

The importance of using games in EFL classrooms

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Abstract

This paper aims to find out how games are important and effective when used in EFL classrooms. Two different kinds of qualitative research methods; semi-structured interviews and observation were conducted in this study. Multi-method triangulation is used throughout in this study. The data was carried out through audio-recorded interview and observation. It is a case study in which two undergraduate students are taught English by using the game called 'Twister' which is adapted for teaching. It was determined from the data that games should be employed in second language learning classrooms in terms of providing an atmosphere for EFL learners in which there are fun, motivation and high learning performance.

Keywords: games, Twister, vocabulary, EFL classrooms

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1. Introduction

Games are one of the most important components in EFL classrooms. They include activities which have goals and rules at the same time fun. Hadfield (1990; Quoted in Deesri, 2002, p.1) describes games as “an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun.”

Some authors suggest that language games should be placed at the center of the foreign language teaching program rather being accepted as a peripheral part of the program, since, besides being fun, additionally they include goals and controlled by rules (Haldfield, 1999). S. M. Silvers, the author of the book *Games for the Classroom and English Speaking Club*, claims that games are often agreed by many teachers as tools which stop monotonous repetitions in the lesson are used to fill in time (Silvers 1992). He claims that many teachers often miss the fact that in a relaxed environment it is mostly possible that real learning take place, furthermore learners are able to use the target language that have been exposed to and have been practiced earlier by the learners. Following definition given by Greenall, it can be said that games create a competition positively among students who are involved in a language activity (Greenall, 1990).

The approval for using games in a foreign language classroom can be seen in the fact that learners provide a lot of benefits through games. It was ensured by many experienced writers that games are educationally valuable. Some reasons are mentioned by Lee as in the following (Lee, 1995): games give a chance to escape from unusual routine, but they are very important in terms of motivation and challenges. Moreover, games provide encouragement to interact and communicate successfully for learners and permanence to carry on the effort of learning and create a context to use the language meaningfully, decreases anxiety, and allow learners to study in a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere.

Games have many advantages for both language teachers and its learners. They support learning the target language when learners are involved in the games and have fun without noticing that they are learning the target language, and furthermore it is a pleasure for the teacher that he presents the language in an enjoyable atmosphere which makes the job powerful. McCallum (1980, p. ix) emphasizes this point by saying that “games automatically stimulate student interest, a properly introduced game can be one of the highest motivating techniques.” Another advantage of using games in a foreign language setting is to make stressful moments clear. In a language learning atmosphere, stress-free environment should be provided. At this point games are very advantageous since learners do not feel any anxiety and their positive feelings increase and their self-confidence improve because they are not afraid of being punished or criticized while they are practicing the language freely (Crookal, 1990).

The aim of this paper is to prove the importance of the games in EFL classrooms. In the following section the role of games in EFL classrooms will be discussed in detail.

2. Literature Review

Games are one of the most important components in EFL classrooms. They include activities which have goals and rules at the same time fun. Hadfield (1990; Quoted in Deesri, 2002) describes games as “an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun.”

Foreign language learning games can be considered as a framework to provide a meaningful context for language acquisition. Constantinescu (2012) claims that learners can improve their understanding of written and spoken English via games. Games help learners learn words and structures in a context using correct pronunciation and spelling.

Games play an important role in the language learning classrooms despite the fact that most of the teachers are not aware of it as a learning strategy. However; it has lots of benefits to the learning process of the learners. Firstly; games prevent the lesson to be ordinary and boring. Conversely, they create a successful and positive classroom environment where students and their learning are central.

Games are always fun for the learners so they attract their interest unlike the ordinary lessons. The learners both learn the language and have fun in the classroom with the help of the games. Even shy and reluctant children react positively to them (Mei & Yu-Jing, 2000). This increases the motivation of the children because they play as an alternative solution which encourages students to keep their interest on the lesson and continue working. By this way, they reduce the stress of learning another language (Mei & Yu-jing, 2000).

