



Teaching English as a Foreign language and the Use of Educational Games

Thouqan Saleem Masadeh ^{a*}#

^a *Curricula and Methods of Teaching, Najran University, Saudi Arabia.*

Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a literature review on the issues of using games to improve the performance of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in the classroom. Its main aim is to determine the importance of using educational games as a teaching method in EFL classes. For this sake, a set of previous studies and a lot of related research are reviewed. Results show that there is an agreement on the benefits EFL learners can get as a result of using Educational games. Most of the studies have asserted the fact that the fun and enjoyment embedded in such games help these EFL learners overcome their shyness and meanwhile motivate them to use the language as a means of communication with others in different contexts. Furthermore, findings show that using games in EFL classrooms is beneficial for teachers because games can change the educational process from teacher-centered into learner centered and place transfer much of the responsibility to the learner.

Keywords: EFL learner; EFL teacher; educational games; teaching method; nature of games.

1. INTRODUCTION

Most people strongly believe that human communication is a complex process, though it is a vital part of their life. Furthermore, none can

ignore that the whole world has become as a global village where people need a common language, beside their mother tongue, to communicate with each other all over the world. Along with knowledge, communication and

Associate Professor of English Language;

*Corresponding author: Email: tmassadeh@yahoo.com;

information explosion, English has become this common language and so learning it has been essential. To master such a global language, learners have to master its main skills beginning with listening and ending with writing. Out of these skills, speaking might be the most difficult skill to master because speakers have to produce both grammatically and meaningfully correct utterances [1].

Moreover, the teaching methods, teachers often adopt, play a significant role in motivating learners to learn this foreign language, i.e English as most of them face anxiety and feel shy to speak in front of peers and others. Hence, adopted teaching methods and activities should minimize the challenges faced during the educational process while teaching speaking [2]. On the other part, learners' success in communication depends on how accurate and fluent they are when speaking. Their accuracy and fluency normally reflect the effect of the English courses they are usually subjected to [3]. Consequently, teachers should always look for ways to help them improve their speaking performance [4].

Motivation might be the most significant factor in helping EFL learners to speak courageously and confidently without stress and anxiety. Good motivation affects the learners' willingness to practice using English regularly. Creativity of EFL teachers to plan and develop more creative and innovative activities can also enhance learners' skills and mainly speaking [5].

One useful strategy by which EFL learners' motivation can be enhanced is the use of educational games in classrooms. Via games, EFL learners can be fully engaged in the lesson and so their participation can be guaranteed [6]. Besides, the use of games can encourage EFL learners to use English in real contexts. Games can lead to full participation because they generate enjoyment and fun. They can also result in a healthy competitive platform for EFL learners to speak English [2].

One more interesting factor that encourages the use of educational games in classrooms is the fact that games themselves can be effective techniques in teaching any language not only the foreign one. They are attractive and meanwhile attract the attention of learners to use language in a funny way. They allow EFL learners the opportunity to orally express their opinions and to interact not only with their friends but also with their teachers [7].

Therefore, the present study aims to theoretically investigate how using games inside classrooms can improve EFL learners' speaking performance and consequently communication in different contexts.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study attempts to provide practical evidence about the importance and benefits of using educational games in teaching EFL language in classrooms. It is a fact that teachers, before starting their profession, should be acquainted with some ideas about effective and interesting teaching. Traditional teaching methods, such as lecturing, that are teacher-centered are no longer sufficient to encourage learners and mainly EFL learners to be fully engaged in the lesson. Games are not a modern invention but can be used in more effective ways in light of today's technological era to create interactive learning environment. Most teachers are nowadays experts in technology and can design the educational game in the way they like with the help of numerous programs that can be used for this sake. Therefore, identifying the merits of using games in education; the ways by which they can be used; and the ways by which learners' achievement can be assessed, both EFL learners and teachers' teaching and learning behaviors can be promoted. By using games, teachers may achieve all the educational outcomes and meanwhile facilitate EFL learning for learners.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The views of both, Carl Rogers, the founder of the Humanistic Approach in (1951) and Krashen, the first to talk about the Affective Filter Hypothesis in (1982) can constitute the theoretical framework of this study. It is well known that human beings learn because they are inwardly driven, and derive their reward from the sense of achievement that having learned something affords. One important principle of the Humanistic Approach is the strong belief that the whole person, including his emotions, feelings, linguistic knowledge, and behavioral skills, is engaged by what is so-called humanistic techniques. Humanistic teaching engages emotion, empathy, encouragement, and learner involvement [8]. Therefore, a fully functioning person can live with all of his feelings and reactions and can reach his full potential [9]. Therefore, using games in EFL classrooms accords with the humanistic approach, where

