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Game-based language teaching – Chapter II

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is a continuation of the previous one, in which some relevant issues concerning the child's development as well as teaching foreign language to preschool learners have been theoretically presented, both in psychological and physical facets, including the child's cognitive progress. This chapter, on the other hand, is centred on various games used in the process of learning / teaching foreign languages. It is composed of three sections, each of which deals with slightly different, but complementary matters.

Keywords: teaching English; children; foreign language; game-based

1. INTRODUCTION

The first section treats of teaching a foreign language, taking advantage of different games and encompasses a variety of useful guidelines. The second section oscillates around a repertoire of games, placing an accent on didactic ones. Together with the next section the second one combines two phenomena – games and language teaching, constituting a brief presentation of different games that can be used in a foreign language instruction.

2. TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE THROUGH GAMES

Games and plays represent one of more exciting ways of teaching and learning on the whole, foreign languages being no exception. As it has been outlined in the previous two sections, games are an ideal recipe for teaching pre-schoolers.

However, it goes without saying that games should be implemented, sticking to some essential principles.

Thus, according to Dobson (1974/1997: 107-108) a good language game:

- requires little or no preparation,
- is easy to play an yet provides the student with an intellectual challenge,
- is short enough to occupy a convenient space in the conversation programme,
- entertains the students but does not cause the group to get out of control,
- requires no time-consuming correction of written responses afterward.

Dobson also suggests a couple of guidelines that help ensure the greatest success with any of the games the teacher selects. Although she (1974/1997: 108-109) gives a wider perspective of each guideline, here for the reason of space, there is only a general outlook on her considerations. She enumerates thirteen suggestions:

1. *Make thorough preparations for the game*. The teachers should know the rules of the game, gather materials, and plan how to direct conversation during or following the game.

2. *Before introducing a game to a class, ask the students if they think thy would enjoy this kind of activity*. When it does not happen so, it is better to change a game, or abandon it for some time.

3. *Choose a game that allows as many students as possible to participate*. It is vital to care if all students are engaged sufficiently as active participant instead of idling their time as observers only.

4. *Be sure that the game you select is within the range of your students' ability*. Otherwise, they can be easily discouraged and the opposite outcome can be achieved.

5. *Do not play a game at the beginning of the conversation period*. Somewhere between the middle or the end of the lesson is a more appropriate moment for changing a pace of the lesson.

6. *Give the directions to the game very clearly, making sure that everyone understands exactly how to play*. It is advisable to play some 'trials' to make sure if rules of a game are intelligible.

7. *Direct the game yourself*. Dobson (p.109) advises the teacher to stand in front of the class to act as the leader or referee.

8. *Be sure to follow the rules of the game exactly*. If all students cling to the rules, there is little space for cheating, tricking, and breaking rules.

9. *Keep the game well under control*. What is needed to prevent disintegration during the game is a pleasant but firm tone and necessary minimum of discipline in the classroom.

10. *Observe how the individual players react to the game*. Proper encouragements and no discouragements are concerned, therefore the teacher should 'see' which students get disheartened or even abashed and ought to take steps to stop his withdrawal into him-/herself.

11. *In team games, try to have in each team an equal number of more proficient students and less proficient students*. Thanks to such a power balance the play or game is fair and every team feels appreciated. As Dobson emphasizes "*some methodologists recommend that you set up permanent teams*".

12. *If a game does not seem to be going well, try a different game*. Not every game appeals to every student, therefore, the teacher should have a sound repertoire of games at his/her disposal.

13. *Always stop playing a game before the students are ready to quit*. Dobson's recommendation is neither to play a game so long that it begins to bore participants, nor to play the same game too frequently.

Teaching a foreign language through games has been repeatedly proved to be beneficial and successful. Siek-Piskozub (1995: 52) quotes a lot of research that has been completed in this field. Some examples are Malley and Duff (1978), Wright, Betteridge and Buckby (1979), Lee (1979), Rixon (1981, 1991), Jones (1982), Lelental (1989), or Mulicka (1990).

3. GAMES AND BASIC ISSUES INVOLVED

As we have seen in the previous section, games and plays are core elements of teaching young learners. It can be even said that there is no teaching without playing (in the case of children, obviously). Thus, it is worth wondering about what game or play is and what elements the game includes.

Okoń defines 'play' or 'fun' as an activity that is performed for pleasure. He enumerates various types of plays, for instance, thematic, constructive, motor, and didactic. What matters seriously here is the didactic play, that is, a play designed by adults for a specific purpose, e.g. a mental play designed to develop cognitive abilities (Okoń 1992: 239). Moving to his definition of game, he perceives it as a variant of a play that depends on sticking to strict rules and achieving a determined outcome (p.64). Byrne, in turn, defines games as "*a form of play governed by certain rules or conventions*" (1986: 100).

