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Seeing words differently: using Dobble for vocabulary learning

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🎴 Item Details

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🔑 Key points

- **Name of ludic object:** Dobble/Spot it!
- **Type/genre/theme:** Card game
- **Intended audience age 👨‍👧:** 6+
- **Intended audience proficiency 💬:** CEFR A1 - C1
- **Typical time to play ⌛:** ± 5 minutes
- **Number of players 👫:** 2-8 players

Microblog synopsis

Using Dobble in the language classroom transforms a simple party game into an engaging vocabulary activity. Customisable and low-pressure, it promotes repetition, confidence, and active participation while making language learning genuinely fun.
#Dobble #EFL #GBLL #LLP

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Why Dobble?

I first learned about Dobble at a friend's place and immediately liked it for its simplicity and energy. It is a fast-paced, five-minute party card game that relies more on observation than on thinking, just quick reactions and attention to detail. With up to eight players at a time, everyone can join in, allowing all participants to be involved and have fun together.

A few years ago, I discovered that it was possible to create customised Dobble sets online for free using generators that are easy to find online (see Figure 1). Also, some language teachers share themed decks adapted for classroom use. Since then, I occasionally use customised versions of the game with my students, most often at lower proficiency levels (A1 to B1), but also as a warm-up or revision activity with more advanced learners. The game never fails to engage them: rounds are short, students always have fun, and they participate enthusiastically while reinforcing vocabulary in a playful way. One reason for this high level of engagement is that, unlike other classroom vocabulary activities, Dobble keeps all players active at the same time. Because nobody has to wait for their turn, learners remain engaged and repeatedly exposed to the target vocabulary throughout each round. Although the main objective is vocabulary familiarisation, repeatedly saying words aloud can also help students become more aware of pronunciation, especially when teachers model or correct unfamiliar words during gameplay.

