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USING LANGUAGE GAMES TO DEVELOP FOURTH-GRADE VIETNAMESE STUDENTS' WORD USAGE COMPETENCE

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Abstract

In the context of educational innovation, language games are considered an effective teaching method that creates an engaging learning environment and encourages students to actively acquire knowledge. Research has shown that language games not only help students retain knowledge more quickly but also promote the flexible application of word categories in real-life situations. Therefore, this paper aims to clarify the role of language games in developing fourth-grade students' word usage competence and propose appropriate teaching methods to improve the quality of Vietnamese language instruction at the primary education level.

Keywords: *language games, word categories, competence, students, fourth grade, primary school*

1. Introduction

In Vietnamese language teaching at the primary level, developing students' competence in word usage plays a crucial role in enhancing their linguistic expression and cognitive abilities. However, in reality, many fourth-grade students struggle with identifying, classifying, and correctly using word categories. The primary cause stems from traditional teaching methods, which tend

to focus on rote memorization, lack innovation, and fail to stimulate students' interest in learning.

In the context of educational reform, language games are considered an effective teaching method that creates an engaging learning environment and encourages students to actively acquire knowledge. Studies have shown that language games not only help

students retain knowledge more quickly but also encourage the flexible application of word categories in real-life contexts. Through these games, students can approach lessons naturally and enjoyably, reducing the pressure of learning. Moreover, language games enhance student interaction with peers and teachers, thereby improving the effectiveness of instruction.

Although language games have been widely applied in foreign language teaching, in Vietnam, there is still a lack of in-depth research on using this method to teach word categories to primary school students. Therefore, this paper aims to clarify the role of language games in developing fourth-grade students' word usage competence and propose suitable teaching methods to improve the quality of Vietnamese language instruction at the primary level.

2. Research Content

2.1. Overview of Language Games

Language games are an effective teaching method that combines learning and entertainment, helping students acquire language naturally and with enthusiasm. Hadfield defines a game as an activity with rules, goals, and fun elements. Based on this definition, language games can be understood as classroom activities designed to facilitate language learning while creating a motivating and engaging learning environment.

According to Polat, language games are designed to support the process of learning a foreign language. They are not merely for entertainment but serve as an effective teaching tool. When participating in these games, students practice and apply their learned language skills in real-life contexts. Lewis & Bodson emphasize that language games differ from typical classroom activities because they follow specific rules and include strategic elements that help students develop both language skills and soft skills.

Deesri also suggests that language games should ensure four essential elements: rules, competition, entertainment, and learning. The primary goal of incorporating games into the classroom is not just to create fun but also to enhance learning effectiveness. Thus, language games not only help students acquire knowledge naturally but also train communication skills, reflexive thinking, and boost confidence in language use.

2.2. Overview of Vietnamese Word Categories and Those Taught in Fourth Grade

In Vietnamese, word categories are classified based on grammatical characteristics and their roles in sentences. The Vietnamese word system is divided into two main groups: content words and function words, with an additional intermediary group.

- Content words have clear lexical meanings, can stand independently, and play a crucial role in sentence structure. This group includes nouns, verbs, and adjectives.
- Function words include conjunctions, particles, auxiliary words, modal words, and interjections.
- The intermediary group consists of numerals and pronouns.

In the primary school curriculum, particularly in fourth grade, students are taught and trained to use key word categories, including nouns, verbs, adjectives, pronouns, and conjunctions. These word categories are essential in helping students develop expressive abilities, enrich their vocabulary, and enhance their

Vietnamese communication skills.

Teaching word categories goes beyond mere recognition; it aims to help students use them flexibly in sentences, thereby improving their linguistic thinking and expressing ideas more accurately and coherently.

2.3. Language Games to Develop Fourth-Grade Students' Word Usage Competence

2.3.1. Game: Who's Faster?

Objective: Helps students quickly distinguish between word categories such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives within a short period while improving their linguistic reflexes.

Instructions:

- The teacher prepares a list of vocabulary words from various word categories.
- The class is divided into 2–3 teams, each with a small board or word cards.
- The teacher reads out a random word, and teams have 5 seconds to raise their board showing the correct word category.
- The team that answers the fastest and most accurately earns 1 point.
- The teacher continues calling out words, and the game lasts for about 5–7 minutes.
- The team with the highest score wins.

Variation:

- After identifying the word category, students create a sentence using the word to practice usage.

2.3.2. Game: Match Correctly – Choose Quickly

Objective: Trains students to form meaningful sentences and correctly identify word categories in a sentence.

