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THE EFFECTS OF COOPERATIVE VERSUS COMPETITIVE WORD GAMES ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' VOCABULARY GAIN

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ABSTRACT

The present study was an attempt to investigate the comparative effects of using cooperative vs competitive games on elementary level learners' vocabulary learning. Sixty elementary level learners (all female) with age range of 6-9 contributed in the quasi-experimental research which lasted for one academic semester. The students were divided into two groups: in one group students were taught new vocabulary items through cooperative games, and in the other one, students were taught the same items through competitive games. At the beginning of the program, the researchers conducted Cambridge Mover Tests in order to guarantee the homogeneity of the students' proficiency level. A pretest was subsequently administered on learners' vocabulary knowledge. Then the intervention started. At the end of the program, one posttest was administered for measuring efficiency of the treatments. Then the researchers analyzed the collected data. The results indicated that cooperative games were indeed more beneficial to L2 vocabulary learning by the pupils than the competitive games. The positive effect of cooperative games has been supported by the authenticity of the games in general and the inherent advantages of cooperative games in particular - Cooperative game has all of the benefits of cooperative learning as well as play, since it is a form of both. Cooperative games have been shown to be useful in enhancing communication skills of children. Cooperative games provide a break from additional competition.

Keywords: Cooperative Word Games, Competitive Word Games, Iranian EFL Learners, Vocabulary Gain

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BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

It is a safe claim that words are important part of life; they affected the knowledge of the world and will continue to do so (Pikulski & Templeton 2004). Vocabulary is the main way for learning a language. Words are bases of language. Vocabulary is an important component of language use. The significant effect of vocabulary knowledge in second or foreign language learning has been emphasized recently (Zahedi & Abdi, 2012). In early 1930s, it was found that there is close relationship between English word knowledge and achievement in life. Success in earning and management was correlated with vocabulary scores. When the vocabulary knowledge is not enough, people have difficulty in expressing their thoughts and ideas and this usually results in physical aggressiveness (Shoari & Farrokhi, 2014).

According to Ur (1996) teaching vocabulary is one of the most discussed parts of teaching English as a foreign language. When the teaching and learning process takes place, problems would appear to the teachers. They have problems in the way of teaching new words as efficiently as possible. The teacher should prepare and find out the appropriate techniques, which will be implemented to the students. A good teacher should prepare himself or herself with various and up-to-date techniques. Teachers need to be able to master the material in order to be understood by students, and make them interested and happy in the teaching and learning process in the classroom. Vocabulary functions as a cornerstone without which any language could not exist. Speaking would be meaningless and perhaps impossible having only structure without vocabulary. The word “vocabulary” generally represents a summary of words or their combinations in a particular language. However, we should bear in mind, as Ur (1996, 60) remarked, that one item of vocabulary can consist of more than one word e.g., ‘post-office’ consists of two words and still expresses one idea. Vocabulary teaching is one of the most important components of any language class. The main reason is the fact that it is a medium, which carries meaning; learning to understand and express the meaning is what counts in learning languages. There has been increased focus on teaching vocabulary recently, partly as a result of “the development of new approaches to language teaching, which are much more ‘word-centered’.” (Thornbury, 2004).

For Uberman (1998), when English is learned as a foreign language (EFL) vocabulary is mostly taught out of context as isolated words, the main criticism of this way of teaching is that vocabulary cannot be learnt in isolation. Activities which involve learners in thinking about the words, like using games allow learners to remember the target words more easily. He further adds that learning vocabulary is a hard work, so attempt is required to understand, produce and manipulate the target words. Games help and encourage many learners to learn target language more easily. They also help teachers to create contexts in which the target words are useful and meaningful; they also bring fun for students, thus help them learn and retain new words more





quickly. In other words, game-based learning can create a meaningful context for language learning process. After learning and practicing new vocabulary through games, students have the opportunity to use language in a non-stressful way (Uberman, 1998).

