

USING GAMES IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY TO BOOST LEARNERS' MOTIVATION

Pronema Bagchi

Phd Scholar

Department Of English,

Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune, India.

Abstract

Learners now-a-days socialize through new media and study by way of effective behaviors and learning styles. A practical approach to language teaching lays equal emphasis on pre-teaching as well as post-teaching methods. Playing language games in the classroom is one of the innovative techniques to drill concepts and prevent long-term memory loss. The role of a teacher is very crucial to integrate skill-development of students along with the fun and learn method. Sometimes, the scope of using games goes far beyond the linguistic concern as it proves to be significantly useful in developing higher order thinking skills and instill values of cooperative and collaborative learning among students. Language learning via games is a powerful tool that not only aims at entertainment but also at reinforcement. Learners, irrespective of their proficiency level, feel motivated to actively participate and interact with their team members in the target language. This further enhances their communicative competence which makes them confident users of language in the long run. The present study is therefore sought to analyze how games can be fruitful in the domain of ELT (English Language Teaching).

Keywords: *post-teaching method, language games, reinforcement, communicative competence, fun and learn...*

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Gone are the days when students were treated as empty vessels to be filled up with knowledge by their omniscient and omnipotent teachers. Today, the act of learning is a pre-requisite to the act of teaching and therefore, teaching and learning experience has become a two-way process where the source (teachers) and the target (learners) both, supplement each other in their own respective ways. Learning no more happens in a vacuum and with regard to the teaching of languages in general and English in particular, students expect the methodology to be dynamic. This poses a great challenge to the teaching fraternity who are still digital migrants and trying to cope with the ever-increasing demands of the digital natives. If learners socialize through new media, they also wish to study by way of effective behaviors. Teachers have to acknowledge the different learning styles of individuals studying under one roof and try to make the study of English an interesting activity by tapping in the energies coming from different potentials of learners. It is within the limits of the class that English Language Teaching has to become a lively endeavor.

Languages are meant to be used, and the more you practise the better you will be in using the language for various purposes. A practical approach to the teaching of English entails giving equal weight to pre-teaching as well as post-teaching methods along with the during-teaching plan. Often, a lot is delivered while teaching a grammar lesson or discussing any chapter and this causes some kind of sensory overload on students. Drilling concepts for future retention is strongly recommended to prevent long-term memory loss. But, mere rote learning does no good as it leads to drudgery and boredom in the classroom. Although the behaviorist approach to language teaching encourages this kind of drilling, it fails to reap benefits in the long run as learning a language is not a mechanical process. To facilitate learning in the best possible way, it is teachers' responsibility to come up with new strategies for teaching English that can enhance learners' ability to comprehend and retain the matter. Students too, are concerned to implement their understanding but they do face problems in actually using the target language. Therefore, incorporating games in the language classroom can take care of students' needs and give a cutting-edge outlook to the teaching of English.

To teach English in an innovative manner, there should be an application of such strategies that not only facilitate learning but also make the whole process enjoyable. According to Schultz (1988),

‘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...One method has been developed to make students forget that they are in class....relax students by engaging them in stress-reducing tasks such as games.’

Using games in the classroom can play a magical role in relieving tension especially from grammar classes –

- **‘Guess who’** for reinforcing pronouns: The class is divided into groups of four or five. Every group is given a name of a celebrity secretly. The groups write nine to ten sentences about the famous personality using pronouns, without disclosing the name. Then each group tells those clues one by one to the class and whichever group guesses the name first, gets more points and the one that guesses wrongly gets negatively marked. This game involves a lot of speculation and excitement.
- **‘Adjective antakshari’** to recall the learnt describing words: The teacher starts this game by giving an adjective to the class. Any one student says another adjective beginning with the last letter of the previous describing word. The one sitting next continues in the same way and then all adjacent rows follow in a similar fashion till the end. While playing this game, speed is an important factor and there is also a check on spellings.
- **‘Sit and stand’** game for articles: The class has to sit when a determinate article (the) is used and stand when an indeterminate article (a/an) is used in the sentence. The student, who survives till the end, wins the game.
- **‘Blind Alley’** for revising prepositions: Select a person randomly, blind-fold him and make him stand at one point of the classroom. Show his destination to the class and ask students to give directions (by using prepositions) to help him reach the exact location. The blind-folded person has to follow directions correctly and reach the particular point without losing track in between or else, he will be disqualified. This game should ideally be played on a playground where there is no restriction of space and volume.

