GAMES LIKE ACTIVITIES IN THE IMPROVEMENT OF ESL CLASSES

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Abstract: *Teaching a foreign language in an Academic environment is quite a hard task to achieve since both adolescents and adults are highly concerned with different activities besides learning (finding a job, having a family, etc). As a consequence, a large quantity of information should be retained during the classes, thus limiting the study time from home. Therefore, teachers should always try to find ways of attracting them, by combining practical issues with fun like activities and this is the main purpose of the present paper. Various "games" in English can lead to an active and relaxed environment that would help students acquire English knowledge in a pleasant way.*

Key words: *group work, communicative teaching, cooperative learning.*

The goal of every language class is that of making the students communicate efficiently in the new language. Language teaching and learning has changed a lot lately, emphasis being placed on successful communication in the second or foreign language, in the proper acquisition of new items that may be used in the future without encountering any problems. Teachers nowadays focus on the so-called CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) as well as on CL (Cooperative Learning).

Teachers try to find as many activities as possible to make their students communicate with one another in a free environment, without imposing strict rules as much as possible. The activities chosen are usually a combination of seriousness and fun, making the students aware that certain serious items may also be acquired through fun activities. Student collaboration is highly important since, the group the teacher deals with needs to act as a team and not as separate individuals. That's why, pair work as well as group work activities are of importance during a class together with mingling different types of attitudes and behaviours.

"When using communicative activities, it is important to strive for a classroom in which students feel comfortable and confident, feel free to take risks, and have sufficient opportunities to speak" (GRIGOROIU, 2000: 145).

Games seem to be the perfect tool to be used in classroom to offer the possibility of speaking freely. Even though they sometimes seem to be used just for fun, they are a way of promoting cooperative learning, as well as a chance of using the acquired knowledge in a free context. "Cooperative learning tasks go a further step by encouraging students to work together and by promoting an equal opportunity for every student to participate in the activity. Improving self-esteem, enjoyment of school, and interethnic relations are key in this approach" (YANG, 2003: 17). Through games, even the less confident students become proud of their team and are encouraged to keep on learning new things.

Teaching English in a fun-like environment can be rewarding for both teachers and students. No matter how young or old they are, students often find classes more enjoyable if they are included in individual, team or group games. It is obvious that the complexity of games varies according to the age and the English level of the students involved in the teaching process. Using games during the classes mustn't be seen as a waste of time but rather as a play-like activity designed to teach new information, to

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introduce certain vocabulary or grammar items or to assess some reading, speaking or writing skills.

"Some language games can also provide opportunities for controlled practice. Again, it is important to model the structures for beginning students, either verbally or by writing the forms on the board." (GRIGOROIU, 2000: 147). For example, one game to be used in class not only with youngsters but also with adults is "Guess the activity". After presenting Present Tense Continuous and after the students have practiced the use of this tense, the teacher offers the students cards with different activities described on them. The students need to mime the activities so that their colleagues would guess the activity. For example, a student receives a card which says "You are crying now", he mimes the action and the others start asking him "Are you crying?"; "Yes, I am/No, I'm not. Thus, they have fun trying to guess the activity, and, at the same time, they practice all forms of Present Continuous without being aware of the "imposed" forming rules.

Games are generally associated with play therefore students tend to be relaxed and detached from the work or attention they usually have to pay during the class. However, this doesn't mean that games require no special concentration. On the contrary, they provide an interactive way of drilling newly presented language or repeating the same language with different partners. Moreover, games are always learner-centered and are carefully guided by the teacher who establishes the rules:

"Games for instance, are played according to rules, conventions, and strategies (...). There are various ways to compete in different kinds of games (...). In some games it may be possible to invent and modify rules, whereas in others it is necessary to follow externally imposed rules, with whatever flexibility that may be needed to fit within those strict guidelines. In all cases (...) a range of rules and conventions guides the players, and helps them decide whether to follow or flout the rules, or indeed whether to play at all" (CASANAVE, 2002: 4).

So to say, games are a sort of communicative practice activities that may supplement any lesson, being a wonderful opportunity for the teacher to monitor the students' weaknesses. Mill drills are examples of games that may be used during a class. They may bring plenty of benefits if they are appropriately conceived. Most of all, they need to be precise, in the sense that the tasks asked to be fulfilled need to be extremely clear. Mill drills determine students to use the language in a controlled manner, encouraging them to participate actively at the lesson. Just as Susan Kay points out in the preface of the Reward Book for Elementary students, "a mill drill makes a welcome change of focus for both students and teacher. It makes controlled practice more communicative and enjoyable for students and basic repetition becomes more stimulating and active. A mill drill can also be reassuring for less confident students, not only because the students are solely dependent on mechanical repetition and substitution, but because they are not required to speak out alone" (KAY, 1997: 4).

No matter what game the teacher chooses to present to the students, he/she should try to find the best way to introduce it to the students in accordance with their level. It is also essential to link somehow the game to a meaningful context. For instance, after a text has been taught, the teacher may give students a word game containing key words related to that text, otherwise, students will not be able to handle the task. Thus, the need to have a context in order to solve a game like activity is highly essential. This category includes the so-called "clarification games" where students receive sentences or paragraphs with bolded words and try to find out from their colleagues what the words refer to.

