

The Use of Educational Games in Teaching Vocabulary: A Focus on EFL Young Learners

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Abstract:

Vocabulary acquisition is regarded as one of the difficult aspects in learning a target language. However, using games in teaching vocabulary can facilitate this task for teachers by creating more interesting environments for learners. Research has revealed that using games in vocabulary learning and teaching is beneficial because they improve students' ability to memorize words, encourage students' interaction, develop their communicative skills and enhance students' motivation.

This paper attempts to analyse the impact that language games have on EFL young learners, and how they affect their performance. The study was conducted in an English class of sixth grader students in Hassan Bin Thabet Elementary school, Misurata where English taught as a foreign language, and was guided by four questions: (1) What are the problems that encounter students in learning vocabulary? (2) What are the possible solutions for those problems?

(3) How can games help in improving students' vocabulary? (4) How can teachers use games effectively in the classroom?

In this study, data was collected from the participants (teachers and students) using interviews, pre-test and post-test as research instruments. The pre-test and post-test procedure was conducted for (25) EFL students, while (3) teachers were interviewed. Clearly, out of the findings of the comparison between the two tests before and after using games in teaching vocabulary, the researchers concluded that using games in class could improve students' performance positively.

Keywords: EFL Young Learners, Vocabulary Learning, Language Games.

1. The Problem and Its Background.

Language is one of the most important aspects in life. We use language to express inner thought and emotions, to make sense of complex and abstract thought, to learn to communicate with others, to fulfill our needs, as well as to establish rules and maintain our culture. Oxford (2005) defined language as "The system of communication in speech and writing that it is used by people of a particular country or area" (p.862).

Vocabulary forms the main pillar to language; without adequate number of vocabulary no one can communicate or express ideas effectively. Vocabulary is defined by Oxford (ibid) as "All the words that a person knows or uses to have a wild / limited vocabulary" (p.1707).

Words are the tools we use to think, to express ideas and feelings, and to learn about the world. Words come in two forms, oral and print. Oral vocabulary includes those words that learners recognise and use in speaking or reading orally, while print vocabulary includes those words that learners recognise and use in writing or reading silently.

Knowledge of vocabulary has a serious influence on general language competence. The more words students know, the more secure they feel and the more willing they are to communicate. But how can they best process new words? And how can teachers make it easier for their students to learn new words and retain them in their long-term memories?

As far as teaching is concerned, teaching English to young learners is not easy because English is not their mother tongue and it is a new experience for them. The interest of students in learning English is needed as a key issue in order to make it easier for them to master the language. Therefore, the teacher should apply some interesting techniques to introduce English for his/her learners, so that they become interested and motivated to learn it.

The kind of issues with vocabulary understanding may relate to the difficulty in knowing the exact meaning, spelling or pronunciation. Traditional techniques that most teachers follow may have a negative effect on the students' performance and motivation. A student's vocabulary bank can be enriched when the teacher use selected vocabulary activities and new strategies, such as pictures, drawing, and games.

Hence, there are many ways to introduce English to young learners: one of them is by using games. Oxford (2005) defined games as "An activity or a sport with rules in which people or teams compete against each other" (p.637). It is widely believed that children like playing, so by using games as a teaching method the students can be more interested to learn. Games are not only for fun but also for motivating students to master English fast and easily. Learning by doing is a good way to make them easy to understand English, because in practicing enjoyable activities by themselves, students will find it easy to remember and to learn about the material which is taught by the teacher.

According to some recent studies, (e.g., Bakhsh, 2016; Darfilal, 2015) games affected positively the students' performance and increased their ability in understanding the meaning of the new words. Meanwhile, another study conducted by Agel (2013) revealed that the use of Grammar-Translation Method succeeded in improving students' vocabulary and stimulated their self-confidence. In this study, however, the main aim is to find out how games as a tool improve the sixth graders' vocabulary in Hassan Bin Thabet Elementary School in Misurata, Libya.

1.1 Statement of the Problem.

This study aims to enhance the vocabulary level of the sixth grade students of Hassan Bin Thabet Elementary School in Misurata, Libya, in the academic year 2016-17, and to determine how games can help in improving language learning. Precisely, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the problems that encounter students in learning vocabulary?
2. What are the possible solutions for those problems?
3. How can games help in improving students' vocabulary?
4. How can teachers use games effectively in the classroom?

