Authentic Games in the Classroom:
An Approach to Teaching Grammar to Young Learners

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Introduction

As we all know, children love games. Therefore, it is essential that teachers of young learners find effective ways to harness their love of games so as to maximize the learning potential inherent in those games. There are a countless number of language teaching games that have been created to do just that; but, there are also a number of commercially produced family games that can be easily adapted to serve both the needs of the teachers and more importantly, the students. In this paper, I will outline why "real" games have a legitimate place in a curriculum based on solid educational principles. Also, I will show as an example how one particular game can be used and adapted so that the students focus on specific grammatical targets while simply playing the game.

The Role of "Real" Games in the Classroom

Most teachers would surely agree with the premise that teaching a foreign language to children is challenging. The challenges involved with teaching children are numerous, but so are the rewards. A smiling child is a priceless gift. Children bring an energy and enthusiasm for learning that makes the rewards of teaching them more than make up for the challenges. Teachers need to spend a great amount of time preparing successful lessons; time we often don't have to spare. In addition, teachers must be ready for the unexpected (which should be expected). To deal with these dilemmas, I have stocked my classroom with an assortment of "real" games from which the students and teachers can choose that are useful to teach specific grammar targets.

There are a number of sound reasons to include real games in the ESL classroom. As Vale and Feunteun (1995) have argued, play has a key role in the learning processes of children. With the exception of formulaic language games, play is often overlooked in children's textbooks and curriculum planning. Vale and Feunteun argue that games and play should have prominent role in the curriculum, and not just as a reward or time-filler. Play can be harnessed as a source of motivation, enjoyment and even a way to control an unruly class. Vale and Feunteun further argue that games should somehow relate to the overall theme or topic of the lesson. Games are usually

flexible enough to be adapted by creative teachers to suit the needs of both the curriculum and the students.

Paul (2003) also sees a central role for games in the foreign language curriculum. He states that when children are immersed in a game, they are far more likely to internalize and give meaning to the language target. He also argues that we must keep the focus on learning, and not simply use a game as a time for playing just for the sake of playing. Therefore, games need to be selected and adapted to meet the learning objectives as much as possible.

Games and Guiding Principles

When adapting "real" games for children it is essential to draw from some guiding principles specific to young learners. Researchers have pointed out that there are specific and important considerations when teaching children. Most importantly, we must remember that children differ from adult learners. Phillips (1993) says that the way children learn a foreign language, and therefore the way teachers present it should reflect the children's current stage of development. Young learners tend to be more holistic in their approach and will respond more to meaning, but cannot be counted on to make the analytical links that older learners are capable of doing. Children are often unselfconscious, and are usually prepared to perform the task presented to them, particularly when it is a game. Brown (1994) identifies five factors to consider when teaching children: intellectual development, attention span, sensory input, affective factors and the use of authentic, meaningful language.

Obviously, teachers and course planners should consider the level of the child and their current intellectual development when planning tasks. Williams (1998) brings attention to the fact that children are often seen as empty vessels to be filled with language presented by the teachers. This is a dangerous trap that we should try to avoid. In addition, many tasks are designed from an adult's perspective and not as it should be, which is from the child's perspective. Brown (1994) states that children are concerned with the "here and now" or the practical function of the language they are using. Brown argues that grammatical rules and explanations should be avoided. Showing by example and drawing attention to certain words or patterns are better techniques for having the students conceptualize the language. Repetition may also be necessary as this helps children acquire certain concepts. Ur (1988) believes there are many ways for creative teachers to overcome the boredom that often accompanies repetitive activities. One particular way to overcome this boredom is to have children play games that naturally require the students to repeat certain utterances.

Teachers of children also face the challenge of constantly producing and presenting

interesting material. The attention spans of children can easily be diminished when the material presented has little or no focus on the "here and now." Games provide the students with challenges and are an effective way to channel their attention to the tasks at hand. Real games are a welcome weapon in the language-teaching arsenal, as they seldom require much preparation from busy teachers. The curriculum that we have employed at our school has time reserved at the end of every class for real games. Students always look forward to game time.

Sensory input is important for all learners, but particularly more so for children. Brown (1994) points out that all five senses should be stimulated for children when possible. The use of realia helps students remember, conceptualize, and internalize concepts. The use of popular, well-known games helps authenticate the tasks at hand. Our school regularly uses Uno, Boggle, Twister, Jenga, playing cards, and numerous board games. When the games cannot be used as designed, the other teachers and I have adapted the rules of the game to better suit the intellectual development of each particular group of students. I have also discovered that students are far more motivated to play a commercially produced game as opposed to a game that has been created specifically for language learning. The authenticity factor is immeasurable. Brown also believes that the use of authentic and meaningful language is very important for young learners. Willis (1996) also emphasizes that teachers should expose students to language that they can make "approximate sense of." The language taught should be context-embedded. Games provide a perfect approach to embed language.

Additionally, Phillips (1993) recommends that activities should largely be orally based, with written activities used sparingly, especially with younger children. Often, grammar activities are thought of as writing or reading activities, but that does not have to be. Young learners (even those who are able to write and read) are better served if their activities are based on listening and speaking. Game time at the end of class allows the students to put away their pencils and books and just focus on oral communication. The students see game time as a reward for "studying" and don't view it as a study task.

