

Grammar games

1 Introduction

Although in any of his three major publications: “The Lexical Approach” (1993), “Implementing the Lexical Approach” (1997) and “teaching collocation” (2000), Lewis does not write explicitly about using grammar games in lexical teaching, the application of that popular technique in the classroom seems to be justified for a number of reasons. Current Second Language Acquisition research has shown the importance of such aspects as: holistic, organic nature of language, developing communicative competence through co-operation, experimenting with the language, and error correction in the classroom.

As far as the first aspect is concerned, the adoption of an ‘organic’ perspective means that “learners do not learn one thing perfectly, one item at a time, but numerous things simultaneously (and imperfectly)” (Nunan 1998: 102).

As for developing communicative competence through co-operation, foreign language teachers should take into consideration the fact that many games are based on the information gap (Laersen-Freeman 1986) and hence, create situations in which learners would use the language communicatively. Sacricoban and Metin (2002) point out that games in which competition plays an important role need some type of problem-solving activity. It means that both games and problem-solving tasks have a communicative purpose so they may be perceived as examples of communicative activities. As far as problem-solving activities are taken into consideration, they are real or imaginary and require individual response and creative solution. In games learners work in groups and the emphasis is on competition and winning.

The third aspect, that is, experimenting with language concerns ‘trying it out’ and seeing if it ‘works’. As a result, learners’ hypotheses about the way that language works are either supported or challenged (Lewis 1993).

The fourth aspect, error correction is inevitably connected with the previously mentioned one as learners make mistakes while experimenting with language.

2 Defining games

In ELT methodology there are several definitions of the term ‘game’. Ur (1996: 290) refers to it “as organized action that is rule-governed, involves striving towards a clear goal through performance of challenging task, and provides participants and/or onlookers with a feeling of pleasurable tension.” Other researchers (Toth 1998, Lewis 2000) define games in a slightly different way and they claim that language games can be characterized according to certain criteria. According to Lewis (2000: 164) they include: rules obeyed while playing, a special time in which individuals or teams play, a score given at the end of a game, a result and a winner. Toth (1998), in turn, claims that games have a final outcome, some of them contain both elements of challenge and co-operation which are necessary to complete the activity. According to Toth (1998), games guarantee a valuable learning experience in which the children can either practice or revise language in a meaningful way.

3 Advantages and disadvantages of games

Supplementing grammar lessons with a large variety of games is highly recommended to teachers as games have numerous advantages. First, they offer a meaningful context for language use (Chen 2005) in which learners pay attention to the message and acquire language unconsciously (Sacricoban and Metin 2002). As Retter and Valls (1984) point out, participants learn although they do not realize that. Second, games enhance learners’ motivation to speak a foreign language, especially encouraging shy and passive students. Third, according to Chen (2005) games can reduce learning anxiety if they are played in

pleasant and relaxed atmosphere. What is more, they teach children about the nature of co-operation by fostering participatory attitudes of the students (Chen 2005). According to Rinvolucris (1984: 4), grammar games “develop students’ individual responsibility for what they think grammar is about.” Furthermore, the teacher is not the focus of learners’ attention but a supervisor of the game who, by showing interest in a game, is able to find out what the students know.

Another commonly held view about games concerns the statement that games are most often used while teaching children (Ur 1996). It is widely known that children learn when they are active. They can not only put considerable effort but also invest their time into an enjoyable game. Rinvolucris (1984), however, claims that not only children but also teenagers are delighted to play games in the classroom, especially when they are taught grammar. That statement is in line with beliefs about second language teaching that the whole process of teaching and learning should be fun as it generates energy for the achievement of the serious goal.

Ur (1996) claims that, although being in favour of using games in the classroom, teachers should be conscious of some dangers resulting from games, that is to say, some students may not take language-learning activities too seriously and waste their time. Adding to that, teachers should bear in mind that calling all activities games if they are, in fact, not real ‘games’ is unfair. Unnecessary excitement may cause learners’ frustration.

In conclusion, games can be used by learners of all ages because everybody likes them. They have many advantages, especially enhancing cooperation and motivation. Adding to that, they provide successful, joyful and enthusiastic learning.

4 Summary

This article presented the rationale for using grammar games in lexical teaching. What is more, the concept of grammar games and their pros and cons have been discussed. Finally, it has been stated that grammar cannot only be taught but it can also be revised through games. That means that games can be a vital part of teacher’s everyday repertoire.

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