1.2 Hypothesis.

Based on the reviewed literature and studies, it is hypothesised that using games in teaching and learning vocabulary is effective and successful. In other words, they affect the students' performance positively and make them more interested in learning.

1.3 Significant of the Study.

The findings of the study are significant to:

The Teachers. They can provide more practical classroom activities by applying the suggested teaching methods which will help students increase their vocabulary.

The Students. They will be able to improve their ability for understanding the new words.

The Future Researchers. This study might be used as a reference for other researchers.

1.4 Scope and Delimitation.

Vocabulary is a vital part of any language because without sufficient vocabulary students cannot understand others or express their own ideas. Using games is one of the best techniques that can be utilised in teaching vocabulary. The present study will be conducted in Hassan Bin Thabet Elementary School with students who are enrolled in the sixth grade in the academic year 2016-17. In addition, it aims to investigate the effectiveness of using games in teaching vocabulary for EFL young learners.

1.5 Definition of Terms.

Vocabulary. Is all about words, the words in a language or a special set of words students are trying to learn.

Games. An activity providing entertainment or amusement. **Communicative Language Teaching. (CLT).** An approach to language

teaching methodology that emphasises interaction.

2. Review of Related Literature. 2.1 Vocabulary.

Vocabulary plays a crucial part in language learning process. The primary factor in learning language is the acquisition of vocabulary, and practice in using it. Vocabulary is a basic aspect necessary for mastering a language. A person cannot understand a sentence without knowing what most of the words mean. The lack of vocabulary knowledge affects all the four language skills as vocabulary is considered an essential factor for learning to read, speak, write, and listen.

2.1.1 Importance of Vocabulary.

Vocabulary is the centre of any language because without sufficient vocabulary people cannot understand each other or express their own ideas. Nation (2001) described the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language use as complementary: knowledge of vocabulary enables language use and, conversely, language use leads to an increase in vocabulary knowledge. Second language readers rely heavily on vocabulary knowledge and the lack of the knowledge is the main and the largest obstacle for L2 readers to overcome (Nation, 2011). Research showed that the acquisition of adequate vocabulary is essential for successful second language use because without extensive vocabulary, people will be unable to use the structures and functions that might have been learned for comprehensible communication.

2.1.2 Types of Vocabulary.

Hiebert and Kamil (2005) proposed that words have two forms: first, oral vocabulary is the set of words for which we know the meanings when we speak or read orally. Second, print vocabulary consists of those words for which the meaning is known when we write or read silently. They also defined knowledge of words in at least two forms as follows:

2.1.2.1 Productive Vocabulary.

Productive vocabulary is the set of words that an individual can use when writing or speaking. They are words which well-known, familiar, and used frequently.

2.1.2.2 Receptive or Recognition Vocabulary.

Receptive or recognition vocabulary is the set of words for which an individual can assign their meanings when listening or reading. These words are often less well-known and less frequent in use.

2.1.3 Difficulties in Learning Vocabulary.

Teaching vocabulary successfully needs sequence of steps. The first step is to identify the difficulties which face the students. Thornbury (2004) highlighted some factors that make some words more difficult such as:

2.1.3.1 Meaning: When two words overlap in the meaning, learners often confused between them. The verbs 'make' and 'do' are a case in point: she makes a cake, and she did the housework.

2.1.3.2 Spelling: Sounds vs. spelling are likely to be the cause of errors. Some words are pronounced in a way unlike their written forms. Words that contain silent letters are particularly problematic. For instance, foreign, bored, honest, and the like.

2.1.3.3 Pronunciation: Research showed that words which are difficult to pronounce are more difficult to learn.

2.1.4 Strategies in Teaching Vocabulary.

It is noteworthy to mention that vocabulary items are imparted mostly by translation: a list of words with their translation at the beginning of the lesson, or the translation of the content having either new words or glossaries at the very end. This is an erroneous practice as it tends to a state of confusion for the learners. There are some key strategies to detect the information and meaning of a new word such as:

2.1.4.1 Self-defining Context: Mehta (2009) stated that the context makes the situation clear, and this in turn clarifies the meaning of the new words. This practice saves time, develops an intensive reading habit, and allows better understanding.

