

Vocabulary Games: More than Just Wordplay

Does this sound familiar? You play a game towards the end of English class. Your learners are delighted; the energy level rises amid shouts, smiles, laughter, and intense engagement. When class ends, learners leave in a good mood. Laughter and happy conversation fill the hallway. And then, you are reminded that a person of authority—a principal or vice-principal who is “old school” in his or her beliefs of what constitutes learning—does not like games. Games are *play*; learning is *serious*.

When I was a teacher trainer in South Korea, my in-service teacher trainees often said that persons of authority discouraged games in the classroom. The teacher trainees’ counterargument was that games were a good way to practice language—true enough.

We know this intuitively, and it is backed up by research. Alemi (2010, 435) found that word games had a “positive effect on vocabulary development” among the students in her study. Huyen and Nga’s (2003) research found that games (1) create a relaxed environment that helps students learn and recognize words; (2) introduce friendly, competitive activities that energize students and increase active participation; and (3) improve students’ communicative competence through the review and practice of vocabulary. In addition, Lengeling and Malarcher (1997, 43) write that using games “lowers the affective filter,” “encourages creative and spontaneous use of language,” “builds class cohesion,” and improves group dynamics. Having fun while learning is not a bad thing. According to Richards (1969, 161), “pleasure for its own sake is an important part of language learning.”

However, despite all the evidence, just claiming that playing games is a good way to practice the language is often not enough to win the argument. My in-service teachers needed a specific rationale to explain what their learners achieve when they play games. I therefore created a simple tool to quickly analyze how different classroom games rate in terms of their vocabulary-building potential. This article describes the procedures for several games and illustrates how to use this tool to assess their overall effectiveness for vocabulary development.

WORD KNOWLEDGE

Language teachers know that it takes more than one exposure in class for students to learn new words, especially if those words are seldom used. For example, it may only take 24 hours for students to forget 80 percent of what they have learned (Thornbury 2002). Reviewing, reusing, and recycling newly encountered words is imperative if students are to fully own them. A learner may need to encounter a new word eight to twelve or even more times to acquire it; variables such as the context, text type, and level of difficulty play

an important role in vocabulary acquisition (Nation 2014; Webb 2007). To maximize vocabulary development, teachers should intentionally repeat the exposure of new words at least 12 times over one or two weeks in different contexts such as reading and listening texts, crosswords, gap fills, spoken dialogues, homework, group work, dictionary lookups, and games. No matter what activity teachers choose to teach vocabulary, it is important to understand the criticality of repetition.

What do learners need to know to “know a word”? Nation (1990) identified eight aspects of word knowledge:

1. Phonological form—how to say it
2. Orthographic form—how to spell it
3. Conceptual meaning—its definition
4. A word’s part of speech—noun, verb, adjective, etc., derivative forms, and grammatical patterns
5. Register or Appropriateness—whether the word is used in formal or informal communication
6. Lexical field or semantic network of association—words often found together (for example, “kitchen” words and terms such as *frying pan, oven, mix, stir, spoon*)
7. Collocations—words that are commonly used with the given word to form an expression: e.g., collocations for *heavy* include *heavy sleeper, heavy smoker, heavy heart, heavy eater*

8. Frequency of usage—how often the word appears in everyday communication (*a* and *the* have a high frequency of usage; *ullage* has a low frequency of usage)

If learners just need to know a word for listening and reading purposes, they will require receptive word knowledge: the ability to recognize and recall the different aspects listed above (Nation 1990). If learners need to be able to speak and write the word as well, they will require productive word knowledge, which includes the ability to produce a word’s spoken and written forms, to employ its collocations, and to use it in suitable situations and in correct grammatical patterns (Nation 1990).

