

Games in the ESL and EFL Class

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One useful strategy to encourage language acquisition is using language games. When using games in the classroom, it is beneficial for teachers to have a complete understanding of the definitions of games, which usually are defined as a form of play concerning rules, competition, and an element of fun. Teachers should also consider the advantages of games: the ability to capture students' attention; lower students' stress; and give students the chance for real communication. Lastly teachers need to assess how to use games appropriately in the classroom. It is important to choose an appropriate time and integrate them into the regular syllabus and curriculum. However, because of the limitations of the syllabus, games often cannot be used, as much as they should be. Therefore, it may be challenging for teachers to try to add some games in class in order to develop students' English proficiency of the target language.

Introduction

Some teachers think that language games are a waste of time and prefer not to use them in classroom since games sometimes have been considered only for its one element, that is fun. In fact, games can provide EFL and ESL students more than that. Among several strategies used to improve students' proficiency such as visual aids, CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), drama, role-play, and so on, games are another useful strategy to promote students' language proficiency (Richard - Amato, 1996). This paper aims to give a clear understanding of what games are and why and how games are used in the classroom.

What are Games?

Language games are not activities mainly aimed to break the ice between students or to kill time. Byrne (1995) gave the definition to games as a form of play governed by rules. They should be enjoyed and fun. They are not just a diversion, a break from routine activities, but a way of getting the learner to use the language in the course of the game. Similarly, Jill Hadfield (1990) defined games as "an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun."

Therefore, games involve many factors: rules, competition, relaxation, and learning, in particular. The main focus of using game in class is to help students learn and have fun. However, to use games in classrooms, it is equally important that before playing the rules of the games are clearly explained and well understood by the students. There should be only a few, well-explained rules. Demonstrations also can be very helpful because it can help students understand the game and help them follow the rules. Otherwise, they will misunderstand the purpose of the game and they may not get the benefits they should from the game. For example, if students do not understand the rules of the games called "Dictation Game" [\[1\]](#) and just write without following the instructions, then it is just an exercise in copying, and it doesn't help students with accuracy, pronunciation, or spelling at all.

In playing games, competition is very important because it can stimulate and encourage students to participate in the activity since naturally they want to beat the other teams. As it happens, in the dictation game students run as fast as possible, remember as much as they can and speak as loudly and clearly as they can. They run quickly back and forth, trying to memorize the content as much as possible. While playing, students have fun, relax, exercise, and tease their friends. Apart from having fun, students learn at the same time. They acquire new vocabulary along with its spelling and pronunciation. Students begin to realize that they have to speak or pronounce the words clearly if they want others to understand what they are saying.

Deciding Which Game to Use

There are a great number of language games. So teachers have a variety of choices. However, in deciding which game to use in a particular class and which games will be most appropriate and most successful with their students, teachers must take many factors into account.

According to Carrier (1990) teachers should first consider the level of the game to fit their students' language level. They should choose the game that fits the purposes of that class or the content. Moreover, teachers should consider students' characteristics: whether they are old or young, serious-minded or light-hearted, and highly motivated to learn or not. They should also consider when the game should be used because there is a big difference between using the game in the morning or in the afternoon, on Monday or Friday.

In addition to the factors mentioned, teachers should also be able to play and overact sometimes to help students feel comfortable and want to join the activity. This means teachers should thoroughly understand the game and its nature and be able to lead the game.

It is quite difficult to find a game that meets all of the teachers' requirements. Some games must be adapted in order to fit students' language level, natures, and characteristics. The most important factor is that games should be used when they can give students both fun and educational meaning otherwise they will be a waste of time.

The Advantages of Games

According to Richard-Amato (1996), even though games are often associated with fun, we should not lose sight of their pedagogical values, particularly in second language teaching. Games are effective because they provide motivation, lower students' stress, and give them the opportunity for real communication.

The main reason why games are considered effective learning aids is that "they spur motivation and students get very absorbed in the competitive aspects of the games; moreover, they try harder at games than in other courses" (Avedon, 1971). Naturally when playing games, students are trying to win or to beat other teams for themselves or on the behalf of their team. They are so competitive while playing because they want to have a turn to play, to score points and to win. In the class, students will definitely participate in the activities. Therefore, it is possible for a teacher to introduce students to new ideas, grammar, knowledge and so on. As in the dictation game, students are so competitive that they want to finish first and win. It can be clearly seen that games can capture students' attention and participation. They can motivate students to want to learn more. Moreover, they can transform a boring class into a challenging one.

Another reason why games are often used in language classes is that they lower students' stress in the classroom. In conventional classrooms, there is a lot of stress put on students trying to master the target language. Schultz (1988) said that

"...Stress is a major hindrance in language learning process. This process [Learning language in traditional way] is by its nature time consuming and stress provoking... .. raise the stress level to a point at which it interferes with student attention and efficiency and undermines motivation. one method has been developed to make students forget that they are in classrelax students by engaging them in stress-reducing task (games)."