2.1.4.2 Writing the Word: Writing the word enables the class to write the new word while the auditory memory is fresh, even if the objective is only to read. Writing or copying the word from the board will give the learners a chance to understand the grammatical aspect of the word such as noun, verb, adverb, or adjective (Mehta, 2009).

2.1.4.3 Games: Games can be found to give practice in all the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), for many types of communications (e.g. encouraging, criticizing, agreeing, and explaining). Harmer (1991) maintained that:

“Games are a vital part of a teacher’s equipment, not only for language practice they provide, but also for the therapeutic effect they have. They can be used at any stage of a class to

provide an amusing and challenging respite from other classroom activity and are especially useful at the end of a long day to send students away feeling cheerful about their English class" (p.101).

2.1.5 The importance of Games in Teaching Vocabulary.

Lewis & Bedson (1999) argued that through games young learners could interact, discover, and experiment with their surroundings. Using games not only enhances students’ motivation, but also provides an incentive to use the language.

Harmer (2008) added that in order to have the ability to speak English fluently, young learners need to have the ability to know the language features and to process information immediately. Therefore, young learners must practice through variety and appropriate techniques that aid their information process and simultaneous operations of the language.

Games that involve learners to take part in a healthy competition could help them learn more without forcing their participation. Thus, choosing the right game can support healthy competition in the classroom (Vernon, 2009).

2.1.6 The Implementations of Vocabulary Teaching Using Games.

There are some steps that must be kept in mind when implementing games to teach vocabulary: (1) Grouping the students; (2) Giving explanation and instruction about the game; and (3) Considering time and material.

2.1.6.1 Kinds of Effective Games that can be Used in the Classroom. Teaching vocabulary to young learners needs special and creative techniques in order to make them interested and motivated. The following are some examples:

Odd one out: is a standard vocabulary exercise in which the learners have to say which word in a list of words is different from the others.

The Dictionary Game: The Dictionary Game, also known as Fictionary or simply Dictionary, is a word game in which the player guesses the definition of an obscure word (or the word of an obscure definition).

A-Z pictures: Using a picture with many elements then, the students attempt to find an object in the picture that begins with each of the letters A through Z.

Charades: The teacher writes a word on individual index card, and divides the class into two teams. Have one individual from each team to act out the same word. The team that correctly guesses the word first scores a point.

It is worth mentioning here that all the games mentioned above were used by the researchers in this study in the course of teaching vocabulary to the participants as part of the research instrument (see section 3.3).

2.1.7 Using Games to Improve Students' Communicative Ability.

Unlike the traditional method of learning and teaching, in a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, learners are required to take part in a number of meaningful activities with different tasks. This is to improve learners' communicative

competence by encouraging them to be a part of the lessons themselves. Richards (2006) referred to this approach as a way that can enable learners to manage their vocabulary meaning and develop their communicative skills at the same time.

Many experts of language teaching methodology also agree that playing games is a good way to learn vocabulary, especially in CLT classes. With the use of games, the teacher can create various contexts in which students have to use the language to communicate, exchange information and express their own opinions.

2.2 Related Studies.

In a research done by Bakhsh (2016) in order to show how much teaching English vocabulary to young learners in Elementary School in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia can be effective by using games, results indicated that games were effective tools when devised to explain vocabularies and they make it easier to remember their meanings. Any game could be effective when it is used suitably to the topic and is controlled by wise and skilled teacher.

Similarly, the current study is an attempt to investigate whether games have any influence on improving students' performance and make them interested to learn more vocabulary. In addition, this study will also deal with young learners in an Elementary School.

Moreover, Darfilal (2015) conducted a study which aimed to see to what extent language games are helpful for learning new methods and using them. The research participants were the third grader in an Elementary School in Algeria. The finding of the study revealed that students learnt nearly all the new words in the syllabus. Moreover, they were highly motivated and interested in the activities performed.

Similar to the above mentioned study, the present study will impute the successfulness of using games in teaching vocabulary to young learners; however, the current study will deal with sixth graders as participants. It will also attempt to show the possible effectiveness of using games in teaching vocabulary ,and how it increases students' confidence and motivation.

3. Methods.

3.1 Research Design.

The present study employs the mixed methods to describe the effects of using games in learning vocabulary. Greswell (2012) stated that mixed methods

are the stages of collecting, analysing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in one or more studies.