During vocabulary games in class, learners review, reuse, and recycle words they have previously encountered using receptive and productive knowledge of Nation’s eight aspects as they play. Not all games, however, are created equal; some require learners to draw on more word knowledge than others. To help teachers analyze the types of word knowledge that are practiced in the games they employ, I created the Word Knowledge Matrix by incorporating Nation’s research into a grid (see Table 1). The top row of the grid lists eight aspects of word knowledge (Nation 1990); the left-hand column lists the receptive and productive knowledge learners employ to access and demonstrate what they know about each aspect of the words they are reviewing in the game. Each aspect has three dimensions: the ability to recognize it, recall it, and produce it. The final row contains the legend with the symbols that are used to fill in the matrix as the teacher analyzes the

	Phonological form	Orthographic form	Conceptual meaning	Part of speech	Register	Lexical field	Collocations	Frequency of usage
Recognize								
Recall								
Produce								
Legend: X = definitely doing; P = possibly doing; S = silent production								

Table 1. Word Knowledge Matrix

game (X = definitely doing, P = possibly doing, and S = silent production, as opposed to spoken production). When the analysis is complete, the teacher will be able to tell at a glance which dimensions of word knowledge aspects—or put more simply, dimensions of word knowledge—the game requires.

To demonstrate how the matrix works, I will analyze Hangman, a game that is popular in English classes worldwide.

HANGMAN

When I started teaching in Japan in the early 1990s, Hangman was a popular game among teachers of young learners. The activity is teacher-fronted and played in this manner:

1. The teacher draws a gallows on the board.
2. The teacher chooses a mystery word, which is usually related to a topic the students are studying.
3. On the board, the teacher writes the topic and a blank for each letter in the mystery word (e.g., if the topic is *fruit* and the mystery word is *banana*, the blanks would be _ _ _ _ _).
4. Learners say a letter they think is in the word (e.g., *a*).
5. If the letter is in the word, the teacher writes the letter in the blank or blanks (e.g., _ *a* _ *a* _ *a*).
6. If the letter is not in the word, the teacher draws one part of the hangman

on the gallows (there are typically seven parts—a line for the noose, a circle for the head, a line for the torso, two lines for the arms, and two lines for the legs; you can search online for hangman images).

7. If the learners figure out the word before the teacher finishes drawing the hanged man, they win.

I have seen Hangman played like this in classrooms around the world. Table 2 indicates the dimensions of word knowledge a student employs in this vocabulary encounter.

Analysis

Suppose the topic is *fruit*. As the teacher writes the topic on the board, learners begin recalling the words they know in that lexical field. When the teacher writes six blanks on the board, learners will try to recall the six-letter words in the lexical field of “fruit” and their orthographic form. Once they have thought of likely words, they will select appropriate letters to make a guess. As the game progresses and the blanks are filled in, learners may recognize the incomplete orthographic form and make a guess, or they may pronounce the sounds of the letters in the blanks to guide them in guessing the phonological form. One or more students may produce the correct phonological form when they finally recognize what the word is, recall how to say it, and shout out the answer.

Hangman is fun and competitive, requires minimal preparation, and is a popular activity, especially for beginning learners. However, it is not very language rich, and the matrix suggests it is somewhat limited in

	Phonological form	Orthographic form	Conceptual meaning	Part of speech	Register	Lexical field	Collocations	Frequency of usage
Recognize	X (guided)	X (guided)						
Recall	X (guided)	X				X		
Produce	X (guided)							
Legend: X = definitely doing; P = possibly doing; S = silent production								

Table 2. Word Knowledge Matrix for Hangman

the opportunities it provides to practice the various aspects of word knowledge. In all, students only demonstrate six dimensions of knowledge and four of those are guided. No game will help learners practice every dimension of every aspect; at least I have not yet found one that does.

Following are additional games that are easy to prepare, are always well received, and give students opportunities to recognize, recall, and produce various dimensions of word knowledge for the vocabulary you choose to review.

GAME 1: SPEED WORDS

This is one of my favorite games. I learned it from a colleague when I was teaching at Global Village in Vancouver in 1997. I do not know where he got it, and for the longest time I referred to it as Freddo's Game in honour of the teacher who shared it with me. I have used it in classes ever since. It involves very little preparation—enough cards or slips of paper for the entire class—and allows learners to select the words they wish to review.

