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USING GUESSING GAMES TO DEVELOP EFL VOCABULARY AND SPEAKING

This paper explores the pedagogical potential of guessing games as a strategy for developing vocabulary and speaking skills among learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). The study is grounded in theoretical discussions within second language acquisition research, particularly the relationship between Krashen and Swain's input-based and output-based hypotheses. While input provides essential linguistic models and supports comprehension, it does not automatically lead to fluent language production. Output activities, in turn, encourage learners to retrieve linguistic resources, notice gaps in their knowledge, and practice various language forms during communication.

Within this framework, guessing games are examined as communicative tasks that stimulate meaningful learner output while remaining supported by sufficient lexical input. The paper also discusses the role of lexical competence in speaking development and highlights the persistent gap between receptive and productive vocabulary. From a cognitive perspective, such activities encourage processes such as prediction and linguistic inference, which contribute to deeper language processing.

The practical part of the study presents a small-scale action research framework implemented in an EFL context in SpiritOn Language School. Several activities, including the "Yes/No" game, "Bananas Dictation", and the "Balloons" information-gap task, are analyzed with regard to their pedagogical benefits and potential classroom challenges. The findings suggest that, when carefully scaffolded, guessing games can promote vocabulary activation, interaction, and learner engagement while supporting the development of spoken fluency.

Key words: *development of vocabulary and speaking skills, EFL, guessing games, input-based and output-based hypotheses, SpiritOn Language School.*

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ВИКОРИСТАННЯ ІГОР НА ВГАДУВАННЯ ДЛЯ РОЗВИТКУ СЛОВНИКОВОГО ЗАПАСУ ТА ГОВОРІННЯ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЮ МОВОЮ

У статті досліджується педагогічний потенціал ігор на вгадування як стратегії розвитку словникового запасу та навичок говоріння на заняттях з англійської мови. Дослідження ґрунтується на теоретичних дискусіях Крашена та Суейна щодо підходів до засвоєння іноземної мови, зокрема взаємозв'язку між гіпотезою вхідного матеріалу (Input Hypothesis) та гіпотезою вихідних даних (Output Hypothesis). Хоча вхідні дані забезпечують

важливі лінгвістичні моделі та підтримують розуміння, вони не призводять автоматично до вільного володіння мовою. Вихідні дії, у свою чергу, заохочують учнів до пошуку лінгвістичних ресурсів, усвідомленню прогалін у своїх знаннях та застосуванню різноманітних мовних конструкцій під час спілкування.

У цих рамках ігри на відгадування розглядаються як комунікативні завдання, що стимулюють змістовні результати навчання, підтримані достатнім рівнем вхідного лексичного матеріалу. У статті також обговорюється роль лексичної компетентності в розвитку мовлення та підкреслюється наявний розрив між рецептивним та продуктивним словниковим запасом. З когнітивного погляду, такі ігри заохочують процеси передбачення та лінгвістичного прогнозування, що сприяє глибшому сприйняттю мови.

У практичній частині дослідження представлено невелику дослідницьку модель, реалізовану в контексті вивчення англійської мови в приватній мовній школі SpiritOn Language School. Кілька видів вправ, включаючи ігри Yes/No, Bananas Dictation та завдання Balloons на заповнення інформаційних прогалін, аналізуються з погляду їхніх педагогічних переваг та потенційних труднощів застосування. Результати дослідження свідчать про те, що за умови ретельного планування ігри на відгадування можуть сприяти активації словникового запасу, взаємодії та залученню учнів, одночасно розвиваючи вільне володіння іноземною мовою.

Ключові слова: англійська мова як іноземна, гіпотези вхідного матеріалу та вихідних даних, ігри на відгадування, приватна мовна школа SpiritOn Language School, розвиток словникового запасу та навичок говоріння.

A Problem Statement. Developing EFL learners' speaking proficiency is one of the most challenging and fundamental objectives of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. As a complex productive skill, speaking cannot be acquired in isolation; it depends on the integration of receptive language skills (listening and reading), linguistic competence (including grammar and pronunciation), communicative competence, and cultural awareness. Lexical competence, a core component of linguistic proficiency, involves learners' ability to understand and appropriately use both active and passive vocabulary, which highlights its crucial role in the development of speaking skills.

