Language Games: An Effective Tool for Teaching a Language

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Abstract

This is an era of communication and technology. With the advent of computer, mobile and internet, information is available at the fingertips. Therefore, the teaching-learning process has undergone a drastic change. Learner-centered approaches are more preferred and activity based learning or learning by doing is given more importance. Language classes are no exceptions. The learners all over the world need to learn at least one or two more languages than their mother tongue in order to gain knowledge, increase proficiency and enhance employability. For teaching second, third or foreign language, language games are one of the most significant and effective tools. They are suitable to the temperament of the present-day learners. They can, if planned and used appropriately, cater to the psychological as well as pedagogical needs of the day.

This paper seeks to explain the rationale behind the use of language games. The advantages and disadvantages, qualities of the games, criteria for choosing games, steps for planning a game class, occasions to use games, challenges for a teacher and classification of games are discussed in detail.

Key Words: Rationale, Features, Criteria, Classification, Skills, Challenges

Introduction

Nowadays, the learner has come to the center of the teaching-learning process. Moreover, the latest research has proved that the affective factors are indispensable to the learning process. The need for the comfort, enjoyment and engagement of the learner has been recognized as legitimate and primary concerns of a language teacher. So, language games have become potentially valuable activities in a language class.

Playing games is a vital and natural part of growing up. Games are basically rule-governed interactive activities leading to learning. The use of games can be a powerful language learning tool. The language games aim at using the target language to persuade and negotiate the way to desired results. This process involves the productive and receptive skills simultaneously.

I-Jung Chen (2005) notes: "In recent years language researchers and practitioners have shifted their focus from developing individual linguistic skills to the use of language to achieve the speaker's objectives. This new area of focus, known as communicative competence, leads language teachers to seek task-oriented activities that engage their students in creative language use."[1] Apart from producing the correct language, the task-based games serve as excellent communicative activities.

Games offer students a pleasant and relaxed learning atmosphere. The students have the opportunity to use language in a non-stressful way. While playing games, the

learners' attention is on the message, not on the language. They do all they can to win rather than paying attention to the correctness of linguistic forms. This lessens the fear of being negatively judged in public. This is one of the main factors inhibiting language learners from using the target language in public. In a game-oriented context, anxiety is reduced and speech fluency is generated thereby achieving communicative competence. One of the important things to be kept in mind is that the students may not realize the amount of time and effort utilized for preparing a game. They may not even recognize the genuine pedagogical value of these games. It is critical to explain the rationale behind the game.

Rationale: How do they help?

- Games are basically learner-centered. They put the teacher in the role of a facilitator.
- Games encourage team building and make the learners feel equal. They help create a friendly and positive atmosphere.
- Games motivate the students for taking active part in the classroom activities and enhance the process of learning. They increase the involvement and span of attention of the students.
- Games add variety to the range of learning experiences thereby leading to mood enhancement of the students.
- Games introduce an element of competition in language-learning activities. This provides valuable impetus to a purposeful use of language. There are positive social implications in sharing, winning and losing too.
- The competitive ambiance makes learners concentrate and think intensively during the activity which enhances natural acquisition of inputs.
- Games create a meaningful context for language use. The students find their own ways to express themselves. They ask questions and think creatively about using the target language to achieve the goal. They communicate about the game: before, during and after the game.
- Games provide sound basis for intelligible input, interaction to enhance clarity and logical output.
- Games promote strategic planning. The students rationally devise new strategies to win the game or score the points.
- Games encourage creative and spontaneous use of language. The students are more engaged in and committed to using the target language than they would be in the classroom.
- Games generate interest in classroom activities. The emotions aroused through games add variety to the sometimes dry, monotonous and serious process of language instruction. The students are attentive to instructions, which they usually are not in regular class.
- Games integrate various linguistic skills. A single game can involve all the basic language skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing.
- Games lessen the anxiety of language learning to a considerable extent. The students feel less intimidated in this less formal learning situation.
- Games facilitate learning at one's own pace. During game sessions, more emphasis is put on fluency rather than grammatical correctness.
- Games enable the students to participate in their own learning process. They foster participatory attitudes of the students.
- Games help the process of socialization. They help creating healthy relationships. They cultivate interpersonal skills such as the skill of asking for

help, encouraging everyone to take a turn, building team spirit, disagreeing politely.
- Games change the class or group dynamics as they minimize the hesitation of talking to a less familiar classmate.
- Games arouse cultural awareness. The students want to know more than just linguistic knowledge during the game sessions. Games stimulate their interest in foreign culture.
- Games create confidence for language usage. Students practice the learned linguistic knowledge in a vivid and significant environment. They feel confident as they successfully use the target language to accomplish a variety of tasks.
- Games can also be used to help recreate various situations from real life and therefore make the learning more real and relevant.
- Games improve the comprehension of general principles and span of retention.
- Games produce or reinforce problem solving and decision-making skills.
- Jacobs quotes Gardner – "Games can connect to a variety of intelligences, e.g.,
  - Games played with others involve interpersonal intelligence
  - Games involving drawing connect with visual/spatial intelligence
  - Games often have a hands-on element, such as cards, spinners, or pieces, which connect with bodily/kinesthetic intelligence."[2]

