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11 Using games in teaching English to young learners

Julia Khan takes up the theme that Shelagh Rixon has already addressed from a practical perspective. She draws on research in psychology and game theory and leads us towards the more formal analysis of principle found in Section Two of this book, while at the same time continuing to provide practical examples and illustrations.

CHILDREN PLAY and children want to play. Children learn through playing. In playing together, children interact and in interacting they develop language skills. Games provide contexts for play, reasons for playing and routines for playing.

This article explores the basis of these assertions in order to argue the importance of giving games a place amongst activities used in teaching English to young learners. It then considers how games might be categorised and how teachers might use and maybe develop them with confidence as part of their methodology. The different roles of language practice games and communicative language teaching games are considered in the context of current thinking on syllabus and methodology for ELT. Finally, some common misgivings about using games in the classroom are discussed and defused.

Why use games?

Characteristics of games

What is a game? Everyone feels intuitively that they know but definition is elusive. Perhaps we can say that, 'A game is played when one or more players compete or co-operate for pay-offs according to a set of rules' (Jones 1986). Alternatively, 'Gaming is competitive . . . rule-governed . . . goal-defined . . . Gaming has closure . . . gaming is engaging' (Rodgers 1981). The games of young children have their own special qualities: 'A true game is one that frees the spirit. It allows of no cares but those fictitious ones engendered by the game itself . . . Play is unrestricted, games have rules. Play may merely be the enactment of a dream but in each game there is a contest . . .' (Opie, I. and J. 1969).

The key characteristics for our purposes are these: games are activities

governed by *rules*, which set up clearly defined *goals*. The achievement of these goals signals the end of the game. Games involve a *contest* either between players or between the players and the goal, and games should lead to having *fun*. Games are for playing, and this element of *play* is crucial.

Ground rules must be set for how games are played. The authority behind the rules and the contest lies in the game itself rather than with the player or teacher and the authority must be acknowledged if the game is to be played fairly. Children are usually very concerned with fairness and with preventing others from breaking the rules.

Children's games

Games are activities that children naturally and universally engage in. There is a certain timelessness in the pleasure children find in games and in how the nature of the games they play changes as they develop, ranging through fantasy, ritual, competition and luck.

Generations of children rediscover the same games and delight in playing them. Games may be seen as a route by which children come to terms with their social environment, presenting as they do a social situation which is firmly governed by rules but whose outcome is unknown. Piaget (1967) saw children's games as, 'the most admirable social institutions. The game of marbles for instance . . . contains an extremely complex system of rules . . . a code of laws, a jurisprudence of its own . . . If we wish to gain any understanding of child morality it is obviously with the analysis of such facts as these that we must begin. All morality consists in a system of rules . . .' It is of course not our present concern to explore morality but to remember that children play games, and to take account of these natural tendencies when developing teaching strategies for young learners.

Children want to play

It is clear then that games – since children naturally want to play them – can be motivating. In pedagogical discussion of motivation for foreign and second language learning in general, emphasis is often put on the sometimes conflicting forces of 'instrumental' motivation and 'integrative' motivation (McDonough 1981). A learner of a foreign language who is instrumentally motivated is concerned to develop competence in the language for reasons such as passing an examination, improving job prospects, gaining prestige or needing to study in the medium of the target language. A learner who is integratively motivated is committed in some way to establishing closer links with the language community within which the language is used. Sometimes a learner's strong desire to pass an exam or to get a new job will create enough motivation to lead to success in language learning even if the teaching leaves much to be desired. The same may also be true of integrative motivation for the mature learner. But for the young learner, motivation deriving from factors outside the classroom, such as parental and social attitudes, is likely to be weaker than that created by events in the classroom

itself. Children need to be involved and even excited in order to learn effectively.

Some of the recent major advances in educational psychology focus on the need that children have to be actively involved in whatever they do in order to succeed in learning. Bruner (1983) speaks of the need for teachers to engage in a 'battle against passivity'. Donaldson (1978) argues strongly that all children have the right and the capacity to succeed and that schools must offer all children opportunities to succeed if they are to educate them effectively. She quotes Bruner – 'We get interested in what we are good at' – as a central truth. Burstall (1974) reported that the major finding of a project in Britain on the teaching of French to young learners was that 'Nothing succeeds like success.'

