The game as a communication technique in foreign language class

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Abstract
Games are a useful resource in the English class, since students of all ages love them. It can be used as a technique to motivate, to increase communicative competence in a foreign langue class. To achieve this goal, games must be adapted to the level and interests of our students. Well used, they create an informal atmosphere and the students tend to lose shyness when they use the language and tend to be more participant and less fearful.
Keywords: Communication, game, language, technique

Título: El juego como una técnica de comunicación en la clase de lengua extranjera.

Resumen
Los juegos son un recurso útil en la clase de inglés, ya que los estudiantes de todas las edades los aman. Se puede utilizar como una técnica para motivar, aumentar la competencia comunicativa en una clase de langua extranjera. Para lograr este objetivo, los juegos deben adaptarse al nivel y los intereses de nuestros estudiantes. Bien utilizados, crean una atmósfera informal y los estudiantes tienden a perder timidez cuando usan el lenguaje y a ser más participantes y menos temerosos.
Palabras clave: Comunicación, juego, lengua, técnica.

1. INTRODUCTION

Games are a useful resource in the English class, since students of all ages love them.

Along this article we are going to explain what we understand as a game, the reason for using games, and also how games can be used in the Foreign Language Class, in order to achieve our main aim: the student's communicative competence.

2. FUNCTIONS OF GAMES AND CREATIVITY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING.

First of all, we should define clearly, what we understand as a game. There are different definitions, some of them according to its recreational aspects, some others to its normative components. We can define game as an activity that contains a series of rules, a clear objective and a recreational component. Sometimes games can be used for other purposes as it happens in foreign language teaching, where games are used as providers of a context in which students can use the language communicatively.

The second aspect to consider is creativity. According to the Collins English Dictionary, it refers to the *"ability or power to create",* and to the *"originality of thought or inventiveness".*

Now, it's time to analyse the reasons for using games in primary education, especially for teaching a foreign language.

The use of games creates an informal atmosphere and the students tend to lose shyness when they use the language and tend to be more participant and less fearful. As a result, games stimulate the student's interest in such a way that a game presented properly can become one of the most reasonable techniques.

During recent years, a great number of articles and books about the importance of games and their use in the foreign language classroom have been published. The reasons for using games in the language class are:

- Games let the students concentrate their attention on specific points of the language either grammatical or lexical elements.

- They can be used with the purpose of reinforcing, reviewing and enriching what has been previously learnt and practised.

- They let the students with different grades of attitudes take part in the same conditions.

- They can be adapted to the group characteristics (age, level…)

- They help to create a good atmosphere (using the language in a creative way in a situation without stress), reducing the distance between teacher and students.

- Games provide immediate feedback to the teacher.

- They guarantee, in normal conditions, a high grade of students' participation.

An important characteristic of games is that they can take a short amount of time, so they can be used as often as wished without major difficulties, and with different purposes. In fact, it's the teacher who must decide when using games.

3. TYPOLOGY OF GAMES USED IN LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

According to Ellis and Brewster, there are many different kinds of games which can be grouped according to the kinds of language or learning focus they have and the kinds of resources, classroom management and organization they need.

These questions can help us to decide which type of game she would like to use.

- Does this game mostly promote fluency or accuracy?

- Does it promote competition or cooperation?

The first question, which asks about fluency or accuracy, divides games into two main types: language or accuracy games, and communication or fluency games.

The second question, which asks about competition or cooperation, divides games into competitive or cooperative ones.

Now, we are going to analyse them in detail.

3.1. LINGUISTIC AND COMMUNICATIVE GAMES

In the first case, linguistic games have as objective the correct production of linguistic structure as a proof of the right comprehension of the instructions given.

They are typical of the controlled practise stage. The length of the students' linguistic productions is usually limited: they do not often require more than one or two sentences, and sometimes just one word is enough as an answer.

Linguistic games can be similar to drills, when their objective is the correct repetition of a structure. For this reason, there is always the necessity of someone judging the correctness of the answers and this can be only done by the teacher. Another characteristic is that participants have to give the right answer to win.