education is really about creating a need within the child, or instilling within the child self-motivation.

Krashens' Affective Filter Hypothesis, assumes that language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill, rather it requires meaningful interaction in the target language, i.e. natural communication where learners are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding. Therefore, the best methods are those that supply comprehensible input in low anxiety situations, containing messages that learners really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the foreign language, but allow students to produce when they are ready, recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production [10]. Following the trends towards the use of interactive, active, participative, and communicative activities while teaching foreign language, many research works propose the use of games or game-like activities in EFL teaching using games [11]. A game means an entertaining, engaging, and often challenging activity where learners play and usually interact with others [12].

On the other hand, Affective Filter Hypothesis assumes that motivation, attitude, anxiety, self-confidence and emotions affect efficient language input processing [13]. In brief, looking at games as sources of motivation and attitude, learners can be highly affected by using them in classrooms.

4. THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL GAMES IN EFL LEARNING

Games can be of significant importance if well used in the context of EFL learning and teaching. For instance, competitive games provide students with the natural opportunity to work and communicate with each other a lot and consequently helps them learn the foreign language in the same way they acquire their mother tongue. Knowledge acquisition will be faster and more effective because of the motivation and interaction allowed by these games. In addition, educational games usually stimulate EFL learners to take part in any activity because of the individual's innate love to win and most importantly, they can lower learners' anxiety [14].

On the other part, using educational games inside EFL classrooms can teach learners how to use language rather than just practicing it in a classroom context. None ignores the fact that real life communication generally takes place when individuals interact with each other in real life various situations. Therefore, teachers via the use of games can create a relaxing atmosphere, which can lead to more concentration where anxiety and stress are decreased to the minimum.

Learning by doing or playing, provided by the use of games, is also regarded very important by many educationalists. It can help learners get over their boredom resulting from serious, strict, and monotonous study in classroom [15]. Nowadays, electronic educational games can be used and integrated in Different forms of electronic games can be used in a variety of ways to educational practice and the easiest way could be in using the game content as a multiple-choice test, where the game could be the learners' actual reward [16].

Moreover, stimulating EFL learners to speak unconsciously in a joyful manner is one of the many most important advantages of using educational games in teaching EFL. The use of games can relief learners by decreasing their pressure levels [17]. Besides, the use of such games can develop learners' personality by promoting their self-confidence and stream (Restopo, 2012).

5. THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE GAMES

A game can have numerous definitions in dictionaries and reference books, but the concept is the same. One definition says that games are activities with rules, a goal, and an element of fun. Competitive games, on one part, are games where players or teams race to be the first to reach the goal. Cooperative games, on the other part, are games where players or teams work together towards a common goal [18].

EFL games are fun and enjoyable activities where English is used as an instructional language. They are usually conducted with some rules to reach a goal. They help teachers to create a better teaching-learning process. Besides, they could be presented to class in different ways at the appropriate moment to create a positive atmosphere without thinking about learning [19]. Activities of EFL teaching can be of several types [20]. They involve:

