**Why Use Games in the Language Classroom?**

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*'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.'*

In A Faraway Land, Michael Berman, UK

The above quote appears in the introduction to Andrew Wright, David Betteridge and Michael Buckby’s seminal 1984 work, *'Games for Language Learning.* ' For many years I wholeheartedly agreed with the first sentence while considering the second to be something of an exercise in indulgence, both for the teacher and the language learner. Rightly or wrongly, it took me many years to even consider actively employing games in my teaching. Indeed, in the formative years of my teaching career, the following statements, at least in terms of how they relate to the use of games in the classroom, while not entirely anathema to me, didn’t exactly represent my teaching ethos:

*'Games… help the teacher to create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful. The learners want to take part and in order to do so must understand what others are saying or have written, and they must speak or write in order to express their own point of view or give information.'*

*'The need for meaningfulness in language learning has been accepted for some years. A useful interpretation of 'meaningfulness' is that the learners respond to the content in a definite way. If they are amused, angered, intrigued or surprised the content is clearly meaningful to them. Thus the meaning of the language they listen to, read, speak and write will be more vividly experienced and, therefore, better remembered.*

*If it is accepted that games can provide intense and meaningful practice of language, then they must be regarded as central to a teacher's repertoire. They are thus not for use solely on wet days and at the end of term!'*

(Wright et al, from their Introduction, p. 1)

Despite my many years of initial trepidation, there has always been clear pedagogic evidence out there to endorse the use of games in the language classroom. Aydan Ersöz, writing in the Internet TESL Journal in 2000, reiterated Wright, Betteridge and Buckby when noting how games may provide a well-needed and wholly justifiable respite from the otherwise arduous task of learning a language:

*'Language learning is a hard task which can sometimes be frustrating. Constant effort is required to understand, produce and manipulate the target language. Well-chosen games are invaluable as they give students a break and at the same time allow students to practice language skills. Games are highly motivating since they are amusing and at the same time challenging. Furthermore, they employ meaningful and useful language in real contexts. They also encourage and increase cooperation. Games are highly motivating because they are amusing and interesting. They can be used to give practice in all language skills and be used to practice many types of communication.'*

This was written only a couple of months before I first became a language teacher, yet it took me a long time to come to terms with the ideas contained therein. Reading up further on the subject of using games, I see that my notion of the classroom as a game-free zone was not unique. Indeed, Lee Su Kim, writing in Forum journal in 1995, summed up the perception that I - and quite obviously many other teachers - held in the early part of my career.

*'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.'*

Hang on a minute… a misconception? Were my fears really misplaced? Could games ever become a meaningful and effective weapon in my teaching artillery? What possible use could I put a game to? Lee Su Kim went on to ram the point home to us unbelievers: *'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 by more traditional, less ‘gamey’ methods? Yes, in my formative teaching years I really took a lot of convincing that using games could have any value in my classes. Sure, a lot of teacher’s books had one or two ostensibly ‘fun’ activities hidden away in the resources section, but the fact that they were there rather than smack bang in the middle of the unit proper surely served to prove the hypothesis that such activities were a luxury, an add-on if you found yourself with half an hour of class time to kill, rather than something that should ever be a fundamental part of my teaching. It was, suffice to say, good to know that I had the coursebook writers on my side… or did I?

Agnieszka Uberman, writing in *Forum* journal in 1998, put forward the case for the defence:

*'Many experienced textbook and methodology manuals writers have argued that games are not just time-filling activities but have a great educational value. W. R. Lee holds that most language games make learners use the language instead of thinking about learning the correct forms (1979:2). He also says that games should be treated as central not peripheral to the foreign language teaching programme. A similar opinion is expressed by Richard-Amato, who believes games to be fun but warns against overlooking their pedagogical value, particularly in foreign language teaching. There are many advantages of using games. "Games can lower anxiety, thus making the acquisition of input more likely" (Richard-Amato 1988:147). They are highly motivating and entertaining, and they can give shy students more opportunity to express their opinions and feelings (Hansen 1994:118). They also enable learners to acquire new experiences within a foreign language which are not always possible during a typical lesson. Furthermore, to quote Richard-Amato, they, "add diversion to the regular classroom activities," break the ice, "[but also] they are used to introduce new ideas" (1988:147). In the easy, relaxed atmosphere which is created by using games, students remember things faster and better (Wierus and Wierus 1994:218). S. M. Silvers says many teachers are enthusiastic about using games as "a teaching device," yet they often perceive games as mere time-fillers, "a break from the monotony of drilling" or frivolous activities. He also claims that many teachers often overlook the fact that in a relaxed atmosphere, real learning takes place, and students use the language they have been exposed to and have practised earlier (1982:29). Further support comes from Zdybiewska, who believes games to be a good way of practising language, for they provide a model of what learners will use the language for in real life in the future (1994:6).'*

So, although it seems that coursebook writers did not necessarily espouse the all out rejection of games in the classroom, the above quote does raise some important caveats, which I’ll be discussing later on. With all this evidence working against me, was it - several years into my teaching career - time to take the plunge? If I were to do so, surely I would need to think long and hard about when I would do it. Agnieszka Uberman continues:

*'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" (1979:3). 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.'*