Instructions:

- The teacher prepares word cards containing nouns, verbs, and adjectives.
- Students are divided into 3–4 groups, each receiving a set of word cards.
- Each group must arrange the word cards into a complete sentence and identify the word category of each word.
- The group that completes the task correctly and fastest wins.
- The teacher reviews and explains any mistakes to help students learn from them.

2.3.3. Game: The Word Category Wheel

Objective: Helps students expand their vocabulary within different word categories creatively.

Instructions:

- The teacher prepares a spinning wheel divided into sections, each representing a word category (noun, verb, adjective, etc.).
- Each student takes turns spinning the wheel.

- When the wheel stops on a word category, the student must quickly name a word from that category within 10 seconds.
- If the student answers correctly, they earn points; if incorrect, they lose their turn.
- The game continues until all students have participated.

Variation:

- Students must create a sentence using the word they found to reinforce word usage in context.

2.3.4. Game: Mystery Word Hunt

Objective: Helps students identify word categories in a passage, improving their reading comprehension and word analysis skills.

Instructions:

- The teacher prepares a short passage (5–7 sentences) and hides some key words.
- Students must guess the missing words and identify their word categories.
- Each correct guess provides a clue leading to a secret keyword in the passage.
- The student or group with the most correct guesses wins.

Variation:

- Students replace the guessed words with synonyms or antonyms to increase the challenge level.

2.3.5. Game: Word Category Map

Objective: Helps students make connections between different word categories and expand their vocabulary within a specific topic.

Instructions:

- The teacher writes a word on the board (e.g., "run" – verb).
- Students take turns adding related words under different word categories.
- Example:
 - **Nouns:** Runner, race
 - **Adjectives:** Fast, enduring
- The group that finds the most correct words wins.

2.3.6. Game: Swap and Change

Objective: Helps students understand meaning changes when shifting word categories in a sentence.

Instructions:

- The teacher writes a sentence on the board with a word belonging to a specific category.
- Students must replace the word with another word from the same root but in a different word category.
- Example:
 - **Original:** "He runs very fast."
 - **Changed:** "He is a professional runner."
- The student with the most reasonable sentence earns

points.

2.3.7. Game: Smart Word Linking

Objective: Encourages creative thinking with different word categories.

Instructions:

- The teacher gives a random word (e.g., beautiful – adjective).
- Students take turns adding a related word (e.g., beautiful girl – noun + adjective).
- The sentence must remain meaningful as words are added.
- The game continues until no one can find a suitable word.

2.3.8. Game: Look and Guess the Word

Objective: Develops students' vocabulary by associating words with images.

Instructions:

- The teacher displays an image on a screen or provides printed pictures.
- Students list at least five words related to the image, including nouns, verbs, and adjectives.
- Example: A picture of a boy playing soccer:
 - **Nouns:** Boy, ball, field
 - **Verbs:** Kick, run, pass
 - **Adjectives:** Fast, strong, skillful
- The student with the most correct words wins.

2.4. Advantages and Limitations of Using Language Games in Teaching Word Categories to Fourth-Grade Students

2.4.1. Advantages

The application of language games in teaching word categories brings several outstanding benefits, helping fourth-grade students effectively acquire word categories and develop their language usage skills.

a) Creating an Enjoyable Learning Environment

Newton explains that language games can break the monotony of repetitive classroom exercises, creating a fun and relaxing atmosphere for students when learning language. Moreover, language games help reinforce and develop the learning process. Polat also points out that language games create a stress-free, entertaining environment that allows students to quickly learn word categories and retain new words more effectively [15, p.295].

b) Boosting Students' Confidence in Learning Vocabulary

According to Horwitz and colleagues, language games establish a joyful and relaxing atmosphere, enabling students to use word categories in Vietnamese without feeling anxious. Additionally, Richard-Amato asserts that games not only reduce fear and frustration but also encourage shy students to actively participate in learning activities [8], [16].

c) Encouraging Student Engagement in Vocabulary Learning

Language games actively engage students in classroom activities. The competitive element of games provides strong motivation for students to use word categories purposefully. When participating in language games, students strive to outperform their peers, which fosters their enthusiasm for learning [13].

d) Providing a Realistic Context for Language Use

Language games help bring the outside world into the classroom, enhancing students' ability to use word categories in real-life situations. Hadfield also emphasizes that language games make word category exercises effective not only in the classroom but also in everyday life [5], [10].

Thus, incorporating language games in teaching word categories to fourth-grade students not only creates a positive learning environment but also helps them develop a more flexible and confident use of word categories.