The discriminating use of games in the young learners' classroom can help in creating, on a small scale, opportunities for involvement and excitement, for achievement and success. And children who are eager to take part in playing a well chosen game will want to master the language necessary for doing so.

Developing language through interaction

Games usually lead to social as well as intellectual involvement since players need to communicate in order to compete or co-operate, to organise or argue.

Wells (1981), in working on first language acquisition, found clear evidence that a child who has a lot of opportunities for negotiating meaning – for making sure that he/she has properly understood what is being said – develops language skills more rapidly than a child who does not. Games can create these opportunities in the foreign or second language classroom by setting out situations where children urgently need and want to communicate in order to have a turn at playing, to point out the rules, to challenge another player and so on.

Games and the communicative approach to English Language Teaching (ELT)

Many of the points made about games hitherto echo the fundamental principles of communicative approaches to language teaching. A brief exploration of how the two correspond will clarify some of the reasons for using games.

It is a principle of communicative approaches to ELT that task-based activities enhance learning. In language learning, task-based activities are those which stimulate effective use of language but involve no conscious analysis of language. An exercise which instructs learners to change the tense of verbs is not task-based because it is language-focused. Getting learners to listen carefully to instructions in order to draw a picture, make a model or play a game are examples of a task-based approach. The purpose perceived by the learners is non-linguistic. The understanding and use of

language is necessary but the analysis of language is not. Some of the most powerful ideas developed recently on syllabus and methodology for language teaching derive from this central notion of the importance of task-based work (Breen 1987, Nunan 1989, Prabhu 1987). It is argued that if tasks are identified as the main elements of the syllabus, then syllabus and methodology will control each other. Getting learners involved in tasks will thus be a catalyst for language learning.

It is a *sine qua non* of a game that it has clearly defined goals – that these are motivating and provide the ‘purpose’ of the game. To play a game is to enjoy competing alone or in groups against other players, against time or against the challenge of the game, and not to think consciously about the language involved in doing so. In other words, games may be seen as tasks. If they successfully engage the learners’ attention as a proper children’s game should, then learning will be supported. Young (1983) describes the use of specially devised communication games and out-of-classroom games to supplement a traditional syllabus in primary schools in Hong Kong; using games in this way as a supplementary activity in order to give children the opportunity to use language purposefully and playfully may be a comfortable and sensible route to follow.

The interactive principle is also central to communicative approaches to ELT. Work on second language development echoes findings about the way in which negotiation and interaction help first language development (Ellis 1985). Opportunities for using a language in order to interact effectively – even if inaccurately – with someone else, help learning to take place. It was assumed for a long time that such opportunities would occur naturally only outside the classroom and, for the foreign language learner, only during visits overseas. But the creation of social contexts inside the classroom where interaction needs to take place in the target language is an important part of any communicative methodology. If a learner can be put into a situation where sheer need to use the language makes him/her strive to do so as effectively as possible, that experience contributes to language learning. Using the language is the best way of learning to use it. Involving children in games which they are very eager to play may be a good way of creating a powerful need to use the language.

A third important principle of communicative methodology is that the teaching situation must be learner-centred. Learners’ needs both as future language users and active language learners should be the chief criterion for assessing how appropriate syllabus and methods are. We can relate this principle to what we have already said about motivation, involvement and the need for success. Krashen (1982) applied several of these principles to the field of second language teaching and one of the concepts he developed was that of the ‘affective filter’. He sees the affective filter as being the emotional disposition of an individual which acts upon learning processes. A high affective filter causes the learner to be a relatively inefficient learner and is likely to result from anxieties, disturbances or inhibitions. A low affective filter which may result from feelings of relaxation, well-being or success maximises learning efficiency. If it is a condition of games that they

contain an element of fun and that they absorb the interest of the learner, it seems clear that using them in the classroom will produce a low affective filter in participants. Accordingly, the capacity of learners to learn should be acknowledged and brought out. Teachers of young learners may find acknowledging the natural tendencies and desire of children to play and incorporating games into classroom activities in a well-ordered and purposeful way to be an effective strategy.

The arguments for using games run parallel with and indeed are simply a part of the broader arguments and theoretical justifications of adopting a communicative approach to ELT.

Which games?

Children may wish to play games for fun. Teachers, however, need more convincing reasons! We have explored the general pedagogical justification for using games. We now come to the classroom specifics. Teachers need to consider which games to use, when to use them, how to link them up with the syllabus, textbook or programme and how, more specifically, different games will benefit children in different ways.

