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THE EFFECTS OF USING GAMES FOR ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE PRIMARY SCHOOL LEARNERS

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Abstract: Language acquisition for primary school learners is an important step in becoming effective students and communicators. Educators cannot afford to oversee the significance of acquiring language skills from an early age. English as a second language is better acquired and used by primary students if teachers include games and play in their teaching. This paper tries to focus on the effects that games have on language learning and acquisition, motivation and self-esteem. Motivation and self-esteem are great factors in acquiring new language. Through games, teachers can enhance motivation and stimulate further interest. Also, using appropriate games, teachers can help students build self-esteem and self-confidence, such important elements when dealing with second language learning.

Keywords: English as a Second Language, games, language acquisition, motivation, self-esteem

Introduction

Children are said to be natural learners of a foreign language because they can learn it quickly and easily. But for teachers who have taught children this is not completely true: children are able to pick up language quickly; however they are likely to forget it quickly, too. The reason for this could be that a young child faces and has lots of new things and experiences each day. A child is thought to operate pragmatically: s/he only remembers the important things. When a child gets to live in a foreign community s/he needs to learn the language quickly for communicating and making friends. Whereas the child that lives in his or her own community has no obvious reason for learning the foreign language.

Jeremy Harmer (2007) describes young learners as being different learners than older children, adolescents, or adults. According to him, children respond to meaning even if they do not understand the individual words, learning from everything that surrounds them. Halliwell (1992) adds that intonation, gesture, facial expression, and actions help to convey to

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children what the unknown words and phrases mean. By understanding the message, they understand the language. Halliwell (1992) associates second language learning to first language learning, mentioning that they can interpret new sounds, new words, and structures in the same way as they acquired their mother tongue. Teachers must make sure they use gesture, intonation, and demonstration to convey meaning parallel to what they are saying.
From a Piagetian viewpoint, a child's thinking develops as gradual growth of knowledge and intellectual skills towards a final stage of formal, logical thinking. Taking Piaget's idea, the child becomes a very active learner, constructing knowledge from working with objects. Thus, the environment provides a setting for development through the opportunities it offers. Transferring this idea to the world of learning, we can think of the classroom and the classroom activities as offering opportunities for learning and development.

Children from the age of eight or nine begin to develop a curiosity about the outside world. This curiosity is fed by the vast amount of information now available to them through TV and the Internet. Children today have a much greater superficial knowledge of the world than adults did when they were their age. This, again, can be utilized in the language classroom, using their natural curiosity to find out about other cultures and countries.

Let's pretend games help children 'to rehearse for the real word and give them an opportunity to try out situations in order to learn to cope with them.' (Reilly, 1997: 8). At this level, 'good teachers need to provide a rich diet of learning experiences which encourage their students to get information from a variety of sources.' (Harmer, 2007: 83) Activities most suited at this stage are song, rhymes, stories, total physical response, dressing up, acting, group games, making things. Total physical response is very useful at this age, as children learn through their senses at this stage, not through abstract concepts. Jeremy Harmer (2007: 68) believes that 'since children learn a lot of their language from commands directed at them, second-language learners can benefit from this, too'. This means getting children to do or mime what the teacher says.

When describing primary children and the way they acquire language, it is very important to discuss the issue of children's instinct for play and fun. By injecting their own element of drama into hiding the cards, for example, by shuffling the cards ostentatiously under the table so that others cannot see them, children make language their own. Through their sense of play and fun, children 'are living the language for real.' (Halliwell, 1992: 7).

The positive effect of games on learning language skills is well documented (Rinvolucri, 1984). Language learning is hard work. One must make an effort to understand,

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to repeat accurately, to adapt and to use newly understood language in conversation and in written compositions. Therefore, games help and encourage many learners, not only children, to maintain their interest, as Rinvolucri (1984) agrees.

Games can focus on various skills, grammar, listening, speaking, writing, reading, pronunciation, so they can be extremely complex. Games also help the teacher to create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful. 'Games provide one way of helping the learners to *experience* language rather than merely *study* it.' (Wright et al., 2006: 2). When exposed to language, children acquire it better. For example, words related to shopping can be better practiced in actual shopping games, than using worksheets with exercises.

Games also offer the possibility of repeated use of language items. By making language convey information and opinion, games provide the key features of 'drill' with the opportunity to sense the working of language as living communication. Thus, learning is better absorbed than learning based on mechanical drills (Hadfield, 1990).