2.4.2. Limitations

Although language games offer numerous advantages in developing students' language proficiency, their application also presents certain challenges that teachers and students must be aware of to optimize learning outcomes. These limitations include:

a) Classroom Discipline Issues

According to research by Nin and Leskovic (2010–2011), one major drawback of using language games is the potential for excessive noise and disruption among students during gameplay. This can reduce learning effectiveness by affecting focus and discipline in the classroom [12].

b) Deviating from Educational Goals

Language games can easily stray from their intended educational objectives if teachers do not properly control the activities. Without clear and structured guidance, students may become overly engrossed in the game itself, leading to a lack of attention to learning goals and failure to achieve the desired outcomes.

c) Lack of Interest Due to Repetitive or Boring Games

When games are used repeatedly or become too familiar to students, they may lose their appeal, reducing students' enthusiasm and willingness to participate. If games lack innovation, students might no longer find them engaging, negatively impacting learning effectiveness.

d) Perception of Games as Inappropriate for Students' Age

Some students, particularly fourth graders with their unique cognitive and psychological development, may perceive certain games as too simplistic or unsuitable for their age. This perception could decrease their engagement and interest in learning. Some students might see the games as “too childish” and unappealing, which can reduce their educational impact.

Recognizing and addressing these limitations will help teachers implement language games more effectively in the classroom while ensuring that the activities maintain their educational purpose and continue to inspire students' enthusiasm for learning.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

3.1. Conclusion

Language games not only enhance students' interest in learning but also help maintain engagement throughout the learning process. They improve students' ability to use word categories and effectively support vocabulary retention. Moreover, language

games provide opportunities for students to practice new words in real-life contexts, thereby enhancing their language proficiency.

Despite these benefits, teachers do not frequently apply this method in every lesson due to challenges in classroom management, particularly in controlling noise and maintaining order. Most teachers use language games during the warm-up phase or after introducing new vocabulary to reinforce learning and assess students' retention. The language games employed align well with the lesson content and curriculum. Both teachers and students express a desire to continue using language games for vocabulary instruction. However, teachers are reluctant to incorporate them too often due to the challenges of preparation and classroom management.

3.2. Recommendations

Based on the research findings, we propose the following recommendations for teachers:

Selecting Appropriate Games: Teachers should choose language games that align with learning objectives and vocabulary content. The games should be engaging, suitably challenging, and appropriate for fourth-grade students.

Diversifying Game Usage: Teachers should incorporate a variety of language games to accommodate different learning styles and student preferences. These games can focus on different aspects of word categories, such as classification, usage in sentences, and correct pronunciation.

Integrating Games into the Curriculum: Teachers should seamlessly integrate language games into the existing curriculum, enriching traditional vocabulary lessons and tailoring game activities to specific vocabulary topics being taught.

Connecting Games to Real-Life Contexts: Teachers can relate language games to real-world situations, helping students apply word categories in practical contexts and improving comprehension and retention. Integrating vocabulary with daily life scenarios allows students to associate learned concepts with real-world applications.

The use of language games in teaching word categories to fourth-grade students is an effective instructional method that enhances engagement and language proficiency. However, to maximize its effectiveness, teachers must carefully manage the classroom and select games that align with instructional goals.

3.3. Suggestions for Future Research

To further explore and expand the application of language games in teaching word categories, particularly in different educational settings, future studies should consider the following aspects:

Age Group Differences: This study focuses solely on fourth-grade students. Future research could examine whether the effectiveness of language games varies across different age groups within primary education. Additionally, comparative studies could identify which types of language games work best for specific age groups in acquiring word categories.

Diversity in Language Skills: The current study primarily explores vocabulary development, while other language skills such as grammar, listening, speaking, reading, and writing remain underexamined. Future studies could investigate the impact of language games on these skills to determine which games are most effective for specific skills and learning needs.

Teacher Proficiency: An important avenue for future research is to explore the relationship between teacher proficiency and the successful implementation of language games in teaching word categories. Assessing the impact of teacher preparation, teaching experience, and enthusiasm on student motivation and learning outcomes could help develop more effective instructional strategies.

Developing New Language Games: Future research could focus on designing innovative language games that cater to diverse student learning needs. The effectiveness of digital language games, such as online learning applications, should also be examined to integrate technology into teaching and create a more engaging and creative learning environment.

Applying Language Games in Other Subjects: While this study primarily focuses on the Vietnamese language, future research could extend the use of language games to other subjects such as Mathematics, Science, or History to determine whether they can enhance students' language development across different disciplines.

These studies will not only clarify the effectiveness of language games in teaching word categories but also expand their applications across various educational aspects, ultimately improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools.

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