This section builds up a system for identifying the procedures and characteristics of different games, which should indicate whether a game is useful and what demands it makes.

Most textbooks published for young learners in recent years incorporate some games. A useful selection of resource books and teachers' books is also available, providing ideas for a range of games for young learners (a brief list is provided at the end of this chapter). There are also a number of games referred to in other chapters of this book. Our purpose here is not to duplicate any of those but to create an analytical framework suggesting ways of selecting games to suit particular contexts and learners. Games referred to are explained in the appendix to this paper.

The pedagogical focus of games

Games to be used for ELT must in some way be language dependent. The specific language focus of a game could be items of vocabulary or particular structures or functions. The language skill focus could be any one of the major skills of listening, speaking, reading or writing, with a narrower focus on, for example, spelling or pronunciation. 'Simon says', for example, uses a range of language including the function of giving instructions, imperatives and vocabulary for parts of the body. The leader of the game has to produce all these items orally and the players have to listen and respond with understanding. The teacher could therefore justify the game as consolidation of the language items or as listening practice.

Another example is 'Spelling bee' which focuses on whatever vocabulary items the teacher selects. The skills involved are very restricted – listening

and speaking – with all the emphasis on accuracy of spelling. The teacher could justify the game as vocabulary development, or listening or spelling practice.

At the pedagogical level then, the focus of the game should match what the teacher wants to teach. This formula may not be as simple as it sounds, however. Focusing on specific language items may be one dimension of language learning, but learners also benefit from being put into situations where they are very eager to communicate but have to manage with what language they have. In the previous section we noted that task-based activities are not normally language-focused. We shall consider these points again below in discussing features of language practice games and communication games.

Young learners often find it is worth learning language in order to play a good game! The involvement and enthusiasm generated by the game itself may give an important boost to children's motivation. And playing the game is for the children an authentic opportunity for language use.

Patterns of organisation

The way in which games are organised varies a great deal. Some games are played in pairs, some in groups, some in teams, some with the whole class playing against the teacher or one leader. This factor may help the teacher decide whether a game is suitable. Is it going to lead to 'dangerous' situations where learners are outside the immediate control of the teacher? Is it going to involve moving a lot of furniture? Are frequent changes of place going to disrupt the class? Is it going to lead to noisy, excited competition between teams?

The pattern of organisation has clear implications for the sort of language activity that a game will engender and is itself controlled by the rules and closure or outcome of the game. A game played in pairs may involve more children in oral interaction for longer than a teacher-led game. 'Find the difference', for example, played by negotiating pairs, involves extensive oral interchange. 'Vocabulary snap', on the other hand, is played in groups and involves reading practice of a limited number of words, repeated oral production of 'Snap' and perhaps some oral negotiation relating to dealing cards, taking turns and who said 'Snap' first! Each game has its own characteristic range of language activity.

Materials and equipment

Teachers may also be strongly influenced in their choice of game by the nature of the materials needed. Computer games, board games, card games, box games, paper and pencil games, blackboard games, question and answer games . . . the level of materials and equipment involved varies considerably. Availability and expense will be major factors in selection as will the effort of organising children's groups, and conservation and storage of materials.

'Ludic' principles

We have already discussed the nature of games. Here we can usefully identify characteristic differences between games in terms of game-related or 'ludic' principles, providing the teacher with another way of defining what is being undertaken and whether it is appropriate. It will also be a way of approaching the invention of games to suit particular purposes, a way perhaps of turning other activities into games.

The ludic principles or playing spirit of a game may derive from a number of elements which give a game its particular tone. For example, different games involve different combinations of the conflicting forces of chance and skill. On the whole young learners like games which have an element of luck because it can add to the excitement and reduces the socially divisive nature of 'clever' games. For teachers with a wide range of ability in the class, an element of luck is very important in a game. Games entirely dependent on skill have the tiresome habit of producing the same few winners repeatedly and thereby rapidly reducing the level of involvement of the majority of the players. Games with a powerful element of chance include guessing games, games with a dice or randomly dealt cards.

Other ludic principles are those of competition and co-operation. One game may be driven by competition between players; another game may require co-operation in order for play to proceed. Some games of course involve both. Whilst every game has within it an element of competition, it may be that players need to co-operate with each other in order to compete against the challenge that the game sets up. 'Describe and draw', for example, involves players in co-operative negotiation in order to beat the challenge of transferring information orally from one given graphic to another. If either one of the pair did not co-operate, the game could not proceed. 'Find the difference' similarly requires co-operation.