In EFL classrooms, games provide many advantages for promoting learning the target language. One of the advantages associated with games is that students' anxiety towards language learning decreases as games are employed. In language classes, learners assume that they have to be successful in the target language that they do not know. In addition to this learners feel much anxiety because of being criticized and punished by their teacher when they make a mistake. At this point games come to the stage since they reduce anxiety, increase positive feelings and improve self-confidence because there is no fear of punishment and criticism for learners when they are practicing the target language freely (Crookall, 1990).

Learners involve in the games actively, so games are called learner-centered activities According to Crookall (1990). Through games learners' and teachers' roles are changed and teacher encourages learners to participate actively in their learning. As a result, games give a chance to learners to take responsibility for their own learning. From an instructional view point, creating a meaningful context for language use is another advantage that games present. By using games, different contexts can be created by teachers that allow learning unconsciously because the attentions of the learners are not on the language, on the message. As a result, when their focus is on a game as an activity, learners acquire the target language as they acquire their mother tongue, that is, without being aware of it (Cross, 2000).

Constantinescu (2012) states some advantages of games as in the following:

- “Games build up learners' English repertoire in a familiar and comfortable environment (even for students who may have special needs), where they feel confident. More than this, English is widespread used with computers.
- Games increase motivation and desire for self-improvement.
- Challenge and competition are key factors for any game and students pay more attention to completing the task.
- Interdisciplinary approach. Students use knowledge from other classes, too.
- Games develop students' ability to observe.
- Games have clear rules and objectives.
- Games develop critical thinking, problem solving, and imagination.
- Games offer new and dynamic forms of teaching/ practicing which replace the traditional worksheets.
- Games are adaptable for different levels of knowledge.
- Educational games are easy to understand and use.
- Educational games do not take long time to be played in the class.
- There are many online educational games which are free of charge.
- Immediate feedback both for the students and the teacher.
- The results are more visible (sometimes both visual and acoustic) and have a stronger impact.
- The working time is usually known from the beginning and it is respected

- Games facilitate collaborative learning but, in the same time, students may learn at their own speed and cognitive level.
- Games may be used in the classroom as rewards for students.”

Students may have the willingness to play games completely for fun. However, teachers need more reasons for convincing to play games. Teachers have to be very careful about which games should be used, when to use them, and how to connect them with the syllabus, text book, and how, more particularly, beneficial they are. While choosing and adapting games in the EFL classrooms teachers should be very careful at many points. Constantinescu (2012) expressed that when choosing language games, many points are needed to be considered by teachers:

- “Games should have an aim. They are used to motivate students, not only for fun.
- Games should focus on the use of language. By their means students have to learn, practice, or refresh language components
- The content should be appropriate. It should fit the curriculum, be correct from all points of view and not to promote wrong values (e.g. violence).
- Games should be technically easy to use in the classroom.
- Games should be in accordance with students’ age and level of knowledge.
- Games should keep all of the students interested.
- It is advisable to use short games; otherwise students may lose their interest.”

Beside all these advantages, learners’ motivation is another important issue that should be taken into account because when learners are in a game; their motivation is much higher to learn the language. McCallum (1980, p. ix) claims this point by suggesting “games automatically stimulate student interest, a properly introduced game can be one of the highest motivating techniques.” Avedon (1971; Quoted in Deesri, 2002) further states that “games spur motivation and students get very absorbed in the competitive aspects of the games; moreover, they try harder at games than in other courses”. Therefore, games stimulate students’ interest in classroom activities and as a result, students become motivated and willing to learn.

Besides many advantages, there are some disadvantages for using games in EFL classrooms. Stojkovic and Jerotijevic (2011) mentioned some disadvantages of games as in the following:

- "1) discipline issues, learners may get excessively noisy
- 2) Straying away from the basic purpose of the game-play activity, perhaps, due to inadequate rules instruction, resulting in playing too much and the lack of learning
- 3) If games are already familiar or boring, students might not get equally involved
- 4) Some learners, especially teenagers, may find games unnecessary and childish.”

