

ENGLISH CLASSES AND EFFECTIVENESS OF GAMES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: *Although games may be viewed as an instructional tool for young learners of English, their use in higher education could be of great help when teachers want to diversify their classroom strategies. Used in a sensible way, games can become a stimulus for grammar and vocabulary lessons which students tend to perceive as boring and unattractive. The purpose of the paper is to show teachers' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of games in teaching practical courses of English to Philology students. We consider that the findings of the present research may help both teachers and students in becoming aware of the great instructional value of games at academic level.*

Keywords: *games, grammar, vocabulary, teachers' opinions, advantages and disadvantages*

1. Paper Rationale

Starting from the premise that games can be used in higher education during practical courses of English, the paper aims at identifying the advantages and disadvantages of their use in such classes. These aspects are presented from the teachers' perspective, as part of a broader research which aims at the improvement of teaching techniques at university level.

2. Theoretical foundation and related literature

There is a common perception according to which all learning should be serious, implying the principle "no pain, no gain". Consequently, having fun and using humour in the classroom cannot lead, in some people's opinion, to real learning and solid acquisition of knowledge. Pedagogical and psychological research has proved the opposite of this common belief. It is possible to learn a language as well as to enjoy oneself at the same time. Therefore, one of the most useful and enjoyable methods to encourage language acquisition consists in using language games. They are powerful means whose goal is that of developing meaningful language skills. Generally speaking, irrespective of their age and level, students love to play, and they participate in a game with greater enthusiasm and willingness than in other classroom tasks. In spite of their attitude, teachers sometimes fail to realize the

importance of games, considering them not an opportunity for real communication, but an uncontrolled and noisy waste of time.

It is hard to define the concept of game in several words. All definitions start from the description of the most common characteristics of games. According to these descriptive definitions, games can be broadly defined as rule-based activities that teachers use during the classes. It is noteworthy that teachers should be aware of the complexity of the concept of game if they want to use game-based strategies during their classes. Therefore, some definitions of the concept should also be taken into consideration:

- “an activity or sport involving skill, knowledge, or chance, in which you follow fixed rules and try to win against an opponent or to solve a puzzle.” (Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary, 1988, p. 596);
- “any specific contest, engagement, amusement, computer simulation or sport involving physical or mental competition under specific rules, as football, chess or war games.” (Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1991, p. 554);
- “a form of play or sport, especially a competitive one with rules”. (The Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English, 1992, p. 359);
- “an activity or sport in which people compete with each other according to agreed rules” (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2001, p. 581).

Along with the definitions provided by the most important dictionaries used by English learners, language researchers have also worked on defining the concept of game. Among the most complex definitions are:

- a game is “a set of rules. In particular, it is a set of more or less elaborate and explicit rules about the constraints under which a goal is to be achieved with certain resources” (Inbar & Stoll, 1970, p. 54);
- a game is “an agreeable way of getting a class to use its initiative in English and as it is gently competitive, it increases motivation. It is also a contrast to periods of intensive study” (Haycraft, 1978, p. 94);
- a game is “an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun” (Hadfield, 1990, p. 5).
- a game is “a form of play governed by rules” (Byrne, 1995, p. 15).

In brief, the essential feature of language and vocabulary games consists in students’ active participation in the process of learning in a relaxing atmosphere. They involve precise rules to govern the instructional process, the outcome being to improve students’ linguistic knowledge of the second language. Moreover, using them in English classes enhances communication in a competitive and challenging environment. According to Richard-Amato (1996), even though games are often associated with fun, we should not lose sight of their pedagogical values. Games are effective because they provide motivation, lower students’ stress, and give them opportunity for real communication.

3. Methodology

The purpose of the research: identifying teachers' opinions on the effectiveness of using games at academic level in teaching grammar and vocabulary.

The objectives of the research:

O1: identifying teachers' views of the advantages of games;

O2: identifying disadvantages of game-based classes in teachers' opinions.

The hypothesis of the research: vocabulary and grammar games can be a successful tool for improving students' knowledge during the practical courses of English.

Description of the instruments

The instrument used in the research was the questionnaire, which included 15 statements to which the respondents had to agree or disagree. The following aspects were aimed at by the items in the questionnaire: the pedagogical value of using games in language teaching, teachers' attitudes towards the use of games in grammar and vocabulary activities, their opinions about the effectiveness of using games in teaching grammar and vocabulary, and the frequency of games in teaching.