Sorayaie- Azar (2012) also asserts that games are advantageous and effective in learning vocabulary. They are motivating because they usually involve friendly competition and create cooperative learning environment, so students have an opportunity to work together. They improve students' communicative skills and they have a chance to use the target language (Sorayaie- Azar, 2012).

Riahipour and Saba (2012) have mentioned that traditional activities such as memorization of long vocabulary lists, derivations, repetition of words, translation, fill-in-the-blank exercises are boring for students. Scrivener (as cited in Riahipour & Saba 2012, p.1259) has stated that using long list of words and their translated forms make no guarantee that remembering will take place. By using vocabulary games, learning process is going to be more valuable, this method can make vocabulary learning more enjoyable, so it can help students to retain target words more quickly. Alternatively, Aghlara and Hadidi-Tamjid (2011) have conducted a study on the effects of using a digital computer game on improving Iranian children's vocabulary learning. It has revealed positive effects of using digital games teaching English vocabulary to children; therefore, they suggested that "Using games in young learner's class smooth their learning because the games capture their attention and motivate them"(p.555).

Similarly, Aslanabadi and Rasouli (2013) conducted a study on the effect of games on improvement of Iranian EFL vocabulary knowledge in kindergartens. The aim of their study was to find a way to help young EFL learners fix the novel vocabulary in their minds. The study was conducted at two kindergartens. They divided the students into the experimental and control group. The experimental group given an online language teaching game and the control group given regular teaching. The result of their study revealed that Games not only bring fun for learners to the class, but they also motivate learners and improve their confidence. Moreover, Yip and Kwan (as cited in Aghlara & Hadidi-Tamjid, 2011, p.558) have suggested that students who used games for their learning became more successful in learning new words compared to those who learned the same vocabulary through traditional method. Therefore, vocabulary games bring real world context into the classroom, and enhance students' use of English in a flexible, communicative way. Hence, the role of games in teaching and learning vocabulary cannot be denied. However, in order to achieve the most from vocabulary games, it is essential that suitable games be chosen. Whenever a game is to be used, the proficiency level and cultural background of the students should be taken into account, and also it should be useful for students with lower language ability and should be easily applied in the class. Many experienced syllabus designers,





textbook writers have argued that games are not just time-filling activities but have a great educational value (Riahipour & Saba, 2012).

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

According to Bradley et al (2010, p. 3), games have some characteristics that are advantageous to language learners as follows: "First, games engage all students in the learning process. When students play games in pairs or groups, they have the opportunity to recognize and appreciate the contributions of others and use team-building skills. Some classroom games focus on individuals working to win against all other peers in the class. This type of game works well with students who are highly motivated and competitive. Second, games provide an opportunity for collaboration and/or cooperation. Classroom games provide an opportunity for students to collaborate and cooperate with each other, while working towards a common goal - winning. In some games, students are paired or grouped, which may lead to peer tutoring and the use of cooperative skills in order to win. They may not realize that they are actually learning, but they are working together towards a common goal. Third, games provide an enjoyable learning experience.

Bradley et al (2010) further adds that creating a fun and enjoyable learning environment is a large first step toward motivating students. Research indicates that classroom games are effective strategies that facilitate learning. Finally, games help engage all students, provide an opportunity for collaboration and/or cooperation, and provide an enjoyable learning experience.

"Vocabulary and Language Teaching Games So far there has been quite good number of researches on vocabulary learning in a foreign language. Since vocabulary plays an important role in understanding any concept in the process of learning a foreign language, it is considered as one important element that links the four language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing altogether. With the growing popularity of pedagogy and focus on games, it is important "to become involved in the design and implementation of new media systems before they are institutionalized". (Steuer, 1993, p. 21).