Co-operation in a game therefore encourages verbal negotiation. Many games are purely competitive of course and winning may be the perceived objective of an individual, a group or a team. With young learners it is important for winning to come everyone's way at some point in order to maintain involvement and enthusiasm. Using teams and groups also helps to reduce the individual pressures of competition.

Uncertainty, caused by demands made on memory, is another ludic principle, important in some types of game. 'Grandmother went to market', for example, is a game because players' memories will fail at some stage; the excitement comes from the challenge of uncertainty!

Bearing in mind these principles – chance and skill, competition and co-operation, uncertainty – that are at the heart of many games may help a teacher to turn a textbook-led language exercise into a game. Introducing an element of competition into a language activity is something teachers often do in order to stimulate effort ('Who can finish first?') Sole use of that ludic principle can, however, be discouraging.

Subtler approaches may be more effective. Straightforward question and answer activities between teacher and pupils ('Where is the pen? It's next to

the rubber/on the book/behind the cup') can be livened up for example by introducing the memory principle ('Look at the things on the table. Now turn round... Where is the pen? Where is the cup? ...'). Possible adaptations are many.

Finally and most importantly perhaps in identifying the characteristic features of games we must consider the ways in which the procedures of games, by setting up particular patterns of activity, offer different kinds of opportunity for language development.

Language practice games

We can define language practice games as those which involve repeated use of particular language items, where the language form is given and controlled and where accuracy of reproduction or spelling is required in order for the player to succeed. Games of this sort are in many ways like language drills; they offer opportunities for repetition of language items that are intended to be learned because it is assumed that engaging in such repetition will lead to learning of the language. Rixon (1981) refers to such games as code-control games.

Using games may certainly be an effective way of making repetition of language natural and purposeful for young learners. Many games involve routines and repetitive formulae, which may be part of their charm for young children who often relish the familiarity of favourite activities. The formulae involved in 'I spy with my little eye' or in 'Happy families' are the routine of the game itself and very much a means to the end of playing the game. Such games might be considered as the palatable side of behaviourist ideas of how language is learned by repeated imitative use and reinforcement. Language practice games might thus be seen as fulfilling a useful role amongst the 'pre-communicative' activities of a broad communicative approach to language teaching (Littlewood 1981).

Second and foreign language development probably owes no more than first language development to behaviourist patterns of learning by stimulus, response and reinforcement. Equally however it is clear that much authentic first language use amongst young children involves repetitive language routines in play. Activities in the classroom which draw upon this natural predilection are unlikely to be rejected if they are used with restraint. They will never on their own be capable of creating in learners a capacity for communicative use of language but they may be a very valuable technique for familiarising children with new language and giving them the confidence to produce that language. Such games may, arguably, still be seen as 'tasks'.

It is worth remembering that a lot of negotiating often goes on in these games as part of managing the game. While the formal focus of the game may appear to be tightly controlled and accuracy- and practice-orientated, incidental discussion goes on about whose turn it is, whether the rules have been broken, or about someone who isn't paying attention and doing what they should be. This is a valuable part of the activity in the English language classroom where the medium is also the message.

Communicative language teaching games

Within a communicative language teaching game the emphasis is on the message being transmitted by the medium of the language rather than on the language itself.

According to Palmer and Rodgers (1983), there are six features which can be seen to greater or lesser extent in communicative language teaching games: the players have to interact; they have to deal with some unpredicted information; they have a clear purpose; the context of the activity is clear; players have to be actively involved; they are given a particular role to play.

More simply, communicative language teaching games can be seen as pair or group games where the need to communicate is powerful and urgent but no fixed language formulae are available or adequate for doing so. The game is the task which sets off the search for the necessary language. The theory of language development underlying the use of such games for foreign language teaching is that language development ensues when learners are put into an interactive situation with which they can just about cope by drawing on language resources and communication strategies. The situation is the game.

'Find the difference', for example, is a communicative language teaching game insofar as the routine, rules and objective of the game make it necessary for information to be transmitted from one player to the other. Hadfield's imaginative collection (1984) offers a range of games within which players, often using cue-cards, seek their partners, plan days out, try to work out routes, transmit information to each other about bus times, shopping lists, family members, items in pictures of rooms and so on. Such games can provide excellent models on which the teacher can base other games in his/her own particular context.