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In the field of teaching and learning foreign languages, playing has been considered a teaching tool since 1990. 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 kindle interactivity and prove to be a stimulus for learning through many of Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory. 'Games often incorporate logical reasoning, communication, kinesthetics, visual stimulation and spatial relations. Games include analysis and interpretation of old and new material which makes learning concrete' (Talak-Kiryk, Amy, 2010). Teaching of tenses acquires a whole new flavour when coupled with creative games. To teach present continuous, the teacher can start the class by a '**miming**' activity. She can write out actions in the present continuous (like 'jumping', 'knocking', 'snapping', etc.) on chits and ask a student to pick one up and mime accordingly. The rest of the class guesses what the action is. She can also try giving two actions together; for instance, 'sitting and writing.' This will involve teaching through realia and lead to a better understanding of rules of that particular tense. For past tense, the class can be divided into groups of four and students can be asked to **describe a robbery in a public place**. They might come up with words but for additional assistance, the teacher could write or project some questions on the board like – *How many robbers were there? Were they armed? What did the robbers take? Who called the police?* so on and so forth. For future tense, activities like **hypothetical fortune-telling, predicting the ending of the movie** or a given scene can very much be implemented. Students enjoy the introduction of audio-visual aids in the classroom. Even if the class is not equipped with an OHP (Over-Head Projector), the teacher can simply make them listen to the story in a mobile which further enhances their listening comprehension. The perfect tense can also be taught with the help of a unique game called '**Then and now.**' Students can be instructed to use the present perfect tense to describe changes that are seen in the pairs of pictures (of celebrities, monuments, cities, etc). This novel idea can also help in making them understand the difference in the usage of the past tense and the present perfect tense.

At the outset, few games might be a little difficult to follow and some may be incomprehensible. But keeping the heterogeneous nature of the classroom in mind, easier version of games could be introduced and weaker students can be asked to first observe others play the game and then be allowed to participate as observation plays a vital role in the process of learning. These students automatically feel motivated to actively participate in the game because watching others have fun, they too feel extrinsically motivated to be a party to that enjoyment. Gradually, trust develops within and among the group-members. Later, after sever rounds of playing, they build up confidence towards rules of the game and follow instructions involuntarily. This leads to a positive intrinsic motivation towards playing games (not playing in anticipation of a reward but playing due to genuine interest) and thereby using the language in

their comfort zones as ultimately the aim is to make them essentially use the language. This kind of motivation works in the favour of learning the language better as there is no kind of fear or phobia involved while talking in the target language. During this process, the responses that are elicited from students stay in their memory for a longer duration as moving from particular examples to general rules of grammar is the best way to teach any language.

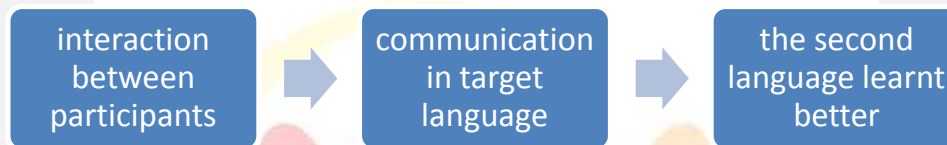
Using games in the language classroom also provides a platform to students to develop their vocabulary. Emotion is a powerful tool in the memory process. We all remember most clearly the times we were overjoyed or saddened. And using a '**Dumb Charade**' does exactly that. Actions involve expressions and being able to estimate the word through those actions leads to happiness whereas being unable to decipher the answer leads to some amount of sorrow but with positive consequences because, even then, there are nominal chances of forgetting the word in the future. By way of explication, there is another game called the '**Word Bingo**' that has students working cognitively on the already acquired vocabulary. They are asked to think consciously about synonyms, antonyms and meanings of the word in a specific time frame. This is where the cognitivistic approach to language teaching comes into play when students get involved in higher order thinking skills and start analyzing the minute details in a creative way. They come up with different associations, permutations and combinations that recycles their vocabulary at regular intervals and in the meantime, they also learn rules of negation and degrees of comparison. Although the rules of this game are a little complicated and vague, giving an apt demonstration answers many queries of students and then they feel motivated to play the game as they learn new words more quickly. Lightbown and Spada (1999: 163) stress the importance of motivation and emphasize that, 'The principal way that teachers can influence learners' motivation is by making the classroom a supportive environment in which students are stimulated, (and) engaged in activities.'

