



THE ROLE OF GAMES IN TEACHING ENGLISH

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Abstract

This article discusses the importance of teaching English and the role of games in teaching young learners. It discusses the problems of teaching English to young learners in educational organizations. Some different kinds of qualitative research methods; group games, physical games, scavenger hunt games, activities like "Simon says" were conducted in this study. Multi-method triangulation is used throughout in this study. It was determined from the data that games should be employed in second language learning classrooms in terms of providing an atmosphere for EFL learners in which there are fun, motivation and high learning performance.

Keywords: individual learning, cooperative learning, creative thinking, playing games, imitation games, approach.

Introduction

Today teaching has changed a lot over the past years. Once it was all about learners being passive and listening in the classroom, but today learners are usually much more active in the classroom, and what better way to be active than by playing games.

The national curriculum in foreign languages in Uzbekistan talks about the importance of keeping teaching methods diverse in order to light and sustain interest among students. Teachers can help sustain diversity in a variety of ways, for example by using activities that require learners to be creative in thinking and emphasizing individual learning and cooperative learning equally. A more specific way that teachers can use in order to keep diversity within the classroom is to not be afraid of using games as a teaching method along with other methods. According to the national curriculum games can be a good teaching method and games, such as role playing games, imitation games, theatrical expression and problem solving activities are especially fitting for all stages of language learning.

Howard Gardner, whose theories that humans have eight intelligences, claims that when exploring a certain topic in school it can be approached in 6 different ways in order to maximize the chances of reaching all students in the classroom. One of these ways is "the personal way", where the ultimate goal is to see if it is possible to approach a specific



topic by using, for example, role play, or other interactions. In addition, Armstrong suggests board games as a teaching strategy that might suit learners with interpersonal intelligence because they provide an excellent setting for interaction between students. There are a number of reasons that games deserve a place in the language classroom. First of all, they are fun, which is extremely important, because they can help activate learners who may have been inactive before, due to lack of interest. Keeping learners active is vital because teachers will never be able to actually teach learners anything unless they can get them to participate in their own learning process. Second, games also play a big part in helping participants build relationships, and to feel equal. Playing games in the classroom can also help create a friendly and positive atmosphere where seat arrangement can differ from game to game, and thus cause diversity from the norm which can be extremely helpful in keeping an exciting learning environment.

Third, the reason most people want to learn a language is to be able to use it in real situations, for example when travelling. Games can be a very good way to practice this skill because they can easily be used to reenact various situations from real life and provide students with practice in their fluency. Also, by using games in the classroom the teacher is giving his learners a bigger role, and he himself is stepping out of the frontline which is a positive thing because it allows learners to take on more responsibility. Also that allows learners to do more on their own, and that can very well result in an increase in their confidence level.

Fourth, language students need to be exposed to the language in a variety of situations, which is a need games can fulfill. Language learners also need to be ready to take on the experience, keeping their minds open and being willing participants again, games make this possible.

Fifth, language learners need to be emotionally involved, meaning they need to feel something while they are exposed to the language. Strong emotions, such as happiness, excitement, amusement and suspense allow students to feel positively about their learning situation and are therefore likely to have a positive effect on language learning. Sixth, games are good for shy learners and learners with low confidence, and that applies specifically when playing takes place in smaller groups because then they get a chance to speak in front of fewer audience instead of having to express themselves in front of the whole class. Also it is sometimes easier to open up and forget the shyness when playing a game because the atmosphere is not as serious and more emphasis is put on fluency rather than grammatical correctness.

Seventh, games can be a good strategy when teaching various subjects because they are very likely to spark interest amongst students. They can be used with learners of all ages, and when they are used with other teaching methods they create diversity which is ideal



for school work. A study that was undertaken in Iceland in 2006 shows clearly the need for diversity in schools. Many participants in that study complained about the lack of diversity, and that they wanted more of it in order for their learning to become more fun and progressive in their school.

Finally, using games in the classroom is important because many children do not get enough opportunity to play during their free time, which can be traced to the rapid changes in our society. Cities are getting bigger and traffic is getting heavier which means that more and more parents are hesitant to let their children play outside. Also passive activities such as watching television, or the computer screen are seen as being more exciting than actually physically playing, so today the sight of children playing various games in groups outside is becoming much more rare than it was 10, 15 or 20 years ago. This is not a good development, and it can have several bad consequences for our society. One possible consequence is that the lack of movement can cause health problems because even though not all games are physical some certainly are another consequence this change might have is decreased social skills because, according to Piaget, children's games reflect society and that by playing games children learn many of society's rules and regulations.

