

THE ROLE OF GAMES IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Annotation: This article is devoted to investigation of the aspects using games in language teaching process. The investigation is done on game related teaching methods. Games can reveal the students' abilities during the classes. Students are motivated by the help of interactive activities.

Key words: game, playing, learners, method, class, profession

Language learning is hard work... Effort is required at every moment and must be maintained over a long period of time. Games help and encourage many learners to sustain their interest and work.

The above quote is taken from the introduction to Andrew Wright, David Betteridge and Michael Buckby's work, 'Games for Language Learning.' While many teachers will wholeheartedly agree with the first sentence, there are those who consider the second to be something of an exercise in indulgence, both for the teacher and the language learner. With this in mind, some never consider actively employing games in their teaching. Indeed, the following statements will infringe on the teaching ethos of quite a few in our profession:

When we check the dictionary for the meaning of the term "playing", we see that it is derived from the Latin word "jocus", which signifies "joking, fooling around". Similarly, Robert defines it as a "physical or mental activity purely gratuitous, which has, in the mind of the person who indulges in it, no other purpose than the pleasure it gives". From these definitions, at first sight, playing is perceived as an activity that children perform for the sake of simple pleasure to which they devote the majority of their time.

"There is a common perception that all learning should be serious and solemn in nature, and that if one is having fun and there is hilarity and laughter, then it is not really learning. This is a misconception. It is possible to learn a language as well as enjoy oneself at the same time. One of the best ways of doing this is through games."

Let's focus on that quote... a misconception? Are our fears of using games really misplaced? Could games ever become a meaningful and effective tool in our teaching portfolio? What possible use could the language teacher have for a game? Su Kim goes on to reassert the point: 'There are many advantages of using games in the classroom':

- Games are a welcome break from the usual routine of the language class.
- They are motivating and challenging.
- Learning a language requires a great deal of effort. Games help students to make and sustain the effort of learning.
- Games provide language practice in the various skills – speaking, writing, listening and reading.
- They encourage students to interact and communicate.
- They create a meaningful context for language use.

All these factors are well and good, but could they not also be achieved through more traditional techniques? Certainly, many teacher's books contain a handful of ostensibly 'fun' activities hidden away in the resources section, but the fact that they are to be found there, rather than in the middle of the unit proper, surely serves to prove the hypothesis that such activities are a luxury, an add-on activity if you were to find yourself with half an hour of class time to kill, rather than something that should be a fundamental part of the language classroom. Could the case therefore be made that those who don't believe in games have the coursebook "Games are often used as short warm-up activities or when there is some time left at the end of a lesson. Yet, as Lee observes, a game "should not be regarded as a marginal activity filling in odd moments when the teacher and class have nothing better to do" Games ought to be at the heart of teaching foreign languages. Rixon suggests that games be used at all stages of the lesson, provided that they are suitable and carefully chosen. Games also lend themselves well to revision exercises helping learners recall material in a pleasant, entertaining way. All authors referred to in this article agree that even if games resulted only in noise and entertained students, they are still worth paying attention to and implementing in the classroom since they motivate learners, promote communicative competence, and generate fluency."

Martha Lengeling and Casey Malarcher, writing in Forum journal in 1997, further explore the ways in which students may benefit:

“In an effort to supplement lesson plans in the ESL classroom, teachers often turn to games. The justification for using games in the classroom has been well demonstrated as benefiting students in a variety of ways. These benefits range from cognitive aspects of language learning to more co-operative group dynamics.” They classify the benefits as follows:

Affective:

- games lower the affective filter
- they encourage creative and spontaneous use of language
- they also promote communicative competence
- games are both motivating and fun

Cognitive:

- games reinforce learning
- they both review and extend learning
- games focus on grammar in a communicative manner

Class Dynamics:

- games are extremely student centered
- the teacher acts only as facilitator
- games build class cohesion
- they can foster whole class participation
- games promote healthy competition

Adaptability:

- games can be easily adjusted for age, level, and interests
- they utilize all four skills
- games require minimum preparation after the initial development stage

Bearing these factors in mind, teachers may be encouraged to use games to help practice language in the classroom. Games can indeed teach and they add genuine enjoyment to a lesson. Nevertheless, working your way through the syllabus and completing stipulated material remain quintessential to ensuring that students are covering the material set out for any particular course, semester or even a specific lesson. Games should not hinder this. It's important that they are used as a means to an end, rather than existing in their own right. Once the core content of any given lesson has been explained and understood, and exercises that practice and utilize the new language have been completed, games can then be introduced as yet another means for enabling greater comprehension.

Games can be a very worthwhile teaching element. A successful game is successful because of the reason that it is based on specific time allocation, it has clear relevance to the material, there is appropriateness to all members of the class, and ultimately, the enjoyment of the learners is increased through their active engagement with the language.

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