It is generally agreed that nowadays we are living in a digital world dominated by computers and internet and nearly all children in major cities are familiar with this modern technology. Using computer at the first stage for children is fun, especially when they use games on it. Learning takes place unconsciously, as Freeman (2000, p78) suggests learning is facilitated in a cheerful environment, and games create such an environment in which children are engaged in a playful activity that makes language learning a fun. Freeman also adds that; Communication takes place on 'two planes': on one the linguistic message is encoded; and on the other are factors which





influence the linguistic message. On the conscious plane, the learner attends to the language; on the subconscious plane, the music suggests that learning is easy and pleasant. When there is a unity between conscious and subconscious, learning is enhanced. So, to increase the amount of vocabulary learning through computers, games are considered as an effective and entertaining tool which can be applied in any foreign language classrooms. Games can lower anxiety, thus making the acquisition of input more likely (Richard-Amato, 1988).

Hornby (1995) believes that game is an activity that you do to have some fun. Games can make students focus on the game and learn the language unconsciously. They are highly motivating and entertaining, and they can give shy students more opportunity to express their opinion and feelings (Hansen, 1994).

Though the role of games in teaching and learning vocabulary cannot be denied, however in order to achieve the most from vocabulary games, it is important that suitable games are chosen. Whenever a game is to be conducted, the number of students, proficiency level, cultural context, timing, learning topic, and classroom settings are factors that should be taken into account. Games help and encourage many learners to sustain their interest and work. Games also help the teacher to create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful. One of the techniques that can be used to teach vocabulary is word games that students would work on over a longer period of time. Of course, the criteria for selecting words should be considered carefully since it is not the case that all words can be taught through word games. However, care should be taken to select those words which convey key concepts, are of high utility, and relevant to the bulk of the content being learned, and have meaning in the lives of the students. Another important issue in that restricting the number of words which students are expected to learn will help them learn words meanings at a deeper level of understanding, which can be considered an important principle of sustained vocabulary growth. The use of word games also addresses specific learner needs. This would mean that, for intermediate and advanced learners, traditional techniques for teaching vocabulary might be given a lower priority. Yet the use of word games is an area often neglected in the teaching of vocabulary. Over the last decade books for teachers and students have focused on ways of organizing, practicing, and presenting new vocabulary to make accessible and memorable to the students. Word games, and the way in which we can increase student awareness of it has perhaps been paid less attention that it deserves (Lazar, 1996).

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

Research Question1: Does the use of cooperative games significantly affect Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge?





Null Hypothesis 1:

The use of cooperative games doesn't significantly affect Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge

Research Question2:

Does the use of competitive games significantly affect Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge?

Null Hypothesis 2:

The use of competitive games doesn't significantly affect Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge

METHOD

Participants

A total of female 60 language learners with an age range of 6-8 participated in this study. The participants were selected from Turkish and Persian backgrounds. The participants were selected from 7 classes. Before starting the classes, a proficiency test (Cambridge mover tests) was administered to the participants in order to assure their proficiency levels. A pre-test was conducted to the two groups of experimental and control for comparability.

Context of Study

The participants were selected from *Alborz* institutes (two branches). In this institute a course consists of 20 sessions which meet three times a week. "New Parade" series by Mario Herrera and Theresa Zanatta are taught as the main source book. The books are based on interactions in different contexts. The course includes teaching new topics, vocabulary, function and grammar. Communication is one of the most important points of L2 teaching in this institute. Materials are used to activate new vocabulary learning and activate using in real situation.

Design of the study

The design of the study is quasi-experimental, that is without random assignment. Typical experimental study comprises two for the case of comparing the results of treatment. In this study 60 learners were divided into two groups, one cooperative group and one competitive group.



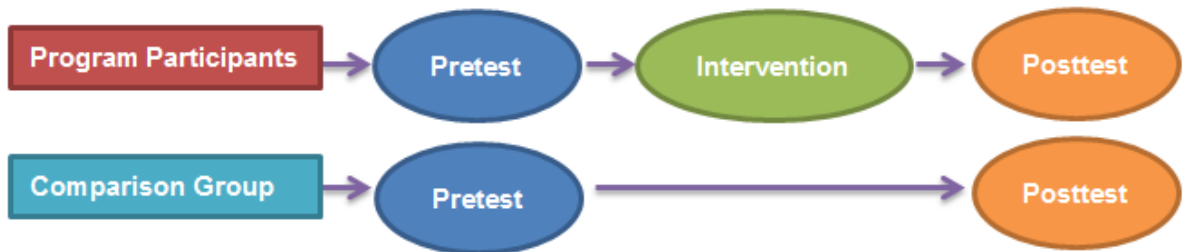


Figure: pre-test & post-test design

Materials and instruments

The following materials were used in this study:

Laptop computer.