A strong lexical base and broad vocabulary indeed enhance speaking fluency and facilitate communication; however, they do not guarantee successful language acquisition due to the inherent limitations of classroom speaking practice. One of the defining characteristics of speaking skill development is the need for extensive and meaningful practice, and even traditional communicative activities may fail to generate sufficient learner output. Consequently, a key pedagogical challenge lies in selecting activity types that effectively elicit spoken production.

Research analysis. The persistence of this pedagogical difficulty is not merely methodological but theoretical in nature. In second language acquisition research, the relationship between input-based and output-based hypotheses (Krashen, 1985), (Swain, 1985; Swain, 1995) reveals certain theoretical tensions, particularly concerning the relative roles of comprehensible input and pushed output in the development of speaking proficiency and their limitations when applied independently. Within this perspective, guessing games may be considered a controlled form of output activity that activates learners' available vocabulary, promotes noticing of lexical gaps, and supports the development of speaking skills in a low-anxiety environment.

Despite its strong theoretical and practical value, Krashen's Input Hypothesis has been criticized for underestimating the role of language production in developing productive skills. Contemporary scholars argue that input alone may not sufficiently promote lexical retrieval, syntactic control, or fluency in spoken communication (Ellis, 2008; Gass & Selinker, 2008). These limitations have led to increased attention to the role of learner output in the acquisition process.

Scholars acknowledge the asymmetry in vocabulary knowledge, particularly in perceiving vocabulary and its productive use, because understanding is much easier than production. That overlaps traditional pedagogical notions in the Ukrainian practice of converting passive vocabulary into active vocabulary (A. Bilak, V. Fedyk, A. Habovda, I. Syrko, etc.). The gap between receptive and productive vocabulary remains a pressing issue in seeking effective cognitive mechanisms with developing teaching and learning activities for vocabulary introduction, acquisition, and measuring (P. Bogaars, R. Ellis, B. Laufer, I. S. P. Nation, K. Vidal)

Speaking is a productive skill that is discussed in terms of accuracy and fluency. The development of speaking ability has been investigated by H. Brown, A. Derakhshan, H. Kayi, S. Nazara, R. Silverman, and Z. Wang.

A number of studies have been done to investigate the effectiveness of games in developing EFL and ESL learners' skills. According to them, using games has a positive effect, especially on vocabulary enhancement, they reduce unnecessary cognitive load and anxiety creating a learning-friendly environment (A. Chirandon, O. Kadaner, O. Moshynska, A. Warwick, Yusri).

The aim of this paper is to justify the pedagogical value of guessing games as an output-oriented strategy for developing learners' vocabulary and speaking

skills and to illustrate practical ways of implementing this strategy in the EFL classroom.

Presentation of the main material. The relative causal roles and mechanisms of input and output remain contested in foreign language acquisition (FLA) research. Input as a core component of FLA generally refers to the linguistic information gained through receptive activities (listening or reading), while output, in contrast, is connected with the language the learners produce through speaking and writing. Thus, input supports comprehension and provides linguistic models, whereas output requires learners to retrieve and organize linguistic resources for real-time communication.

In formulating SLA theory Stephen D. Krashen developed five hypotheses with the Input Hypothesis as part of his Monitor Model, where he distinguished language acquisition from language learning, defining language acquisition as a natural process. In contrast to learning, that was viewed as a conscious process, he emphasized the central role of comprehensible input as the primary condition for language acquisition that learners develop through reading or listening. Krashen argued that the successful acquisition becomes possible when the language slightly exceeds the learner's current level of competence and that real language proficiency may be gained only through subconscious acquisition. According to his Affective Filter hypothesis, emotional factors of motivation, self-esteem, and anxiety are crucially important for FLA (Krashen, 1985).

Comprehensible input through reading and listening is considered particularly important for vocabulary acquisition, as learners encounter lexical items in meaningful contexts that facilitate form-meaning connections. This contributes significantly to the development of receptive vocabulary and implicit linguistic knowledge.

Swain's Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985; Swain, 1995) proposes that language production contributes to acquisition by engaging learners in processes that extends beyond comprehension. Swain identifies several key functions of output:

1. Producing language enables learners to notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge when they become aware of discrepancies between what they want to express and what they can express using available language resources.