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HARMER (2001: 272) believes that "games which are designed to provoke communication between students frequently depend on an information gap so that one student has to talk to a partner in order to solve a puzzle, draw a picture (describe and draw), put things in the right order (describe and arrange), or find similarities and differences between pictures".

Besides being linked to a particular context, games will be completed successfully if they are active and practical to deal with. Everyone will react positively if all these conditions are fulfilled. When a teacher decides not to use games in the teaching activity, he/she risks of turning the atmosphere of the class into a boring and non interesting one. The consequences may be the acquisition of limited information. Although funny, important for the stimulation of students and for a less stressed atmosphere in the class, games should not be repeated again and again since they do no longer maintain their initial features but become uninteresting and students will no longer be willing to cooperate.

"A slow, boring lesson teaches very little, so it is important to keep everyone moving and challenged with something which is just a little beyond his capacity. No topic or device should be overworked, however good an idea it is or however much preparation it has entailed. It is always better to stop whilst everyone is enjoying it and wants more, rather than pursue it to the bitter end. " (PINCAS, 1980: 87)

As a consequence, a game should be played as long as it draws the students' attention and as long as the grammar or vocabulary structures comprised in the game are retained. In order to avoid the possible moods depicted in the quotation above, the language teacher should focus on a variety of games. It is also important for the teacher, (before conceiving the game and giving the instructions), to establish the type of activity he/she aims at (such as: reading, writing, speaking or writing), and the vocabulary pattern he/she intends to be retained. The time devoted to the selected game is also important to be set but generally, it should be limited somewhere around 10 to 30 minutes, so that the presentation stage of the lesson should not be affected. After these objectives are clearly established, the teacher can proceed to explaining the procedure or demonstrating the exercise if necessary.

Another aspect that needs to be taken into consideration is the topic chosen for the basis of the games. The main idea is that games should always be conceived in relation to the age of the students. There is one way of dealing with adults who feel more attracted by word search, mime game, a guessing game, dialogues, picture dominoes, picture bingo, dramatization, role-playing activities, etc. and one way of dealing with primary school children. "At the younger end of the primary spectrum, the most attractive items are those with potential (…). It is what the child can do with a thing, rather than what it is, which matters. Things to hold, drop, throw or carry, things to build with, to color, to wear, to give and take, to hide and find are what matter when the child is growing experimentally in relationship to his environment. (…) The need to name things is best harnessed by learning lexical sets—parts of the body, clothes, furniture, food, toys and animals and so on—and the manipulative appeal may be supplied by simple drawing and coloring activities followed up by games which use these objects—real or represented—as tokens for touching, collecting, finding, counting or constructing, as appropriate" (PINCAS, 1980: 171)

An activity appealing to young students is "Guess the person" where students receive cards with names of famous persons on them. One student stands in front of the classroom and he/she gets a card that cannot be seen and needs to guess who he is. He can do that only by asking questions to his colleagues. For example he asks them

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questions like “Am I a woman/ a man?”, “Am I a football star”, etc to find out his/her identity as quickly as possible. Yet, the teacher should allocate a certain time for each student, otherwise the activity tends to become too long and boring if the students cannot easily guess their identities.

For advanced students memory games are great fun. Students receive paragraphs of a story, read them and try to memorize as many things as they can so that, after giving the cards back, they would remember to tell their colleagues the story. At the end, when the entire story is put together it is compared to the one received. The result is often funny since, without realizing students change the course of action.

Games can also be used in ESP classes, where the tasks involved are related to the interests of the students. For example, teachers may form activities based on specific vocabulary and ask questions waiting for quick answers from the groups of students. The questions may be of multiple-choice form to ease the task of students and, those who answer quickly receive one point. At the end of the activity, the team with most points wins the game. It is a great activity of working with new vocabulary, terms specific to their future specialization. For example, in a business class teachers may form questions such as “Is a building a fixed, an intangible or a current asset?” in order to answer correctly, students need to know what the words involved in the questions refer to.

What should be remembered is that “not all games used by language teachers require students to communicate with each other in the second language. Some games are fun games. The objective of a fun game is to have a good time, often by beating the other team. A fun game may get students involved in the class and with their classmates, but it may not involve any type of communication practice. It may stimulate interest and excitement in the class, but that interest and excitement may not transfer to second –language learning itself. In fact, using fun games to create interest in the class may have the opposite effect. Students may have such a good time that having fun becomes the principal objective, and as a result they lose sight of the learning goals of the course” (GRIGOROIU, 2000: 234). Therefore, the teacher is the only one who can choose when to use a game and its purpose – be it to practice structures or simply to change the monotony of the class. He/she is the only one who knows the type of group he/she is dealing with, their favourite type of activities as well as their expectations from the course.

For the activities to be communicative and cooperative, they should be meaningful. Students should be convinced to do the activity and need to achieve something at the end of it, be it only in the form of which team gets the highest score. The activities need to suit the habits, attitudes and environment of the students since they need to use the items both for academic or non-academic purposes. However, “it has never been suggested that a class be organized in cooperative groups all the time. It is impractical to think that one or two approaches can work wonders for all students, even when they have identical educational backgrounds” (YANG, 2003: 20).

In conclusion, teachers should always bear in mind the fact that games are ways of associating fun and encouragement to learning. They can be used in all areas to enhance different skills. Games may be used to practice writing, spelling, vocabulary, and reading skills. So, use them as frequently as possible to promote learning in an active environment.

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