Even though games are usually started with the aim of having fun, they can sometimes end badly, for example if someone gets carried away with all the fun and says or does something that hurts someone else or his feelings. When games are used in the classroom the teacher must keep this in mind and control the game in the right way. Also he or she must make sure that every participant has a positive experience because the classroom must not become a place where students feel vulnerable or picked on in. Another thing that is important to acknowledge is the fact that not all games fit the classroom environment, or all groups of students, and that it can be hard finding the right game. In fact, it is good to keep in mind when selecting a game that a recipe for a good educational game is one that balances both fun and challenge.

Another point teachers need to keep in mind is to choose wisely when it comes to selecting a game to use in the classroom because; although one game might be perfect for one teacher or a particular group of learners it can be terrible for another teacher or group of students.

Materials

First of all, the teacher has to look at the group that will be participating in the game and he or she then has to set out a goal for the group which the game should aim towards. Selecting an appropriate game for a specific group of students who are working towards a specific goal can be tricky because, for example, they need to make sure that the game



is relevant to the subject, that it fits their students' age and, teachers must remember not to select a game that is too complicated because that might result in a loss of interest amongst the students, or even defeat.

Also teachers must make sure they explain the rules of the game in detail and that all instructions are clear before starting the game. During the game it is important for the teachers to observe and be ready to help, but without unnecessarily interrupting the flow of the game because that might affect the fluency, which could result in discouraging students from participating. After the game, it is a good idea to have some sort of a follow up activity planned because it gives the learners' time to reflect upon the game and how it turned out.

It is important for teachers to know that augmenting a game is allowed and can certainly be necessary in some cases. More difficult games can be made easier so they become a challenge instead of too hard for less skilled or younger students and vice versa.

Although games can usually be modified to suit learners of various ages, there are certain characteristics in games that appeal to children within specific age groups. For children age 6-8 repetition is very common in games, rules are often few, and the games usually do not take a very long time. When it comes to children age 9-11 they have patience for longer games, which often include much more suspense. Also when children reach this age they start to be able to augment the games themselves, for example to bend the rules to make the game more suited for their group. For children older than 12 games are often much more planned and they often emphasize teams and teamwork.

Games are used in teaching can be divided into categories in many different ways. One way of dividing educational games is by categorizing them into groups depending on their model. Ingvar Sigurgeirsson has divided games into the following categories: games for dividing larger groups into smaller groups, introduction-games, group games, physical games, scavenger hunt games, educational games, theoretical expression games, drawing- and coloring games, educational card games, word games, story games and question games.

Another way of dividing educational games is by categorizing them into co-operative games and competitive games. Although competitive games can be a useful way to get some students interested and to maintain their focus, co-operative games, which revolve around working together towards reaching a specific goal, can be an excellent way to foster the skill of working with others. In co-operative games the emphasis is not on winning or losing, and as a result nobody should have to suffer trauma to his or her self-confidence which could lead to better results in the learning process.

Educational games can be categorized in many other ways, for example dividing games into groups depending on which age group they fit could be convenient, also a division



into writing-, reading-, speaking-, and listening games could be a good idea. Some games will always fit into many categories, which can make categorizing games a complex project.

Games for dividing larger groups into smaller groups within the group: games for dividing larger group into smaller groups, there are games that can be used prior to some group activity in order to divide the whole group into smaller groups. A great game that fits into this category is the game "Group dividing by miming" and it goes like this: The teacher has prepared notes with a certain role written on them. If the teacher wants to have 4 students in a group he has made 4 notes of each role, for example 4 notes that say "teacher" or "clown". The second step is to give each student a note and remember to tell the students that they have to make sure that nobody besides them sees their note. Once everybody has gotten a note then they can begin acting out their roles and while they are doing so they must watch the others in order to figure out who is acting the same role as them. Once they have figured that out they will have created their groups. An activity like this can also be very good because it "breaks the ice" and prepares the students for the group work.

This category might include games like: "Searching for people" where students have to walk around the classroom and find students that have for example lived on a farm, been to Spain or eaten Mexican food and of course they would have to use the target language in order to get the necessary information. Also a good game in this category is the game "Stating the names" where students sit in a circle and one by one they introduce themselves, but the only catch is that before saying their own name they always have to repeat the names of the students who have already introduced themselves, and as the game progresses it gets harder and harder for students to memorize all the names.

Methods

In order to make this game more fitting in a language classroom the teacher could ask the student to add something they like that starts with the same letter as their name, for example "my name is Anna and I love apples". Another idea could be to have students add adjectives with the same letter as their names, for example "Sigga super" or "Anna awesome" and that way it teaches adjectives as well. For kids whose names begin with special Icelandic letters, the rules would have to be adjusted to some degree. A good idea could be to allow them to find adjectives that begin with the same letter as the second, or even third one in their name.

