methods. His findings indicated that games can enhance learning remarkably. He found that people remember 10% of what they read, 20% of what they see, 59% of what they hear and see, 70% of what they say, and 90% of what they do. Traditional teaching was based on teachers' explanations and students used to listen and do their homework but while playing games, students are active, autonomous and energetic, and enthusiastic participants in the learning procedure. Therefore, they learn more meaningfully and recall more easily.

Online instructional games

According to Yip and Kwan (2006), online vocabulary game results in the students, long-term recall and useful learning. A combination of physical and mental work constructs a behavior to achieve the goal (Martinson & Chu, 2008). By playing games, students learn to put their acquired language into practice. In addition, it increases their flexible thinking and provides an interactive learning situation where students and their learning needs are the central concern. Learning using an action needs actively discovering, analyzing, interpreting, problem-solving, physically working, and memory and cognitive processing (Forman, 2003). Learners extract meaning while playing. Furthermore, they learn from their errors as well as the other players. Learning procedure demands attractive, easy, and funny situations. It also should be congruent with daily activities and working conditions for obtaining maximum advantages (Pivec & Dziabenko, 2004).

Empirical Background

Several empirical investigations confirm the effectiveness of using games on vocabulary learning. Aslanabadi et al. (2013), Aghlara & Hadidi Tamjid (2011), Ashraf et al, (2014), Vahdat & Rasti Behbahani (2013), Taheri (2014), and Salavati and Salehi (2016), have all conducted studies in this domain. The results of all of these studies support the hypothesis that games play a positive role in vocabulary learning.

In previous studies, the effects of games on vocabulary learning were examined. However, a specific game was not chosen and studied yet. Moreover, a longitudinal case study was not carried

out in former works. To bridge these gaps this research was carried out to answer the following research question:

Q. Does playing the Clash of Clans game significantly improve Iranian pre-intermediate EFL students' vocabulary knowledge?

Method

In this part, the design, participants, instrumentation, and procedure of the study will be discussed in detail.

Design

This qualitative study is a primary case research in nature that examines the effect of *the Clash of Clans* online game on vocabulary retention of Iranian pre-intermediate students. The researcher performs the role of a participant to collect detailed and in-depth data. The interview is also used to complete the data collection procedure.

Participants

The participants of this study including three *Clash of Clans* male players were chosen randomly from among 19 pre-intermediate EFL students in Shahreza, Iran. They were 10,11 and 13 years old. Their English proficiency ranged from pre-intermediate (for two of the cases) to a new beginner who was the 10 year- old case.

Instrumentation

Some instruments and materials were utilized in the present study. For instance, the *Clash of Clans* application was installed on the students' cell phones. A non-structured interview was also applied to evaluate the students' progress. Inside the interview, a list of 60 words and over 70 instructional sentences which were mostly about building a village, fighting, and shopping, was embedded.

Procedure

The present study was conducted in Shahreza, Isfahan, Iran. In the first stage, a series of general questions related to vocabularies used in this game was asked and students' responses were expressed orally. Then, 3 participants made a clan with the researcher and started playing the game.

Time allocated to this game varied from 10 to 30 minutes per day for all of the participants. Students did not use their dictionaries. Perhaps due to being deeply immersed in playing the game, they did not care about looking up the words in dictionaries. Every month, the same test was administered and after the passage of 3 months, 11 and 13 years old per-intermediate participants could answer all of the questions. The other participant who was a 10-year-old case could respond correctly to all of the questions after about 6 months.

Results and Discussion

To answer the research question, three randomly selected cases were studied and every month they were being tested. After one month, the number of correct responses of 13, 11, and 10-year-old cases was as follows respectively: 25, 32, and 17 words out of 60 words and 34, 31, and 19 instructional sentences out of over 70 total sentences. At the end of the second month, the results were 49, 53, 30 correct words and 56, 59, and 32 correct instructional sentences. After a passage of about three months, two of the participants who were 11 and 13 years old, could gain good mastery of these words and sentences and responded correctly to all of the questions. On rare occasions, they showed poor pronunciation however, they could answer correctly all of the questions regarding the meaning of words and sentences. Then, they were excluded and the research continued with the 10-year-old case whose English knowledge was very limited. After four months, the number of correct words and instructional sentences was 50 and 59. After five months, 58 and 66, and after six months, despite showing mispronunciation on some occasions from the start to the end of the research, he could grasp the meaning of all of the words and sentences. As mentioned earlier, Chun –Wang Wei et al., (2012) pointed out that understanding through recitation results in distraction, exhaustion, and anxiety, and as in this study vocabulary learning was accompanied by an appealing game and took place without recitation, learners were not distracted, exhausted or anxious at all; instead, they enjoyed the process of learning. Therefore, this study is in line with the claim of Chun- Wang Wei et al., (2018). The obtained result also confirms the findings of Vlachopoulos and Makri (2017) that considered digital and online games as effective and appealing learning tools. The result is also congruent with the achievements of Holler (1996) who indicated that people remember 10% of what they read, 20% of what they see, 59% of what they hear and see, 70% of what they say, and 90% of what they do. It also supports

the findings of Aslanabadi et al. (2013), Aghlara and Hadidi Tamjid (2011), Salavati and Salehi (2016), Vahdat and Rasti Behbahani (2013), and Taheri (2014) who regarded games as beneficial factors in vocabulary learning. It is also in line with the results of Yip and Kwan (2006), and Ashraf et al. (2014) that examined specifically online games and stated that they are interactive and motivating aids for vocabulary learning.

Conclusion

This study indicates that *Clash of Clans* online games can contribute to vocabulary learning. Participants had to decipher the meaning of words and sentences from the context to survive and win the game. They learned subconsciously and in an enjoyable situation which resulted in learning the meaning of almost all of the words and sentences. The more they learn the words, the better they can play this game; therefore, the *Clash of Clans* online game can be utilized as an English vocabulary learning tool. The present research has some shortcomings as well. As it is a case study and only 3 participants were studied, the results cannot be generalizable. The other pitfall is the gender of the participants to the effect that only male students were observed. Despite these limitations, this game can help the students to enrich their vocabulary knowledge without any formal instruction. Probably, it can contribute to the enhancement of some other skills such as grammar; therefore, further research can be done on this game. Furthermore, other online English games with different themes seem to be appropriate choices for doing research.

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