2. Output provides opportunities for hypothesis testing, allowing learners to experiment with linguistic forms and receive feedback during the interaction.

3. Output promotes metalinguistic reflection, as learners consciously analyze language forms while attempting to construct accurate utterances.

Importantly, nowadays, output is not necessarily viewed as the primary cause of language acquisition. Rather, it is often considered a facilitator that enhances lexical retrieval, promotes automatization, and supports the development of spoken fluency by encouraging active engagement with linguistic material. From this perspective, effective language instruction may benefit from integrating output-oriented activities within an input-rich learning environment, allowing learners to process language receptively while also applying it productively.

According to *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (CEFR), lexical competence is defined as "knowledge of, and ability to use the vocabulary of the language". It includes lexical elements and fixed expressions (Council of Europe, 2001: 110). Concerning the hypotheses discussed above on input and output approaches the highly debatable problems of ESL vocabulary acquisition are such questions as incidental and intentional learning and the receptive and productive vocabulary. That is, either the vocabulary can be learned implicitly through exposure or explicitly through study. While investigating this matter stressed that receptive vocabulary use involves perceiving the form of a word while listening or reading and retrieving its meaning. Productive vocabulary use involves wanting to express a meaning through speaking or writing and producing the appropriate spoken or written word form (Nation, 2001: 24–25).

Limited lexical knowledge increases the cognitive demands of speaking because learners must allocate working-memory resources to lexical retrieval while simultaneously constructing utterances.

Speaking is commonly regarded as a fundamental skill for second or foreign language acquisition. Spoken language is complex and characterized by features such as clustering (grouping words into thought units), hesitation markers e.g., pausing; colloquial expressions, and suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm, and intonation. Speaking proficiency is usually defined in terms of accuracy and fluency i.e. form-focused and meaning-focused approaches (Lazaraton, 2014: 106–107). The discussions focus on the issue of greater importance of one of them.

Fluency is mainly associated with a focus on meaning over form, as well as learners' ability to communicate or receive content and viewed as the goal of instruction (Parrish, 2019: 100). Some researchers and practitioners persist in its primary importance and thus the need to practice more successful oral fluency activities in the classroom (Ur, 2012: 124). On the other hand, accuracy concerns pronunciation, lexical skills, and grammar; they are the abilities to

articulate correct sounds, use appropriate words, and construct grammatically acceptable sentences. In an EFL setting with limited out-of-class opportunities for interaction, fluency-based activities merit more attention in comparison with meaning-focused tasks (Lazaraton, 2014: 107). It means that teachers should intensify their in-class efforts and devise the instruction materials to enhance their learners' fluency in speaking. However, intensive fluency practice may increase processing demands, particularly for learners with limited lexical resources, which may result in their cognitive overload. Processing a foreign language requires more substantial working-memory resources, especially for simultaneous retrieving vocabulary, constructing grammatical structures, and monitoring pronunciation.

Cognitive load theory (Sweller, 2017) states that overload on working memory negatively impacts learning and explains how instructional design can manage the limited capacity of working memory. Therefore, teachers face a dilemma because it is not always possible to make their classes simple while adhering to the course program. To solve this problem and create the best learning environment "the mental processes focused on internalising the lesson material needs to be maximised according to student ability" (Sweller, 2017). Instructional strategies should aim to reduce unnecessary cognitive load and anxiety. That can be achieved with integrating pre-task activities, giving clear instructions, collaborative learning, or working in group activities (Warrick, 2021: 26). Online learning still remains a relevant issue for many students in Ukraine, it is also advisable to avoid unnecessary textual information, use cognitive helpers, promote an emotional atmosphere, etc.

In EFL speaking instruction, this implies that tasks should provide sufficient lexical input while limiting unnecessary processing demands. Activities should gradually increase production requirements and support vocabulary retrieval in order to prevent excessive cognitive load.

Seeking effective strategies to help EFL learners improve their vocabulary and speaking skills, language teachers and researchers often turn to a game-based approach.

