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The use of vocabulary games in the ESP classroom

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Abstract. Studies show that engaging students with game-based activities increases their involvement and leads to better language acquisition. Students who associate learning with playing games and having fun are more relaxed, at the same time being more involved and competitive. Therefore, language games can prove to be a very useful tool in teaching vocabulary effectively in ESP. They can be used as warm-up activities or time fillers, as review exercises or even as an assessment tool. The present paper discusses a series of fun activities aimed at improving students' vocabulary mastery, their spelling skills, inference making and morphology knowledge, such as: alphabet and spelling games, fun matching activities, concentration and memory games, vocabulary review games, etc. These activities advocate for a change in the teaching techniques, which could provide some variety and turn standard textbook activities into playful tasks meant to revive the ESP classroom and improve learners' vocabulary and fluency.

Keywords: ESP, vocabulary games, vocabulary acquisition, Maritime English

1. Introduction

Over the last decades, linguistic research has given more and more attention to vocabulary in second-language acquisition. That is how, what was once disregarded became indispensable to the process of learning a foreign language. As researchers nowadays believe, vocabulary has a crucial role in deepening English mastery and improving the four language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening.[1] In ESP learning, vocabulary is particularly significant, and should become the first priority for the language teacher, as one of the most difficult and important tasks that the ESP learner is faced with.

When defining vocabulary, Graves refers to the entire stock of words belonging to a branch of knowledge or known by an individual. (Graves 48-89) In the case of ESP, we could say that vocabulary is both the terminology of a particular field and the number of terms known by an individual. For instance, Maritime English, like any other specialised language, is quite distinct from General English, since it abounds in specialized technical terms, specific phrases and set structures, some of which are unfamiliar even to the native speaker. In order to become a successful Maritime Officer, and to be able to communicate in real work related situations, learners must first master a substantial lexical basis pertaining to the maritime and nautical fields so that they might one day be able to use these structures productively in onboard communication. Good specific vocabulary knowledge may therefore be one of the best guarantees of success in the future career of a Maritime Officer.

Vocabulary acquisition arguably takes place in different ways. Two main approaches stand out: incidental vocabulary acquisition, which takes place, from context, through unintentional exposure to written or oral materials; and intentional vocabulary acquisition, that is the deliberate learning of new words by means of various techniques meant to commit the lexical information in the memory of the learner. We believe that ESP vocabulary learning is in many ways a by-product of intentional vocabulary acquisition, although incidental vocabulary acquisition has its many advantages and cannot therefore be ignored.

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[1] See McCarthy (1988), Berne, Blachowicz (2008), Thornbury (2002).

Since language competence is related to language comprehension and the richness of vocabulary (Nation 1990), in learning ESP, intentional vocabulary acquisition is of paramount importance to one's professional success. That is why, in order to satisfy the ESP learners' needs, teachers need to adapt and adjust teaching methods and strategies so that students effectively acquire specific lexical items. In traditional lexical pedagogy, teachers use and organise class activity around specialized texts, followed by comprehension and vocabulary practice exercises, following the PPP model – Presentation, Practice, Performance. (Tomlinson ix-xviii) However, more and more research studies argue that vocabulary retention can be achieved more easily if vocabulary practice implies educational games such as puzzles, board games, card games or adapted TV games.[2] Using games for educational purposes is related to the constructivist learning theory. The ensuing situated learning and experiential learning theories promote the ideas of learning in a significant context, alongside social interaction and collaboration (Anderson et. al. 5-11), and learning by doing (Kolb 84). The benefits of these approaches can be significant. Games appeal to learners, keeping them more focused in a pleasant learning atmosphere that is bound to stimulate creativity and self-expression.[3]

The following activities are part of what we believe to be a successful strategy of increasing motivation and building up specialized vocabulary in ESP learners. Using games for effective vocabulary teaching helps students actively enlarge their knowledge of specialized vocabulary, in the same time making the learning process more appealing. Reference will be made to the maritime field, although all the activities mentioned hereon can be successfully applied to various fields.

2. Alphabet and Spelling Games

2.1. The A to Z Game
Alphabet and Spelling Games are fun vocabulary activities designed to infuse energy into the ESP classroom. They represent the perfect way to activate vocabulary, improve learners' orthography and morphology while having a bit of fun.

