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USING GAMES TO REVISE GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY – STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

In this paper we present part of the research done for the purposes of a doctoral thesis in the field of English language teaching (ELT). In it we show the comments and opinions of students who were exposed to revising grammar and vocabulary through educational games. These students were all attending English as a subsidiary at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade. Their comments were analyzed, categorized and then interpreted. The comments included student statements on why they liked or disliked certain games, and their suggestions on how certain games could be improved. Some actual samples of these comments are also provided to better illustrate their positions and views when it comes to using games in learning a foreign language.

Keywords: education, games, grammar, vocabulary, revision, B2 level, students' opinions

1. Introduction

Games have been part of educational systems all around the world for centuries. We encounter them in ancient Egypt and Greece (Johnson 1907: 26) and in China over 5000 years ago (Mungai, Jones & Wong 2005: 1).

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The first games were used to help soldiers practice their strategic skills (Gredler 2004: 571). They also hold their rightful place in the realm of foreign language teaching. They are often associated with fun, but their educational value, especially in the domain of learning foreign languages must not be forgotten (Richard-Amato 1988: 147). They became most prominent in the field of ELT with the communicative approach in the 1970s (Simović 2012: 678). However, long before the 1970s we encounter suggestions about using games for the purposes of learning a language. For example, Locke (1902: 130–133) talked about using dice in teaching children how to read and write. Letters could be put on the different sides of dice, and then the dice are rolled and words are formed from the given letters.

In the past some authors held the view that in schools there should be a clear difference between studying and playing games (Carr 1902: 38). For a long time, learning was considered to be a serious activity and as such it was the opposite of fun and play (Lee 1995). However, even then there were people who recognized the importance of learning through games. Hall (1904: 231) believed that we should avoid or postpone teaching children that there is a clear difference between playing and working. Making games part of the learning process is the way to help children find enjoyment in serious work (Johnson 1907: 18). Groos (1912: 399) warned us that: "… a discerning educator could not afford to ignore so important a coadjutor [as games]." Nowadays, the position that games are for playing, and classes for learning, has long been abandoned, but we believe that there are still some educators who want this distinction to exist (Vitaz 2017: 39).

2. Are games meant to be used just with children?

When most people think about games they think about children, as if children are the only ones who can and should enjoy playing games. It is similar when it comes to people's attitudes towards education: games are a welcome part of lessons if the students are children. Mungai, Jones and Wong (2005: 1) hold the same view, but they say that things are slowly changing in terms of the age of students with whom games are used. Gasser and Waldman (1979: 53-54) maintain that, as long as we explain the purpose of using a game in class, adults too can enjoy a game, unafraid

that they will feel childish. Lee (1986: 3), in his classification of games, refuses to define them by the age group they are appropriate for, saying that experience has shown how some games meant for children were quite enjoyable for adults, especially if the adults are able to clearly see the educational purpose of those games.

We strongly believe that educational games can be beneficial when used with adults. Compared to young children, adults are more inclined to provide the teacher with detailed and comprehensive feedback about the games they are exposed to. This feedback is valuable to a teacher in terms of planning lessons, choosing new games or adapting the ones that have already been used. This is why we chose to do our research with young adults, and analyze their opinions.

3. Research methodology

Ten ELT games were used with students at the Faculty of Philology, Belgrade University. These students all attended English as a subsidiary language course in the school year of 2014-2015. They were in their 1st year of studying English at the faculty and there were 71 students who took part in the experiment. Five games were connected to revising grammar and five to revising vocabulary. The table below presents the list of games used (Vitaz 2017: 179-180). Alongside, we have included the reference books where these games and their descriptions could be found. Some are very popular games in the domain of ELT, while others are not so prominent.

Table 1. A list of games with reference books

Grammar	Vocabulary
Chain story Lee (1986), Steinberg (2009)	**Password** Gasser & Waldman (1979), Lee (1986), Susser (1979), Steinberg (2009), Alemi (2010), Zimmerman (2014)
Little Red Riding Hood Seymour & Popova (2005)	**Bingo** Dobson (1972), Susser (1979), Lee (1986), Rixon (1988), Hadfield (1990), Watcyn-Jones (2000), Greiner (2010)

Chinese Whispers	Memory game
Chamberlin & Stenberg (1983), Lee (1995), Steinberg (2009)	Susser (1979), Yu (2005)
Strange objects	**Charades**
Lee (1986)	Gasser & Waldman (1979), Susser (1979), Lee (1986), Lee (1995), Steinberg (2009), Alemi (2010), Hartani (2012)
The Card Game	**Silly Answers**
Vitaz (2017)	Silvers (1982), Lee (1986), Deesri (2002), Ojeda (2004), Sánchez, Morfín & Campos (2007)

There is one grammar game we used which is not described in any ELT game books that we had access to. It is the Card Game. We encountered this one at a teacher conference. Its description can be found in the author's doctoral thesis (Vitaz 2017: 174).