Cooperative and competitive games.

Cooperative games (co-op games) are a form of play in which players work with one another in order to achieve a common objective. The goal of a co-op game is to reduce emphasis on competition and increase emphasis on the social aspects of play or game. They also emphasize the joy and productivity that come from working together to achieve a group goal. They allow students to work together to make decisions based on creative thinking, communication, and collaboration. Students are therefore learning to collaborate and depend on one another, not simply to win, but to achieve a goal.

Competitive games are those in which students play against one another and where one student winning means another student loses. Two-student games are often competitive, with a distinct win-or-lose outcome. ... Competitive games may involve multiple competing students or teams. Even one-student games can be competitive when a student plays against themselves or a given standard.

White board, marker and pictures were used for teaching different numbers, animals, colors and family members to the participants of the study.

Vocabulary Pretest was with the intention of comparing the word knowledge of the participants and also to prove that their word knowledge was approximately at same level before the program.





Vocabulary Posttest was for measuring the effectiveness of the treatments. It is a safe claim that the pre-test and post-test were of the same level of difficulty.

The researcher also used **OXFORD PICTURE DICTIONARY** for teaching some words relevant to new items that are given in learner's source book.

Procedures

At the beginning of the study a language proficiency test was conducted to both groups including Listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The mover listening paper has five parts with 25 questions. The reading and writing have 6 parts, and there are 40 questions. Movers' speaking has four parts. After solving the problem of controlling proficiency level of participants, a pre-test was conducted to determine the knowledge of the participants before the treatment, and then the researcher began the instruction.

During twenty sessions of teaching period, which consisted of two 90-minutes sessions per week, children in the cooperative group were taught English vocabulary consisting of the names of different animals, family members, numbers and colors through a cooperative game, namely they worked together during the game. Namely, there was no competition, and all of the students tried to complete the game to defeat the class, not an individual.

The second experimental group was taught the new words by working with competitive games, namely every student tried to save herself in an individual manner. At the end of the treatment, a vocabulary posttest which was of an identical difficulty level -with that of the pretest- was ran to the both groups. The participants were given the pictures of the items taught within the treatment period and were asked to name them. Then, the data were analyzed.

For keeping equivalence of pre-test and post-test and assuring that tests were from same difficulty level, researcher provided 40 questions and divided them in to two parts 20 as pre-test and remaining 20 as post-test. It is worth to say that the researcher pilots all the questions and procedures in order to increase authenticity of work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main objective of the study was comparing the effects of Cooperative versus Competitive Word Games on improving Iranian EFL Learners' vocabulary learning. For this reason, 60 learners were divided into two groups at Alborz institutes (two branches) in *Tabriz, Iran*. Learners were to learn word lists prepared by the researcher that include the new words of their source book. The researcher taught that words to one of the experimental groups through





competitive games and to another group through cooperative games. One pre-test was administered to both groups before starting the program. It can be said that both were about at approximately same proficiency level before the program.

According to design of the study and because there were two groups researcher was to compare the means of two groups both in pre-tests and in post-tests. Because two groups were different-independent- thus for comparing their means with each other the researcher used independent t-test. Besides the researchers used paired t-test for comparing the pre-test and post-test of each group. Paired t-test is used when researcher is to compare matched samples -it is also called matched t-test. These t-tests applied by the SPSS software and the results are discussed below.

Results of the data analysis for the research hypotheses

H1: There are no significant differences in the effect of competitive games on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning.

H2: There are no significant differences in the effect of cooperative games on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning.