In the *A to Z Game,* the teacher writes the letters of the alphabet in columns drawn on the board (see table below). The class can be divided in pairs or small groups. Each team nominates a writer who comes to the front and writes on the board terms related to a given topic. Each writer uses a different colour to write on the board, so that answers are clearly distinguishable. The nominated students must race to write an appropriate maritime term next to each letter, while teammates help by shouting out suggestions and giving spelling tips. For each letter, only one term can be written, so the first student to start writing claims the letter. After a certain time limit, or when all the letters have been used, the teacher adds up the score, giving a point for every correct term each team has written. In case of any spelling mistakes, the correct spelling is elicited from the class.

Ground Tackle			
A	B	Chain grab	D
E	F	G	H
I	J	K	L
Mooring	N	O	Pelican hook
Q	R	S	T
U	V	Windlass	X
Y	Z		

2.2. The Crossword Puzzle

Given its popularity and adaptability, the crossword puzzle can be effectively used to teach vocabulary in the ESP classroom. The key to the success of crosswords is that they launch a motivating challenge for language learners, and thus vocabulary study is made fun and attractive. (Bressan 93-95) Crosswords can be designed to cover any specific topic. Moreover, they aim at improving students' vocabulary mastery, their spelling skills, inference making and morphology knowledge.

We have learnt that direct-definition clues, especially synonymic, definitory, and descriptive, work best with ESP crosswords. For practical reasons, cryptic clues should be avoided. On the following page, we illustrate a crossword activity based on Maritime English terms related to ship directions.

Across

2. directly off either side of the ship

3. very high, such as on a mast

6. in a lee direction

11. behind the stern

Down

1. further to the rear

4. moving in a lee direction

5. the left side of the ship

7. across the ship from the starboard to the port side

13. the right side of the ship	8. from the bow to the stern
14. toward the bow of the ship	9. away from the wind
15. in the centre of the ship	10. near the ship
16. to the back of the ship	12. under

2.3. The Categories Game

To focus on several topics, especially at revision time, the *A to Z Game* can be adapted so that instead of letters the table contain only the categories as table headings. In the *Categories Game*, each team is given a blank sheet of paper on which to copy the category layout on the board. (See table below) The teacher chooses a letter of the alphabet, and students write down, as quickly as possible, a term beginning with that letter under the appropriate category on their answer sheet. For instance, if the category headings include maritime topics, such as: *Ship Structure, Ship Dimensions, Directions, Deck Fittings,* and the letter chosen is *B*, teams might write the terms: *bulkhead, beam, below, bollard* in the appropriate categories. The first team to find words for each category shouts *Stop,* and the game comes to a halt until the teacher checks the answers and awards points to the first team to finish and then to the other teams. The team with the most points after a number of rounds wins.

Ship Structure	Ship Dimensions	Directions	Deck Fittings
bulkhead	beam	below	bollard

3. Matching activities

Although matching exercises might not seem very compelling at first glance, a change in the teaching techniques could provide some variety and turn them into playful tasks meant to revive the ESP classroom. For example, a standard textbook exercise in which students are asked to match the terms with the definitions could be easily turned into an engaging task if the teacher cuts the handout in half so that the students are left only with the terms. In pairs or small groups, students should try to give as many definitions as possible to the given terms, in a specific amount of time (e.g. 5 minutes). For the next step of the activity, the teacher reveals the other half of the exercise and students try to solve the matching exercise, all the while checking their own definitions. In addition, coloured cut-ups (one colour for the terms, and another one for the definitions) could be used to make the activity more interesting. The slices of paper are then shuffled and students are asked to find suitable definitions to match a set of specialized terms.