Level: All

Materials: Four or five cards or slips of paper for each student in the class; one chair for each group of four or five students

Procedure:

- 1.** Give each learner four or five blank cards or slips of paper.
- 2.** Tell learners to write on each card one word (or one phrasal verb or expression) they wish to review from the unit they have just studied. It is important that all learners use words from the same unit; it will be easier to guess what the word is if they are all drawing from the same vocabulary list.
- 3.** While the learners are filling in their cards, the teacher lines up a row of chairs at the front of the room.

- 4.** The teacher makes teams of five students (Team 1, Team 2, etc.) and assigns a number to each chair (Chair 1 for Team 1, Chair 2 for Team 2, etc.).
- 5.** Once team numbers are assigned, the teacher asks learners to come to the front of the room and line up in front of their team chair.
- 6.** The first person in line sits down in the chair and collects his or her team's cards. That person shuffles the cards and hands them, face down, to the first person on the team standing in the line.
- 7.** The first person in the line—the explainer—turns over a card and describes the word to the person sitting in the chair—the guesser. The explainer can use words or gestures, if necessary, and as many examples as needed.
- 8.** The guesser tries to guess the word.
- 9.** When the guesser has guessed the word correctly, he or she stands up and goes to the back of the line.
- 10.** The teacher collects from the explainer the card with the word that has been guessed correctly.
- 11.** The explainer sits down in the chair, becoming the new guesser, and gives the remainder of the cards to the next person in line, who becomes the new explainer.
- 12.** The new explainer turns over the top card and explains the word to the new guesser, and the process is repeated until all the cards are gone. The first team to guess all the team's words wins.

Analysis

At the start, as learners are searching for words they would like to review from a unit or chapter's vocabulary list, they recognize the orthographic form and silently produce the phonological form in their head as they

	Phonological form	Orthographic form	Conceptual meaning	Part of speech	Register	Lexical field	Collocations	Frequency of usage
Recognize		X	P	P				
Recall	P		X	P				
Produce	S	X		P				
Legend: X = definitely doing; P = possibly doing; S = silent production								

Table 3. Word Knowledge Matrix for Speed Words (all students at start of activity)

	Phonological form	Orthographic form	Conceptual meaning	Part of speech	Register	Lexical field	Collocations	Frequency of usage
Recognize	X	X						
Recall	X		X	P		P	P	
Produce	S		X	P		P	P	
Legend: X = definitely doing; P = possibly doing; S = silent production								

Table 4. Word Knowledge Matrix for Speed Words (the explainer)

read, or possibly recall the phonological form if they are uncertain how to pronounce the word. As they read, they also recall conceptual meaning, and if they have to search for a definition, they will recognize conceptual meaning. They then produce the orthographic form by writing the word on a piece of paper. Students will also recall, recognize, and produce the word’s part of speech if the teacher instructs them to include that on the slip of paper. Table 3 identifies the word knowledge that all students employ at the start of the activity.

Table 4 illustrates what the explainer is doing once the game begins. The explainer reads the word silently, recognizes the orthographic form, silently produces the phonological form while reading, tries to recall its conceptual meaning, and then produces that meaning orally. Depending on the word, the explainer might need to draw upon expressions in the lexical field that may help to explain it more quickly. For example, if the word is *hamburger*, an explainer might give a definition like this: “Fast food, ground beef, sandwich.” Or the explainer might employ words from the lexical field and have the guesser try to complete a phrase or sentence: “French fries and _____.” Explainers may also recall

and produce collocations as they shout out hints—and may also shout out the word class if the guesser says a noun or verb and the word is the adjective or adverb form of that word. While describing the word, the explainer is also listening for the guesser to say the word, hoping to recognize the correct phonological form that will signal a correct guess.