In this study, quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques are used. The quantitative data are needed in order to identify the common problems that students faced in learning vocabulary. In addition, qualitative data are required to investigate how games may affect learning vocabulary.

3.2 Participants and Settings.

The participants were the sixth grader students, who had an English course in the academic year 2016-2017. The number of students who participated in this study was 25 (13 females and 12 males). Moreover, three teachers who took part in teaching this stage were interviewed. This research was conducted in Hassan Bin Thabet Elementary School in Misurata, Libya.

3.3 Research Instrument.

The researchers used both tests and interview (see Appendices A, B, C) in order to collect data for this research. Students were tested: they were asked some questions designed by the researchers (complete, match and dictation questions). After the test, they were taught vocabulary by using games for two weeks and a second test is conducted in order to identify whether games have improved their vocabulary learning or not.

In addition, the researchers interviewed the teachers of the sixth grader to identify their opinions about using games in learning vocabulary. The teachers were asked some questions about the teaching methods and the syllabus (see Appendix A).

3.4 Procedure.

3.4.1 Data Collection.

A letter is signed by the Head of the English Department to ask for permission to conduct the research in Hassan Bin Thabet Elementary School (see Appendix D). The researchers interviewed three teachers to gather the needed information and also to know how students responded to their technique in teaching vocabulary.

Furthermore, two tests were designed and given to the students who took place in this study. Students were given a suitable time to answer the questions.

3.5 Ethical Consideration.

The participants were informed prior to conducting the investigation that the purpose of the test was totally academic and confidential. They were also informed that their works would not affect their level in the course. Also, no personal information would be shown.

3.6 Data Analysis.

The researchers of the current study used the quantitative data which was collected from the tests and the qualitative data which was collected from the interview. Objective analysis was used with the qualitative data, while the percentage was used with the quantitative data to describe the participants' performance.

4. Results and Discussion.

The tendency of showing the results is to help the readers realise the effectiveness of games in teaching vocabulary , and to investigate the participants' attitudes towards using games and to know whether they are effective in teaching and learning vocabulary or not.

After implementing the strategy of using games to teach and learn vocabulary, and having collected the data using interviews and tests, it was revealed that:

- The use of games in teaching and learning vocabulary seemed to enhance the word memorisation.
- The use of games in teaching and learning vocabulary seemed to encourage students' interaction and performance.
- The use of games in teaching and learning vocabulary seemed to increase students' motivation.

This was clearly noticeable throughout the classes and from the percentage of the students results in both, the pre-test and the post-test represented according to the charts in the quantitative data.

4.1 The Quantitative Data.

Quantitative data is numerical and acquired through counting or measuring, for instance, test results. The quantitative data in this study, were the results of the students tests represented in a table and two charts.

Table 1. Results of pre-test and post-test examination after the experiment finished

No.	Pre-test score	Post-test score	Difference
1	14	20	6
2	12	24	12
3	7	13	6
4	19	23	4
5	8	15	7
6	20	24	4
7	16	18	2
8	8	23	15
9	24	24	0
10	5	20	15
11	8	15	7
12	3	18	15
13	2	14	12
14	6	15	9
15	14	15	1
16	0	12	12
17	1	10	9
18	3	7	4
19	8	16	8
20	6	23	17
21	7	11	4
22	1	18	17
23	4	9	5
24	4	21	17
25	19	24	5
Mean	8.76	17.28	--

From Table 1 above, mean of the pre-test score is 8.76 and mean of the post-score is 17.28. The 3 most different score between pre-test and post-test score are numbers 20, 22 and 24. The 3 medium different score between pre-test and post-test score are numbers 2, 13 and 16. The lowest different score between pre-test and post-test score are numbers 7, 9 and 15.

The following chart (Figure 1) indicates the results of the students in the pre-test, while they were taught vocabulary using the traditional techniques.