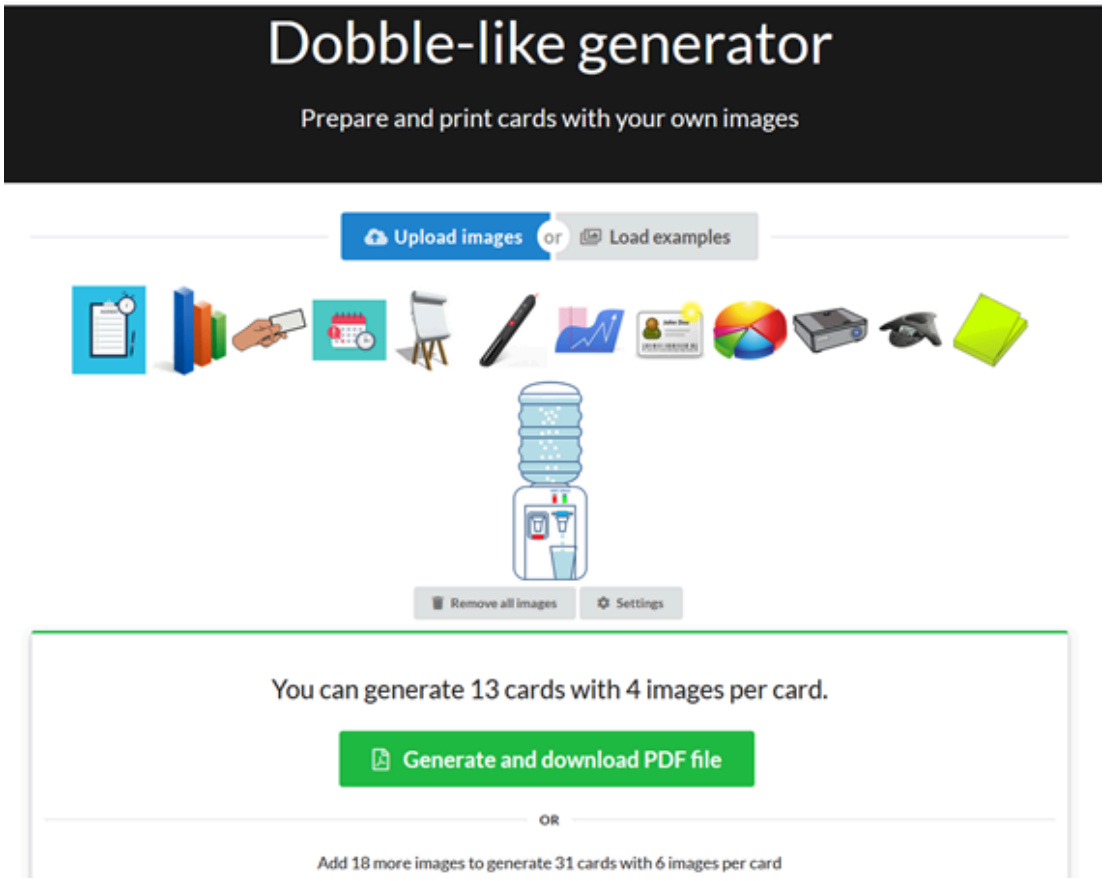

Figure 1: Online Dobble generator used to create customised decks

Rules and gameplay

Dobble is a visual matching game played with a deck of fifty-five circular cards. Each card includes eight symbols (objects, animals, shapes, or icons), with a single matching image linking any pair of cards. The game can be

played with two to eight players. In the classic version of the game, each player receives one card, and a central pile is placed face up on the table. All players then try to find the one symbol their card has in common with the card on the pile. As soon as a player spots the matching symbol, they must call out its name aloud and take the card. A new card is then revealed, and the game continues until the pile is empty. The player with the most cards at the end of the round wins. Because players usually play several rounds, they encounter the target vocabulary repeatedly throughout the activity. A typical round lasts about five minutes, and because everyone plays simultaneously, it keeps all players focused and engaged.

Figure 2: Dobble

The pedagogical value of Dobble

When used in the language classroom, Dobble can support vocabulary learning through repeated exposure, active participation, and customisable content. Its rapid visual-matching mechanic promotes repeated exposure to target vocabulary in a non-threatening format, helping learners recognise, retrieve, and remember words more efficiently. In customised classroom versions, students can also be provided with a glossary to support unfamiliar vocabulary during gameplay. As deHaan (2019) notes, game-based learning becomes effective when the game is purposefully integrated with linguistic goals and guided teacher mediation. This principle applies naturally to Dobble, since teachers can select target vocabulary for each deck and design follow-up activities that reinforce language use beyond the game itself. Research by Kneoh and Miura (2021) supports this approach: their use of a memory game to teach idioms showed that playful, low-anxiety formats encourage learners to engage more confidently with the target language and help them retain new language, benefits that align closely with Dobble's pedagogical potential.

In practice, one of Dobble's greatest strengths lies in how easily it can be adapted. Online generators such as the *Dobble-like generator* (MacRusher, n.d.) make it possible to design custom sets at no cost, allowing teachers to tailor the vocabulary to specific lesson goals or thematic units. The game's flexibility extends to scale as well:

depending on class time and learning objectives, sets can range from 7 to 133 cards (for example, 7 cards with 3 images each, 13 with 4, 31 with 6, 57 with 8, or 133 with 12). For example, smaller sets with fewer images per card work better for beginner learners or shorter revision activities, while larger sets make the game more challenging. Free resources such as Pixabay provide a wide selection of copyright-free images that can be used to design each deck. Because of this adaptability, teachers can create Dobble versions that fit any learning context, from small-group vocabulary review sessions to larger, more competitive class activities. Combined with the game's simultaneous play, which keeps all learners focused and engaged, these customised decks provide repeated, meaningful exposure to new vocabulary in a dynamic, low-stakes environment.

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Adapting Dobble for the language classroom

One example of how Dobble can be adapted for language teaching comes from a customised set I created to scaffold vocabulary for the interactive fiction game *Help! My Vacuum Cleaner is Broken!* (Admiral Jota, 2001). The goal was to familiarise students with key lexical items they would later encounter in the game. Using an online generator (Macrusher, n.d.), I designed a set of 31 cards containing six images each. Because the Dobble generator requires a specific number of images to produce a full deck, I needed to upload 31 different images to create 31 cards with six images on each. I selected mostly key lexical items from the game while adding a few familiar words to complete the set. I sourced the images online through a Google image search, prioritising copyright-free visuals suitable for classroom use. I also created a glossary to accompany the game, which students could consult when they were unsure of a particular image's meaning. Both resources are freely available on itch.io (van der Velden, 2024).

