

Vocabulary Games in the Korean ESL Class

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Abstract

One of the most tedious parts of language learning is the memorization of vocabulary, yet it is also one of the essential components of language learning. Korean learners spend endless hours memorizing lists of words, which never get used in context in order to facilitate understanding.

Using games students are exposed to the words, the context of the words, their spelling and their sounds, all in an atmosphere that is relaxed and creative and where the student can make mistakes without feeling that it will affect their academic performance negatively.

Games that will be presented to the participants range from games for presenting new vocabulary to games using existing vocabulary. Participants will be given the basic tools to use within Excel spreadsheets to create many games of their own, appropriate to their students and their curriculum.

I. Introduction

As phonemes are the building blocks of words, so words are the building blocks of sentences, which build into paragraphs or discourse ideas, which ultimately is what we commonly think of as language – people exchanging ideas in either written or verbal format, either as monologue or as a dialogue. Of course syntax and grammar are intimately bound with this creation of a logical discourse, but for now, let us focus on what is probably the biggest problem for L2 learners – the words.

Not just how to pronounce the words, but actually learning all the words they need to express themselves in a sentence. And let's face it, English, with its habit of borrowing liberally from others, has more words than most to learn.

The accepted way to learn vocabulary is to memorize it, and in the Korean classrooms where the author has worked, the methodology was for the students to chorus the list of words three or four times, following the teacher, and then write a spelling test the following day. This had many problems, not least of which was the habit of students to chorus the words without actually looking at them, thus never associating the sound and the written word, and to consider that once the test was passed they did not need to think about those words again.

In order to address these problems, and also to address another problem – the fact that after the English words had been read, the Korean teacher would provide the translation and the students would write that down, thus ending the session with their L1 rather than the target L2 – a method that uses the power of puzzles to ensure repetition and use of the vocabulary was developed.

II. Method

Using any spreadsheet or table generating program, or a database program, develop a word list table that contains the following, in this order: the Korean word, an example sentence or a picture illustrating the concept or word, the English word and a simple English definition of the word. Students are then given a sheet on which the first two columns are completed, and they have to complete columns 3 and 4 using clues given to them in a puzzle type format. The puzzles can either be a randomly arranged table of the Korean word linked to the English word and definition, or a sheet in which the words are linked via connecting lines and students have to trace the correct lines in order to complete their list.

Once the word list is completed, several written puzzles drawing on the vocabulary words are presented, and have to be completed. Finally a quiz style game is played in which the English definition is given by the teacher and they have to say the English word in response. Usually the whole process up to and including this stage can be completed in a single period.

Following on the lesson in which this takes place, further puzzles and games using the vocabulary can take place as short fillers during their grammar or reading or listening lessons. These include pelmanism type matching games (match example and word), find the correctly spelled word out of a variety of misspelled ones, word search and crosswords, cryptograms, arrange the words according to categories (animals, kitchen, nouns, verbs, etc.), target vocabulary game, and twenty questions played with the vocabulary list.

III. Results

Since first introducing the method, it has been found that the majority of students in a class respond positively to this lesson. They become engaged by the puzzles and tend to help each other to solve them, thus teaching the material to each other.

Introducing a competitive edge also focuses them on remembering the words, and on using them in context. It has also proven beneficial since all levels of students take part in the exercise and gradually show, by means of conversation with the teacher outside the classroom, that they have absorbed the words as means of communication rather than as things to be learnt and forgotten.

IV. Conclusion

Unless we are raised in a bilingual household, most of us come to an L2 learning situation with a ready-made L1. If we continually relate from L2 back to L1, we never really reinforce the L2 concepts. Moving from L1 to L2, however, enables us to relate our existing concepts to a new word.

We also need to repeat the new word as often as possible, in as many ways as possible. The estimates of how many times you need to be exposed to a word before it becomes familiar range from hundreds to thousands. The more students are exposed to words in a way that engages their attention, the better,

and that is exactly what puzzles do – they engage students actively rather than passively.

Finally, it is an activity that all levels can be engaged in, and can do at their own pace. Lower level students will take longer, and solve less puzzles than higher level students, but the fact that they do take part and do actually engage with the work rather than tuning out is an advantage. The lesson also becomes much more student centered and allows the teacher to monitor students and engage with the students who need the most help.

To see the method at work, go to:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wP0TuSAE15U>