Developing the issue of games, they can be identifiable and recognizable by several characteristic features. Worth enumerating is a set of six crucial points, according to Juul (in: Whitehead 2006, www2). Thus, listing its properties, the game can be defined as follows:

1. Rules: games are rule-based.

2. Variable, quantifiable outcome: games have variable, quantifiable outcomes.

3. Value assigned to possible outcomes: that the different potential outcomes of the game are assigned different values, some being positive, some being negative.

4. Player effort: that the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome. (games are challenging.)

5. Player attached to outcome: that the players attach a significant importance to the outcomes of the game – they know that a player will be the winner and "happy" if a positive outcome happens, and loser and "unhappy" if a negative outcome happens.

6. Negotiable consequences: the same game [set of rules] can be played with or without real-life consequences.

Pulling these six qualities together, Juul's definition of game takes the form:

> A game is a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player

exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the
outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable
(Juul 2003, www3).

As far as different types of games are concerned, Okoń (1992: 64) lists didactic games
that require intellectual effort, motor and sport games that are based on physical effort, and field
games which require special preparations. Didactic games are fundamental instruments for
achieving teaching objectives. According to Coleman (1967) and Galloway (1976), quoted in
Siek-Piskozub (1995: 27), the didactic game is characterized by six properties (own
translation):

–   players (actors) strive to attain their goals,
–   the amount of players is determined in advance,
–   rules of the game determine allowable activities,
–   rules of the game represent an order and a structure of actions,
–   rules of the game limit time and space,
–   there are special principles that are applicable to a particular game.

In a nutshell, there are two indispensable conditions that must be fulfilled so that an
activity could be labelled as a game – an existence of both determined rules and competition
among players (Siek-Piskozub 1995: 28).

Effectiveness of games and simulations in the process of learning and teaching (any
school subject) is substantial (see different research quoted by Siek-Piskozub 1995: 44-51).
Special attention has been attached to such advantages as motivational, stimulating, cognitive,
and therapeutic features of didactic games. This is so because games have open structures and
necessitate varied acting strategies, thereby contributing to their development.

4. TYPES OF GAMES EMPLOYED IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Now, it is the time to build some kind of classification of games in teaching foreign
languages. The quotation by Byrne constitutes a good starting point for this section. It shows
an elementary function of games in teaching a foreign language:

They (games) are meant to be enjoyed – wherever they are played. In the
language classroom, however, games are not just a diversion, a break from
routine activities. They must also contribute to language proficiency in some
way by getting the learners to use language in the course of the game (Byrne
1986: 100).

There are two ways, in which games can do this:

•   They can be used to improve the learners' command of a particular item or items of
language (sounds, vocabulary, spelling, grammatical items or functions).
•   They can be used to provide the learners with opportunities to use language rather than
simply practise it, that is, they are connected with fluency rather than accuracy.

Threefold general division of games in teaching a foreign language has been established
by Byrne (1986: 101-114), namely, accuracy-focused, fluency-focused, and board games.

Accuracy-focused games that can be played either in small groups or in pairs. The aim of this game is to strengthen and expand learners' grasp of specific language aspects. They are divided and sub-divided into those involving variation of an item within the same structure (guessing and sentence-building games), and those involving a variety of structures (guessing, elimination and memory games).

Fluency-focused games take place rather in small groups, however, some activities can be performed in pairs. There is no use describing these games in full because of their little applicability in the preschool language teaching. Their division and sub-division is the following:

- Information gap games ('Find the difference', 'Describe and draw', and 'Complete it').
- Opinion gap games ('Use it', 'Desert Island', and 'The Bus Game').

The last category is represented by board games. As Byrne (1986: 111) discerns, the principal skills involved in such games encompass:

– listening and speaking; the players have to listen to one another in order to participate in the game,
– reading; normally the players will have to interpret the rules of the game.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Board games are very valuable as a high motivational drive. They can be characterized as real-life activities that have been brought into the classroom. Three basic types can be distinguished. First, a map of pictures / images is employed. The players are asked to take various guesses while moving around the board. Second, this type of a game depends on moving along a continuous track and making varied language-based specific actions when they stand on different squares, for instance, giving a few names of animals, singing a song, and suchlike. Third, although it is a separate type of game, it also takes advantage of a track board. Respective squares are characterized by particular roles and actions to play. This board involves START and HOME fields and the goal is to pass through multifarious circumstances – "*To make full use of the board, therefore, you must invent different contexts or situations in which good or bad things happen*" (Byrne 1986: 114).

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