Target group

The questionnaire was administered to a sample 25 English teachers from the Philology Department of the University of Ploiesti, whose teaching experience ranges from 5 to 20 years. They all teach English practical courses to students specializing in Romanian and English language and literature.

4. Results and discussion

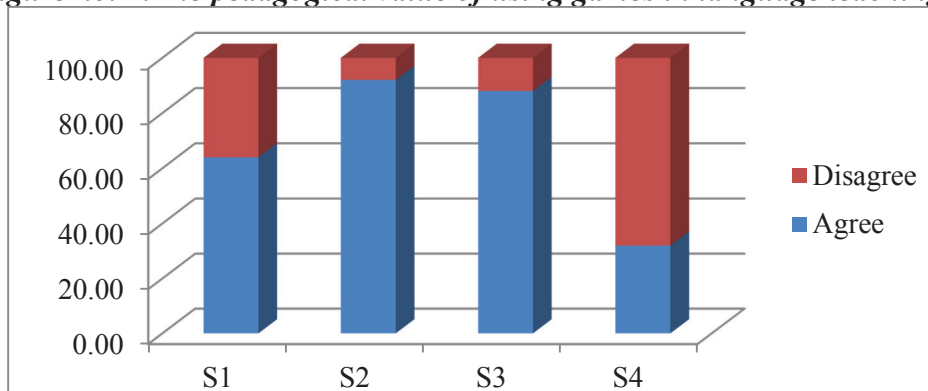
As a general finding, it should be mentioned that the teachers expressed a very favourable opinion concerning the instructional value of games in teaching grammar and vocabulary. Analysing this opinion in detail, the following data can be highlighted. According to Table 1 and its accompanying visual representation, which focus on teachers' perceptions of the role of games in language teaching, we noticed that high percentages were obtained especially for S2 and S3, which aimed to find their opinions on the importance of games in a language syllabus and in teaching grammar and vocabulary. This proves that teachers prefer the communicative approach to their teaching style which demonstrates their preoccupation for effective classroom strategies.

Table no. 1: The pedagogical value of using games in language teaching

	Statement	Agree %	Disagree %
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S1	Games are both fun and educational.	64.00	36.00
S2	Games should be given a special role in a foreign language teaching syllabus.	92.00	8.00
S3	Games offer the learners the possibility to prove their skills in grammar and vocabulary.	88.00	12.00
S4	Teachers must use games as an alternative for avoiding boredom in the classroom.	32.00	68.00

Figure no. 1: The pedagogical value of using games in language teaching



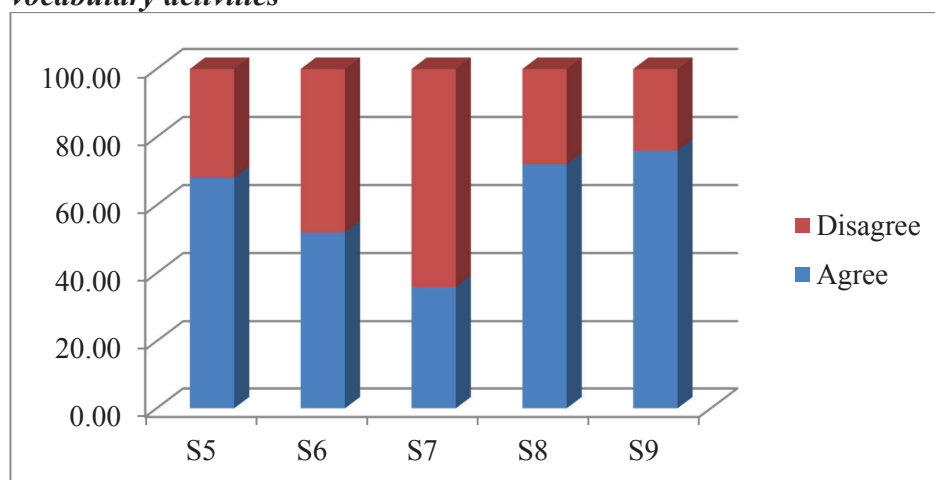
Although teachers' general perception of using games is positive, they are aware of the difficulties implied by designing game-based classes. The data in Table 2, which is visualized in Figure 2, highlight several obstacles that teachers usually encounter when dealing with such classes. The highest percentage (76.00%) indicates that teachers cannot find enough games to teach grammar and vocabulary structures and, as a result, they have to be inventive and create their own games, which is time-consuming. Another shortcoming of using games in grammar teaching, as shown by the results of S8, is the teacher's uncertainty as regards students' acquisition of grammatical items. This is emphasized by the answers given at S5, as 68% of the respondents admit that, due to the fact that games are free activities, students' knowledge cannot be evaluated properly.