Suggesting the importance of games in learning, Uberman (1998) writes, "Games encourage, entertain, teach, and promote fluency and communicative skills. If not for any of these reasons, they should be used just because they help students see beauty in a foreign language and not just problems that at times seem overwhelming."[3]

Psychological Aspects Displayed by Language Games

- Learner-centric approach
- Learning by doing
- Learning at one's own pace
- Involvement of more than one sense
- All domains of knowledge – cognitive, affective, psycho-motor
- Acceptance of diversified thinking
- Immediate feedback – reinforcement
- Importance of individual participation
- Extended concentration and retention
- Habit formation

Development of Various Skills through Language Games

- Linguistic skills
- Initiative taking – leadership
- Problem solving
- Decision making
- Team building
- Creative and critical thinking
- Diversified thinking
- Inter-dependence / co-existence
- Self-discipline
- Rule-governed behavior

When to use Language Games?

- Games can be used to open or close a lesson in a stimulating way.

- Games can be used to punctuate long formal teaching units and renew students' energy before returning to more formal learning.
- Games can act as a testing mechanism for finding out the areas of weakness in language proficiency.
- Games can be used to relieve tension after a test or concentrated practice session.

As Jacobs states, "Traditionally, games have been used in the language class as warm-ups at the beginning of class, fill-ins when there is extra time near the end of class, or as an occasional bit of spice stirred into the curriculum to add variety."[4]

Games give meaningful practice of language. Therefore, they can be exploited as the follow-up activities of the presented teaching material for practicing and reinforcing the required skills or knowledge. They can also be used for revising and recycling the already acquired skills or knowledge.

Qualities / Features of Language Games

Games chosen for the students must be –
- Relevant to the topic as well as for the students
- Having genuine pedagogical value
- Having appropriate difficulty level
- Neither too complicated nor too simple for them
- Interesting and entertaining
- Challenging and rewarding
- Limited to specific time duration

Criteria for Choosing Language Games

Games can be framed or chosen or modified keeping in mind the following points:
- The number of students
- Proficiency level or previous knowledge of the students
- Cultural context or background
- Time allocation
- Learning topic or material
- Classroom settings

Steps for Planning a Language Game Class

- Plan the games keeping in mind the learning objective as well as the age, gender, background and previous knowledge of the students.
- Prepare the rules and outline for the execution.
- Explain the rationale behind the game. It is crucial to clarify the purpose behind the activity.
- Arrange the pilot test on a small sample and make modifications if necessary.
- Execute the game in the class.
- Give clear and elaborate instructions about the point-system, negative points, pass, rules etc.

- Demonstrate a few things in the class if required.
- Facilitate the students during the game sessions.
- Declare winners and conclude giving summative remarks on the learning outcome.

Challenges for a Teacher

- Selecting, modifying or creating an appropriate game is time consuming.
- Maintaining class-control is important.
- Managing things in such a manner that every participant gets positive experience is necessary.
- Combination of fun, learning and challenge is required in the right proportion.
- Avoiding unnecessary interruption during the games is needed.
- Encouraging equal amount of participation from all is necessary.
- Controlling the mother-tongue hindrance is difficult.

Nguyen Thi Thanh Huyen and Khuat Thi Thu Nga specifically notes, "Another issue related to using games for language teaching is while playing games, students usually speak in their mother tongue to discuss instead of the language they are learning. … especially those who speak the same language, prefer using their first language to English."[5]

Classification of Language Games

It is difficult to classify games into watertight compartments as the categories greatly overlap. Two ways of classifying language games are offered by Hadfield. According to her first classification, the language games are of two types: linguistic games focusing on accuracy and communicative games focusing on successful exchange of information and ideas. The former gives importance to correct language usage and the latter, to communicative goal.

Hadfiled's second classification, cited by George Jacobs[6], is more comprehensive:

1. **Sorting, ordering, or arranging games**. For example, students have a set of cards with different products on them, and they sort the cards into products found at a grocery store and products found at a department store.

2. **Information gap games**. In such games, one or more people have information that other people need to complete a task. For instance, one person might have a drawing and their partner needs to create a similar drawing by listening to the information given by the person with the drawing. Information gap games can involve a one-way information gap, such as the drawing game just described, or a two-way information gap, in which each person has unique information, such as in a Spot-the-Difference task, where each person has a slightly different picture, and the task is to identify the differences.

