



# CLASSROOM RESEARCH

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## **The impact of using linguistics games to build productive written vocabulary among young EFL learners**

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### **Abstract**

The teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Chile has been a subject that is attracting interest due to the fact that most EFL teachers are trained to teach at secondary levels, presenting some challenges when teaching young learners at elementary stages due to their insufficient preparation concerning effective methods to foster the development of productive language skills. This action research aims to determine the influence of linguistic games in developing productive written vocabulary acquisition of 4th grade EFL learners from a subsidized primary school in the south of Chile. To do so, a vocabulary test was carried out to identify students' background knowledge concerning their already acquired written productive vocabulary. Then, specific linguistic games were implemented for ten classes related to the topics seen in the third term of the school year. A second test was taken to compare results. Finally, a modified self-assessment questionnaire was applied to determine their attitudes towards the implementation of linguistic games. The findings indicated that linguistic games aided learners not only in improving their productive written vocabulary skills, but also speaking skills. Those implications shed light on the procedures when using linguistic games and their outcomes in the EFL classroom, which other teachers, in similar contexts, may find beneficial.

## Introduction

Teaching English at the primary level has been a growing focus in the field of foreign language education (Al Malihi, 2015; Muñoz, 2017; Nguyen, 2018), promoting the spreading of English as one of the most popular foreign languages (Castro, 2018; Emery, 2018). Regardless of the scarce research to support early foreign language learning (Copland & Garton, 2014), the execution of such programs is based on the grounds of taking advantage of learners' favorable attitudes (Muñoz, 2017), providing a language proficiency underpinning and deepening their intercultural competences (Al Malihi, 2015).

The Chilean Ministry of Education (MINEDUC, 2012) has declared that learning a foreign language at an early stage allows continual input exposure and socio-cultural awareness. In spite of promoting the development of these key elements in language acquisition, the teaching of English has been implemented from first to fourth grade at elementary levels through a voluntary curricular proposal, enabling schools to determine the inclusion of English in their own curriculum (Barahona, 2016). Hence, vocabulary acts as a basis for the first concrete access to language acquisition (Nation, 2001) and unifier of receptive and productive skills (Azar, 2012). Therefore, vocabulary instruction for young learners must not only contemplate words and amount of lexicon, but also the manner of teaching (Siyanova-Chanturia & Webb, 2016).

One of the suggested methods to respond to this demand has been games. Games may influence learners' motivation and additionally, permit the reinforcement and acquisition of language contents in a carefree environment (Chou, 2012; Wang et al., 2011). In the English National Framework, the employment of games is proposed to take advantage of young learners' characteristics in terms of motivation and willingness (MINEDUC, 2012). Nevertheless, there is a lack of parameters concerning how games should be implemented and which approaches they respond to.

The present action research aims to determine the impact of using linguistic games to build productive written vocabulary in fourth grade EFL learners and their attitudes towards linguistic games. The results pretend to shed light on procedures to orient novice elementary EFL teachers in the implementation of linguistic games to conform with the Chilean curricula standards and above all, to contribute to the field of teaching English to young EFL learners in Chile.



## **Literature Review**

### ***Young learners***

Young learners are children between the ages of five and twelve (Emery, 2018; Nguyen, 2018). Young learners are active learners and their metalanguage is in development (Cameron, 2005). They comprehend words by the provision of their concrete meaning (Agustín-Llach & Gómez, 2007) and collect the available surrounding information (Harmer, 2001). Other characteristics are young learners have limited concentration span (Saleh & Ahmed Althaqafi, 2022) and lose interest rapidly (Shin & Crandall, 2014). Furthermore, young learners engage in group activities (Bakhsh, 2016) and they are less concerned with making mistakes (Pinter, 2017).

### ***Vocabulary***

A critical element in second language or foreign language acquisition is vocabulary (Agustín-Llach & Canga Alonso, 2016; Saleh & Ahmed Althaqafi, 2022; Tragant et al., 2016). Consequently, Asyiah (2017) and Azar (2012) state that vocabulary serves as a bridge to connect the receptive and productive language skills enabling the language communication process.