Matching exercises can also be used to test students' grammar knowledge, alongside vocabulary. For instance, the purpose of the following activity is to test learners' knowledge of phrasal verbs commonly used in maritime English. The teacher designs two piles of paper slips, one with the verbs (*single, double, bend, stand, heave, steer, bring*, etc.), and the other one with the prepositions (e.g. *up, on, by, for, off, out*, etc.). Students are divided into small groups, and then take turns in turning over a slip from each pile. If the designated student thinks that the resulting combination is a valid phrasal verb, then he/she must use it in a SMCP in order to win a point for the team. The game continues until there are no more slips left. For example, the student might draw *bring* and *up*, which is a valid phrasal verb, and might use it in a sentence such as *Are you brought up?* (*Are you at anchor?*)

hold	up
heave	on
bring	on
stand	up
bend	by
pay	up

double	off
single	by
switch	up
stand	out

Other possible answers for the given verbs and prepositions could include:
stand by: Stand by to heave up.
heave up: Heave up the port cable.
bring up: Are you brought up?
hold on: Hold on starboard cable
switch off: Switch off anchor light.
heave up: Stand by to heave up
*pay out*: The anchor chain is paid out.
bend on: Bend on the head rope.
double up: Double up lines fore and aft.
single up: Single up springs fore and aft.

3.1. Word Clouds
In order to heighten students' awareness of maritime collocations and improve their ability to use set structures in maritime communication, word clouds can prove to be efficient. In the example given, students need to create collocations related to mooring ropes using the words given in the wordle. As a follow-up activity, they might be asked to use the ensuing structures (*spring forward, spring aft, heaving line, headline, stern line, breast line, messenger line, bow quarter lead, port quarter lead*) in a corresponding standard marine communication phrase.

quarter
forward head
port aft messenger
line lead
bow breast
stern spring
heaving
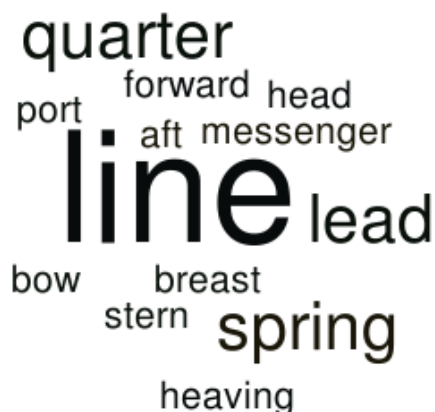
4. Concentration and memory games

4.1. Hot Potato
Hot Potato is a simple and exciting game that can be used to review vocabulary. In order to proceed, the teacher needs a "potato" (usually a ball), that students can easily pass around, and a timer. Standing in a circle, students pass the "potato" around the class, while revising specialized terms. To begin, the teacher throws the "potato" to one of the students and gives a Romanian term or phrase. The student that catches the ball has 5 seconds to give an English equivalent, or he/she is out of the game. If the answer is correct, the student has another 5 seconds to think of a Romanian term and throw the potato at someone else. If the answer is wrong or if the student takes longer than 5 seconds to answer, he/she is out of the game, and is asked to sit down. The last student standing wins the game. According to students' level, a glossary may be used to prompt students thinking about the target vocabulary.

4.2. Scatter Sheets
Scatter Sheets is a memory activity that can be used for vocabulary review at the end of a lesson. Students are given a worksheet comprising scattered terms pertaining to a particular topic. After scanning the terms, they

need to turn the page and try to solve a fill-in exercise, in which they have to use the words on the previous page. The teacher should discourage students from peeking at the scatter sheet.

TOWING	Fill in the gaps with one of the words on the opposite page:

tug-boat   tow-lines
 	
    pilot
             cast off
 	
steel wire   towed
 	
          fast
 	
letter signals
                     flags
 	
             hawsers
	1. A ... is sometimes required to manoeuvre a ship into the dock.
	2. Big ships require big ... .
	3. Most modern vessels are provided with ... tow-lines of sufficient length.
	4. It is advisable to use wire ... connected with a good length of manila rope.
	5. The towing and ... vessels communicate with each other to coordinate their actions.
	6. Usually they signal with the International Code, using single ... .
	7. Ships communicate with each other and with shore in a number of ways: by radio, by ... , by light and sound signals and by semaphore.
	8. Signal "G" means: "I require a ...".
	9. When used between towing and towed vessels, the signal "G" means: "... the towing hawser".
	10. The signal "A" signifies: "The towing hawser is ...".