Table no. 2: Teachers' attitudes towards the use of games in grammar and vocabulary activities

Statement	Agree %	Disagree %
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S5	One cannot measure students' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary when using games during the class	68.00	32.00
S6	Using games to teach grammar and vocabulary may distract students' attention during the instructional process.	52.00	48.00
S7	Using games in grammar and vocabulary teaching can be time-consuming.	36.00	64.00
S8	I feel uncomfortable when I do not give the exact rules for grammar items.	72.00	28.00
S9	I find it difficult to find a game suitable for every grammar or vocabulary notion.	76.00	24.00

Figure no. 2: Teachers' attitudes towards the use of games in grammar and vocabulary activities



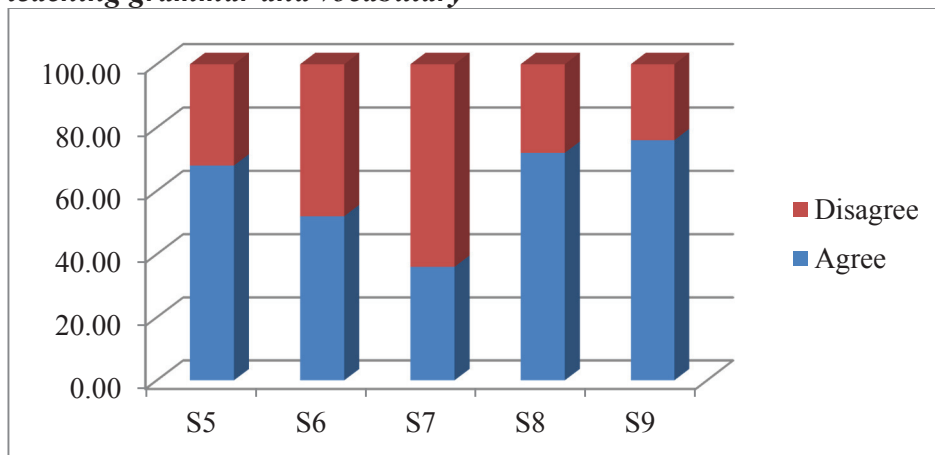
The very high percentages of teachers who are aware of the benefits of games in the language classroom are shown in Table 3 and its graphic representation. It is noteworthy that more than two thirds of the respondents (see S 10, S11, S 12, S14) point to the highly motivating quality of games, as well as to the relaxing atmosphere that characterizes classes during which they are used. Nevertheless, a percentage of 76% of the teachers mentioned a less beneficial aspect involved by games, that is, students are more interested in playing rather than in improving their knowledge.

Table no. 3: Teachers' opinions on the effectiveness of using games in teaching grammar and vocabulary

Statement	Agree %	Disagree %
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S10	Using games lower students' anxiety towards grammar and vocabulary learning.	80.00	20.00
S11	Grammar and vocabulary games encourage, entertain and promote fluency.	84.00	16.00
S12	Games are a highly motivating and entertaining ways of teaching grammar and vocabulary, especially for weak students.	84.00	16.00
S13	While playing a game, learners are not necessarily concerned about focusing on learning.	76.00	24.00
S14	Games are not very effective in grammar and vocabulary teaching.	28.00	72.00

Figure no. 3: Teachers' opinions on the effectiveness of using games in teaching grammar and vocabulary



Concerning the frequency of using games, the percentages indicated in Table 4 are almost equal, which can be explained by the fact that, although teachers are aware of the positive effects of games on students, the shortcomings mentioned above determine them to adopt a balanced attitude when it comes to game-based activities.

Table no. 4: The frequency of using games in teaching

Statement	Agree %	Disagree %
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S1 5	I use games for teaching grammar and vocabulary as much as possible.	48.00	52.00
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5. Conclusions

Starting from the data presented above, we can state that teaching English through games is not only an enjoyable way of making the transition from knowledge towards competence, but also an effective strategy to involve students in the learning process. In other words, as Wright et al. (2005:48) state, “games also help the teacher to create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful. The learners want to take part and in order to do so must understand what others are saying or have written, and they must speak or write in order to express their own point of view or give information.” It is a fact that games are a motivating factor for students, especially in the case of grammar classes, which are perceived as boring, but if adequately used by teachers they become a perfect tool for improving students’ grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Moreover, the classroom atmosphere specific to game-based classes will give a fresh impetus to students’ participation in the learning process.

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