Games are generally preferred by the teachers to be used as warm-up activities or at the end of the lesson if time is left. The games are used by the teachers to escape from the monotony of the course book, filling extra class time and for reviewing for a test. However; Lee (1979) states that games should be at the heart of the language learning process instead of being an activity which is just used when the teacher and students have nothing better to do (As cited in Uberman, 1998). They have more effect on the teaching of the learners than just creating fun in the classroom. They are educationally valuable and useful for the English language learners. Moreover; Rixon (1979) mentions that games can be used at the all stages of the lesson if they are suitable and carefully chosen (As cited in Uberman, 1998).

To sum up, games provide a great pedagogical value for language teachers with many advantages when they are introduced in foreign language classrooms. The review of the studies related to language games indicates that games play a crucial role in foreign language teaching and learning contexts in a variety of areas.

3. Methodology

In this qualitative case study semi structured interview and observation were used as data collection techniques. The reason for choosing a case study lies behind the idea that it helps the researcher to go deeper into the participants' lives and obtain richer and valuable data. Yin (1984, p. 23) defines the case study research method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used. According to many researchers (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Debreli, 2012; Silverman, 2011) a qualitative research is more flexible in obtaining detailed background information through asking flexible questions or through close observation of the events and occasions on a regular base. Since the aim of the present study was to investigate the effects of Twister game on students', who are not EFL students in English Preparatory Schools, vocabulary learning, this required an in-depth look into the participants learning process. Therefore, the qualitative data collection instruments which would allow such closer look and investigation to students learning process were preferred. According to many, instruments such as games, interviews, reflective reports, observations are the most widely used qualitative data collection instruments (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2012). Kopinak defines multi-method triangulation as "gathering information pertaining to the same phenomenon through more than one method, primarily in order to determine if there is a convergence and hence, increased validity in research findings" (Kopinak, 1999). Kopinak states that more detailed and multi-layered information about the fact under study would be provided from using more instruments.

Another main reason for the choice of a qualitative research design is that since the present study does not intend to the generalizations to broader context and is not interested in revealing statistical data for comparisons. It aims to reveal a detailed picture from a small number of participants, which would provide a bigger picture. The following sections will provide more information about participants and data collection instruments used in the present study.

3.1. Data Collection Instruments

Of the many qualitative data collection instruments discussed in the literature, in this study specifically, a game, observation and the interview instruments were preferred. Since the aim of the study was to find out the positive effects of the Twister game on EFL elementary level students learning Twister game was regarded as a qualitative instrument itself. The other instruments following Twister were the semi-structured interviews and observation. In the following two subsections information about these three methods are given.

3.1.1. Game (Twister)

Games are incredibly valuable in a class because they provide many opportunities for learners to learn the language. As Carrier (1980, as cited in, Sánchez, Morfín & Campos, 2007) mentions it, three appropriate stages are in a lesson that games can be used; that it, they can be applied as an introduction, the development of the lesson, and as a conclusion of the lesson. When games are employed as an introduction, the lesson begins with stimulation. At this point, the students' interest is provided from the very beginning of the lesson. Besides they play a very crucial role to know what level students already have. Moreover, games can be used for revision of a previous activity. Furthermore, games are included after development of the lesson to emphasize an item which is

considered significant by the teacher for revision or practice. At the end of the lesson games are brought into play to serve a stimulating end. Consequently, students have chance to practice the studied item, and the teacher can have an idea if the item well achieved or not by students. According to Sánchez, Morfín, and Campos (2007), games have a positive effect at any moment of the lesson since this makes students have fun in the activity without noticing that they are practicing the language with hidden helpful practice.

Twister is an old American game. It consists of a direction board with a pointer. There are four areas on the board: left foot, right foot, left hand and right hand. Each area has four colored circles: green, red, yellow and blue. The twister mat is rather large and consists of six rows of green, red, yellow and blue circles.

In the present study, a widely used game activity, “Twister”, is preferred to evaluate its contribution on EFL elementary level students’ language learning. Twister is a game which is often used in EFL classrooms, although its effects on learning are not yet satisfactorily evidenced on empirical basis. In this study, the effectiveness of this game which is used as an instrument of data collection as well as a game to be tested.