Jill Hadfield, a widely recognized British author and researcher, defines a game as "an activity with rules, a goal, and an element of fun" (Hadfield, 2010: 5). She emphasizes that while playing games, learners mainly focus on communication rather than on using correct language. Thus, if speaking about fluency-accuracy-spectrum, games are at the fluency end. Games give opportunities for drilling and, although limited, real communication, so they

shouldn't be regarded just as an entertainment activity to fill in time during the lesson.

Creating a bridge between the classroom and real-world communication can be achieved through various tasks such as information gap activities and guessing games which can create an artificial shortage of information, encourage learners to actively communicate using the target language of the lesson to exchange information and complete the task. Information gap activities serve as an effective mechanism for language acquisition that promotes language proficiency through meaningful communication, critical thinking, a motivating learning environment, and peer interaction. These types of activities, which can be organized in teams or pairs, include such tasks as jigsaw and information sharing tasks, vocabulary building and problem-solving exercises, cultural exchange activities, and so on (Vadhana, 2024: 205–206).

Meaning-oriented interaction can also be facilitated through problem solving and survival games, such as Desert Island or Balloon Debate, as well as role-plays, simulations, deduction games, and jigsaw storytelling. These games promote meaningful output because while playing, learners are forced to describe, define, and rephrase things; these activities encourage learners to search for appropriate words, phrases, and linguistic structures to use, promote their strategic competence, and thus enhance vocabulary and spoken performance.

The effectiveness of guessing games can also be interpreted through cognitive mechanisms of prediction. Predictive coding theory explains that the brain constantly anticipates incoming information and adjusts its internal models based on prediction errors. Such predictive processes support language comprehension and production by encouraging learners to formulate hypotheses about linguistic forms and meanings. In language learning, this mechanism promotes deeper processing and facilitates vocabulary retrieval (Gabhart et al., 2025).

Game-based strategies align with CLT by prioritizing functional, real-world interaction over rote grammatical practice. Within a Task-Based Language Learning (TBLT) framework, information gap and survival games serve as pedagogical tasks that require learners to use the target language as a tool to achieve specific, non-linguistic goals. By shifting the focus toward these goals and the element of fun, such activities effectively lower the affective filter. This reduction in anxiety creates a safe environment where learners feel comfortable taking linguistic risks, thereby facilitating more natural language acquisition with development of skills of higher-order, such as self-assessment and self-regulation. Ultimately, these

methods transform the classroom into a dynamic space where fluency and meaningful communication take precedence over the fear of making errors.

The incorporation of guessing games into the EFL classroom requires teachers to understand both their pedagogical benefits and the potential challenges associated with their implementation. To examine these aspects, this study employs a modified form of action research.

Action research is typically conceptualized as a spiral process consisting of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The advantage of action research for teachers is that it can be conducted individually or collaboratively. Mertler defined it as “research that is done by teachers for themselves” (Mertler, 2020: 4).

In this study, the framework was adapted to support the enhancement of teaching and learning practices at the private language school *SpiritOn* (Kharkiv, Ukraine). The adaptation focuses on improving students’ vocabulary acquisition and speaking performance through the systematic use of guessing games. Addressing these specific issues, the research design involved problem identification, a reflection stage, a plan of interventions, implementation of the plan, observation and evaluation of the results. The action-research-based framework illustrated how activities such as the “Yes/No” game, “Bananas Dictation”, and the “Balloons” information-gap task could be used for improving lexical competence and speaking skills in the English language classroom with regard to their pedagogical benefits and potential classroom challenges.

The EFL “Yes/No” game is a popular activity that promotes learners’ fluency. When playing, one of the students answers the classmates’ questions without using the words “yes” or “no”. This activity is good for practicing question formation, it encourages to alter the basic language structures in their answers.

Despite its popularity, this activity also presents several pedagogical challenges for both teachers and learners. First, teachers face common issues found in other game-based activities as well. These include difficulties in monitoring learners’ responses, ensuring equal participation, and managing time effectively. To address the specific challenges of this activity and improve learners’ critical thinking and speaking skills, teachers should avoid oversimplifying it, especially for higher-level learners who can follow their explanations and demonstrate their cognitive engagement. Furthermore, teachers should be very precise about the use of grammar and vocabulary by learners. Learners can also face several difficulties. Comprehension difficulties connected with the use of unfamiliar vocabulary or complex grammar constructions,

lack of confidence for various reasons, can be considered as some of the general challenges of game-based activities for learners. A specific challenge is the limited opportunity for language production, which therefore requires particular attention from the teacher.

