

## THE IMPORTANCE OF DIDACTIC GAMES IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS

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**Abstract:** *The process of teaching-learning-assessing has always been in the centre of methodologists' research. They have tried to improve the methods and techniques used for teaching foreign languages and to make the didactic process challenging and attractive. In the past few years, they have discovered that using interactive techniques, songs, games and other communication-based activities increases the chances of acquiring communicative competence in a foreign language. Didactic games are one of the most attractive techniques that teachers of English use with young learners, and not only, in the didactic process. They are interactive, communication based, challenging and most of all fun.*

**Keywords:** *teaching, interactive techniques, communication, didactic games*

Didactic games are essential in the educational process because they make the classes funnier and the students are motivated to actively participate in the activity and do not perceive their contribution as a must, a mandatory activity. The didactic game has aims, objectives and results and in order to play it, pupils have to perform different tasks and say different things. Therefore, they have a reason to communicate and don't have to repeat things without thinking what they say. Through playing, pupils want to learn more and are more confident in their ability to use the language. Games stimulate and motivate pupils to achieve a new level in the mastery of a foreign language.

Using didactic games in the foreign language classroom from time to time will determine pupils to interact with each other and the teacher and to be an active participant in the instructional-educational process. They will also bring about a bond between teaching and having fun. Teachers have three main goals regarding the pupils' education:

- to help them think on their own
- to help them pass exams
- to help them trust themselves when speaking a foreign language, as well as when reading and writing in it.

Games help teachers when they want to practice speaking, without neglecting spelling, reading and writing. They develop contexts where pupils can practice language in a useful manner. Playing is an interesting activity for all children; therefore they want to take part in the games. In order to do so, they have to understand what their mates tell them as well as be able to talk back.

### **The benefits of didactic games in teaching English**

There is a series of benefits for using games in the English teaching process. Wright, Betteridge and Buckby (1994: 1) list some of them:

- didactic games help and encourage students because they are funny and interesting;
- they help teachers to create useful contexts;
- they assure an intense and useful practice of the language;

- they develop all four language skills (writing, reading, listening and speaking), in all stages of the didactic process (presentation, repetition, practice, etc.) and for different types of communication (encouragement, approval, disapproval, explanations, etc.);
- using games can engage pupils in different activities and it motivates them to interact on a given subject.

Sugar și Sugar (2002: 6-8) identifies other benefits of the didactic game:

- games are experiential;
- they allow teamwork and pair work;
- provide an educational alternative to traditional methods;
- revise what has already been taught;
- develop abilities required to pass exams;
- the games show how good the energy of a classroom is;
- can be used to introduce a new or difficult topic;
- improve teamwork;
- teach pupils to follow and obey rules.

### **The goals of didactic games**

The teacher has to take into consideration certain variables, when s/he chooses games for the activity. The variables are the following: the age of the pupils, the level of the classroom, the pupils' interests.

After establishing these details, games have to be chosen according to certain criteria:

- a game has to be not only funny;
- it should involve all students and keep their interest high;
- explanations should be short;
- they should involve a friendly competition;
- they should give pupils the opportunity to learn, practice and revise vocabulary or other studied material;
- they should not last too long because pupils will lose their interest;
- they should involve all four skills.

The teacher has to explain the rules and once something was settled, s/he should stick to what has been said. Otherwise pupils will lose interest and consider the teacher unfair. On the other hand, the teacher has to encourage pupils in their work, not highlight every mistake they make. S/he should be fair and honest, but also understand the fact that being fair is not about being authoritarian and making faces when pupils make mistakes.

The teacher can be considered funny and friendly but at the same time strict. The most important is for him not to break his own rules and to shout in order to be heard. S/he should talk in a low and calm voice or to stop and give pupils time to make silence. They should be aware of the fact that for each minute the teacher loses over discipline matters, extra homework will be assigned. The teacher can use the 1, 2, 3 ...rule, namely to count while waiting for the pupils to slow down. If counting reaches 3, the pupil who keeps making noise will no longer take part in the game. An alternative is allowing him to join the game but if s/he breaks the rules again, the punishment will be magnified.

### **Classification of games**

The variety of techniques used in the classroom is very important when choosing the didactic games.