The guesser, listening to all this information, tries to recognize the conceptual meaning, lexical field, word class, and collocational hints he or she is receiving; tries to recall which word best fits with that information; and attempts to produce it by stating its correct phonological form. Table 5 illustrates what the guesser is doing once the game begins.

By the end of the activity, all learners have employed various dimensions of word knowledge, as shown in Table 6.

Speed Words is highly versatile and works well as an end-of-unit review. I have also used it to review the day’s new vocabulary at the end of a class or to review the previous day’s vocabulary at the start of a lesson. It also works well before a listening task where there is new vocabulary. Students get a chance to hear new words before they listen to the

	Phonological form	Orthographic form	Conceptual meaning	Part of speech	Register	Lexical field	Collocations	Frequency of usage
Recognize			X	P		P	P	
Recall	X							
Produce	X							
Legend: X = definitely doing; P = possibly doing; S = silent production								

Table 5. Word Knowledge Matrix for Speed Words (the guesser)

	Phonological form	Orthographic form	Conceptual meaning	Part of speech	Register	Lexical field	Collocations	Frequency of usage
Recognize	X	X	X	P		P	P	
Recall	X		X	P		P	P	
Produce	S, X	X	X	P		P	P	
Legend: X = definitely doing; P = possibly doing; S = silent production								

Table 6. Overall Word Knowledge Matrix for Speed Words

passage, preparing their ears for the unfamiliar words, reinforcing conceptual meaning, and increasing chances of success.

Suggestions

Keep the cards, as they indicate the words students struggle with. You can use the cards as the basis for a Pictionary game in another class or use the words to create crossword puzzles or writing activities you can assign for homework. Also, if there are no extra chairs in the class, the first person in line can stand as well.

GAME 2: WORD WALL CRAWL

This is another fun activity for reviewing recently taught vocabulary that involves the whole class. I learned it from my colleague Fiona Wiebusch at RMIT University Vietnam (who wrote the instructions below).

Level: Lower Intermediate

Materials: Sticky labels; one handout per student

Procedure:

1. Prepare a list of words you wish to review and write each word on a sticky

label. There should be one for each student in your class.

2. Give students a handout with three columns labelled Name, Word, and Definition, as shown in Table 7.

Name	Word	Definition

Table 7. Handout for Word Wall Crawl

3. In the Name column, students list the names of the other students in their class (not including their own name). To save time, the teacher can include all names in this column.
4. Take students to an open space, or move all the tables and chairs to the edge of the room. Tell students they are going to play a game to review vocabulary and practice their scanning and spelling skills. They will need a pen, the handout, and a book to prop their handout on while they write.

5. Tell students that you are going to stick a word on each person's back. The goal of the game is to find out and write down each student's word beside his or her name on the handout. However, students should try to "protect" their own word and prevent other students from seeing it—that is, keep their back to the wall.
6. Explain the rules: Students cannot stand still for more than four seconds; students cannot press their back up against the wall for more than four seconds; and there is *no* touching—i.e., grabbing other students by the shoulders to see the word on their backs! There is *no* copying words from other students. The winner is the first person to write down every word.
7. Stand students in a circle, facing in, and post the vocabulary words on their backs. When all students have a label, shout, "Begin!"
8. When you have a winner, students return to their seats and work together in groups to complete their handouts.

Analysis

Table 8 indicates the dimensions of word knowledge employed while playing Word Wall Crawl. When learners spy a word on a classmate's back and read it, they are recognizing the word's phonological form and silently producing it in their heads. Then, as learners write down the word on the handout, they are practicing their spelling and producing the word's orthographic

form. During the discussion part of the activity, students recall the phonological form and produce it by saying and writing it phonetically. They must also try to recall the conceptual meaning and produce it in written form. If the teacher instructs learners to include part of speech in the definition, students will also recall the appropriate word class and produce it in written form.

Variation

One variation is to use picture cards instead of words on stickers. Students will then have to recall and produce the orthographic form. You can also use a combination—half picture cards and half words on stickers.