Summing up, by reducing the prospective challenges, “Yes/No” activity can turn to an effective and encouraging communicative task that promotes meaningful language use and critical engagement.

“BANANAS dictation” activity (a variation of creative or open-gap dictation) allows to activate the target vocabulary and grammar with development skills of reading, writing and listening for details. This activity also stimulates such skills as language prediction and linguistic inference, which are fundamental for functioning of the human mind in general and for language processing in particular (Huetig, 2014: 480). Anticipating can involve upcoming sounds, words, grammar constructions during doing listening or reading activities.

There are several methodological challenges that can arise. Lower-proficiency learners may experience difficulties can have difficulties with producing suitable options. That needs pre-teaching or revision of the key vocabulary. Collaborative working or working in pairs can lower learners’ stress. Teachers can also limit the range of possible answers (e.g., a verb, a business noun, an adjective). Indication of grammatical category will help avoid grammatically incompatible answers.

This activity may incorporate several skills (e.g., listening and writing) which makes an excessive cognitive load. To cope with this challenge, teachers can choose short texts, reduce the number of words that the learners have to write down, and use a suitable pace of dictation.

To make this activity even more creative, linguistic accuracy can be seen secondary. In this case it can include a follow-up stage with discussion of the most logical or creative ideas. That turns the “Banana-dictation” activity into a communicative task which enhances speaking skills and creative thinking.

When carefully scaffolded, this activity encourages linguistic prediction, contextual inference, and vocabulary activation. Its effectiveness increases if it includes collaboration, grammatical guidance, and reflective discussion after the dictation.

Another information gap activity that involves linguistic prediction is called “Balloons”. While doing it the learners first write their short answers for a set of categories (e.g., *Something you’ve wanted to buy for a long time; Something you always carry in your pocket or handbag*, etc.) and then classmates ask questions to

identify the corresponding categories. A specific difficulty of this question-formation and speaking may arise if lower-level learners struggle to produce questions. To cope with this, teachers can provide models or examples of speaking. One more challenge may come from the learners' attempts to guess the category without asking questions that needs establishing strict rules for learners to follow.

When properly structured, this activity promotes question formation, interaction, and inferential thinking. It also encourages learners to use language for information-seeking and negotiation of meaning, which are central elements of communicative language learning.

Guessing games can be used in EFL classrooms as speaking warm-ups, follow-ups, and consolidation activities. A valuable feature of many guessing games is their ability to be adapted to fit curricular needs, the age and level of learners, and classroom environment conditions. Because they reduce learners' anxiety, increase students' engagement, and are adaptable, guessing games are an effective pedagogical tool.

Despite our focus on the importance of output strategy for implementation of guessing games in the EFL/ESL classroom, it should not be overexaggerated because of the great role that input plays. Input activities can include modelling of speech patterns by teachers, learners' activation of these models, pre-teaching the vocabulary that learners should use. Collaborative activities also can stimulate peer input that occurs in the process of the exchange of ideas during the game.

Conclusions. The present study demonstrates that guessing games can serve as an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing EFL learners' vocabulary development and speaking proficiency when implemented within an input-sensitive, output-oriented framework. The theoretical discussion of second language acquisition highlights that neither comprehensible input nor learner output alone can fully support the development of productive language skills. Instead, effective language instruction requires a balanced integration of receptive exposure to linguistic material and opportunities for meaningful language production.

Within this perspective, guessing games represent a productive communicative task that encourages learners to actively retrieve vocabulary, notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge, and experiment with language forms during interaction. By creating information gaps and meaningful communicative goals, such activities stimulate learners' engagement, support lexical activation, and promote spoken fluency in a low-anxiety learning environment. Their effectiveness can also be explained through cognitive mechanisms such as predictive processing and linguistic inference, which facilitate deeper language processing and retention.

At the same time, the pedagogical value of guessing games depends largely on careful instructional design. Teachers need to provide sufficient lexical input, clear instructions, and appropriate scaffolding in order to prevent cognitive overload and ensure productive participation.

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