3.1.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Since, interviews ask questions orally and collect available data orally (Kuale, 2006), semi-structured interview is preferred in the present study. One of the main reasons for the selection of semi-structured interview type is that it allows more detailed information to be collected compared to the structured interviews, as they include investigations in order to collect further exploratory information concerning the questions. The other reason for employing semi structured interviews is in- depth understanding of the interviewees’ perceptions, attitudes and feelings. The rationale for using interviews was that the need of researchers to see factors which could not to be observed directly such as students’ attitudes, perceptions, and opinions (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Non participant observations were also used to obtain information about participants’ behaviours and actions concerning the EFL context under study (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

In this study, semi-structured interview was conducted with students to reveal their views about learning English vocabulary with a game. With this aim in mind, researchers developed an interview form. After finishing all the activities related to the game, the interviews were conducted with four participants, who granted permission and who were informed that their names will be kept confidential and their comments will be used only for the research purposes.

3.1.3. Observation

Researchers find observation methods useful in a variety of ways. Schmuck (1997) indicates that they supply ways to control for nonverbal expression of feelings, determine the interaction between participants, understand how they interact with each other, and check for the amount of time that is spent on various activities. Moreover, the researchers find participant observation helpful in terms of checking definitions of terms that are used by participants in interviews, monitor events that informants may not be able to or may not be eager to share ideas that would not be polite or sensitive, and monitor situations participants have reported in interviews, by means of that they aware of inaccurate and distorted information described in interviews which are provided by those informants (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

As it was mentioned before observation method is used in this study. Participants were observed during eight hours in order to cross-check the observed behaviours, verbal reactions, feelings with the interview results of the participants.

3.2. Participants

Since qualitative research designs deal with a few number of participants, only two participants were decided to deal with to get into deeper understanding. These participants are selected on a criterion based sampling. A certain criteria that the participants who had the below given characteristics were chosen, in a random manner of the general:

- It is not important if they are EFL learners in English Preparatory schools or not.
- Their level of English proficiency should be Elementary level.

General characteristics of the two participants are given below:

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Education
Fatma	23	Turkish	Private lesson
Elif	22	Turkish	Private lesson

3.3. Data Collection Process

The game “Twister” was played four times in November in a school garden. The game which was adapted by the researcher was played for two hours at each time. During four weeks in each lesson participants were observed by the researcher. Interviews which were conducted at the end of four weeks, took nearly one hour. Six questions were asked to the participants such as “do you think this game motivated you to learn vocabulary? Would you prefer learning vocabulary with this game?”

3.4. Data Analysis

The analysis of the data gathered began with the transcription of the audio-recorded interview data. This is then followed by the familiarization of the data transcribed through reading the transcription several times. The data were then given meaningful codes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Those codes were then developed into categories with the intention of collection the most relevant data under general labels. These categories and the data that suits them best are presented in the following section.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section covers some of the categories that emerged from the data. Some extracts from the interviews are also provided as examples for the categories.

4.1. Motivating factors

4.1.1. Feeling of fun and satisfaction

The findings revealed that the features of Twister like color, the word cards, etc. created fun, relaxation, satisfaction. The mostly given reasons to the question – do you think this game motivated you to learn vocabulary- is as follows;

“I would like to play this game again and again because, this game is very enjoyable. When I have fun, I am more motivated, satisfied, and eager to learn.” (Interviewee, Fatma)

The finding of this study is parallel with the related literature. Bartle (2004) claimed that people play games because they would like to have “fun”. In the same way, Gee (2007) points out that pleasure cannot be separated from deep learning and working hard.

This finding is agreed with the literature of this study.