5. Vocabulary review games

5.1. The Jeopardy Game

Jeopardy is a more complex game, but an excellent way to review vocabulary. It can be used successfully in the ESP classroom to expand students' maritime vocabulary, and provide them with more communicative practice, or to just liven up the lesson. Jeopardy is highly suitable for review purposes since it can cover several topics at once. As with most English fun activities and games, Jeopardy may be customized and the topics changed or supplemented according to students' needs. There are many ways to play the Jeopardy game in an ESP classroom. The teacher may search the web to get more inspiration, including downloadable templates, or interactive online templates, which can be used in a computer-based classroom.

A Jeopardy game commonly comprises five question categories, each with five questions ranging from easy ($100) to difficult ($500). The teacher draws a 5 x 5 Jeopardy grid on the board as in the example below. In teams of four, students take turns in choosing a category and a difficulty level from $100 to $500. The teacher reads out the corresponding question. If the answer is correct, the team gets one point, if the answer is incorrect, the question stays in the game for a later round. The game continues with the next team and so on, until all questions have been answered or after a set amount of rounds.

Anchoring	Mooring	Towing	Propulsion	Pilotage
$100	$100	$100	$100	$100
$200	$200	$200	$200	$200
$300	$300	$300	$300	$300

$400	$400	$400	$400	$400
$500	$500	$500	$500	$500

The items may contain simple term translations (e.g. *a guverna / to steer*), SMCP translations (e.g. *Cîte chei de lanţ mai sunt de adus la post? / How many shackles are left to come in?*), or open questions related to the content of the lesson (*How is the ship's head brought up in a strong wind?*)

5.2. The Taboo Game

The Taboo game is the perfect way to improve learners' fluency in Maritime English by building up vocabulary and improving their speaking and listening skills. It is highly suitable for collective end of term revision.

On separate small squares of paper, the teacher writes terms related to the study unit(s), then folds up each square and puts them in a box or a hat. The students are arranged into groups of four. Each group assigns a team member who comes to the front of the class, draws a piece of paper from the box, and tries to describe the term to his team mates, without actually saying the word or using their native language. If the word is guessed, then it is put aside and the team gets a point. If not, the word goes back into the hat and the player draws another one. After 60 seconds, the teacher sounds a buzzer and counts the number of correct guesses. The game continues until every team and team member has taken a turn in the describing role.

In a variant of the taboo game, the students can be divided in groups of five or six. Each team will designate a person who will have to sit on the "hot seat". The teacher stands behind the student in the "hot seat" and holds up a piece of paper on which a term is written. Teams have only one minute to get their hot-seat member to say the word on the paper, by using any hints, explanations or definitions they can think of, without actually saying the term. Teams take turns in designating their hot-seat members until everyone has a go.

Also, instead of slips of paper, the teacher might use pictures to help students practise describing objects and instruments. In this case, the teacher needs a tablet or a smartphone and a set of 10 to 20 preloaded pictures of objects based around the topic of the lesson. The students are seated in a circle while the tablet will be passed around the group. The student holding the tablet must swipe to a picture and describe an object, either in terms of its physical appearance or its function, but should avoid naming the object. The other students must try to identify it from the description given. If they guess correctly, the picture may be shown to the class to confirm the guess. The tablet is then passed to another student and so on. If no one guesses the answer, the other students may ask questions to get relevant information.

6. Conclusions

ESP vocabulary learning is vital to the aquisition of language proficiency and professional competence. The specificity of the ESP lexis demands a more purposeful teaching approach that implies engaging students in vocabulary activities aimed at the target vocabulary.

In planning their teaching strategy of how to meet the specific needs of the learners, to stimulate practice or reactivation of specialized vocabulary, educators may also use games and fun activities, as a strategy to better commit information to the memory of the learners, in a challenging way. Alphabet and spelling games raise morphology awareness in students, as an indicator of not only vocabulary development , but also of enhanced reading comprehension and writing skills. Matching activities provide students with the opportunity to store, organize or retrieve information in accordance with the lesson topic. Concentration and memory games, as well as the more complex review games are especially beneficial to learners, in the sense that they encourage interaction and competitive cooperation, along with spontaneity and creativity.

In addition, group-work and the learning-by-doing approach lead to higher levels of active engagement on the part of the learner, a process which naturally leads to higher levels of information retention.

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