Group games - an example of a group game is the game "Fruit basket" which emphasizes listening, memory and reflexes, all of which are good and necessary skills to possess. The rules of this game are that participants sit in a circle and they all get a name of a certain



fruit to “be”. One participant does not have a chair and has to stand in the middle. He then calls out a name of a fruit, for example an orange, and then all the students who are oranges have to stand up and switch seats. The one in the middle has to try and “steal” a seat while the others are switching and if he succeeds someone else will be left alone in the middle and gets the task of calling out the name of a new fruit. This game could easily be augmented to suit different situations or to train some other vocabulary just by using other categories of words, for example clothes, names of relatives, or different types of food instead of fruits.

Physical games - an example of a physical game is “Walking the line” where participants have to walk a line and perform various types of tasks at the same time, for example walking backwards, or balancing a book on their heads (Ingvar Sigurgeirsson.. In order to make this game more fitting in a language classroom the teacher should give the instructions in the target language, for example “everybody has to walk backwards”. Another example of a physical game could be the game “Simon says”, where someone plays Simon and gives the others orders, for example “Simon says jump” or “Simon says clap your hands”. I categorize this game as a physical game because of the fact that the Simon’s orders are usually physical.

Activities like “Simon says” fits into a teaching method called Total Physical Response (TPR) in which languages is taught by allowing students to observe and take their time to understand the language before having to speak it. TPR is thought to be a good teaching method for learning a foreign language for two reasons. The first one is that it is thought to reduce the stress level of learning a language and therefore making the learning more enjoyable, and the second one is that it resembles the learning of children’s native language, where children are exposed to the language for many months before starting to talk.

Scavenger hunt games - scavenger hunt games are especially fitting in the language classroom because the clues can be written in the target language, which forces the participants to read and fellow team members to listen and test their understanding. Also within the scavenger hunt could be puzzles, which the students would have to solve, such as crossword puzzles, word searches and questions. The possibilities are almost endless and teachers are only bound by the limits of their own creativity.

Educational games - the “mail game” where participants have to deliver “mail” and make sure it gets to the right places works as an excellent example of an educational game. For languages a good idea would be to work around a theme of a certain place, such as the home. The first thing the teacher has to do is to make the envelopes and the “mail”. The envelopes should be labeled with a specific genre, which in this example would be “kitchen”, “bedroom”, “bathroom” etc. The mail should then be letters with words on



them that fit into specific envelopes, for example the word “knife” or the word “refrigerator” would match the envelope labeled “kitchen”. Each student should then get a certain amount of “mail” that he has to write his name on and then get to work delivering. The first one to deliver all of his mail would win if it turned out he delivered correctly.

Theoretical expression games - the game “who am I?” fits perfectly into the theoretical expression category. In this game the class is usually divided into two teams and then one by one students stand in front of the whole class and act out a specific profession, which the teacher has given them. The teams take turns in guessing or asking questions, but the actor can only reply to questions by answering yes or no. The scoring can then be managed in a way that one point would be given to a team that asks a question, which is replayed with a yes answer and 5 points would be given to the team that figures out who the actor is playing.

Drawing- and coloring games - an example of a game from the category: drawing- and coloring games can be a game called “drawing in a foreign language”. That game is very similar to the “who am I” game from the category above but the only difference is that the students have to draw on the blackboard instead of acting, and they could be working with other types of vocabulary than professions, for example nouns, verbs or adjectives. Educational card games - one educational card game is Bingo, which is an excellent activity to use in language teaching because the teacher can draw words and the students only have pictures on their bingo cards or vice versa. That way the students have to understand the words to be able to match it to the right picture.

Word games - word games can be especially good for language teaching. Included here are crossword puzzles and word searches where students get the words in their native tongue but they are hidden in the word search and only match the crossword puzzle in the target language. Also it is easy asking students to use the target language in the game “Filling in a chart” where participants have to find, for example a country, a city, an animal, or a type of food.

Story games - an excellent example of a game from the category: story games, is the game “to tell a story”. The participants sit in a circle and one of them gets the role of the story teller. The teacher whispers one word into the ear of each student and asks him or her to remember it. Then the storyteller begins telling a story and every now and then he stops and points at a student who then has to say the word the teacher has whispered to him. The storyteller then has to incorporate this word into the story, and that usually has amusing consequences. This game fits into language teaching perfectly because the story would be told in the target language and the words would also be in the target language.