The students were exposed to one game per class, and the classes lasted for ninety minutes each. The games themselves lasted from 10 to 40 minutes. Immediately after a game was used, students were given a piece of paper and they were asked to write down what they thought about the game. Their comments are valuable in terms of determining what students expect from using games in ELT. Furthermore, the comments help the teacher decide which games need to be improved or excluded.

4. Results

Several games proved to be the students' favorites: one grammar game (Chain Story) and one vocabulary game (Bingo); whereas the two least favorite activities were the following ones: Chinese Whispers and the Card Game – both games used for grammar revision (Vitaz 2017: 195).

After analyzing their comments, we were able to put them in several different categories: advantages, disadvantages, suggestions (Vitaz 2017: 196-198). Below is the description of each category.

To better illustrate the students' views, we have decided to include pictures of the comments they wrote. One comment was chosen for each category and a translation of this comment was provided.

4.1 Advantages

Overall, students enjoyed being exposed to games during class. What they enjoyed most of all were the games which were dynamic, as well as those games which included the use of realia. They loved when there were prizes to be won. They also recognized the effect of games to include and engage all students and they preferred those games which were organized as competitions. What they considered crucial was the fact that, while working in small groups, they were able to correct each other.

Certain games gave them an opportunity to revise the materials in a variety of ways. Sometimes, they were asked to draw something, which they enjoyed immensely. This proves the assumption that, although they are students of language, they learn things in different ways, and some of them remember things more easily if their other senses are engaged.

A number of students pointed out the importance of the teacher's attitude. According to them, a good teacher should always find new ways of teaching or revising the materials with his/her students. The teacher should be motivated and motivating, with a cheerful attitude.

Picture 1. A comment about the Chain Story
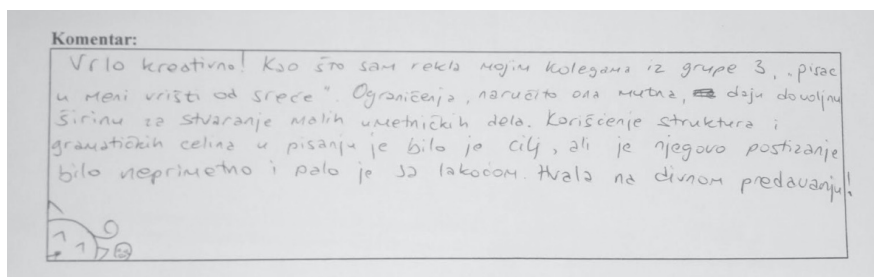
Translation of comment 1:

Very creative! As I said to my colleagues from group 3, 'the writer in me is screaming for joy'. The restrictions, especially the blurry ones, give us enough scope to create small works of art. The use of structures and grammar points was the goal, but its presence was unnoticeable and was accepted with ease. Thank you for a wonderful class!

4.2 Disadvantages

Not all the games used were agreeable, fun and engaging. In their comments, students singled out some of the characteristics which made some of the games less interesting. For example, the students did not enjoy the games which meant they had to write or say long sentences, the games which were not very creative, but rather repetitive. The work done in bigger groups (ten to twelve people per group) was also disliked. The students consider such activities to be less useful than others.

Some students disliked certain activities for what we would describe as external reasons or factors. They said that it was too warm in the classroom, or that they were not in the mood for playing a game at that particular moment; that they were exhausted. At first glance, we might think that these comments are irrelevant, and that they do not refer to the games themselves, but we would be wrong to think that. For example, some authors see the use of games as a way of providing students with a break in learning (Susser 1979: 57). Steinberg (2009: x) recommends using games as a way to rest and relax after some more demanding activities. Similarly, Ersoz (2000) considers games to be a way of doing something useful while taking a break from learning. Lee (1995) says games are a break from learning, which then helps students go back to learning feeling refreshed and helps them endure. But if we are to compare this to the abovementioned student comments, we need to understand that sometimes the students are too tired to be able to play and enjoy a game, and that doing a more traditional exercise would suit them better.

Some games were, according to students, unclear, and thus they were thought of as uninteresting, difficult and not so useful. These were also the games which lasted a bit longer. In this case, it is the teacher's job to stage the explanation of a certain game, or to make it shorter if he/she notices the game is taking too much time.