Examples of linguistic games are: *"Simon says"; "Say Sunday"; "Chinese Whispers" (also known as The Telephone); or "The secret sentence". We can also use "the Hungry crocodile" or "Categories on the blackboard"*

In contrast, communicative games put emphasis, not on the absolute correctness of words or sentences produced, but on the general message made by the students, for example, giving a description or following a series of instructions. In other words, their aim is fluency, or, more widely, communicative competence.

Success is assessed according to the communicative results, according to the fact that the message is understood. For this reason, there are different ways of saying the same things, of achieving the desired communicative effect.

The teacher has not to be constantly paying attention or taking part in the game, he can be only a helper in the process.

Examples of communicative games are: *"Vocabulary race"; "Who am I?" or "Let's travel together".*

As we have been able to see, both, linguistic and communicative games have obvious differences. However, they are not incompatible. In an ideal way, the language practised in linguistic activities will be able to be used freer in communication activities and games.

Apart from these considerations about linguistic and communicative games, which is the teacher's role in each kind of game?

- **Teacher's role in linguistic games.**

In this kind of games, the teacher plays as a master of ceremonies, as a leader. It is important to keep a dynamic rhythm in the carrying out of the game, having notes or reminders of the game rules.

The only person who can play as a judge is the teacher, who finally decides about the correctness of the answer. Of course, the quick and effective correction of the students' language is essential if these ones must learn errors and correct answers, especially in those games that are adaptations of drill exercises.

How can we register scores? There are many ways, and some of them are very educational on their own, for instance: sticks of hangman game, a thermometer, a mountain to climb, small drawings that are filled, etc.

- **Teacher's role in communicative games.**

The teacher does not control the activity as it happens in linguistic games. Instead of judging what the students can say, the teacher must be ready to help them to express the best what they want to communicate. The teacher is there to be used as a source of information.

Errors haven't got too much importance. However, if he decides to stop completely the game to do explanation or check some concrete point, there is a risk of breaking the good atmosphere that it is necessary for this kind of activities. For this reason, correction should be made in the most possible indirect way (sometimes only a look at the students who made the error is enough for this one to realise about it and to correct himself).

Another possible risk is that students, having a lot of interest in taking part in the activity might use their mother tongue, in our case, Spanish. In those cases, it is important to make our students be conscious that the game objective is not the game itself, but the game carried out in the target language.

3.2. COOPERATIVE AND COMPETITIVE GAMES

This second criterion for classifying games attends to the way of playing them. Both linguistic and communicative games can be either cooperative or competitive.

In the former ones, students work together towards the achievement of a common goal. In the latter ones, students race to be the first to reach that goal.

In the teaching of a foreign language, cooperative games have some ethical advantages in contrast to competitive ones, since they contribute to learning to work together, in groups. In contrast, with competitive games some students might lose motivation if they never win.

4. THE GAME AS A CREATIVE TECHNIQUE

Reviewing the previous definition of games, they provide with good opportunities to practise the language in an enjoyable way, so students will be able to learn the language within a positive atmosphere. Surely this fact will foster their communicative competence in the language, making them able to understand others and to make themselves understood using the foreign language.

4.1. WHEN CAN WE USE GAMES?

It's the teacher who must decide when to introduce games in the classroom development. They can be included as a warm-up at the beginning of the lesson, as it creates the appropriate atmosphere; but games can also be used as a closure, to practise what has been learn and to leave the class with a good feeling. Finally, they can also be used as a central activity of the lesson planning, or to keep fast-finishers busy while the rest of the class finishes the activities.

4.2. HOW CAN WE USE GAMES?

Next, we are going to analyse in detail the different uses we can do of games in the language learning stages:

- Introduction and practise of new linguistic points: there are different stages in the process that goes from the moment in which the contents are unknown for the students to the moment in which those ones can se them fluently. For instance, in the presentation stage, it is better for the students to pay attention only to the teacher with the purpose of assimilating the meaning and form of the new contents but in the final stage of the unit the teacher shouldn't control the activity, but let students interact freely.