1. Get-acquainted activities that can be practiced for situations where students in class do not know each other and like to introduce themselves to others.
2. Circle chat where students form two concentric circles, with the students in the inner circle facing those in the outer circle. Each student can introduce himself to the person directly in front of him. Then the teacher announces a topic that the students must discuss with their partners.
3. Story completion that is: a very enjoyable, whole-class, free-speaking activity for which students sit in a circle.
4. Interviews conducted by students on selected topics with various people.
5. Reporting before coming to class where students are asked to, in advance, read a newspaper or magazine and, in class, report to their friends the most interesting news they have found.
6. Storytelling where students can briefly summarize a fairy tale, Fable or story they heard beforehand, or create their own stories to tell their classmates.
7. Picture describing to foster students' speaking abilities using games since students can make use of pictures.
8. Role-play where students pretend they are in various social contexts and have a variety of social roles.
9. Simulations, in which students can bring items to the class to create a realistic environment.
10. Information gap where students are supposed to be working in pairs. One student will have the information that other partner does not have and the partners will share their information.
11. Find the difference: for this activity, students can work in pairs and each couple is given two different pictures. Students in pairs discuss the similarities and/or differences in the pictures.

Designers of educational games, in general and EFL ones, normally design the game with multi-interconnected levels of difficulty. The acquired or learned information forms the basis or the next problem-solving situation. In this way, students' lesson content understanding can be deepened through what is so called experiential learning [21]. Most of these games can help learners make information-based decisions when facing similar situations in future because their content is related to real life. Some other games are

designed to promote learner-educator collaboration in order to strengthen their relationship, which is not feasible with other learning experiences [22].

With regard to the construction of any educational game, one can argue that for any game to be suitable for learners of all ages there should be a set of specific rules to follow. Before starting designing the game, the designer should state its type and aim. However, the teachers himself should test it to make sure that the learning objectives can be achieved. In addition, the game should allow learners enough time to guarantee very accurate results [23].

Another interesting point to mention is that game-based learning is, in general, a teaching method, which allows the teacher the opportunity to attract his learners' interest and make them learn and assimilate specific skills in real life situations [24]. Nevertheless, the progress of each EFL learner will depend on his understanding of the subject matter being taught. In short, using games in classrooms make learning fun and challenging and provokes learners' engagement [25].

6. BENEFITS OF LANGUAGE GAMES

The use of educational games and mainly EFL ones has many benefits for teachers as well as learners. For instance, the anxiety and depression learners usually suffer from make it difficult to learn appropriately and effectively. Language anxiety is referred to as the EFL learner's feeling of tension and fear in classroom [26]. It is build up from typical self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behavior towards EFL language learning in classroom [27].

One of the benefits of using games for EFL learners is that games encourage them to use EFL language instantly without thinking about the correct form of the and so their levels of anxiety comes down. Moreover, more opportunities will be provided to learners to express their opinions and feelings [28]. Another benefit of using games for EFL learners is that games, in addition to being motivating and challenging, they can be viewed as a welcome break from the usual routine of language classes. They can help learners make and sustain their efforts of learning. They can provide language practice in various and integrated language skills. Moreover, they can encourage students to interact and communicate to each other. They can also

create a meaningful context for language that is being learned by the student [29].

With regard to games' benefits for EFL teachers, Games can stimulate the learners' enthusiasm to win by providing them with opportunities to use language in a less formal situation, without the pressure of speaking in perfect form. They can give them a variety of tools to facilitate the teaching-learning process. They can make the lesson less monotonous, and can raise the students' motivation. They can also make students produce language subconsciously, and can stimulate their participation and give them confidence. They can transform the teacher's role from that of formal instructor to that of an organizer or/and moderator of the class. They can serve as a testing mechanism, too [30].

7. IMPLEMENTING GAME-BASED EFL LESSONS

Teachers can implement the EFL lesson through three main stages, namely, presentation, practice, and production. In the first stage, they can inductively introduce the topic and vocabulary to students through one of such contexts as a short reading text, guessing, drawing and listening. Then, they can ask students to deal with the text tasks individually or in pairs. After that, they can pose some prompting questions to get students involved in the EFL structures embedded in the text. In the next step, they can ask students to work in pairs to discuss the guiding questions and then derive the grammar rules with the teacher's facilitation. Teachers, in this step, can explain the grammar rule or topic if necessary. Before moving to the next stage of practice, teachers need to check students' understanding by using games. They can use fast answer race games, sound games, word games, picture games or caring and sharing games related to the lesson topic.