Games must not be seen as a way of passing the time, because their purposes are multiple. Besides the major importance of games of spurring motivation and reducing the stress level in the classroom, games have a great advantage in the sense that children learn without knowing they are learning (Hadfield, 1990). During games, children do not worry much about grammar mistakes, they are focused on what they are trying to convey. Apart from having fun, they will learn a grammatical rule just by playing an appropriate game. 'Students stop thinking about language and begin using it in a spontaneous and natural manner within the classroom.' (Mubaslat, 2012)

Another advantage in teaching through games is that games increase learners' proficiency (Hadfield, 1990). Playing games in the classroom can enormously increase children's ability in using language because they have a chance to use it with a purpose and in the situations mentioned. Hadfield (1990: VII) confirms that 'games provide as much concentrated practice as a traditional drill and more importantly, they provide an opportunity for real communication, albeit within artificially defined limits, and thus constitute a bridge between classroom and the real world.' Therefore, children can learn the language the way they learn their mother tongue: without being aware they are learning it.

Game-like activities provide choices for the classroom. 'They allow teachers to add variety and flexibility to the teaching menus' (Sugar, 2002: 6). Sometimes educators feel weighed down by assigned curricula and need to come up with new ideas and interesting activities.

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Another advantage associated with games is that students' anxiety towards language learning decreases as games are employed (Sugar, 2002). In language classes, learners feel stressful because they think that they have to master the target language that is unknown to them. Besides, learners become too anxious about being criticized and punished by their teachers when they make a mistake (Sugar, 2002). Games are advantageous at this point because they reduce anxiety, increase positive feelings and improve self-confidence because learners are not afraid of punishment or criticism while practicing the target language freely (Crookal&Oxford, 1990).

Children who have difficulty in expressing themselves can begin to explore difficult emotions in games. Games also help in this way 'in the process of reflection and demonstrate to children that they are not alone in their feelings and that others have things in common with them'. (Plummer, 2008: 31)

Prabhu (1987) offers two main reasons why teachers should use games in teaching second language. The first reason is based on spontaneous interaction that games can generate amongst the children, 'creating opportunities for the deployment of their emerging internal systems' (Prabhu, 1987: 83). A second major reason for using games is the supportive environment that is created. Interaction between learners is less threatening than interaction with the teacher.

Method

In this paper we tried to focus on the effects that games have on language learning and acquisition, motivation and self-esteem. Motivation and self-esteem are great factors in acquiring new language. Through games, teachers can enhance motivation and stimulate further interest. Also, using appropriate games, teachers can help students build self-esteem and self-confidence, such important elements when dealing with second language learning.

Hypotheses

- If teachers use games in teaching English to primary classes, then students acquire the new language better.
- If teachers use games in teaching English to primary classes, then students feel motivated to learn and have a higher self-esteem, which leads to easier language learning.

Description of participants

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For this study we have chosen fourth grade students from a village in Bihor County, Romania. The school has three hundred and eight students (one hundred and fourteen primary students, one hundred and two preschool children and ninety-two secondary students). The school is located in a rural area in the east part of Bihor County. The fourth grade has fourteen students, nine girls and five boys. They all are between ten and eleven years old and live in the village or near it. Four out of fourteen children in the class have separated parents. This affects also their self-esteem and learning interest. Only one out of fourteen has a parent with higher educational level, which might influence the student's motivation to learn. Most of the parents have financial problems and have to work at home, therefore their learning time is diminished and most of the information should be acquired at school, which is the point of games at English. These variables (age, social situation, family background) influence foreign-language acquisition. One of the authors of this article has been teaching this class for almost two years. Their English level is beginner. Despite their family problems, they are cooperative and really nice to work with. They also seem to be a competitive group, especially when they compete in games like girls versus boys.

Procedure

We have used observation as a tool of collecting data about the students and also to observe students' attitude towards the games we played.

The questionnaire was used to collect data about students' motivation, language learning and self-esteem. Through eighteen questions, students were asked to identify situations in which they feel confident and motivate to learn and also when they feel they have better grades.

The pre-test and the post-test were given to check the knowledge level regarding the topic of weather. Before the activity based on games, we have given the students a pre-test, in order to measure their knowledge level. The pre-test consisted of three items, matching item, *Yes/No* item and a writing task. The collected data served as starting point for the activity that followed. The post-test, or the final test, was given to students to identify the difference in knowledge and to see whether games truly have an impact on language learning. At the beginning of each lesson we have given the students an *Initial Test,* to check their knowledge towards the new topic. The test was focused on three items. The first item is a matching item. The second item is based on the true/false principle. The third item helps students use the new words in full sentences. At the end of the chapter, the students were given another test, a *Final Test,* to identify the progress they have made.