Regarding lexical acquisition, it varies according to the context input. As in foreign language learning contexts, the exposure to input is limited, and the process of vocabulary acquisition is seen as “slow and uneven” (Siyanova-Chanturia & Webb, 2016, p.229). Additionally, another aspect to consider is the age factor. Hellman (2018) considers children are better learners due to their literacy skills’ development in their mother tongue and increased explicit understanding processes. These two factors lead to shaping the process of teaching vocabulary which includes some relevant issues such as exposure. Nation (1990) argues that learners need to encounter vocabulary constantly for its retention. The second is meaning. Piaget characterizes young learners between the ages of 7 and 11 as being concrete thinkers (Shin & Crandall, 2014). In this respect, explicit presentation of vocabulary meaning leads to its appropriate understanding (Agustín-Llach & Gómez, 2007). The third is the lexicon amount. Siyanova-Chanturia and Webb (2016) mention vocabulary teaching requires to decide the word amount necessary to comprehend and produce the language. Lastly, the role of the mother tongue. Khetaguri et al. (2016) conclude that a learner's mother tongue serves as an aid to fill in knowledge gaps in the foreign language.

### ***Writing***

Brown (2007) refers to writing as a productive skill whose components have been organized into micro and macro skills. The micro skills relate to accuracy in terms of spelling and word patterns principally. On the other hand, the macro skills relate to fluency in terms of communicative functions. Concerning the teaching of writing, Shin and Crandall (2014) describe two writing approaches. The product-based approach is a controlled approach based on the grounds of writing by strengthening accuracy elements of language, while the process-based approach focuses on fluency elements of language such as discourse organization encouraging an autonomous learning experience by going through different stages of the writing process from brainstorming to publishing. Although the last approach takes more time (Harmer, 2001) because of the writing stages, both are necessary to acquire writing skills.

### ***Games***

The benefits of games applied in the second or foreign language teaching field are described by many authors. For instance, games foster a suitable atmosphere for language learning diminishing learners' anxiety (Masri & Najar, 2014; Sangia, 2022; Wang et al., 2011). Also, games can be seen as a motivating (Sangia, 2022), fun (Saleh & Ahmed Althaqafi, 2022), and challenging (Birova, 2016) resource adding variety to the lesson (Masri & Najar, 2014). Furthermore, games encourage learners to take a major role in their learning process (Bakhsh, 2016), foster cooperative work (Azar, 2012); and provide receptive and productive language skills practice (Bakhsh, 2016).

Nevertheless, Wang et al. (2011) reported that carrying out games may produce negative effects on learners. The authors mention that learners with a low English level may feel peer pressure about winning. Consequently, the researchers concluded that teachers should implement a diversity of cooperative games to address that issue.

Regarding the teachers' perspective, Gaudart (1999) reported that teachers showed reluctance towards games because they were not taught using that method avoiding their use. Nonetheless, Birova (2016) who investigated teachers' attitudes towards the use of games for teaching, revealed that teachers displayed positive attitudes towards the use of games; however, they indicated the lack of game activities in textbooks produced games' implementation sporadically.

For purposes of this action research, games are defined as learning activities with a clear learning objective and procedures. Moreover, the games implemented in this investigation are linguistic games that focus on "accuracy" (Hadfield, 1998, p.4).

## **Methodology**

This study has a mixed-method approach with an action research design. The quantitative methodology was considered to compare the results from the pre-test , post-test , and the adapted self-assessment smiley face questionnaire with the Likert scale by using SPSS. In addition, qualitative methodology was considered to analyze the field notes.

## ***Research questions***

The aim of this action research was to determine the impact of using linguistic games to build productive written vocabulary among young learners, addressing the following questions:

- a.What is the written productive vocabulary level of the participants prior to the intervention?
- b.What is the influence of linguistic games on written productive vocabulary acquisition?
- c.What attitudes did participants have regarding the implementation of linguistic games?

## ***Participants***

The participants for this study were a convenience sample of 25 fourth-grade EFL learners between the ages of nine and ten (16 girls and 9 boys). This class was selected to be part of this action research because the teacher/researcher was the head teacher and had background information about the learners' parents. Concerning their English level, the participants should have an A1 level (basic user) according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) established in the Chilean English National Framework. The context for the study was in a subsidized school in southern Chile. Their exposure to English took place principally during class time held 180 minutes a week regularly. The initial sample was 31 learners; however, 6 participants missed some classes producing a reduction in the research sample to 25 which corresponded to participants who answered the pre-test , post-test , and self-assessment smiley face questionnaire.