Williams (1998) has compiled a thorough list of principles to keep in mind when teaching children. They are: Start where the child is; encourage social interaction; support negotiation of meaning and collaborative talk; allow children to be active participants in the learning process; pitch input within the zone of proximal development; introduce language at discourse level; plan meaningful and purposeful activities within a clear, familiar context; help learners become more independent; develop a supportive, non-threatening learning environment; and test and assess in the way we teach. With all of the above principles in mind, we can see how effective games can be in the classroom.

Adapting Jenga for the classroom

Most commercially games can be used as they are but I have discovered that a simple adaptation can make for a more rewarding learning experience for the students. To illustrate how this can be done, I have chosen a popular "real" game that is a big hit with my students. I will also show the same game can be used to teach students at different levels. Jenga is a popular wood stacking game that can be purchased at most toy stores. The object of the game is to have players take turns pulling one block of wood from a tower and placing it on the top of the tower. As the tower increases in height, it destabilizes until it finally falls over. The tension level of the players naturally increases as the game proceeds. This game is enjoyable on its own, but to justify its use in an EFL classroom some changes to the rules needed to be made.

I wrote high frequency sight words on the wide sides of the blocks using four different colored pens. There are 54 blocks in the standard game, so I used each colored pen to write on both sides of thirteen blocks. With the two remaining blocks I used all four pens to write the word WILD, one color for each letter. In addition, I bought four colored bandanas that match the colors of the words written on the blocks. The students then wear the bandanas. This game can be played by children of all ages, as the younger students do not need to be able to read the words to play, as the game is color-coded. Now the game can be played a number of different ways to teach a particular grammar target. As an example, I will demonstrate how to use Jenga to teach possessive *s* and possessive determiners. These particular activities can be used with students of all ages. More advanced students can be asked to read the sight words on the block they have chosen. The following two tasks were designed not only to be communicative, but also to be consciousness-raising.

Teaching possessive *s* and possessive determiners

This game can be played by two to five players. Each student is asked to select a colored bandana and wear it anyway they like. If there are only two players, each player selects two bandanas. In the event of three players, two players will have one bandana and one player will have two bandanas. In this case, the player with two bandanas will have his or her score divided by two at the end of the game. In the event of four players, each player will get one bandana and one player will also be selected to be the scorekeeper. In the event of five players, the fifth player will keep score for the other four players.

The winner of Paper, Rock, and Scissors goes first. The winner takes a block from the tower and gives the selected block with the colored writing to the player with the matching bandana. For example, if the player selects a block with red writing, he or she gives the block to the person

wearing the red bandana. As the student does this, he or she must say whose turn it is. For example, "It's Maria's turn," or, in the event the student draws his or her own colored block, "It's my turn." When a student draws the WILD block, they can select who gets the next turn. This can include themselves. The scorekeeper then marks each turn on a score sheet or on the whiteboard. Now the player who was given the block places it on the tower and proceeds to pull out the next block. This continues until the tower collapses. The winner of the game is the player who had the most turns without causing the tower to fall. This differs from the traditional Jenga rule, which has only one loser. Having this "one winner" element adds a bit more strategy to the game.

As the students develop their language skills, this same game can be adapted to other language targets. Pienemann's (1995) teachability hypothesis states that language can only be successfully taught if the students are developmentally ready to acquire it. After students have become comfortable with possessive *s*, I recommend that teachers present possessive determiners. The game can be played as above, but the students should face the scorekeeper and gesture to the student they are referring to. For example, "It's **her** turn." I have observed that students are usually quick to recognize that the possessive determiners *her* and *his* correspond to the sex of the student, but there may be some initial confusion when students notice that *her*, *your* and *my* could refer to the same person, depending on who is speaking. This is where a quick translation or very brief explanation might help.

This task can be used as a consciousness-raising activity. As Ellis (1991) explains, consciousness-raising involves providing the students with a declarative knowledge of a specific grammar point. In the case of possessive *s*, I can do a quick translation of the target into Japanese. My experience has shown me that there is no need for an elaborate explanation. When demonstrating the pronunciation rules for the first time, I put stress on the pronunciation of /s/, /z/, and /iz/. The students are usually quick to pick this up.

As the students become more familiar with the game and the language needed to play it, the function of the game shifts from consciousness-raising to communicative practice. The learners are now provided with an enjoyable way to internalize the language target. Ur (1988) states volume and repetition can be very beneficial to children. She supports activities that are designed to have learners use the targeted structure as much as possible. Yes, repetition can lead to boredom, but I believe the playing of a "real game" prevents this from happening. The students devote themselves to the strategy to win the game, and the language learning becomes an afterthought.

Conclusion

Teachers of children are lucky in the sense that we can receive instant feedback from the

students. This feedback comes in the form of observable signs. If children are not interested in something, you will surely know. However, if they are actively engaged in a task you can rest assured that learning is taking place. The use of authentic games is a useful tool in promoting grammatical competence. As Long and Robinson (1998) have noted, the effectiveness of instruction is most likely gradual and cumulative rather than instantaneous, so the effects attributed to noticing might not make immediate grammatical sense to children, but the function of the language will serve them here and now.

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