There are two types of games: **competitive** (the pupil tries to be the first one who finishes the activity) and **collaborative** (pupils try to achieve the same goal together, they help each

other). It is very difficult to classify and name all types of games. We will list only some of them, the one that can be used more frequently in the classroom.

*Movement games*: are those types of games where children are physically involved in the activity (for instance finding the partner). All pupils can take part in this activity and the teacher's role is to supervise the game. Movement games have clear rules and can be both competitive and cooperative. It depends on the teacher and how s/he wants to organize the activity. The same thing can be said about the didactic material. No material is required for movement games; for example the game called Directions requires no material. A pupil is blindfolded and other pupils tell the directions. For "Find your partner". The teacher will prepare some cards. While playing movement games, pupils train all four skills.

*Board games* for example Hangman. The teacher needs any type of board (black, white, smart). These games can be played in different types of groups and the teacher has to prepare the material for these games. They can be competitive or collaborative and the teacher is organizer, participant and facilitator of the didactic process.

*Guessing/identification games* are based around the principle that a student possesses a piece of information and another one has to guess what it is about (for example, with the help of a sheet of paper glued on his back). There are several versions of this game, where the teacher assumes two roles: participant and facilitator. Material does not have to be prepared in advance and pupils practice their listening and speaking abilities. They must follow the given rules, which are not very severe.

*Grouping games* involve finding the pair. The teacher has to prepare some material in advance. It can be topic based and used as a revision activity (for example pairs of fruit, animals, actions, etc.) or just used as a warm-up activity with the ultimate aim of grouping students. In this situation, the teacher can just use coloured sheets of paper and ask the students to group themselves according to the colour they have chosen. Pupils cooperate in order to find the pair and solve the task as quickly as possible. The task can change the game from a collaborative to a competitive one, if they face time pressure. The game can be played individually, in pairs or teams. Pupils develop their reading and speaking skills and the teacher is the facilitator.

*Card games* are very much appreciated by both parties. Nowadays, publishing houses print didactic cards, but teachers can prepare them at home too.

*Desk games* can be played as individual work (puzzle) or in pairs and team (scrabble). These games required material prepared in advance and are both collaborative and competitive. Memory games and scrabble are considered competitive while puzzle is collaborative. The teacher is the assessor of pupils' work.

*Role play* can be used as an independent game or part of other games. The pupil is actively involved in the game and some role plays do not require materials though they might be useful. The teacher gives the instructions and supervises the activity. Pupils train their writing, reading and especially speaking abilities.

*Task-based games* are very popular nowadays. Pupils receive a task and cooperate for its fulfilment.

"I Dare You" Cards (Card Set 1)

I dare you to spell the word "orange". (2 points)

I dare you to hop on one foot 20 times. (2 points)

I dare you to sing the "ABC" song. (4 points)

I dare you to say 6 colours in 5 seconds. (3 points)

*Computer games* are also very popular among pupils. They can be played both at school in an IT lab or multimedia room, or at home on the pupil's personal computer. Pupils find them extremely attractive, because they contain pictures, colourful visual material, sounds and the assessment usually take ores their points which is encouraging and at the same time challenging.

As seen in our study, there is a wide variety of games that teachers can use in teaching English as a foreign language. Most of the above listed games are for young learners but there are also other games that can be used with intermediate or advanced students as well as with adult learners.

For this study, we have interviewed a number of 40 English teachers that teach young learners and a class of 30 pupils that study English as second language, third year of study, namely 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

We have applied a very short questionnaire to teachers and pupils. The pupils were asked to rank their favourite games for TEFL usage and teachers had to answer questions about the usefulness of didactic games, about the frequency they use them and their preference in terms of games.

As revealed by Figure 1, pupils mostly appreciate computer games, board games, movement games, card games and desk games. We think that the reason is that they require less effort than other games (card and board), they are more challenging (computer games) and are also competitive (desk games). Movement games are more about understanding orders than about practicing English; therefore they seem easier and funnier for the pupils. On the other hand, role play for instance, requires concentration, skills and discourages shy pupils. Tasks based games are viewed as too strict and boring if the task is not challenging. The last category, the guessing games are considered useless, boring and too noisy.