Table 1. Paired Samples Statistics-Competitive Group

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest	13.838	30	1.687	0.307
	Posttest	14.000	30	1.367	0.249

Indicated in the Table 1, the Competitive group of the study had a mean score of 13.838 ($SD=1.687$) in the pretest. The group, however, scored higher ($M=14.000$, $SD=1.367$) in the posttest. It can be seen that there was an increase in the vocabulary scores from Pretest to Posttest for the participants in the Competitive group.





Table 2. Paired Samples T-Test- Competitive Group

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Posttest - Pretest	-.167	1.116	.203	-.587	0.250	-.817	29	0.420

Table 2 displays that the mean increase in the vocabulary scores was -.167 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -.587 to 0.250. It is also indicated that the mean increase in the vocabulary posttest was not statistically significant ($t(29) = -.817, P = 0.420$). Consequently, the null hypothesis has been accepted, since competitive game does not have any significant effects on the vocabulary learning of the participants.

Table 3. Paired Samples Statistics-Cooperative Group

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 2	Pretest	13.638	30	1.847	0.337
	Posttest	18.239	30	1.222	0.222

Table 3 displays the descriptive statistics for the cooperative group. In a brief look, it can be perceived that there was a statistically significant increase in the vocabulary scores from Pretest ($M = 13.638, SD = 1.847$) to Posttest ($M = 18.239, SD = 1.222$).





Table 4. Paired Samples T-Test- Cooperative

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Posttest - Pretest	-4.600	1.275	0.232	-5.079	-4.129	-19.749	29	0.000

According to the Table4, the mean increase in the vocabulary scores was -4.600 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -5.079 to -4.129. The mean increase in the vocabulary posttest was statistically significant ($t = (29) = -19.749, P = 0.000$). In comparison with the competitive group, the cooperative group performed much better in the vocabulary posttest. Consequently, the Alternative Hypothesis is supported and the Null hypothesis is rejected.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics-Pretest

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest Competitive	30	13.838	1.687	0.307
Pretest Cooperative	30	13.638	1.847	0.337

Table 5 depicts the descriptive statistics for the vocabulary pretest. The Competitive and cooperative groups of the study had a mean score of 13.838 ($SD=1.687$) and 13.638 ($SD=1.847$) respectively. More specifically, two groups did not perform differently in the pretest and they were homogeneous in terms of their vocabulary knowledge.





Table 6. Independent Samples Test-Pretest

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pretest	Equal variances assumed	0.337	0.564	0.438	58	0.664	0.200	0.456	-0.717	1.114
	Equal variances not assumed			0.438	57.505	0.664	0.200	0.456	-0.717	1.114

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the statistics scores of cooperative and competitive groups in the vocabulary pretest. The mean difference in statistics scores was 0.200 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -0.717 to 1.114. The results revealed no significant difference between the mean scores of cooperative and competitive groups in the vocabulary pretest $t(58) = 0.438, p = 0.664$. Consequently, the two groups performed homogeneously in the vocabulary pretest.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics-Posttest

Groups		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	Competitive	30	14.000	1.367	0.249
	Cooperative	30	18.239	1.222	0.222

According to the descriptive statistics shown in the Table 7, the cooperative group performed much better than the competitive group in the vocabulary posttest. The mean score for the former was 18.23 ($SD = 1.222$) whereas for the latter the mean score is 14.000 ($SD = 1.367$).





Table 8. Independent Samples Test-Posttest

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Posttest	Equal variances assumed	0.00	0.99	-12.65	58	0.00	-4.22	0.33	-4.90	-3.56
	Equal variances not assumed			-12.65	57.31	0.00	-4.22	0.33	-4.90	-3.56

Another independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the statistics scores of the two groups in the vocabulary posttest. The mean difference in statistics scores was -4.22 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -4.90 to -3.56. The results revealed significant difference between the mean scores of cooperative and competitive groups in the vocabulary posttest $t(58) = -12.65, p = 0.00$. Therefore, the Null hypothesis is rejected and the Alternative hypothesis is supported. In other words, it is safe to claim that cooperative games are of significant importance in the process of vocabulary learning.