Picture 2. A comment about the Card Game
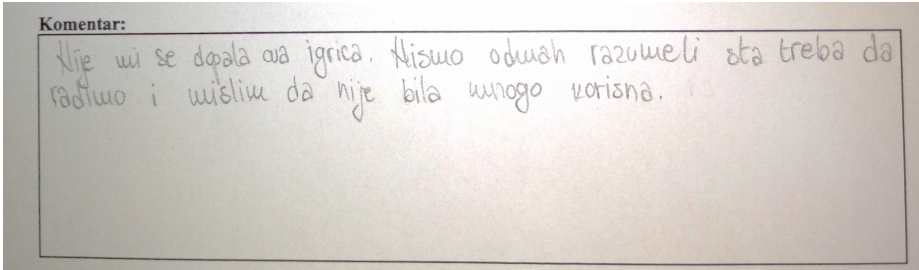
Translation of comment 2:

I did not like this game. We did not understand immediately what we were supposed to do and I think it was not very useful.

4.3 Suggestions

The comments provided by our students sometimes included suggestions about how some games could be improved and changed. For those games that meant doing work in bigger groups (e.g. the Card Game or Chinese Whispers) students recommended playing them in smaller groups, which would make more of them involved, instead of them waiting a long time for their turn. Some games that were a bit more dynamic (e.g. Chain Story) made it impossible for students to correct their mistakes. The suggestion was to devote some time at the end of an activity to error correction.

Picture 3. A comment about Charades
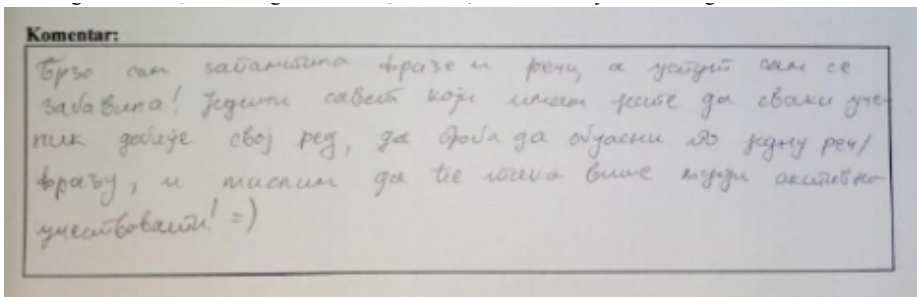
Translation of comment 3:

I quickly memorized the phrases and the words, and I had fun as well! The only advice that I have is that every student should get his own turn to try and explain one word/phrase, and I think in this way more people would be actively involved. ☺

5. Conclusion

We strongly believe that educational games should be used in teaching English to young adults. However, it is of vital importance to have a constant dialog with your students, to listen to their opinions, comments, preferences and suggestions. Sometimes, as in this paper, the dialog can be analyzed more thoroughly, and specific conclusions can be drawn.

Students love being challenged, competing, working in small groups, and being engaged in activities which are lively. We as teachers should have in mind their individual differences and the ways they learn. Bringing everyday objects to class is always welcome. And last but not least, if it is clear in the teacher's demeanor that he/she enjoys what he/she does, the students will enjoy the games, too.

Longer and repetitive games are usually disliked. It is the same with games which are played in larger groups and those games whose instructions might be unclear. Sometimes, we need to recognize that our students do not feel like playing a game, for whatever reason, and we need to respect that.

When they were unhappy with a game, students were ready to make suggestions on how it could be improved, and we think it is the teacher's job to carefully listen to their advice.

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Милица Витаз

КОРИШЋЕЊЕ ИГАРА ЗА ПОНАВЉАЊЕ ГРАМАТИКЕ И ВОКАБУЛАРА – СТАВОВИ СТУДЕНАТА

Сажетак

У овом раду представљамо део истраживања рађеног за потребе докторске дисертације из области наставе енглеског језика. У њему приказујемо коментаре и ставове студената који су понављали граматику и вокабулар кроз едукативне игре. Сви студенти похађали су енглески језик као изборни предмет на Филолошком факултету у Београду. Њихови коментари су анализирани, категоризовани и онда протумачени. Међу коментарима студената било је исказа о томе зашто им се неке игре свиђају или не свиђају, као и њихових предлога како неке игре могу бити унап-ређене. У рад су укључени и примери ових коментара како би се боље приказали њихови ставови и мишљења када је у питању коришћење игара у учењу страног језика.

Кључне речи: образовање, игре, граматика, вокабулар, понављање, Б2 ниво, ставови студената