There is a high level of stress in the classroom because students have to face unfamiliar or unknown grammatical structures, words, texts and so forth. Therefore, students often feel uncomfortable and insecure in class, which inevitably affects their ability to learn. As a result, games can help lower their anxiety, make them feel comfortable, and want to learn more. It is believed that when students play games, they relax and have fun. Since students know that they are playing games and want to communicate efficiently they do not worry about making mistakes and do not try to correct themselves in every single sentence. When students are free from worry and stress, they can improve their fluency and natural speaking styles.

Next, students learn without realizing that they are learning (Schultz, 1988.) For instance, when playing a game called "What Would You Do If?" students will have to pick one hypothetical question from those that they have written in a box. They might get a question like "What would you do if a lion came into this classroom?" Next they have to pick one answer that they have written before. The answer they get may be "I would be a fly." Usually the question and the answer they get do not match each other, so students have to use their own imaginations to explain their bizarre answer, and everyone has fun listening to it. The explanation might be "If a lion came into this classroom, I would be a fly because I am a good person, so an angel would come and rescue me by turning me into a fly." While trying to explain, students do not worry too much about grammar mistakes because they want to communicate and to explain why it can happen. Apart from having fun, students do not worry about errors and punishment; moreover, they will learn a grammatical rule and have a chance to use it. Thus, they learn unconsciously-learn without realizing they are learning. Students stop thinking about language and begin using it in a spontaneous and natural manner within the classroom (Schutz, 1988.)

Another advantage is increasing students' proficiency. Playing games in the classroom can enormously increase students' ability in using language because students have a chance to use language with a purpose in the situations provided. Hadfield (1990) confirms that " games provide as much concentrated practice as a traditional drill and more importantly, they provide an opportunity for real communication, albeit within artificially defined limits, and thus constitute a bridge between classroom and the real word. " Like in a traditional classroom, students have an opportunity to drill and practice using grammatical rules and other functions. For example, look at the "Find Someone Who" game in which students have to ask classmate s the questions implied by the chart such as: "Can you swim?" "Do you have a pet?" etc.

Find Someone Who...

Likes rock music.	Loves watching movies.	Likes to cook.	Has a pet.
Can sew.	Cannot swim.	Is reading a novel.	Loves chocolate.
Has a big family.	Likes green.	Hates durians. :	Loves English.
Watches TV every day.	Is having a good time.	Has visited three Countries.	Can speak two languages.

Students have to mingle around the classroom to find whoever these statements apply to and then write their names in the appropriate places. Whoever can fill their page first will be the winner. While playing, students practice asking and answering questions. They may have to repeat the same question several times until they get to the right person. This provides the opportunity to drill and repeat as in a conventional classroom, but with playing games it is more communicative and meaningful. Moreover, it will link students to the real world because they can actually speak like this outside the classroom. Therefore, playing games in classroom does not only give students a chance to use English, but it can also connect them to the real usage of language outside the class.

Editor's note: You can print out <http://iteslj.org/Handouts/Kelly-Classmates.html> and duplicate it for your students.

When to Use Games

It is necessary for those who want to use games as a learning aid to be concerned about how to use them. Hadfield (1990) suggested that "games should be regarded an integral part of the language syllabus, not an amusing activity for Friday afternoon of for the end of the term." Games can contribute to students' skills if they are incorporated into the classroom, particularly if they are used to reinforce or introduce a grammatical rule or structure. For example in the games called "What Would You Do If?" and "Find Someone Who..." students do not only have fun in class but they learn about some grammatical rules; they also have a chance to practice and use it with purpose. In "What Would You Do If?" students learn about the conditionals. In "Find Someone Who," students learn how to form questions and answers. Therefore, as we have seen before, it is quite a good idea to incorporate games in daily classes. For example, if teachers are going to introduce present tenses or conditionals, instead of teaching them in a traditional way, (by simply telling them the rules, have them do some written exercises, drilling and answering questions), teachers may help students understand these forms of grammar by playing games, which can also meet all the requirements of the traditional classes involving learning rules, drilling and repeating. Moreover, students can take this opportunity to use them in real communication.

However, even though games sometimes do not work since student have different learning styles and preferences, and some other factors such as being used in an inappropriate time, the nature of games themselves, and even the nature of teachers, it is still worth trying to us e them in class because they offer several good advantages to students. Language games used in the classroom are very effective and supportive activities in contributing to students' language skills and proficiency. Unfortunately, because of limitations of time and curriculum, teachers normally have to cover all the content and materials, which students will be tested on, and it is not always easy to incorporate games into the class.

Nevertheless, it can be seen that games are very useful and can be used to develop students' language learning and also provide the students an opportunity to practice communication. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers try some games that may be useful to their students in order to enhance students' proficiency and help them meet their goals, and at least to try new things in teaching.

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Footnote

[1] Dictation game: students work in pairs. One has to run and read the article posted and tell his partner who has to write down what his partner tells him.

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