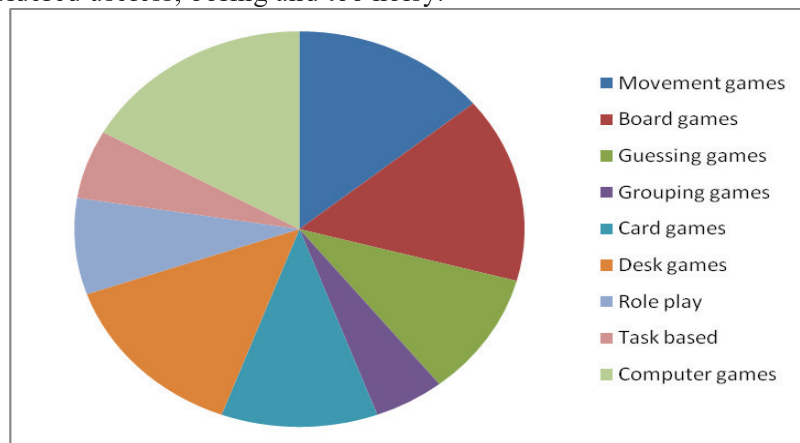


Figure 1 Pupils' preference in terms of didactic games

Figure 2 shows the teachers' opinion about the usefulness of didactic games. Some games from the list (common with the pupils' list weren't ranked; therefore they do not occur in the chart). In the section *Types of games* we only refer to those mentioned several times. The frequency is referred to in terms of *often, sometimes, rarely, never* and it represents the frequency of game usage in general, not of a particular game. For this aspect we have taken into consideration all types of games. As seen below, teachers use role play, grouping games, card games and movement games very rarely. They explained their choice in terms of noise management, because movement games cause a lot of noise. They consider their pupils not prepared enough to perform a role play properly; therefore they use it only rarely. Computer games are almost never used due to the lack of computers in the classroom.

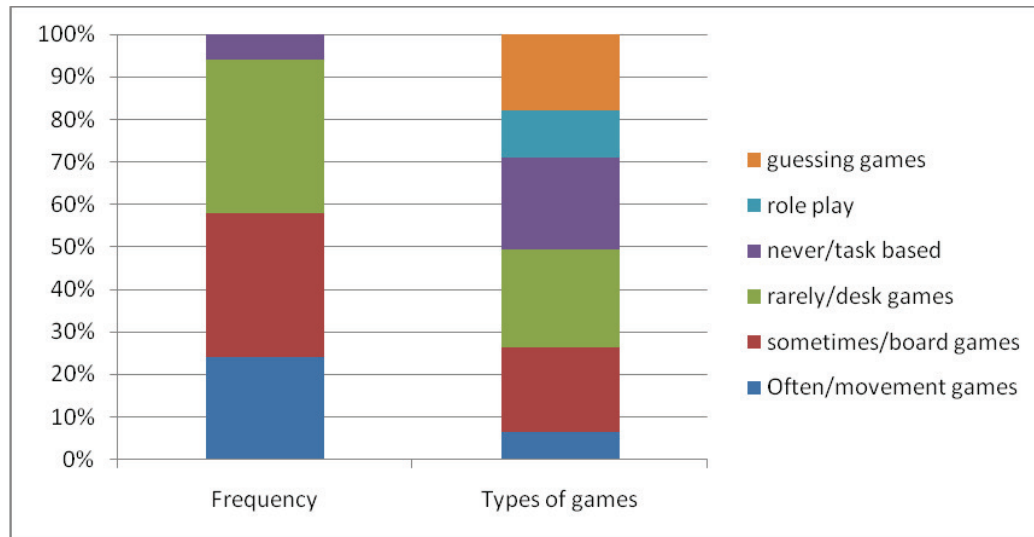


Figure 2 Teachers` opinion on didactic games and the frequency of usage

As we can see in the above presented figures, teachers are still reluctant to interactive classroom techniques, while pupils like them and would work with more interest and commitment in an interactive classroom. Our recommendation is to try and get over technology barriers or barriers attributed to exterior factors and work for the child`s best interest. In a communicative society the child`s best interest is an interactive classroom, a challenging atmosphere but at the same time a relaxed one.

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