3. **Guessing games**. These are a variation on information gap games. One of the best known examples of a guessing game is 20 Questions, in which one person thinks of a famous person, place, or thing. The other participants can ask 20

Yes/No questions to find clues in order to guess who or what the person is thinking of.

4. **Search games**. These games are yet another variant on two-way information gap games, with everyone giving and seeking information. Find Someone Who is a well known example. Students are given a grid. The task is to fill in all the cells in the grid with the name of a classmate who fits that cell, e.g., someone who is a vegetarian. Students circulate, asking and answering questions to complete their own grid and help classmates complete theirs.

5. **Matching games**. As the name implies, participants need to find a match for a word, picture, or card. For example, students place 30 word cards, composed of 15 pairs, face down in random order. Each person turns over two cards at a time, with the goal of turning over a matching pair, by using their memory. This is also known as the Pelmanism principle, after Christopher Louis Pelman, a British psychologist of the first half of the 20th century.

6. **Labeling games**. These are a form of matching, in that participants match labels and pictures.

7. **Exchanging games**. In these games, students barter cards, other objects, or ideas. Similar are exchanging and collecting games. Many card games fall into this category, such as the children's card game Go Fish: http://www.pagat.com/quartet/gofish.html.

8. **Board games**. Scrabble is one of the most popular board games that specifically highlights language.

9. **Role play games**. The terms *role play*, *drama*, and *simulation* are sometimes used interchangeably but can be differentiated (Kodotchigova, 2002). Role play can involve students playing roles that they do not play in real life, such as dentist, while simulations can involve students performing roles that they already play in real life or might be likely to play, such as customer at a restaurant. Dramas are normally scripted performances, whereas in role plays and simulations, students come up with their own words, although preparation is often useful.

Klimova (2015) mentions two more types of classifications[7]:
(1) Lewis & Bedson
- movement games – the learners are physically active
- task-based games – usually pairs or groups work on meaningful task in the way the learners enjoy
- computer games – they can be played either at school or at home, individually or in pair; the learners predominantly practice their reading and writing skills
(2) Jacobs
- competitive games – the learners try to be first to reach the goal
- cooperative games – the learners try to reach the same goal together; they help each other

Some Books and Websites Offering Language Games
Games for Language Learning by Andrew Wright, David Betteridge and Michael Buckby, Cambridge University Press, Third Edition, 6th Printing 2006, ISBN 978-0-521-61822-9 http://www.cambridge.org/

Grammar Practice Activities: A Practical Guide for Teachers by Penny Ur, Cambridge University Press, 1988, ISBN 0521338476, 9780521338479

Language Activities for Teenagers, Ed. Seth Lindstromberg, Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers, Cambridge University Press, 6th Printing 2009, ISBN 978-0-521-54193-0

Five-Minute Activities: A Resource Book of Short Activities by Penny Ur and Andrew Wright, Cambridge University Press, 1992, ISBN 9780521397810

- http://iteslj.org/games/
- https://www.gooverseas.com/blog/10-best-games-esl-teachers
- http://www.vocabulary.co.il/english-language-games/
- https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/games
- http://www.fluentu.com/english/educator/blog/esl-tefl-ell-vocabulary-games/
- https://www.edutopia.org/discussion/12-fun-speaking-games-language-learners
- http://www.eslgamesplus.com/
- http://www.manythings.org/vocabulary/

Difficulties Involved in Using Language Games

- Games may create fear of failure in the students. The students may refuse participation altogether.
- Games may also generate fear of humiliation. The students may hesitate to use the target language in public.
- Games may hinder the learning process due to the fear of underperformance.
- Games may produce the stress of proving oneself in the competition which, in turn, obstructs learning.
- Games do not serve the desired purpose if the students are not adequately involved in the proceedings.
- Games may promote unhealthy competition.
- Games may prove to be unfruitful due to the incompetence of the teacher.
- Using games in the classroom sometimes fails due to the lack of cooperation among the students.
- If games are played too often, the students may consider the teacher as being a little frivolous or not taking care to prepare a real lesson. They may feel embittered at this kind of 'waste of time'.

Conclusion

V. Lukianenko rightly comments, "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."[8]

Games help enhance grammar competence, discourse competence, socio-linguistic competence, strategic competence and socio-cultural competence. They assist in developing all the three cognitive, affective and psycho-motor domains of learning. They stimulate the function of certain psychological and intellectual factors. Learning through games facilitates communication, increases self-esteem, motivation and spontaneity, reinforces learning and builds confidence.

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(4) George Jacobs – P. 2

(5) Nguyen Thi Thanh Huyen and Khuat Thi Thu Nga, "The Effectiveness of Learning Vocabulary through Games", Asian EFL Journal, P. 13 (Available at: http://asian-efl-journal.com/dec_03_vn.pdf) (Accessed on – 25/2/17)

(6) George Jacobs – P. 3-4

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