

Grammar-Teaching Games

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I. INTRODUCTION

Language teaching methods which emphasize aspects of meaning and transmitting information are now in vogue. Communicative Language Teaching, for example, uses games, role plays, simulations, etc. as its teaching techniques. Among those, games have been widely used for a long period of time and are still very popular. Games are rather easy to do in the classroom and besides that, they are enjoyable and exciting. We find many language games in books and periodicals, which are often classified and arranged according to four skills and oral or written skills. Recently a new light has been cast on games from a standpoint of grammar teaching. In this article, firstly, features of games for language teaching and their effectiveness will be clarified and then games for teaching grammatical points will be discussed.

II. THE NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF GAMES

What is a game? A game is defined as “(form of) contest played by skill, strength, or luck” (*COD*⁷). According to this definition, a game is something to be enjoyed and is competitive and has rules. Lee (1965:1) explains games as follows:

The essence of many games lies in outstripping, in friendly fashion, someone else's performance, or in bettering one's own. There is a zest in trying to do this. The goal is visible and stimulating : ...

Palmer and Rodgers (1983:3) indicate the following characteristics, referring to Rodgers (1981):

1. *Gaming is competitive.* Competition may be:

- (a) Against another direct participant (e.g. chess).
- (b) Against time (e.g. race heats).
- (c) Against your own best performance (e.g. hammer throw).
- (d) Against a specific goal (e.g. puzzle-solving).

2. *Gaming is rule-governed.* There are a limited number of specific and well defined rules

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that all participants know about and understand. These rules cover every possible play, define play acceptability or non-acceptability, and grade plays in terms of some game values.

- 3 . *Gaming is goal-defined.* There are a limited number of specific and well defined objectives for gaming which participants recognise and agree upon.
- 4 . *Gaming has closure.* There is some pre-determined point at which a game is said to be finished, whether players have achieved the goals of the game or not.
- 5 . *Gaming is engaging.* Gaming engages and challenges participants. Sometimes a game is fun, sometimes it is motivating, sometimes it is merely attention-focusing. But like an automotive transmission, a game requires players to engage their mental and physical gears.

When we think of games, these characteristics will be a good framework to rely on. Moreover, we can also distinguish between various games for elementary and advanced learners, games for classes, groups, pairs, etc., games requiring an apparatus, indoor or outdoor games (Lee,1979:4).

III. GAMES ARE USEFUL

It is often said that games as a language teaching technique have strong points. Some of them are enumerated as below.

1) **Language Acquisition**

Many scholars indicate that we learn a language by using it. We need to learn forms and rules of a language, but it is not enough. In audio-lingualism too much emphasis was placed on parroting and mechanical drills, which ended in producing a 'structurally competent but communicatively incompetent student' in Johnson's terms(1981). Now the aspect of communication as an important role of a language is a focus of language teachers.

As is often quoted, Krashen and others have made a distinction between acquisition and learning.

...**acquiring** a language is "picking it up," i.e., developing ability in a language by using it in natural, communicative situations.

.....

Language **learning** is different from acquisition. Language learning is "knowing the rules," having a conscious knowledge about grammar.

(Krashen and Terrell, 1983:18)

In order to use a language, we have to acquire it: in order to acquire a language, we have to pick it up, understanding what it is used for, in a natural environment. In this sense, games

give learners a lot of opportunities to pick up a language, because it is easy to understand a limited amount of a language used in the game, easy to catch words or phrases or sentences in an authentic language-use situation, although a game situation is rather special. Actually the Natural Approach which Krashen and Terrell advocate recommends to use games.

2) **Enjoyable and Effective Repetition**

Although Krashen and others have stuck to the distinction between learning and acquisition, scholars such as Rivers (1986:1-7) states:

That not everything we know was consciously and formally learned is true, but what we learn in any way still interacts with previous knowledge, which frequently facilitates the learning of it. New knowledge also modifies existing knowledge. Furthermore, what has been consciously learned may be used without conscious attention once it has become very familiar, after, for instance, much practice in use. (p.3)

Therefore there is a possibility that learning may be transformed to acquisition. Not a few methodologists and teachers suggest that (conscious) repetition is indispensable for language learning (or acquisition). It is, however, a problem to be solved as to whether repetition plays the primary role in language learning or not.

Lee (1979:3) also writes:

Repetition is basic to language learning, but not the repetition of mechanical drills, although in the writer's view they should not be entirely eliminated. But it seems to be repetition of *successful and interesting* communication which counts and which has the most encouraging, 'language advancing', and motivating effect. This kind of repetition is found in many language games. There can be *uninteresting* communication too, which does nothing to sustain motivation.

In language games learners can repeat the same language forms without any sense of monotony or boredom with their mind on their meaning and use.