In brief, then, in deciding which games to use a teacher has to bear in mind a number of points. Does the game focus on appropriate language items and skills? Can it be organised within his/her classroom? Are materials available or 'makeable'? Are the learners going to find the degree of competitiveness or co-operation stimulating? Is the balance between skill and luck right for the class? Are the children at a stage where they will benefit from familiarisation through repetitive practice? Do they need the stimulation of situations where they have to struggle a little but which are fun because of the challenge, and can they cope with them?

The questions are many but may be quickly dealt with by the teacher who has begun to use games as a teaching technique and resource. The appendix at the end of this paper presents all the games referred to and indicates how their key features may be identified in terms of the analytic framework laid out in this section.

Meeting the critics

There are numerous misapprehensions about the use of games in the language teaching classroom. An effective way of synthesising what has been said so far and of focusing on some of the uses of games for teaching English to young learners is to identify and discuss some of these misapprehensions.

'Games are not serious and cannot therefore be treated seriously as part of a methodology for teaching English.'

It is true that many games are seen by the players as fun rather than work. A serious objective can be approached by many routes, however, not only those which preclude fun. A teacher perceives classroom objectives differently from children. Statements of syllabus (the teacher's perception) are not intended as a means of explaining to children the purpose of their activities.

'Games can only ever be decorative extras – time-fillers perhaps.'

This attitude builds upon the previous one, implying that worthwhile learning takes place only when teaching activities are declared to be such to the learners. Krashen and Terrell (1982) would claim the opposite: '... experienced instructors who work with children know that they become more involved more quickly within an activity if it is presented in a game format.' Our earlier discussion of the nature of tasks identified the fundamental principle of communicative approaches to language teaching that using language to succeed in a task is one of the most profitable ways of developing competence. A game is, for young learners, a task.

'Games belong outside the classroom.'

It is sometimes argued that classroom games lack authenticity – children only really believe in the games they organise for themselves in the playground, the street, the home. To set up such a divide between children's lives outside school and in the classroom seems to ignore the intense importance to children of their school relationships and involvements. Breen (1985) argues that learning activities are fully authentic for eager learners (more so in the classroom than imported, simulated situations can be). The classroom is a social context with as much reality for those participating in it as any context outside the classroom. For young learners who enter into friendships, enmities, arguments, sulks, resentments, fears and excitements with such very real passion and involvement in the classroom, it is very unconvincing to argue that appropriately managed games cannot engender as much involvement inside the classroom as outside.

'If children get involved and excited in playing games, they will use their first language and gain no benefit in English.'

It may indeed happen where children are playing games in groups or pairs that breakdown in communication or eagerness to finish a game tempts

them to switch languages. Persuasion is always worth trying. Children are quite able to understand that if their lesson is intended to help them learn English, they should use English. It is also worth remembering the power of the rules of a game; if the rule is to conduct as much of the game as possible in English, that has some authority.

We should also bear in mind, however, that switching between languages is a recognised communication strategy resorted to by many efficient language learners when faced with communication breakdown. For young learners striving to become efficient learners, the strategy will be a natural resort. Occasional use of it is an indication of normal learning processes in operation. They can be encouraged to switch back to English once the immediate problem has been solved. The attentive teacher will be able to observe and remedy the cause of breakdown.

'Games are noisy and therefore disruptive.'

Games may focus on oral or written language, use a wide range of patterns of organisation and procedures, focus on a vast selection of activities. Certain activities will be potentially noisier than others; certain procedures will be more difficult to organise with a large or boisterous class than others. But the most powerful threat to good order in the classroom comes from lack of learner interest in what is going on. High levels of motivation are conducive to good order. Purposeful and involving games may be a strong support to motivation. The promise of play becomes an effective way of maintaining order.

Conclusion

We have discussed why games might be used in teaching English to young learners and tried to indicate clearly the many dimensions that need to be taken into account in selecting and organising games if they are to become an important part of a teacher's repertoire. Once teachers have discovered the enthusiasm they can engender in children, they are not likely to be deterred by the classic misapprehensions outlined above. It remains a powerful truth that play is in the essential nature of the child. The teacher who has the confidence to recognise that and to direct and exploit it for language learning purposes will soon reap the benefits in the classroom.

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