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The games we have used are language games. The activity was based on warm-up games, language learning games, practice games and also production games.

Throughout the activity, we have used different games, in order to stimulate their participation (at the beginning of the lesson) and also to consolidate the new language: puzzle games, listening games, circle the correct picture game, robot dance game, bingo game, etc.

Results

The first item in the Initial Test was a matching exercise, where students had to match the correct picture to the correct sentence. Thirteen students took the test, one student was absent. Thirty-one percentage of the students have managed to get between 2-3 points, 54 % got between 1-1.9 points and 15 % got between 0- 0.9 points (see Figure 1).

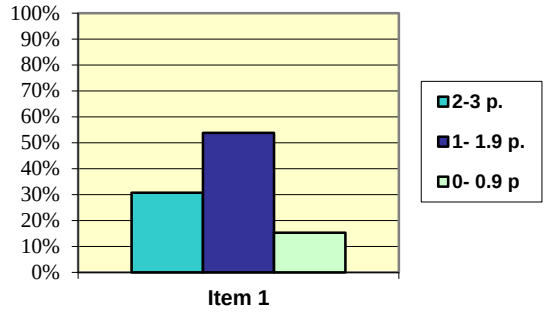


Figure 1. *Results in the initial test for item 1*

The second item in the Initial Test was based on the true or false principle. Students had to read the sentences and write ‘yes’ if they are true or ‘no’ if they are false. Sixty-nine percentage of the students received between 2-3 points, 23 % got 1- 1.9 points and 8 % received between 0-0.9 points (see Figure 2).

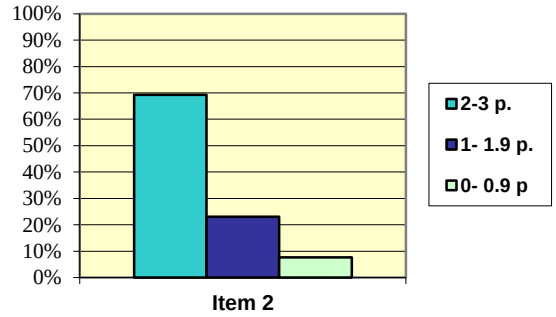


Figure 2: *Results in the Initial test for item 2*

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The third item in the Initial Test required using weather words in order to form sentences. Fifteen percentage of the students got between 2-3 points, the rest of them between 1-1.9 points and 0-0.9 points.

Summing up the points in the Initial test, none of the students received between 9-10 points, 23% students got between 7-8.99 points, 23% students had 5-6.99 points and 54% of the students got between 1-4.99 points.

The first item in the Final Test was a matching exercise, where students had to match the correct picture to the correct sentence. Thirteen students took the test, one student was absent so when evaluating the progress or the regress, we will have only twelve students to deal with. Eighty-five percentages of the students have managed to get between 2-3 points, none got between 1-1.9 points and 15 % got between 0-0.9 points (see Figure 3).

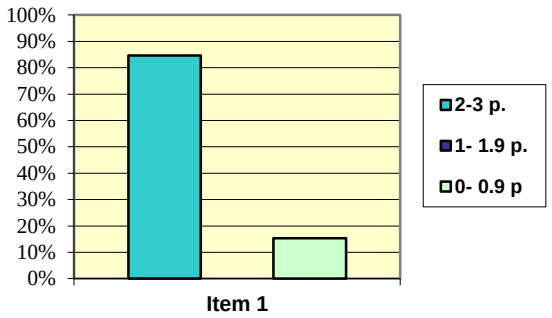


Figure 3*: Results in the Final Test on Item 1*

The second item in the Final Test was based on the true or false principle. Students had to read the sentences and write ‘yes’ if they are true or ‘no’ if they are false. Sixty-nine percentages of the students received between 2 -3 points, 31% got 1-1.9 points and none received between 0-0.9 points (see Figure 4).

