

TEACHING LITERATURE BY MEANS OF GAMES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

It is generally accepted that games provide a stimulating teaching and learning classroom environment. In spite of their beneficial effect on students, most literature teachers avoid using them in their classes, especially at the academic level, because they tend to consider them to be time-consuming and inappropriate for literature classes. The main purpose of the research is to find students' perceptions of using games in literature classes and, starting from the results, to change teachers' opinions about the usefulness of game-based activities. Being stimulating for students, games will definitely improve the learning atmosphere in the classroom, and will lead to the development of the skills required by the literature syllabus.

Keywords: *literature classes, student-centred, active learning, games, higher education*

Paper Rationale

- a. Based on classroom observations, the research tries to highlight the possible advantages of games used during literature classes in higher education, starting from the assumption that these activities are not very common at such a level. The study aims to reveal the contribution of game-based classes to the improvement of teaching literature.

Theoretical foundation and related literature

It is well-known that games, as a form of organized play, have a great instructional potential that can be exploited during foreign language classes in general and literature classes in particular. They help learners to relate to others naturally and effectively, strengthen self-confidence and stimulate creative freedom in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. In a word, games provide all necessary conditions to develop communication skills and, as Hubbard et al. argue, “to practise all the different skills, although inevitably a game practising one skill will probably overlap with another skill or structure” (1991, p. 98).

In the specific case of literature classes in higher education, all virtues of games can be successfully put to use if teachers want to develop students' independent learning style, critical thinking and stylistic awareness when coping with authentic literary texts.

There are several misconceptions about using games in the instructional process. For instance, they are commonly considered to be suited for young students or are viewed as “an end-of-term activity or something to fill the last five minutes of a lesson” (Hubbard et al., 1991, p. 95). In reality, as games always provide an enjoyable atmosphere and motivate learners to engage in the classroom activities, they are recommended for all students and all types of classes, including the literature ones as well. Moreover, games can be systematically used “at all stages of practice from controlled to free” (Hubbard et al., 1991, p. 95) with a view to improving the teaching process itself. What each individual teacher has to do is to find the appropriate game for the appropriate age and level of his/her students' knowledge, and to include it in “a set of actions and activities that improve student outcome”. (Hightower et al., 2011, p. 5).

As part of what researchers describe as active learning, games may become a valuable tool for implementing a new way of teaching literature in higher education. Explained by Felder and Brent, the concept of “active learning” refers to all teaching techniques related to a course, which “all students in a class session are called upon to do other than simply watching, listening and taking notes” (Felder and Brent, 2009, p. 2).

Used regularly and effectively, games make the activities devised for literature classes meaningful, attractive and challenging. Taking into account the instructional goal and the kind of reading text, the teacher may use different memory or guessing games if he/she wants to check students' knowledge about specific literary information. Furthermore, various reading games, which are more or less complex depending on the degree of difficulty of the text or task, are highly effective when the purpose is to consolidate or verify the understanding of a storyline. Such games may be:

- describe and arrange;
- information gap;
- matching;
- sorting;
- ordering and arranging;
- jigsaw text games;
- puzzle stories.

Role plays are always a good choice for impersonating literary characters while performances of plays and dramatization of stories may serve as effective tools for consolidation of knowledge opening the way to free

imagination and creativity. In this way, teachers put students “in the middle of the whole literary process, to make them creators rather than passive containers of boring theories” (Salasar, 1992, p. 31).

As drama-like activities usually require rehearsals accompanied by discussions about themes, ideas, characters involved in the plot, sequence of events, style etc., they help students to improve their ability to analyse and evaluate a text from a critical perspective. To put it differently, it means that learners “are beginning to get into the area of below-the-surface meanings, the appreciation of which is the true key to understanding and enjoyment of a work of literature” (Gwin, 1990, p. 12).

The use of games during literature classes at an academic level may contribute to the development of what Carter and Long define as a “personal growth model”. In other words, the game-based teaching approach can change the traditional way of studying literature into “a memorable, individual and collective experience” that will pave the way to a lasting positive attitude towards reading literature (1991, pp. 2, 3).

To sum up, literature classes may benefit from the instructional value of games due to the following qualities:

- Learners get highly motivated because they want to win the competition in which they are taking part; thus, they do their best to understand the rules of the game and to perform their tasks successfully.
- Games lower students’ anxiety enabling them to find solutions to the problems they have to solve without caring too much about making mistakes or being wrong.
- Providing a non-stressful atmosphere, games help students to become self-confident, creative and independent.
- When playing, students acquire or consolidate knowledge without consciously knowing it. (Schultz & Fisher, 1988). While doing the task, they aim to communicate and exchange opinions ignoring the instructional role of the game.
- As games are student-centred activities, they involve equal participation from both fast and slow learners.
- Games stimulate classroom interactions which create conditions for a better understanding of the information provided. Students experiment, discover and learn by working together as a team for a common goal.
- Activities based on games focus students’ attention on specific information which may be related to a variety of issues (themes, characters, narrative, style, etc.).
- Games can serve as review, reinforcement and enrichment of knowledge in a pleasant way.

- Well-designed and stimulating, game-based activities enable students to have the leading role and teachers to be facilitators of the learning process.

Methodology

The purpose of the research: demonstrating the positive impact of games on literature classes at academic level in order to improve teaching strategies.

The objectives of the research:

O1: identifying students' perception of the use of games in literature classes;

O2: identifying students' views on the advantages and disadvantages of games used during literature classes.