Games give a natural opportunity to students to work together and communicate with each other using the target language. They are willing to discuss spontaneously and work collaboratively towards a common goal as the spirit of competition and some kind of time restriction spurs them to walk that extra mile to get the desired result. Since there is a positive pressure working on students, they learn the quintessence of team-work, stress management and social norms which prepares them for exploring alternative decisions and think flexibly. According to Bruner, (2009: 47),

'It is through playing that the child has access to language and to being motivated because: when you have playing in class, there is obviously a creation space. In the game, not all is set from the beginning: haphazard, strategy, imagination and emotions intervene....in each type of game, the "I"

is involved. From there on, words are not simply mechanically repeated because when playing becomes saying, they reflect a genuine communication intention and creation on part of the child.’

The teacher’s role is to give silent feedback to individuals or teams through a thumbs-up or a clap or a pat for every correct answer which again brings down the teacher talk-time and increases the student talk-time during the process. This further leads to increased motivation levels of students as they are encouraged to put their best foot forward and enhance the team’s performance. Even if answers are wrong, the teacher is not allowed to discourage students but instead, boost their morale by acknowledging the fact that they at least took an effort to think in the target language.



In such a student-centered classroom, games help creating a constructivist environment and, co-operative learning through fun and learn method becomes central by way of discovery.

Language learning via games not only aims at entertainment but also at reinforcement; and sometimes, it can also be used to test how much students actually know. Hence, games can be used diagnostically either before presenting a given structure to find out how much knowledge of the area is already disjointedly present in the group; or after a lesson presentation to check how much the class has grasped. These games are cost-effective and do not require a lot of preparation. Once a teacher has done the physical preparation, he/she can re-use a game without further work in subsequent classes. There are also times when games require no physical preparation at all as the teacher simply needs to do a spot of copying. This reduces the work-load on teacher’s part and allows the classroom situation to get blended with fun and learn method. The traditional classes are teacher-centered but using games in the language classroom helps getting rid of this unilateral and unidirectional pedagogy that fails to nurture the resourcefulness of learners and is, in fact, detrimental to their personality development. Mubaslat M. Mania (2012: 4) therefore, recommends that,

‘A game should not be regarded as a marginal activity filling in odd moments when the teacher and the class have nothing better to do. Games ought to be at the heart of teaching...should be used at all the stages of the lesson...’

The present study is not intended towards any specific target group because every game can be modified as per the age group of learners. It is the teacher's discretion that matters the most pertaining to elasticity in rules of games and relativity in the level of difficulty.

Often, games are criticized to create a hostile learning environment because of their competitive nature. But many fail to realize that after all, games are also characterized as making 'good noise' and if played consistently, lead to a healthy competition and a feeling of co-operation. Still, there are some possible risks involved in using games in the language classroom. Some teachers think that language games are a waste of time and even if you have them as short warm-up activities, explaining too many rules at one go leads to confusion which is also a time-consuming task. Further, some students withdraw themselves from participating in them due to fear of giving wrong answers and therefore, losing the game. But as an old saying mentions that there are two sides of every coin, similarly, there is mitigation too, to the above mentioned risks. Chunking of rules is a tried and tested method to avoid confusion. Rules of the game can be always explained in parts where students follow limited instructions first, act on them and then move ahead. There can be a reward for the winning team or the person as well; this calls for the behaviorist approach of teaching that believes in positive and negative reinforcement. But in this case, we can call it a modified version of behaviorism as there is no punishment involved for wrong answers. In fact, there is a very positive attitude towards making mistakes with the belief that students would eventually learn from their mistakes! Finally, the present study, in no way insists on depending solely on games as a classroom practice. It rather advocates a judicious use of games in the language classroom as complementary activities that would motivate learners to speak English while they employ meaningful language in a real context. Hence, this will also enhance their communicative competence and make them confident users of the English language.

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