It is a safe claim that the findings of the present study are in agreement with Misirli (2007) claims about the general effectiveness of games in learning. According to Misirli (2007) Games deemed to be a group of tools for effective language learning in real life. That is a game can be an active way in learning a new language which can be formed and shaped due to the real life. He further adds that the main reason for the importance of games is due to their being effective learning aids. He believes that they enhance motivation and attract students' attention. Also, games have revealed many advantages and efficiency in the process of teaching and learning vocabulary in many ways.

The findings are also in line with what Nguyen and Nga (2003) has reported on the effectiveness of cooperative games. Since they also report that First, games create relaxation and fun for the students. Therefore, the teacher should aid them in learning and retaining new words effortlessly.





Then, games typically involve friendly cooperation and they keep learners interested. These situations motivate the children to get involved and participate actively in the learning activities. Third, games bring real world context into the classroom, and enhance students' use of English in flexible and communicative way.

The findings are also in line with those reported by Taheri (2014) in that social interaction in cooperative games provides the students opportunities to get help and support, create them atmosphere to participate in authentic communication, cooperate with each other, increase their self-esteem, show a greater willingness to interact with their peers. She also reported the same conclusions regarding the fact that while students are interacting with each other in a vocabulary game they have mutual orientations to achieve a goal which is finding the new word and defeating the other group. In fact, they are unconsciously motivated towards cooperating and consulting

It is safe to claim that the findings of the present study are in line with the studies which provided supports for the effectiveness of the games in word acquisition. For instance, the findings are in agreement with that of Segers and Verhoeven (2003), and Chuang and Chen (2007) who reported strong supports for the role of games in word acquisition. The findings also support the study of Rohani and Pourgharib 2013. They also have found that games affect the process of vocabulary learning in seriously positive manner. Tuan (2012) also came to the same conclusion on the efficacy of games in word learning. Aghlara and Hadidi Tamjid (2011) have found the similar points regarding games and word learning. The current study also support the work of Aslanabadi and Rasouli(2013).They reported that games affected the kindergarten children's vocabulary learning and memorizing of the second language vocabularies. Generally speaking, the number of studies on the effectiveness of games on word acquisition are extremely limited but the existing ones all testimony the constructive role of the games. The reports of Ashraf et al (2014) also are supported in the current study, namely using games as instructional tools, create a meaningful and useful language learning context. In the present study too, Games are found as challenging and motivating tools. The participants of the current study found that games decrease anxiety in significant manner. The findings have been also in line with those of reported by Bahojb Jafarian & Shoari (2017) in that they have also reported that for the effectiveness of the games in word acquisition might be due to their role in making a relaxed, less stressful, cheerful and enjoyable atmosphere for learning.

Limitations of the study and Suggestions for further research

As it is the case with any other research study, there were some limitations in this study which makes us to generalize the findings with caution. They are as follow:





Firstly, it can be said that: One of the main limitations of this study was that because of the form of research (games) and also the level of learners (elementary) at the beginning learners did not take the instruction serious. So additional sessions were required for focusing on the main objectives.

Secondly: The other limitation was that participants were female learners. No male learner included in the study.

Thirdly: games were of different kinds, as a result time-on-task was one of the limitations of the study. It took more time for participants to learn games.

And finally: The final limitation was that because of time limit the main focus of vocabulary teaching was primary meaning and other aspects have not been worked on in detailed manner.

There are number of issues that need more investigations, as follow:

Firstly: The current study's participants were from one of the institutes of Tabriz, in order to generalize the results to a wider population, more students should be included from different areas.

Secondly: Since this study includes only females, so further studies should on male Iranian learners.

Thirdly: This research was conducted on elementary level learners; further studies should be on higher levels.

Fourth one is that: Since the study tested learners' progress with one post-test, further studies with delayed post-tests are required to measure the long-term effects of Co-operative and competitive games.

And the last one is that: Further longitudinal studies are need to be conducted to compare different vocabulary teaching strategies as well as games in a comparative manner, to decide on which strategies are more effective to Iranian learners than others.





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