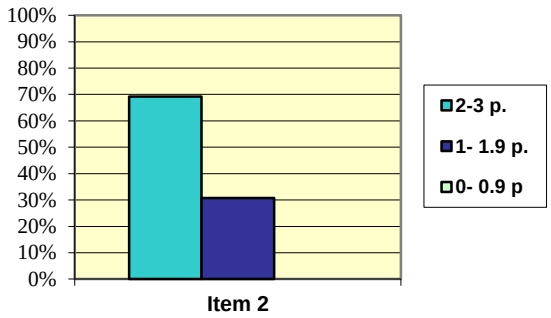


Figure 4: *Results in the Final Test on Item 2*

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The third item in the Final test required using weather words in order to form sentences. Thirty-one percentage of the students got between 2-3 points, 31% between 1-1.9 points and 38% between 0-0.9 points (see Figure 5).

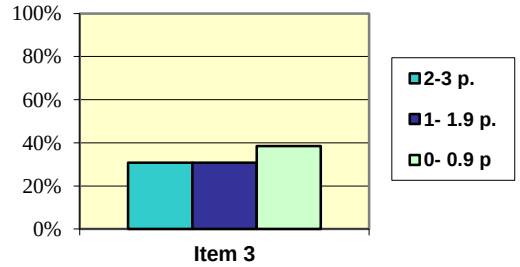


Figure 5: *Results in the Final Test on Item 3*

Summing up the points on the Final Test, 15% of the students received between 9-10 points, 31 % students got between 7-8.99 points, 31% students have 5- 6.99 points and 23% of the students got between 1-4.99 points.

Comparing the results of the two tests 83% of the students has made progress and 17% regressed (see Figure 6).

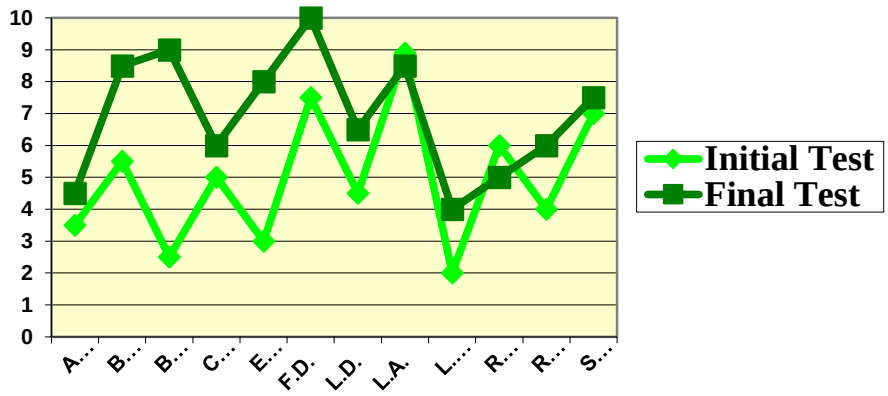


Figure 6: *Comparison of Initial Test and Final Test*

We also distributed a questionnaire to the fourth grade students after game-like activities, in order to find out the effectiveness of games in terms of self-esteem, motivation and also language acquisition. There were thirteen students taking the test, as one student who participated at the previous activities, changed schools, due to family issues.

The questionnaire included three parts (see Appendix A). Part one aimed at the way children like to learn and if they think that through games they can learn easier and better – language achievement (questions 1, 6, 7, 10, 14, 18). Part two is based on building self-esteem and self-confidence in language learning (questions 2, 4, 5, 9, 12, 16). Part three focused on

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motivation and how children react to games, whether games act as motivators for further interest (questions 3, 8, 11, 13, 15, 17).

Regarding the language achievement, most students feel that their results are based on the methods that are used for grading. Sixty-nine percentage of the students feels that they can achieve better grades when they are evaluated through games. Students think they can study easier if the words are being practiced through games (100%). Also, regarding the traditional translation method, students' attitudes are mixed: 69% like to translate texts, while 7% of the students do not like at all translating. Students like to play games and also to translate.

Learning can also be done through fun activities, not only in a formal atmosphere, so that children enjoy the whole process of learning (question 1). Grades are also influenced by games. 39% of students feel that their grades are not that good when games are not used in class. Learning becomes an easier job when it is done through fun activities. All students (question 18) think they can memorize and learn English better when they play games during the English lesson. Thus, games help not only interested and motivated children to learn, they also encourage less motivated children to learn English and to actively participate in the English class.

As far as the *self-esteem and self-confidence* goes the majority of participants feel that they have the self-confidence to speak in front of the class when there is a friendly atmosphere and when they participate in a game. The anxiety level lowers when games are played, thus children stop being afraid they would make mistakes and try to pronounce the words.

The answers given for question 16 indicate that students are quite confident in their own possibilities. Only 15% of them think that when their team loses they are fully responsible, whereas 30% of the students do not feel guilty for a team failure. This means they have a good self-esteem, which was built by the teacher through encouragement, positive attitude and positive feedback.