A couple of things leaped out at me from this particular quote and were fundamental considerations when I finally made the plunge to introduce games into my classes. Any game should be suitable for the classroom context and should be carefully chosen. Suitability can of course refer to many things, such as level of difficulty, complexity or the amount of class time they consume. Carefully choosing a game incorporates the notion that the game should be better for the particular purpose that you’ll employ it for than any alternative method. When I started exploring the use of games, I came to the decision that the way they require participants to recall information from their knowledge pool would be a useful method in enabling students to assess their vocabulary recall abilities and thus started using them in classes primarily for vocabulary revision. It seems that I was not alone in this conviction. Nguyen Thi Thanh Huyen and Khuat Thi Thu Nga, writing in the *Asian EFL Journal* in 2003, explain the rationale behind exploiting the game format in this way:

*'Games have been shown to have advantages and effectiveness in learning vocabulary in various ways. First, games bring in relaxation and fun for students, thus help them learn and retain new words more easily. Second, games usually involve friendly competition and they keep learners interested. These create the motivation for learners of English to get involved and participate actively in the learning activities. Third, vocabulary games bring real world context into the classroom, and enhance students' use of English in a flexible, communicative way.'*

*'Therefore, the role of games in teaching and learning vocabulary cannot be denied. However, in order to achieve the most from vocabulary games, it is essential that suitable games are chosen. Whenever a game is to be conducted, the number of students, proficiency level, cultural context, timing, learning topic, and the classroom settings are factors that should be taken into account.'*

*'In conclusion, learning vocabulary through games is one effective and interesting way that can be applied in any classrooms. The results of [our] research suggest that games are used not only for mere fun, but more importantly, for the useful practice and review of language lessons, thus leading toward the goal of improving learners' communicative competence.'*

There it is again, that notion of suitability. M. Martha Lengeling and Casey Malarcher, writing in Forum journal in 1997, further explored 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

So, why am I reigning in on my use of games in the classroom? Well, it’s my feeling that teachers should be encouraged to use games to help practice new language in the classroom. Games can indeed teach, they offer a way to practice new structures and 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.

When would I suggest games be used effectively in the language classroom? Well, despite the provocative title, which probably led you to think I consider games to be a bad idea, you can successfully use games in many ways, such as for a quick review, after material has been covered or as a cool-down activity at the end of a lesson to practice what has been covered (as well as to inject an element of fun). You could also use a game to practice specific new language in groups or pairs for a limited time, as a short introduction to new vocabulary or a concept, as a prompt for writing work, even as a link into a new part of the lesson. Games may even be used merely to change the pace of a lesson.

So, getting back to the title of this post… why am I suddenly so against gaming? Well, I’m not, but beware of the caveats that I mentioned previously. Firstly the fact is that many students might not actually enjoy long, time consuming games, especially if they are already having difficulties with their new language. I’m basing this first point directly on feedback I’ve received recently. Such activities, even if not exploited regularly (in my case, incorporating a game into classes twice during an eight-week period was deemed excessive by some of my students), may not be universally enjoyed. Consider it from their perspective: learners with difficulties fear that not only will they fail in the task of learning the language, but may also find themselves underperforming in a game. The consequences of such an outcome may be deflating, even humiliating to some. This does not mean that the teacher should not encourage participation, as there are positive social implications in sharing, winning and losing too. Nevertheless, a game that takes up a considerable chunk of a lesson may be quite stress inducing for some students. If you can work through the activity in a different way, would that not be kinder to such students?

Secondly, and this is at least as important as the first point, if games are played too often (and you have to be careful here, as certain – not all, remember - students may frequently prompt the teacher to play a game whenever possible), a large number of students may feel that they are not learning at all, faulting the teacher as being a little frivolous or not taking care to prepare a real lesson (we know this almost certainly isn’t the case, as games often take more pre-planning than more ‘conventional’ lessons). Many students feel embittered if they perceive the classroom as being a place where they are playing too much; they feel that there is time wasted, and it concerns them. Remember: they may not realize how much time and effort it takes to prepare a game nor that it has genuine pedagogical value, which leads me on to a mistake I’ve been making which has, thankfully, been brought to my attention: explain the rationale behind the game.

If a teacher plans a game, it is critical to explain the rationale of the game to the students in the class, no matter what. For example, if you were to employ a short, simple hangman or hotseat game, the teacher should swiftly - but very clearly - inform the students that this game will help them with spelling, get their brains focused on recognizing the shape and structure of new words, and will facilitate their learning of new vocabulary. In addition to making sure the students are aware of the learning benefits of the activity, preparing such an explanation will also help teachers to make sure that they know precisely why they are spending time on the game in the lesson in the first place. Such explanations are absolutely vital, as I’ve learned through experience, because they satisfy the more serious student who can feel pressured by game time, they make sure the weaker student understand that this isn’t a waste of time and also enable all of the students to comprehend that the teacher is playing for an explicit reason, has planned the game to enhance their learning, and is not just wasting time by adding a fun element to the lesson. Failure to take this fundamental step, or even merely to make the point clearly enough for all to understand, can lead to all kinds of repercussions, trust me.

Games can be a very worthwhile teaching element. A successful game is successful because for 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 actively engaging with the language.

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