GAME 3: CHOPSTICK TAKE

I learned the basics of this game from my colleague Marie Richardson at RMIT University Vietnam and made a few modifications. It is highly popular and draws the most laughter of all the activities presented here.

Level: Beginner to Lower Intermediate

Materials: One pair of chopsticks for each student in the class; three sets of word cards in three different colours (laminated if possible); three plastic cups/containers/bowls

Procedure:

1. Prepare three sets of laminated cards with words to review with your students; the same words are repeated on each set. Each set should be a different colour (e.g., white, yellow, blue).

	Phonological form	Orthographic form	Conceptual meaning	Part of speech	Register	Lexical field	Collocations	Frequency of usage
Recognize	X (alone)	X (alone)		P				
Recall	X (in groups)		X (in groups)	P				
Produce	S (alone), X (in groups)	X (alone)	X (in groups)	P				
Legend: X = definitely doing; P = possibly doing; S = silent production								

Table 8. Word Knowledge Matrix for Word Wall Crawl

One of the most common register activities involves analyzing and rewriting a text—changing language from formal to informal English or vice versa.

2. Divide the class into three equal-sized teams. Ask students to form three lines in a U-shape. There should be about two metres or so of free space in the middle. Assign each student in the three teams a number (e.g., if there are six students per team, each team will have a Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, etc.).
3. Tell students you are going to spread three sets of cards on the floor. Tell them the sets are the same, but white cards are worth 1 point, yellow cards are worth 2 points, and blue cards are worth 3 points. Each word appears three times (once on a white card, once on a yellow card, once on a blue card). Then tell students you are going to say a definition and call out a number. The students with that number must find the correct word, pick up the card, and put it in their group's bowl—using only their chopsticks! They must pick only one card!
4. Lay out the cards face up in the space in the middle. Give each student a pair of chopsticks. Stand at the front of the U-shape. Place one bowl per team in front of you.
5. Give students a moment to look at the cards. Call out a definition for one of the words on the floor and then call out a

number. The three students rush to find the cards and deposit them in the bowl.

6. Once all the cards have been collected, the groups go to their desks and count their points. The team with the most points wins.

Extension

In groups, learners write three sentences using as many of the words as possible. They can use a word only once. Once the sentences are completed, students choose their best sentence and read it aloud.

Analysis

Before the game begins, as students read the words on the cards on the ground, they recognize the words' orthographic form and silently produce phonological forms in their heads. When the teacher says the definition, students recognize the conceptual meaning, recall the word and its orthographic form, and then try to recognize the orthographic form on the card on the floor. That is all that happens in the basic version of the game. The teacher of course can vary the hints, giving out collocations for the word instead of a definition and make the students recall which word collocates with the hints. The teacher can also have students say the word after dropping it into the bowl and have them recall and produce its phonological form.

	Phonological form	Orthographic form	Conceptual meaning	Part of speech	Register	Lexical field	Collocations	Frequency of usage
Recognize		X	X			P	P	
Recall	P	X				P	P	
Produce	S, P	X (Ext)				P (Ext)	P (Ext)	
Legend: X = definitely doing; P = possibly doing; S = silent production; Ext = extension activity								

Table 9. Word Knowledge Matrix for Chopstick Take

The words we need to understand in order to interact with others are usually the ones that are most important to us.

The extension activity allows students to use the words and their collocations or draw upon the words' lexical field and produce the words' orthographic form in sentences. Table 9 contains the Word Knowledge Matrix for Chopstick Take.

GAME 4: CHANGING REGISTER

One of the most common register activities involves analyzing and rewriting a text—changing language from formal to informal English or vice versa. This activity is a full writing lesson provided by my teacher—trainer colleague Catherine Peck at Chonnam National University.