Motivation is a very important factor in English learning. It is that internal wish that helps children to want to learn. The answers that children provided for question 13 show that games motivate them to learn and help them wait eagerly for the English class.

Children like to work in teams, according to the answers given for question 15, and are motivated to solve the tasks. Also, they are motivated to continue studying for English, even though their team might have lost.

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Games also have a great impact on motivating children to investigate and study on their own. According to answers given for question 11, children look for other information regarding a certain topic if during the English class the teacher has provided them with games. Therefore, games have stimulated them to research on their own.

Discussion

Regarding the results of the initial test, the students seemed to have managed quite well in matching the pictures to the sentences in item 1. Also, some of the students did not have real problems with saying whether the sentences are true or false, but item 3 proved to be the most difficult, as only two of the students managed to write sentences about their favorite season. Students seemed to have some problems with writing sentences and short texts; therefore, the teacher could focus on games that involve writing short compositions in which children can express their own feelings.

If we look at the results in the final test, children have managed to solve item 1 and item 2, without too many difficulties. Also, item 3, which in the initial test proved to be a challenge, was solved by the students with more ease. Comparing the two tests, we can definitely see a progress regarding this topic. Two students seemed to have regressed, which may be due to tiredness and not dealing seriously with the test, as the students were previously announced they will not be graded for these tests. Also the average score that students got for each item in the final test is higher than the average score they received in the initial test which shows that games helped them consolidate new language.

When playing the proper games, children feel confident to use English outside the classroom as well. Games help the process of learning to become spontaneous. Therefore the teacher's job is to channel this process of language learning so that children can use it in other contexts, too, with confidence.

Using games at English gives also prospects for the future regarding learning. Teachers should be aware of the importance that their methods and teaching style have on the children's future career. In preschool years teachers can shape a positive attitude towards knowledge and English as well. If students feel encouraged and confident from the very beginning, their interest for English will continue in the future. Children are eager to continue studying English, as long as they continue playing games and have fun activities.

Teamwork is a great motivational strategy but contests should be done not very often, as they can lower motivation for the losing team. However, this class is aware of the importance of

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studying even when losing. This is because the teacher has encouraged them throughout this time and they know that only by persevering they can reach a higher level.

Conclusions

This research shows that there were increased scores that students received in the final test as compared to the initial test. Based on the data, we can conclude that games can help children acquire new language and memorize words. Using games in teaching English can create learning conditions and motivate students to learn. Games help students remember new language easier and develop their self-esteem, such an important factor in language learning. The traditional methods can be transformed into fun activities by introducing games. Therefore, the teacher's methods should be various and stimulating for children.

Games have a great impact on self-confidence and motivation as well. Students feel more confident to speak and to express themselves in a friendly and game-like atmosphere. Sometimes, teachers face with situations in which students do not have the confidence to enunciate new words or to use them in front of the class. Children are more likely to say the new words when they play a game. Motivation is also influenced by games. The questionnaire has demonstrated that, together with self-confidence, motivation is shaped by the games that are conducted in the classroom. By playing the right games, children are also motivated to learn at home, and even research on their own for new information.

Games not only liven up the class, but also provide great material for learning and motivation. They help students achieve better results in English, and build-up their self-esteem. Their implications are higher than providing fun moments during a class. Games encourage students to learn, to participate in an activity and to motivate all students to acquire a new language, not only those who are already interested in doing so.

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Appendix A

Student questionnaire

1. I like to learn new words in English when we play.
2. I have the courage to speak in front of the class if the atmosphere is friendly.
3. I review new words at home if at school we have played.
4. I am confident in saying words and sentences in English outside school if we have played.
5. I wish to learn English in the future if we continue to play games at school.
6. I like to translate texts into English.
7. My achievement at English is not very good if we don't play.
8. When the teacher encourages me, I feel I like English.
9. I am confident in speaking if we are doing a game.
10. I have better grades if we are evaluated through games.
11. I want to know more words about a topic in English if we have played.
12. I am confident in saying new words when we play.
13. I can't wait for English class to come when we play games.
14. I want to play at English because I feel I can learn new words better.
15. I like to solve tasks in English when we have a group game.
16. When my team loses, it is my fault, I am not very good at English.
17. When we have team contests and my team loses I don't want to learn for the next English class.
18. It is easier for me to learn words at home if we have practiced them at school.

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