Question games - a good game in the category: question games, is the game “riddles about European countries”. The students get divided into pairs and each pair gets assigned a specific country and the task of preparing a small riddle about it, such as

“It has many horses, it is surrounded by sea, and there you cannot travel by train”

Answer: Iceland

After each pair has made their riddle they would be asked to come to the front of the class and ask the other pairs to solve the riddle. The other pairs then have to write down what they think the right answer is and when all pairs have asked their riddles all the answers are collected and the pair with the most correct answers wins.

Results

Games have four areas:

1. Writing is a skill that, even in the native language, is learnt and not acquired. That fact could explain in part why writing is often considered to be difficult, or even boring in the target language. Another explanation could be that it is often assigned as homework, and many students don't like homework. One possible reason why writing can be viewed as being difficult is because the writer does not get an immediate feedback similar to what happens during conversations, and as a result the writer could feel more insecure about his work. Some teachers also unwisely use writing as punishment: “Ok, just for that Bobby, I want to see an essay on my desk tomorrow on the dangers of smoking!” Writing also demands a completely different language than normally used in conversations. For students in school this must not become their experience of writing because that can lead to their loathing of writing. Games can be a good way to prevent this because not only are games fun but they can provide writers with a reason to write and it is obvious that writing will become easier when there is a clear reason instead of just having to write because the teacher said so. Another thing that games can provide for writers is an audience. In many games other students will play the reader's part and therefore provide the writer with the necessary feedback that writing often lacks. A variety of interactive writing games can be found on the internet and teachers can, without much effort, create a game that practices writing. For example, when teaching students how to write a formal letter a game where participants would have to rearrange sentences to position them correctly, so they make a formal letter, could be a good game.

2. Listening - most people remember training their listening skill mainly by doing listening activities when they were in school. Listening activities might very well be an effective way of training that particular skill but teachers need to remember to keep the activities versatile or their students might get bored. By combining listening with games, teachers might prevent their students from getting bored, and by keeping them



interested they are increasing the chances of the students achieving their goals. An example of a good listening game is the famous game "Simon says" where one participant plays the role of Simon and gives the others directions, for example by saying:"Simon says jump", or "Simon says stop jumping" and then everybody would have to do that. If Simon only says "everybody jump" and does not attach the phrase "Simon says" at the front then the other participants are not be supposed to follow the direction. Because of this, students need to listen carefully in order to know when to follow Simon's directions and when to ignore them. This game can also be used to train any vocabulary.

3. Speaking - according to the national curriculum, teaching communication is very important because of the fact that it plays such a big part of knowing a language. The curriculum also claims that since communication is unpredictable in real life, students must get the chance to practice exactly that and not just to read premade conversations. In order to achieve this, the curriculum suggests games as a good method.

Even though the importance of teaching communication is stressed in the national curriculum, some teachers seem to be lacking when it comes to actually teaching students to communicate. According to a study made on English teaching in elementary schools in Iceland in 2006 only 10% of English teachers, who teach 9th and 10th grade, always use the target language in the classroom, 66% of them use it often or sometimes, and 24% seldom uses it in the classroom. The same study showed that students did not use English much either. In fact 39% of students said they seldom answered their teacher in English and an astonishing 75% of students said they did not use the target language to communicate with their fellow students. Students look up to their teachers and when they do not use the target language inside the language classroom it should not come as a surprise that many students do not use it either. Games could be helpful in solving this problem because they call for communication, and they emphasize fluency instead of accuracy, which should encourage students to communicate because when the emphasis is on fluency students usually do not receive much criticism although they might make errors. Fluency is an important skill to practice because it is what is needed in the real world, and in that sense it could be said that games provide a necessary connection between the classroom and the real world. Although games in general might emphasize fluency the category speaking games can be divided into two main categories. Those categories are: linguistic games and communicative games. Even though they both aim towards teaching speech in the target language they put emphasis on very different things. While linguistic games emphasize speaking correctly the goal when playing communicative games is fluency.

Reading is an important skill to possess especially when learning the English language. First of all it is important because of the fact that to be able to write people need to know



how to read. Secondly it is important for people if they plan to visit the country where the language is spoken because then they will have to be able to read, for example, various directions, menus, and tourist brochures. Thirdly, knowing how to read is important if students are planning on getting an education beyond elementary school because that requires reading. This last point applies especially in Iceland where the majority of textbooks for university are in English. Because of how important the skill reading is it is crucial that teachers seek appropriate means in order to keep students interested. As with the other skills, games can provide diversity and help keep subjects fun and interesting.

Conclusion

In conclusion, according to the findings of this study, it can be obviously understood that games are very important instruments in language teaching classrooms in terms of providing a relaxed environment for learners and for both teachers and learners, games are very useful if they have an educational purpose rather than being fun.

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