Level: Lower Intermediate

Materials: Handouts of text (one handout with no underlined words, one handout with underlined words); list of replacement words

Procedure:

1. Distribute text with no underlined words (or show on PowerPoint). Tell students to read the text.
2. Ask students who the author and the intended reader are.
3. Ask students the purpose of the text: Why was it written?
4. Ask students whether the text is written in formal or informal language. Have them justify their answer.
5. Distribute the handout of the text with 20 formal words underlined and a list of 20 informal words that can replace the formal ones.
6. Students match the underlined formal words with their informal counterparts on

the list. Each informal word or expression on the list may only be used once.

7. Students look for other vocabulary words they would like to change.
8. Students select words that can be appropriately abbreviated. Certain informal texts may contain common abbreviations, such as “Rd.” for *Road*, “hr.” for *hour*, or “dept.” for *department*. However, students must be aware that not all words can be abbreviated and that abbreviating too much may make even an informal text appear inauthentic.
9. Students rewrite the text and make the following changes:
 - Replace formal passive constructions with active phrases, using *I* or *we* as personal pronouns.
 - Make contractions (e.g., changing *I am* to *I'm*) where necessary.
 - Reduce repetition by replacing noun phrases with object pronouns such as *this*, *these* and *it*.
 - Replace longer, complex sentences with shorter, simpler ones.

Variation

Use pop songs and have students rewrite the lyrics, changing words from informal to formal register. This makes the activity fun and almost game-like.

Analysis

Assume that most of the work is completed individually. As learners read the text, they recognize the orthographic form of words and silently produce phonological forms in their head. They recall whether certain words are

formal or informal and recognize the overall register of the text. To complete the vocabulary-matching activity, learners may select a word from the text, recognize its orthographic form, silently produce its phonological form, recall its conceptual meaning or synonym, search for the synonym on the list, and then produce the orthographic form on the text, above the word they need to replace. When learners consider which vocabulary words to change, they recognize a word's orthographic form, silently produce its phonological form, and recognize its register; if they determine the word is formal and should be replaced, they try to recall an informal word with the same conceptual meaning. They may then produce its orthographic form over the word they intend to replace. When students search for appropriate words to abbreviate, they recognize a word's orthographic form, silently produce its phonological form, recall its abbreviated orthographic form, and then produce it over the word they intend to replace.

Once learners have selected the words they intend to change, they rewrite the text. They recognize orthographic forms each time they consult the original handout, silently produce phonological forms as they read, then produce orthographic forms, specific parts of speech such as conjunctions, and language associated with an informal register as they create an informal version of the text. Finally, if learners discuss their changes with a partner or the class, they produce phonological forms of the words as they speak and recognize phonological forms as they listen. Table 10 shows the dimensions of word knowledge learners employ in the Changing Register activity.

GAME 5: KEEP OR TOSS?

The words we need to understand in order to interact with others are usually the ones that are most important to us. Some textbooks have the Academic Word List or University Word List rankings beside words at the end of units to give learners an idea of a word's frequency of usage in specific contexts. Though people sharing a learning experience will have to draw from the same vocabulary lists for activities and assessment tasks, their personal context will determine which words they encounter and employ outside class. My colleague Wendy Collins at RMIT University Vietnam suggested an activity, modified from a source she has long since forgotten, that enables learners to prioritize their vocabulary learning by constructing a personalized frequency list that ties words to the concepts that are most relevant to their lives.

Level: All

Materials: Whiteboard and markers; notebooks and pens (PowerPoint or handouts optional)

Procedure:

1. Draw three pictures on the whiteboard: a refrigerator, a backpack, and a rubbish bin.
2. Ask students to discuss this question with their partner: What do you put in the refrigerator, your backpack, and the rubbish bin? Give students a few minutes. Elicit answers.
3. You can tell students that:
 - In the refrigerator, you keep things that you will need a bit later, but not right now.