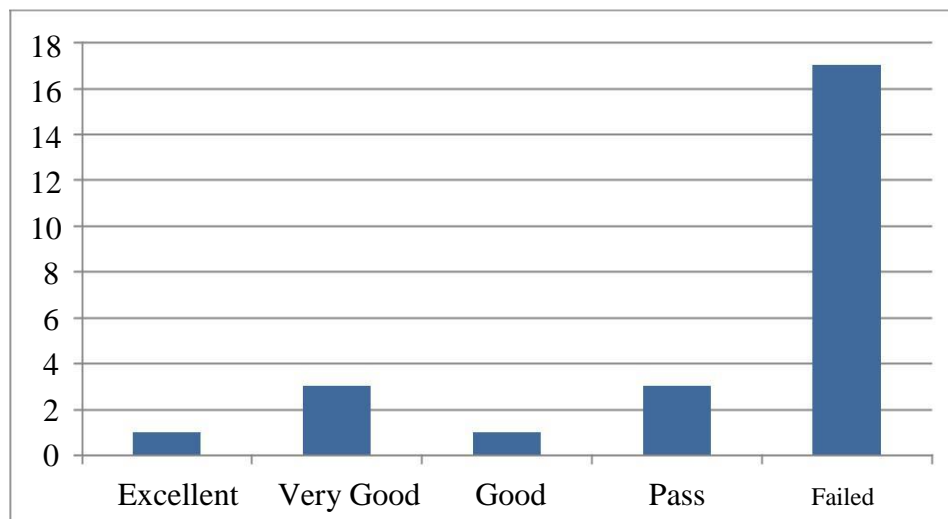


Figure 1: Students' results in the pre-test

As the chart above shows, only one student (i.e., 4% of the students) performed perfectly well (i.e., excellent), 16% of the students scored either very good or good grades, 12% of the students barely passed the test, while the majority (68%) of the participants failed the test.

Hence, according to the pre-test results, the percentage of the participants who do not perform well is the highest one. This is related to the lack of using games in teaching, or to the use of the traditional techniques such as: grammar translation method which was followed by most teachers (see section 4.2.1). It is clear that this technique was not effective and did not animate students' mental ability.

As soon as the researchers finished scoring the pre-test, they started arranging classes of vocabulary teaching using games for the selected participants according to a two-week preplanned timetable: five sessions a week— 45 minutes each. This means that participants underwent a total of around 7.5 hours of intensive programme of vocabulary teaching using games. For example, when the class began, researchers asked learners to rearrange their chairs into groups of four or five. Then, researchers told and reviewed the playing rules clearly before playing the game. After the game finished, researchers gave a reward appropriately to the winner. These processes could facilitate the class; otherwise, the game might not be successful.

The next bar chart (Figure 2) represents the percentage of the students' performance in the post-test, (i.e., after they were taught vocabulary by using games).

Figure 2: Students' results in the post-test

Based on the results shown in the chart above, it is clear that students have become better in terms of vocabulary learning: 32% of the students did excellent, also 20% achieved either very good or good results. In addition, the percentage of the students who performed poor in this test has decreased from 68% (in the pre-test) to only 16% (in the post-test). In other words, this time the majority (84%) of the subjects passed the post-test, and out of this percentage, 48% did some excellent or very good work.

Those results give us insight that games affect the students' performance in a good way and motivate them.

4.2 The Qualitative Data.

As it was mentioned in chapter 3, the qualitative data might include any information that is not numerical in nature. Some of its major categories are: direct observation, written documents, and interview.

4.2.1 The Interview.

The researchers interviewed three different teachers who taught the sixth grade. For the purpose of the study, the topics that were discussed in the interviews with the teachers are presented as follows:

4.2.1.1 The Methods Used in the Class.

Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 (henceforth, T1 and T2) said that due to the poor facilities in the school, they were using the traditional method. While teacher 3 (henceforth, T3) said that both traditional and modern methods were used in her classes, but she explained that time limitations might have prevented her from playing educational games with her students.

4.2.1.2 The Issues that Students Face in Learning Vocabulary.

Both teachers (T1 and T3) approved that the problems appeared clearly with the memorisation of the correct spelling. T1, for instance, argues that, "as much as they learn more vocabularies they became more confused with the spellings" (sic), whereas T2 thought that the problems were related to pronunciation.

4.2.1.3 The Proposed Solutions to those Issues.

The answers of the three teachers were convergent: they thought that the teacher should use creative techniques to help the students, and students should practice more.