Figure 3: Customised Dobble deck

In class, I used this customised Dobble activity after a short introduction to interactive fiction and its conventions. Students played Dobble in small groups of three to four, a size that maintains the game's competitive energy while ensuring everyone has multiple opportunities to say and hear the target vocabulary. This stage of the lesson lasted approximately fifteen minutes, including setup, gameplay, and a short post-activity discussion. After playing Dobble, students proceeded to play *Help! My Vacuum Cleaner is Broken!* independently. In my experience, this vocabulary-scaffolding phase helps reduce initial hesitation among learners who are unfamiliar with interactive fiction. Because they recognised much of the vocabulary from the Dobble activity, they were able to focus more confidently on navigating the game and understanding its text, rather than being hindered by unfamiliar lexical items.

This approach demonstrates how a simple, customisable game like Dobble can effectively prepare learners for a more complex, text-based task. By blending playful repetition with purposeful pre-teaching, teachers can help students build lexical confidence that supports comprehension and engagement in subsequent activities.

Dobble can also be adapted for more advanced learners and professional communication contexts. In a Business English course using *Business Benchmark Advanced* (Brook-Hart, 2007), I created a customised Dobble set as a warm-up activity for a unit on chairing meetings. The set included visually recognisable meeting-related vocabulary such as *agenda*, *deadline*, *pie chart*, *projector*, and *speakerphone*. Students played several short rounds in small groups before moving on to the textbook activities, which focused on managing meetings, inviting opinions, maintaining focus, and summarising discussions. In this context, Dobble functioned primarily as a rapid vocabulary-retrieval activity, helping students activate key lexical items relevant to the lesson topic before engaging in more complex communicative tasks. The Business English Dobble deck and accompanying glossary are also available on itch.io (van der Velden, 2025).

Adapting Dobble for other contexts

While the examples in this paper come from a university EFL context, Dobble can be adapted across age groups, proficiency levels, and learning environments. Its visual, fast-paced gameplay supports lower-level learners in acquiring and practising basic vocabulary, while more advanced learners can use customised decks for specialised terminology, revision, or warm-up tasks. Because the game relies on simple visual matching rather than complex rules, teachers working in different languages and educational contexts can easily tailor the content to their own learners' needs.

As Reinhardt and Sykes (2014) note, game-based learning principles are not tied to specific technologies or settings but to the ways in which games engage players in meaningful, goal-oriented interaction. By aligning Dobble's mechanics with linguistic or communicative aims, as suggested by deHaan (2019), the game's simplicity becomes a strength: it allows for seamless adaptation to varied cultural and curricular contexts without losing its motivational appeal.

In this sense, Dobble demonstrates how small-scale, low-preparation games can serve as effective tools for teachers worldwide, bridging linguistic, technological, and institutional differences.

Conclusion

Dobble illustrates how even simple game mechanics can support vocabulary familiarisation, retrieval, and engagement when thoughtfully integrated into broader classroom practice. As both a playful warm-up and a scaffold for more complex communicative tasks, it bridges the gap between engagement and linguistic development. In the vocabulary-preparation activity preceding *Help! My Vacuum Cleaner is Broken!*, Dobble provided students with repeated, low-stress exposure to target words, enabling smoother progression into a demanding reading-based game. In a Business English context, the game also functioned effectively as a warm-up activity, supporting vocabulary activation before more complex communicative tasks. Together, these examples highlight the pedagogical value of play not as a distraction from learning, but as a dynamic means of reinforcing and extending it. When teachers align a game's structure with specific linguistic goals, as deHaan (2019) recommends, simple tools like Dobble can enhance motivation, foster confidence, and promote active vocabulary use in ways that traditional drills often cannot. Ultimately, the success of such activities depends less on the game's complexity than on the teacher's creativity and purposeful use in the classroom.

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