3) **Authentic Materials and Language Activities**

Recently, especially since the time when Communicative Language Teaching has become influential, the use of authentic materials is being advocated in language teaching. It seems better to give learners language materials as close as possible to the language they are going to speak or hear in a real-life situation. If we follow this line of thought, we can also safely say that learning activities similar to actual language use are recommendable. Games are not panacea: in our daily life we do not play them all the time. But games per se are authentic activities and the language used in them is thought to be authentic.

4) **Motivation**

Games are competitive and we find enjoyment 'in outstripping, in friendly fashion, someone else's performance, or in bettering one's own' (Lee, 1965:1). A game has a clear goal. Learners have to co-operate to conquer the other groups. These elements motivate learners to use a language consciously or unconsciously. But Lee (1965:2) warns:

...there are many children's games which adults like playing, particularly if they see the language-learning point. Children are less interested in the language-learning point than in the game, but do not like to feel that the game is over-childish.

It is the kind of game that counts.

IV. **KINDS OF GAMES**

Several books about games have already been published so far and they classify games in various ways. Let's survey how they arrange games. Lee (1979) groups games as follows:

- Structure Games
- Vocabulary Games
- Spelling Games
- Pronunciation Games
- Number Games
- Listen-and-do Games
- Read-and-do Games
- Games and Writing
- Miming and Role-Play
- 'Language Club' Games
- Discussion Games

Earlier Dorry(1966) mentions Number Games, Spelling Games, Vocabulary Games, Structure-practice Games, Pronunciation Games, Rhyming Games and Miscellaneous Games.

On the other hand, Wright et al. (1984) collect games under the following titles:

- Picture games
- Psychology games
- Magic games
- Caring and sharing games
- Card and board games
- Sound games

- Story games
- Word games
- True/false games
- Memory games
- Question and answer games
- Guessing and speculating games
- Miscellaneous games

Finally, Rinvolucri (1984) arranges games as follows:

- Competitive games
- Collaborative sentence-making games
- Awareness activities
- Grammar through drama
- Miscellany

Each game has a structure to practice, which is indicated together with the games.

If we want to use games as a chief element of teaching procedure, we should arrange games according to a rigid framework. Otherwise the activities will be whimsical and will not be very effective. It will be desirable to keep Rinvolucri's following words (1984:3) in mind.

I do not use grammar games as a Friday afternoon 'reward' activity—I use them as a central part of the students' learning process.

V. WHY GRAMMAR?

As we saw, games have strong points when we use them in a language teaching situation, but at the same time they have weak points as well. For example, there are situations which cannot be incorporated into games. Also, it can be rather difficult to present a wide variety of vocabulary and expressions through games.

Recently syllabuses are often discussed and such terms as the grammatical syllabus, the situational syllabus, the notional/functional syllabus, etc. are being seen in methodology books. Among these syllabuses, the situational syllabus has the problem that a 'situation' is difficult to define and so we do not know how many situations we should teach or how to select situations necessary for language teaching. The N/F syllabus is a new idea and is yet to be examined to what extent it is applicable in various teaching scenes. On the other hand, the grammatical syllabus is quite familiar to us, especially in Japan and moreover, it has been employed for a long time in many parts of the world. Grammatical points including sentence patterns belong to a closed class, while vocabulary to an open class. Therefore we can rather

easily identify a limited number of items to teach in a foreign language from the grammatical point of view. Experience tells us that grammatical knowledge works well as a foundation on which the ability to use a language is developed, although the role of grammar in language learning is yet to be defined. The grammatical syllabus seems to make it possible for learners to grasp a rough idea how the target language functions and build a solid basis for using the language in a short amount of time.

Despite the fact stated above, the grammatical syllabus has been criticized in some respects:

- (1) What we have learned in the grammatical syllabus cannot be easily applied in a real-life situation, because we tend to treat the target language as if it were dead.
- (2) We tend to focus on language forms rather than their meaning and content.
- (3) We tend to require learners to perform monotonous repetition. A typical single structure is repeated one by one and we fail to practice using the sentence together with other sentences in context.

All these drawbacks to the grammatical syllabus seem to be minimized, if not eliminated, if we use games in a language class.

VI. GAMES IN THE CLASSROOM

When we use games, we need to consider what the class size is and how much time can be allotted to games, etc. Let's suppose that the class size is around 40 and the time allotted is 10 to 15 minutes and the age of the learners is 13 to 15. We will discuss and devise games on the supposition that they will be used at the practice stage (and the production stage) defined by Spratt (1985:5).

They...copy the instructor and practise by repeating the same operation under the instructor's close supervision (the practice stage).

...the instructor puts the learners in a situation in which they must make their own restricted choices, decisions and actions (the production stage).

Teaching points such as grammatical items and sentence structures will be selected mainly in accordance with textbooks, *Course of Study for Lower Secondary Schools* and *A Guide to English Teaching Procedures*, etc. In my next article various games which aim at teaching these specific points will be examined and discussed.

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