4.2.1.4 Teachers' Position on Using Games.

All teachers confirmed the importance of using games and how they were effective in teaching. For instance, T1 stated that, "Of course, the games improve so much, and students are interested in games and like it" (sic). Moreover, T2 said, "Yes, it improves the students' vocabulary performance". Whereas T3 added, " games are very important and help to save information".

5. Conclusion and Recommendations.

5.1 Conclusion.

Using games has become a popular technique applied by many teachers in the classroom. Many sources list the advantages of the use of games in vocabulary learning and teaching. We as researchers have made it clear and could find the answer to the research question: Do games help students learn vocabulary effectively? After the students went through the pre-test, the performance was poor as many of them had a low percentage which indicated that the traditional techniques were not effective. However, the results of the post-test indicated how games were effective as a technique for learning vocabulary, and how they motivated the students: this was clearly noticeable from the performance of the students in the post-test.

Moreover, all of the teachers who were interviewed in this study support strongly the idea of using games and confirmed its importance in helping young learners learn new vocabulary. This goes in line with Gillespie's quotation (as cited in Kalaycioglu, 2011):

Educational games are used frequently due to their benefits. They give students responsibility and the opportunity of being active physically and mentally, they are student-centered rather than teacher-centered, they easily grab children's attention, increase their interaction and are fun to play in the formal academic process, and socialize students. In addition, students gain or develop many skills such as taking turns, working individually and working with others as a team toward a common goal (p.43).

To conclude, using games as a tool in teaching inspire students and encourage them to learn more vocabulary. In other words, by using vocabulary games students can use the language more communicatively.

5.2 Recommendations.

Although it cannot be said that games are always interesting and easier to cope with for everyone, an overwhelming majority of students find games relaxing and motivating. Based on the findings of this study, the following are recommended:

- 1- This study investigates the positive effectiveness of games in the achievements of students on vocabulary learning at the elementary stage of education (i.e., sixth grader). It is recommended, therefore, that further research to be conducted on other stages of education such as the preparatory stage to see whether games have a similar impact on their vocabulary learning.
- 2- Games lead to better motivation on the part of the students to learn the language; therefore, elementary schools may specify classes for vocabulary learning and provide games for teaching.
- 3- A game must be more than just fun, it should give students a chance to learn, practice, or review specific language material.
- 4- Games should encourage students to focus on the use of language rather than on the language itself.
- 5- The effect of using modern technology in teaching and learning has become obvious in many fields of education. Therefore, taking the advantage of mobile-assisted language learning applications such as WhatsApp and Kahoot, learners can improve their domain of vocabulary and have fun at the same time.
- 6- By expanding their repertoire and looking for new ideas to reach their learners, teachers not only become more successful, but they also help their students to become more successful learners. It is, therefore, essential to remember that there are many methods to learn vocabulary, and helping learners to find the one which works best is the key to setting them on the road to success.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions.

- Q1- What do you think about the English syllabus of 6th grade?
 Q2- What are the methods that you follow in your classes?
 Q3- What is the vocabulary's level of the students?
 Q4- What are the problems that students face in learning vocabulary?
 Q5- What are the possible solutions for those problems in your opinion?
 Q6- What is your opinion about using games in teaching vocabulary?
 Q7- Do you think games are effective or not?

Appendix B: Test 1.

Q1-Complete the following:

- 1-T.....n 2-Va.....ey 3-.....mera 4-Fi.....ing
 8-
 5-.....cycle 6-rad..... 7-..... sert mounta

Q2-Match:

- 1-CD levision.
 2-Fax mputer
 3-Mo llage
 4-Co sic
 5-Vi torbike
 6-Ri player
 7-Mu ver
 8-Te machine

Q3-Dictation:

- 1-..... 2-..... 3-..... 4-.....
 5-..... 6-..... 7-..... 8-.....

Appendix C: Test 2.

Q1-Complete the following:

- 1- Swi.....ing. 2-Vi.....age. 3-Motorbi..... 4-Go.... bed
 7- 8-
 5- Fax mach.... 6- GetC..... y Cy..... ing

Q2-Match:

- 1-Fi ading
 2-Te opping
 3-Re shing
 4-Sh tching
 5-Wa mera
 6-Fo levision
 7-Ta otball
 8- Ca ble

Q3-

Dictation:

- 4-
 1- 2-..... 3-.....
 5- 6-..... 7-..... 8-.....