	Phonological form	Orthographic form	Conceptual meaning	Part of speech	Register	Lexical field	Collocations	Frequency of usage
Recognize	P	X	X	X	X	P		
Recall		X	X	X	X	P		
Produce	P, S	X		X	X	P		
Legend: X = definitely doing; P = possibly doing; S = silent production								

Table 10. Word Knowledge Matrix for Changing Register

- In your backpack, you have things that you will need all the time and things that you take wherever you go.
 - In the rubbish bin, you put things that you do not want or things that you do not think you will ever need.
 - It is the same with words—you need some more than others.
4. Have students open their books and look at the words they have learned during the week.
 5. Have them make three columns in their notebook: Refrigerator, Backpack, and Rubbish Bin.
 6. In the columns, students are to write down words they will use now (Backpack), words they will keep for later (Refrigerator), and words they wish to throw away (Rubbish Bin).
 7. Once they have finished their lists, have them compare with a partner to see which words appear in the different columns. Students discuss and explain their choices with their partner. They can move words to different columns before sharing with the class.

Alternate version

1. Give each student three different-coloured cards or three different-coloured pieces of paper.
2. Have them draw a refrigerator, a

backpack, and a rubbish bin—one drawing per card.

3. Have learners write the words on cards as in Step 6 above and then discuss with a partner.
4. The cards or pieces of paper can be stored in learners’ binders or notebooks and added to later.

Analysis

Assume that all the words are listed at the end of a unit that has just been taught in class. Learners begin the activity by opening their book and reading over the words they have learned that week. As they read down the list, they recognize orthographic forms and silently produce phonological forms. They may recall conceptual meaning if not provided, or recognize conceptual meaning if it is provided. Parts of speech may be provided, and if so, students will recognize them as they read the list. They then produce the orthographic form of the words as they write them in the Refrigerator, Backpack, and Rubbish Bin categories. As stated above, this activity is all about determining *personal* frequency of usage. As learners think about which words to assign to each category, they recall how often they speak or write about a topic. They will then guess or think about how often they will likely employ a word in the future. Once they make that decision, they are recognizing how frequently the word may appear in their life. As they write the words in the categories, they produce their own personalized frequency list. Table 11 contains the Word Knowledge Matrix for the Keep or Toss? game.

	Phonological form	Orthographic form	Conceptual meaning	Part of speech	Register	Lexical field	Collocations	Frequency of usage
Recognize		X	P	P				X
Recall	P (guided)		P					P
Produce	S, P	X (guided)						X
Legend: X = definitely doing; P = possibly doing; S = silent production								

Table 11. Word Knowledge Matrix for Keep or Toss?

Be selective in the games you play and remember to recycle words at least 12 times over one or two weeks using different contexts, activities, and text types.

CONCLUSION

Games offer more than just fun and play, and the analyses suggest that varying vocabulary activities is important if learners are to practice all the aspects of word knowledge. Be selective in the games you play and remember to recycle words at least 12 times over one or two weeks using different contexts, activities, and text types.

The Word Knowledge Matrix is easy to use; analyzing a game may take five to ten minutes and enables teachers to determine which dimensions of word knowledge are being practiced, reflect on their own teaching, and identify areas that require further practice. Granted, it is impossible to know what learners are thinking with 100 percent accuracy, but for each activity I have tried to map out what I believe learners are doing when they are fully on task. Try it with your own favorite vocabulary activity; you may be surprised to discover what learners are practicing. Should you focus solely on the number of dimensions of word knowledge to select your games? No. Do not forget the fun element. Chopstick Take, for example, does not score highly on the Word Knowledge Matrix, but it is great for creating excitement, energizing students, and building class cohesion.

High-energy, fun activities make words more memorable and animate even the most lethargic students (Thornbury 2002). But not all games are created equal. An understanding of what learners are practicing with each activity will help teachers design a more meaningful learning experience. And, should a person of authority frown and say that “Games are just play,” the teacher will be able to smile back and reply that, actually, “Learners are practicing seventeen dimensions of word

knowledge, more than twice as many as they would have practiced had they just been sitting there quietly reading a text.”

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