- Short and frequent activities: there are games that can be frequently used to improve some language skill by means of constant practise. For example, pronunciation can be improved thanks to games such as *Chinese Whispers*, or using *tongue twisters* as the following one:

  - "She sells seashells by the seashore".

We can also use games in which vocabulary and spelling are developed, such as "*I spy with my little eye*".

- Games can also be used as a review: for this purpose, they must be used with the frequency we consider advisable. These games can require the use of structures and vocabulary previously practised in previous games.

- Diagnosing weak points. A game with a communicative feature (characteristic) can be a very useful way to collect the necessary data and help the teacher to reach a conclusion about students' competence.

  - And finally, the last use:

- Language general practise. Games can also help to practise language, in a freer and more creative way. As they can be adapted to different levels, games can be carried out by beginners and by native speakers. The problem here is that the teacher must be ready to assume a great deal of work according to the way the game is being developed.

4.3. INVENTING OR ADAPTING GAMES?

The teacher can decide whether he prefers inventing a game, or maybe adapting it, taking advantage of games that already exist.

If he decides to invent a game, the following aspects must be taken into account:

- Firstly, he must decide the linguistic area this game is going to be concentrated.

- Secondly, he must decide in which stage of the unit or lesson it's going to be used and if it must be linguistic or communicative.

- He must also think about the students' way of participation (in pairs, small groups, etc.), the rules that govern the process, the materials we will need, and finally, how they win.

In contrast, if he decides using games that already exist, he should think of adapting them to the necessities of his students.

In this case, he can adapt the rules, according to the aim he want to achieve, but he can even change the central topic of the game and adapt it to students' necessities.

4.4. WHAT IF THE GAME DOESN'T WORK?

Probably, some games won't work well with our students, maybe because they have other interests, maybe because the level is not well adapted…

A good technique is finishing a game when the students still consider it funny, because it will create good expectations for the next time.

4.5. TECHNIQUES FOR USING GAMES

We have already seen different uses that games can have in the foreign language class, but we haven't gone through the techniques that the teacher might apply in order to exploit the games.

Next, we will comment on some techniques for game exploitation:

- Information difference: these are the easiest activities, in which a student A has certain information that a student B does not know; the latter needs get such information to finish his task successfully.

- Riddle games: these are a variant of the aforementioned principle. One student must guess the information that another student has.

- Searching games: they require the whole class participation. Each student has a piece of information and the task of getting all the necessary information to fill in a questionnaire or to solve a problem. Examples: *questionnaires, surveys…*

- Matching games, such as: *Find your partner.*

- Exchange and collection games: the students have some cards or pictures that they want to change for other similar ones to complete a family of them.

- Combinations games: the purpose is forming groups or families: of colours, etc.

- Games of solving problems: in these games, the participants share and exchange information with the purpose of solving some problem or mystery.

- And finally, simulation games: the class is transformed into an imaginary street, supermarket, hotel, etc.

4.6. GAMES, LANGUAGE TEACHING AND CHILDREN

Apart from the different usages we can make of games, we must consider that not all the games are suitable for children. For this reason, it is advisable to choose games that show cognitive, physical and emotional characteristics like those ones of children.

For instance, small children like cooperation games in which the whole class takes part and that let them to take part as many times as possible, but they hate games in which they can lose.

Other points to be considered when we use games with children are:

- Children need know exactly how the game works; they need know all the rules.

- It is important to stop a game before the students get tired.

- Games must be funny, and the teacher must add all the possible amusement.

- If the group is large, the students can work in pairs or small groups.

5. CONCLUSION

As we have been able to see during this article, games are a very useful resource in foreign language teaching, because they are essential for a child's development, and as a result, help to create a good and appropriate atmosphere which guarantees communication.

If the main aim of the foreign language area is to achieve a communicative competence in our students, games can be the solution.

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