During the practice stage, teachers can use games through communicative, reading and listening to help students get involved in each task. While in the production stage, teachers have to ask students to produce the structures by real-life situations, especially their own real-life through games activities. Then, teachers have to allow students wider opportunities to keep on participating in one or two of such as speaking activities like for example, caring and sharing games, picture games, fast answer and race games, sound games or word games.

8. PREVIOUS STUDIES AND RELATED LITERATURE

A lot of research has been carried out to identify the effect or benefit of using games, mainly educational ones, as a teaching method in classrooms. As a result of reviewing previous studies and related literature, any interested researcher can come up with a number of studies, which strongly support the use of games. Most of these studies deal with using games method as a welcome break from the EFL classroom usual and boring routine to more enjoyable learning environment. The first productive skill that EFL learners should master to start communication with others is speaking. Ordering these studies in an ascending order can show the development of the beliefs about the benefits of using games in Teaching EFL inside classrooms.

One of the earliest studies, León & Cely [31], for instance concluded that by using games, students can gain confidence in speaking by overcoming fear of making mistakes and perceived speaking as a natural process when they were playing. Whereas, Oradee [32] ascertained that learners' speaking skills were significantly higher after using communicative games because games encourage interaction among students in the classroom.

Zhu [33] also concluded that practicing speaking through participation in games helps develop sociolinguistic and discourse competence among learners in a multimodal and interactive classroom environment. Furthermore, Keshta & Al-Faleet [34] claimed that puzzles, as one kind of games, are important in teaching speaking skills such as vocabulary achievement and retention. Besides, Mahmoud & Tanni [6] found that using games as classroom energizers and short warm-up activities not only sustains attractiveness to learning but also brings real life learning.

Nguyen & Pham [35], on the other hand, concluded that via the use of games as a means of instruction, EFL teachers could encourage their learners to practice speaking in the classroom. Another study conducted by Jannah, Kuswari, Muna, & Nabilla [36] showed that the use of games resulted in an improvement on student vocabulary mastery. Student motivation and involvement during teaching learning process also increased significantly. Most of students got high scores when translating

English vocabulary. The implementation of games and other supporting fun activities succeeded in helping students to learn and understand new vocabulary. Overall, using games during teaching English was successful in improving students' vocabulary mastery.

Recent studies such as Ho, Thien, An, & Vy [4] believed that gaming in the classroom can have a great effect on training students on how to use the language because of its ability to encourage students to interact with each other, work together and become more creative in expressing their ideas. In addition, Meiningsih & Madya [37] showed that students' speaking skills improved after learning through the use of guessing games and the main sub-skills that improved significantly were pronunciation, vocabulary, and fluency. However, Grammar and comprehension were not improved significantly.

Whilst, Saha & Singh [38] revealed that the use of games not only provides fun to the students but also engages them in the classroom by creating contexts for speaking, which helped them to use the language in communication. Using games transformed the learners from silent listeners into speakers by developing self-confidence. Students also developed the ability to introduce themselves to each other, answer questions asked by others, provide instructions and respond to instructions. In short, they have practiced and mastered a few speech function skills. Hernández-Chérrez, Hidalgo-Camacho, & Escobar-Llanganate [39], on the opposite, concluded that students consider using games in the classroom beneficial for their learning. Likewise, it was evident that communication games contributed significantly to the students' oral production, which showed an increased level of vocabulary, more accuracy and fluency, and a more relaxed interaction with their peers and their teacher, after the intervention.

Recently, Adansia & Oringo's [40], for example, concluded that games could enhance learners' speaking skills, which significantly became higher after using communicative games because of interaction among students in the classroom. In addition, the use of games could involve all the basic language skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Games could motivate learners, promote learners' interaction, and improve learners' acquisition.

9. CONCLUSION

Language games such as Fruit Naming Game, Guessing Game, Match Words and Pictures Game, and a Sentence Forming Game have been used as a teaching/learning method to improve EFL learners' language skills. Results concluded by most related studies prove games can be an alternative learning method for school students to improve their skills in English language. However, EFL language games should be applied as designed activities in teaching. Although this study does not provide a final solution to the problems of EFL learners' weak language skills, it has created a scope for the use of games in the classroom as an innovative pedagogy of language teaching where access to technology is limited.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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