4.1.2. Feeling lower anxiety and stress

Learners have to encounter unfamiliar words while learning a second language, so they feel a high level of stress. Therefore, they do not feel comfortable and secure, which certainly influence their ability to learn. As a conclusion, games assist to decrease anxiety, feel comfortable, and want to learn more. It is assured that they are relaxed and have fun. Since, learners know that while they are playing games to interact effectively not being worried about making mistakes and not to worry about correcting themselves in every single sentences. When learners do not feel worry and stress, they could develop fluency and speaking styles. Moreover, when learners play a game their anxiety decreases as games are used. Furthermore, the level of anxiety of learners is high since they are afraid of being criticized and punished by their teacher when they make a mistake. Games come on the scene at this stage because they reduce anxiety, increase positive feelings and improve self-confidence. Crookal, (1990) highlights that learners do not feel fear of being punished and criticized while they are producing the second language freely. One of the participants indicated that “while I was playing the game, I did not consider if I made a mistake or not, I only used the language to give the message”. Another participant pointed out “While I was playing the game, I was not under any stress, since I was enjoying while presenting the words.”

According to Yiltanlilar and Caganaga (2015) using a game for language learners is a kind of encouragement by supporting them to hinder their negative feelings like fear, hesitations, anxiety by creating a flexible and warm learning environment for them. This statement is supported by one of the participants as in the following sentence ‘I did never recognize that if I had a mistake or not and also if my friend would laugh at me or not. It is impossible for us always to use the language appropriately because we are not EFL learners, so I would like to inform that the game which was very enjoyable and interesting should be used for teaching a language’

4.1.3. Preventing from memorization

Traditionally, vocabulary is not seen as a particular subject by learners to learn, but they are taught in the speaking, listening, reading and writing lessons. Students use the vocabulary that they have and new vocabulary is introduced by the teacher and classmates that will be used in classroom activities during the lesson. For many English learners, when point at issue is vocabulary, they think that they learn a list of new words with meanings in their mother tongue without practicing any real context. Most of the learners may experience the same situation which is looking up words in a bilingual dictionary to find their meanings or definitions when they meet unknown words. They may copy the lines of new words without knowing how to use them in a real context. When they work with this way, they may recognize that learning vocabulary in list is not enough and pleasing for them, and they think this is just because of not being able to memorize, Gnoinska (1998). This way is not an effective way to learn a language. Decarrico (2001) indicates that words should not be seen as a separate issue while learning or be memorized without comprehending. Furthermore, “learning new words is a cumulative process, with words enriched and established as they are met again”, Nation (2000). In conclusion, learning vocabulary by ‘looking and remembering’ is not seen as an effective way for English language learners.

It was obviously revealed from the interview and observation results of the study that the game Twister helped participants to learn the language without doing any memorization. Furthermore, according to results it was obvious that games are useful instruments that provide learners recall the words without looking at any written source. One of the participants responded to the question ‘Was it easy to remember the words while playing the game?’ as in the following: ‘Yes, it was very easy to recall the words. Both the given clues by my friend and the help of you it was not difficult to

remember. What was the most impressing thing was I recognized that I could learn vocabulary via games without looking up a dictionary.'

4.2. De-motivating Factors

Having very unfamiliar vocabulary

Although lots of advantages mentioned above, one of the participants found the game little bit boring because of not being able to explain some words that she could not explain. She mentioned this problem as: 'When I cannot explain or understand what my friend is asking, it was little bit boring, but by the help of you and my friend I can do it so it so fun motivation and enjoy helped me to continue the game. Actually, this is not a big problem.'

5. Conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to explore the importance of using games in EFL classrooms. As this findings show that using games creates an environment in which there is fun and satisfaction besides high motivation for learning a language. Moreover the role of games in order to decrease anxiety of using the target language cannot be ignored. Games are important for teaching English because they are a way to provide for learner not only having fun and amusement with the target language but also practice incidentally. To be short, games can be accepted as useful and effective tools that are effective for teaching vocabulary. The use of games in EFL classrooms is a way to provide more interesting, enjoyable, and effective teaching (Uberman, 1998).

In conclusion, according to the findings of this study, it can be obviously understood that games are very important instruments in language teaching classrooms in terms of providing a relaxed environment for learners and for both teachers and learners, games are very useful if they have an educational purpose rather than being fun.

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