The hypothesis of the research: taking into account the fact that games are not frequently used in literature classes, students' perceptions of game-based classes could be a starting point for utilizing active learning strategies on a regular basis.

Description of the instruments

The present research made use of a questionnaire that included 10 items, out of which 8 were closed and 2 open, their aim being to investigate students' opinions about the benefits and the possible drawbacks of using games in literature classes in higher education.

Target group

The questionnaire was administered to a sample of 75 respondents specializing in Philology at the Faculty of Letters and Sciences within the Petroleum – Gas University of Ploiesti. All participants in the research attended the Comparative Literature courses and seminars in the second year of study.

Results and discussion

After analysing the students' answers, we may state that they generally have a favourable opinion about the instructional value of games in literature classes. This positive perception of games is evident in table no. 1, which shows that the majority of the respondents (66.67%) appreciate them as being educational whereas only a low percent does not admit their pedagogical role.

Table no. 1

Q1. Do you consider that games used during your literature classes are educational?	
Yes	66.67%
No	33.33%

As regards the answers to question two (*In your opinion, what are the benefits of using games in literature classes?*) most students justified their

opinions by pointing out relevant pedagogical qualities of games like: a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, challenging tasks, having fun, lack of stress, collaborative work etc. It should be noted that such points of view do not show enthusiasm about the traditional teaching style, but preference for literature classes which engage students actively in the learning process.

Due to the respondents' perception of games as stimulating classroom techniques, the results shown in table no. 2 are not surprising. A high percentage of students (74.67%) consider that game-based activities can eliminate the boredom of regular classes and that their teachers should make use of them more frequently when teaching literature.

Table no. 2

Q3. Teachers should use more games in the literature classes to avoid dullness and routine.

Yes	74.67%
No	25.33%

The percentages in table no. 3 demonstrate that literature classes do not generally satisfy students' desire to take part in challenging activities based on games. According to the majority of the learners (69.34%), most of their literature teachers do not include games in their teaching strategies. Moreover, the teachers who use them to a certain extent (often or sometimes) represent very low percentages.

Table no. 3

Q4. How frequently do your teachers use games in literature classes?

Often	13.33%
Sometimes	17.33%
Never	69.34%

The answers to question five reveal the impact of games on learners' attitude towards reading. As the table below indicates, the majority of the respondents (62.67%) believe that studying literature through games arouses their interest in reading the literary works required by their teachers.

Table no. 4

Q5. Do you consider games to be highly motivating in making students read the authors they have to study?

Yes	62.67%
No	37.33%

Students' answers to question six reflect their opinions about the strategy adopted by teachers when using games in their literature classes. The percentages presented in table no. 5 show that a large majority of students (82.67%) consider it important to understand what the rules and the final goal of the game are.

Table no. 5

Q6. If the teacher uses a game, does he/she clearly explain the aim and the rules of the game?

Yes	82.67%
No	17.33%

The respondents' answers to question seven show that they appreciate games as a means of consolidating the information they get during literature classes. As seen in the table below, more than half of the respondents claim that games helped them to consolidate their knowledge.

Table no. 6

Q7. Do you remember the newly taught knowledge better if acquired by means of a game?

Yes	53.33%
No	46.67%

As to questions eight and nine, they focus on the possible shortcomings of the use of games in literature classes. It is noteworthy that students maintain their favourable opinions about games and consequently the majority disagree to the issues raised by each question. Thus, more than half of the respondents do not perceive games as a disturbing factor in the activity they perform in class (table no. 7). Equally, 53.33% of them do not consider games to be ineffective and a waste of time (table no. 8). The relatively high percentages of students (45.33% and 46.67%) who admit these shortcomings of games may be explained by the fact that such classes tend to become noisy if the teacher does not monitor them effectively and tactfully.

Table no. 7

Q8. Do you think that games may distract the students from the learning process if used during literature classes?

Yes	45.33%
No	54.67%

Table no. 8

Q9. Do you consider games to be time-consuming and useless?

Yes	46.67%
No	53.33%

The answers to question ten (*In your opinion, what are the disadvantages of using games during literature classes?*) refer to several drawbacks that need consideration on the part of teachers. Among the most relevant opinions are the following:

- game-based classes can be noisy, inevitably disturbing the atmosphere of the learning process;
- not all students want to collaborate and rely on other members of the group to complete a task;
- some students are unreliable and provide incorrect answers;
- slow students cannot solve the task during the time allocated to the game.

Although games are not frequently used by teachers in teaching literature, it is remarkable that students were able to point out the most common dysfunctions of the classroom games.

Conclusions

The present analysis clearly shows that students are really enthusiastic about the use of games in literature classes, even if most of their teachers do not include game-based activities in their classroom strategies. The fact that students appreciate these activities proves that they are aware of their educational value, considering them meaningful, challenging and fun.

It is worth mentioning that students perceive games as a means of developing and consolidating their knowledge of literature in a pleasant atmosphere. Moreover, they consider that games foster interest in reading in and outside the classroom, which shows that games may contribute to the formation of long-lasting habits. It depends on the teachers to encourage this attitude towards reading by adopting classroom strategies meant to satisfy students' needs. One way of doing this is to use games, which are ideal for

making students become active, responsive and fully engaged in studying literature.

As games are complex activities, they can have a psychological impact on students by developing feelings such as self-esteem, self-confidence and the satisfaction of being part of a team. Therefore, they may create positive relationships between the teacher and his/her students or among students themselves. The cognitive features of games, which involve discussion, decision, action, problem solving and guessing, stimulate students' thinking. All these characteristics recommend games as a good choice for practising literature in higher education.

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