

Using Games to Promote Communicative Skills in Language Learning

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This article considers the reasons why games serve as excellent communicative activities. The use of games can be a powerful language learning tool. On the surface, the aim of all language games is for students to "use the language"; however, during game play learners also use the target language to persuade and negotiate their way to desired results. This process involves the productive and receptive skills simultaneously. In this article the author also shares her experience of some interesting games and their application in the language classroom.

Introduction

In recent years language researchers and practitioners have shifted their focus from developing individual linguistic skills to the use of language to achieve the speaker's objectives. This new area of focus, known as communicative competence, leads language teachers to seek task-oriented activities that engage their students in creative language use. Games, which are task-based and have a purpose beyond the production of correct speech, serve as excellent communicative activities (Saricoban & Metin 2000). On the surface, the aim of all language games is for students to "use the language"; however, during game play learners also use the target language to persuade and negotiate their way to desired results. This process involves the productive and receptive skills simultaneously.

Games offer students a fun-filled and relaxing learning atmosphere. After learning and practicing new vocabulary, students have the opportunity to use language in a non-stressful way (Uberman 1998). While playing games, the learners' attention is on the message, not on the language. Rather than pay attention to the correctness of linguistic forms, most participants will do all they can to win. This eases the fear of negative evaluation, the concern of being negatively judged in public, and which is one of the main factors inhibiting language learners from using the target language in front of other people (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope 1986). In a game-oriented context, anxiety is reduced and speech fluency is generated--thus communicative competence is achieved.

Games are also motivating. Games introduce an element of competition into language-building activities. This provides valuable impetus to a purposeful use of language (Prasad 2003). In other words, these activities create a meaningful context for language use. The competitive ambiance also makes learners concentrate and think intensively during the learning process, which enhances unconscious acquisition of inputs. Most students who have experienced game-oriented activities hold positive attitudes towards them (Uberman 1998). An action research conducted by Huyen and Nga (2003), students said that they liked the relaxed atmosphere, the competitiveness, and the motivation that games brought to the classroom. On the effectiveness of games, teachers in Huyen & Nga's (2003) reported that action research reported that their students seem to learn more quickly and retain the learned materials better in a stress-free and comfortable environment.

The benefits of using games in language-learning can be summed up in nine points.

Games....

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- are learner centered.
- promote communicative competence.
- create a meaningful context for language use.
- increase learning motivation.

IV. Art Master

1. The instructor describes a picture orally.
2. Competitors simultaneously recreate the picture on a sheet of paper, correctly including named objects in accurate positions.

This game reinforces the use of prepositions, such as to the right of, to the left of, in the middle of, or under, etc. It also reinforces the vocabulary of concrete objects students have already learned before. The complexity of the picture will depend on the level of the students.

V. What's Cooking?

1. Participants read a recipe and make the dish.
2. The amount of ingredients and assembly process must follow exactly the instructions laid out in the recipe.
3. The participants eat the dish they have prepared, all together and as fast as possible, because whoever finishes the five tasks first wins the entire competition.

This game not only reinforces food vocabulary, but it also tests the ability of students to comprehend written instructions. This is also good for introducing cross-culture topics. Recipes may vary depending on what food terms and cultures the teachers wishes to cover. Salads and sandwiches are easy-to-prepare recipes. The eating part adds an additional element of fun to the game.

Although the whole competition is a combination of five games, each game is suitable for reinforcement of individual language skills and easily applied in the classroom. One feature of these games is that students with lower language ability in a team can still contribute if they are good at skills other than languages, such as putting together jigsaw puzzles, calculating numbers, drawing, or eating fast.

Observations

Throughout the competition, I observed that students were more engaged in and committed to using English than they would be in the classroom. They were attentive to instructions, which they usually are not in regular class. In each of the games, students found their own ways to express themselves. Participants went all out with their English to win the game.

The games also aroused cultural awareness. After the competition, students told me they will now pay more attention to geographical names that they often ignored before simply because they had never been there. Thus, students expressed a motivation and desire to know more than just linguistic knowledge.

Conclusion

Our experience creating a competition for our students taught us that games stimulate communicative skills. Competitors revealed that they felt less afraid of using their English during game play. I also observed that they were more willing to ask questions and think creatively about how to use English to achieve the goal. The competition gave students a natural opportunity to work together and communicate using English with each other. Furthermore, by integrating playing and learning, students practiced the learned linguistic knowledge in a vivid and meaningful context. Many came to understand that they could successfully use English to accomplish a variety of tasks. And finally, the competition stimulated their interest in foreign culture. As Uberman (1998, 87) writes, "Games encourage, entertain, teach, and promote fluency and communicative skills. If not for any of these reasons, they should be used just because they help students see beauty in a foreign language and not just problems that at times seem overwhelming."

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