## ***Instruments***

Three instruments were applied to fulfill the objectives of this research. A pre-test containing 20 words concerning the topics of sports (7 words), health (7 words), and body parts (6 words) concepts previously reviewed in class. Additionally, a post-test containing 20 words related to the topics of weather (12 words), seasons (4 words), and natural disasters (4 words). The writing tasks of both tests were taken from Hughes (2003), concerning productive vocabulary assessment, and Cambridge Young Learner English Tests (YLE): Starter level, specifically parts three and four of the reading/writing section.

The first part was concerned with writing the correct concept for each illustration using the first letter as a clue. The second part was spelling where learners had to write the correct letters for each picture. Lastly, the third part dealt with writing the provided words in a specific context. Finally, an adapted self-assessment questionnaire from Klaewharn et al. (2017) with Likert scale was administered. This instrument was written in Spanish containing ten statements in which learners had to color a smiley face according to their attitudes. The “very happy face” meant they totally agreed with the game method. The “happy face” meant the learners were satisfied, while the “straight face” meant they were neutral. The “sad face” meant the learners were dissatisfied.

### ***Procedure***

Before the implementation of the linguistic games method, written consent letters were signed by the school’s principal and parents authorizing learners’ participation. During the parent-teacher meeting, the teacher/researcher explained the parameters of the action research by distributing an information sheet about the aim of the study, data protection, and contact address. After gathering the consent letters and the school’s permission, the pre-test was applied based on Hughes (2003) and the YLE reading and writing test.

During the following months, the English classes were held three times a week lasting 90 minutes each. A total of 20 words were selected to be covered through games and written tasks related to the topics of weather (12 words), seasons (4 words), and natural disasters (4 words). The lessons began with a game. The teacher explained the rules of the game in Spanish. The implemented games were taken from Bakhsh (2016). Those were Hot Potatoes (Lessons 7 and 9), Bingo (Lessons 1 and 2), Memory Challenge (Lessons 4 and 6), Pictionary (Lessons 3 and 8), and Last One Standing (Lessons 5 and 10). When games were in teams, the grouping process was based on their seating arrangement. While the participants were part of the games, the teacher took field notes. Afterwards, the participants carried out written vocabulary tasks designed for their level such as writing the correct concepts for pictures, a weather report, what was heard from a listening audio, matching, and describing the weather for some Chilean cities.

After the ten lessons, the post-test was applied at the end of the intervention. The instrument tested the 20 words reviewed in class. The test contained three parts based on Hughes (2003) and the YLE reading and writing test. Then, in the same class, the participants answered the modified self-assessment smiley face questionnaire with the Likert scale. Finally, the results were later analyzed to measure the impact.



### ***Data analysis***

The collected data from the pre-test, post-test, and self-assessment questionnaire were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to identify written vocabulary knowledge differences at the beginning and end of the treatment as well as to determine the learners' attitudes toward the game method.

### ***Results***

The quantitative findings from the pre-test, post-test, and self-assessment questionnaire analyzed using SPSS, were displayed according to each specific research question.

#### *What is the written productive vocabulary level of participants prior to the intervention?*

The pre-test consisted of three parts with a total score of 20 points. Each part had a different score. Part one had a total score of six points, and parts two and three had a total score of seven points each. Each answer was scored with a one (right answer) and a zero (wrong answer).

#### *Part 1*

This part corresponds to the body vocabulary. The students' highest scores concentrated on questions one and two. In the first question, 15 students correctly wrote "eye" whereas 9 students correctly wrote the second word "nose". On the other hand, the students' lowest scores concentrated on questions three "ear", four "leg", and five "arm" in which students got similar results for correct answers. The lowest scores were obtained in question six as all the students answered incorrectly the word "shoulder" (Table 1).

#### *Part 2*

This part was related to sports. The highest scores corresponded to question thirteen "karate" in which 22 students answered correctly. Moreover, questions nine and ten obtained high scores. The first word "tennis" was spelled correctly by 15 students whereas the second word "soccer" by 18 students. However, the lowest scores corresponded to question seven as 17 students wrote incorrectly "basketball", question 8 in which 20 students misspelled "baseball" and question eleven as 17 students misspelled "volleyball". The results of question twelve were similar as 12 students answered correctly whereas 13 students did not (Table 1).



### Part 3

The topic was health. The 25 participants answered incorrectly in this part of the test (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Pre-test results*

	Part 1. Body					Part 2. Sports					Part 3. Health									
Q	O	T	T	F	F	S	S	E	N	T	E	T	T	F	F	S	S	E	N	T
ue	n	w	h	o	i	i	e	i	i	e	l	w	h	o	i	i	e	i	i	w
sti	e	o	r	u	v	x	v	g	n	n	e	e	i	u	f	x	v	g	n	e
on			e	r	e		e	h	e		v	l	r	r	t	t	e	h	e	n
			e				n	t			e	v	t	t	e	e	n	t	t	t
											n	e	e	e	e	e	t	e	e	y
													e	e	n	n	e	e	e	
													n	n			e	n	n	
																	n			
RA	15	9	3	3	2	0	8	5	15	8	8	12	22	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
WA	10	16	22	22	23	25	17	20	10	17	17	13	3	25	25	25	25	25	25	25

**Note:** RA= right answers WA= wrong answers

*What is the influence of linguistic games on written productive vocabulary acquisition?*

The post-test consisted of three parts with a total score of 20 points. Each part and answers had the same score as the pre-test .

### Part 1

The topic of this part was weather. The highest scores corresponded to questions one and three. The first word tested was “sunny” which was written correctly by 21 students whereas the third word “stormy” was written correctly by 22 students. On the other hand, students in questions two “snowy”, five “hailing” and six “windy” obtained similar scores. Question four, which tested the word “foggy”, was the lowest with 10 students answering correctly (Table 2).

### Part 2

The topics of this part were natural disasters and seasons. The highest scores focused on questions eleven, twelve, and thirteen. The first question tested the word “spring” which 18 students answered correctly. The second question was “fall” which 22 students answered and the third question “summer” which 18 students answered correctly. Once again, in questions seven, eight, and nine students got similar results. Question ten “wildfire” got the lowest scores of right answers as 17 students misspelled the word (Table 2).

### Part 3

The topic of this part was a mixture of weather, natural disasters, and seasons. This part got the lowest scores in the post-test . The highest scores were in questions seventeen and eighteen. The first word “thunderstorms” was answered correctly by 7 students and the second word “cloudy” was answered correctly by 11 students. Furthermore, in questions fifteen “hot”, sixteen “winter”, nineteen “cloudy”, and twenty “wet” students got similar results. The lowest scores concentrated on question fourteen which tested the word “rain” in which there were no right answers (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Post-test results*

Q101 Test Results																				
Part 1. Weather							Part 2. Seasons and natural disasters							Part 3. Weather, seasons and natural disasters						
Question	On	Tw	Th	Fr	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Th	Th	Fri	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Th	Th
	e	o	r	u	v	x	v	g	n	n	e	e	i	u	f	x	v	g	n	e
			e	r	e		e	h	e		v	l	r	r	t	t	e	h	e	n
			e				n	t			e	v	t	t	e	e	n	t	t	t
											n	e	e	e	e	e	t	e	e	y
													e	e	n	n	e	e	e	
													n	n			e	n	n	
																	n			
RA	21	14	22	15	14	13	9	10	14	8	18	22	18	0	4	2	7	11	3	5
WA	4	11	3	10	11	12	16	15	11	17	7	3	7	25	21	23	18	14	22	20

**Note:** RA= right answers WA= wrong answers

After the analysis of the pre-test and post-test results, the linguistic games method showed significant results ( $p=0.0002$ ). Additionally, the mean of the post-test was 9.20 (Table 3). Consequently, the impact of games on learners’ writing productive vocabulary was positive.

**Table 3***Pre-test and post-test results*

	Minimum	Maximum	Total score	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test_results	.00	11	20	4.80	3.02
Post-test_results	1.00	18	20	9.20	4.61
Valid N (listwise)	25				

*What attitudes did participants have regarding the implementation of linguistic games?*

The questionnaire had a total of 10 statements with smiley face questions. The values for each smiley face were 4 (very happy face), 3 (happy face), 2 (straight face), and 1(sad face). The students' attitudes toward games in the classes were positive. The highest responses concerned questions four (mean= 3.72) related to the aid that games provide for recalling vocabulary, and nine (mean=3.80) related to the statement of positive feelings experienced during games. On the other hand, the lowest responses were focused on question six related to how interesting the games were (mean=3.36), and question eight related to the difficulty of the games' procedures (mean=3.32) (Table 4).

**Table 4***Self-assessment questionnaire results*

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Question one	2	4	3.56	.71
Question two	1	4	3.20	.95
Question three	1	4	3.56	.76
Question four	2	4	3.72	.61
Question five	2	4	3.68	.62
Question six	1	4	3.36	1.03
Question seven	1	4	3.60	.91
Question eight	1	4	3.32	1.06
Question nine	2	4	3.80	.50
Question ten	1	4	3.68	.74
Valid N (listwise)	25			



## Discussion

The data analysis of the pre-test and post-test revealed the difficulties faced by the students concerning the vocabulary related to the body, sports, and health. This could be due to the little reinforcement made in previous years and weak association with other word families in a meaningful way. On the other hand, the vocabulary related to weather, seasons, and natural disasters taught with games made a significant impact because the students identified and spelled the written vocabulary more efficiently not only in the post-test but also in writing tasks during classes. Games provide a pleasant setting that furthers language learning by exposition to other means to experience words, activating the process of vocabulary recall and retention (Masri & Najar, 2014).

Concerning the data collection from the field notes during the implementation of games, the results vary around four main findings. The first was students' willingness. When students were informed about the game method to be carried out, the students showed a favorable reception as they had never played games in English classes previously. The games which students seemed to enjoy the most were "bingo" and "the last one standing" since they mastered the rules and vocabulary which made them feel confident, including the students with low grades. This fact is supported by Taheri (2014) who mentions the engagement of weak learners experienced by being part of games and how this favors their affective dimension. Furthermore, the game "memory challenge" did not show the same reaction as the other two. This was because students did not understand the rules. In this sense, that game was changed for another renamed "vocabulary race" in which students, grouping by establishing a turn-taking order, listened to the word in Spanish and had to run by grabbing a ball and saying the word in English. The students seemed to enjoy that game because it was carried out outside the classroom, and they showed enthusiasm every time the game was played, constantly demanding it. The second was collaboration. Despite authors mentioning how games promote a collaborative atmosphere (Azar, 2012; Saleh & Ahmed Althaqafi, 2022), the participants of this action research preferred individual games rather than in teams. This is due to the fact students displayed a preference for playing "bingo", "the last one standing" and "vocabulary race" rather than for "Pictionary" and "hot seat". This situation responded to students' willingness for individual tasks shown during classes as they felt more comfortable working at their own pace. The third was language development. The implementation of linguistic games not only resulted in the improvement of written productive vocabulary but also speaking, regarding the micro skill of accurate pronunciation. Before the games took place, the students prepared by checking the target vocabulary in their notebooks and asking their classmates for accurate pronunciation. Since most of the linguistic games implied saying the word in English after the students heard the word in Spanish, they learned "incidentally" how to pronounce the target vocabulary.

This fact responds to what Lee (2018) mentions concerning the role of the mother tongue as a resource to strengthen language learning by triggering cognitive processes that lead to the association with the second language. The fourth finding was concerning games' disadvantages. Although games did not have scores, students competed to "win" and blamed their classmates for being unable to recall the vocabulary. This situation produced a tense environment among the students when they "lost" which took place during the game of "Pictionary" and "hot seat". In these games, students who did not know the answer were paralyzed because their classmates were yelling and expressed exasperation. This result is opposite to what Dodigovic (2018) points out about anxiety declination. As an alternative to decrease the adverse effects of peer pressure and anxiety, the previously mentioned games were modified to respond to the students' interest for individual activities without excluding the games' purposes.

Despite the outcomes of this action research, it is influenced by limitations such as limited sample size, time for intervention, and context; the overall findings suggest linguistic games have a positive impact on the acquisition of productive written vocabulary.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, linguistic games can be contemplated as a method to develop written productive vocabulary in young learners by guaranteeing the practice and recalling of words inside the classroom generating improvement in word accuracy. Moreover, by using linguistic games at the beginning of the class during the pre-task stage, they became the first access for young learners to the target vocabulary fulfilling the purpose of introducing the language contents. Furthermore, linguistic games promote the establishment of a suitable environment for the learning process as learners are more interested in being involved, encouraging their active participation.

Nevertheless, linguistic games can produce some negative effects such as anxiety and peer pressure producing fear of participating and making mistakes. Those matters can be addressed by setting the teams according to their preferences and needs, promoting a cooperative environment. Additionally, setting the rules clearly from the beginning can address issues such as score and behavior to strengthen empathetic relationships among learners.

Finally, it is hoped this study will contribute to the field of foreign language teaching in Chile to guide novice EFL teachers concerning the pedagogical implementation of linguistic games with young learners. As the results of this action research cannot be broadened to other age groups, further research is recommended to carry out longitudinal studies to investigate the outcomes of linguistic games with other age groups and contexts to have a wider perspective on their effects on the development of language skills.

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