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26-27 април 2018 / 26-27 апреля 2018 / 26-27 April 2018  
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## GAMES AS A DIDACTIC TOOL: THE ATTITUDES OF PROSPECTIVE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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### Introduction

In the Dictionary of Didactics (Cuq, 2003: 160) the term *game* is found under the entry *playful (ludique)* and is defined as “a didactic activity, which follows a set of rules and is used in the classroom for the amusement it provides”<sup>1</sup>. For centuries, games were excluded from the school environment. It was in the late seventies of the previous century that they slowly started appearing in classrooms through the communicative approach (Silva, 2009: 106). Despite the fact that this approach recognized games as a legitimate didactic tool, we cannot help but notice that games are all too often still used merely as fill-ins at times when “serious” activities are out of the question, for example during the last class before the holidays.

A similar conclusion was reached by Silva (2009: 105-106): several decades after the pioneering work *Play, Language and Creativity (Jeu, langage et créativité)*, edited in 1978 by Jean-Marc Caré and Francis Debyser, the relationship between games, language and creativity remains unsettled, also in light of the action approach, which is currently being introduced by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001). Silva (ibid.: 106) furthermore elaborates on play and creativity, stating that both are seemingly self-evident and lack a sound theoretical base, reinforcing her conclusions by referencing Brougère, who believes play should be regarded as a value rather than a research topic. Contrary to their findings, Cuq and Gruca (2002: 416-417) believe that games “are no longer a simple gadget to be used at the end of a term; the pedagogy of play already exists and its pedagogic value is widely recognized”.

What is the function of games in foreign language teaching? Cuq and Gruca (2002: 416-418) put forward four groups of games: language games (grammatical, morphological/syntactic, lexical, phonetic, orthographic; to put it briefly, games

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by the author.



which enable the students to study or reassess linguistic structures), creativity games (the authors believe these types of games mostly involve the students' personal reflections, expressed either verbally or in writing), the so-called cultural games (e.g. Jeu du baccalauréat, similar to Scattergories), and games derived from the theatrics (improvisation and dramatization). This classification confirms Silva's abovementioned thesis on the undetermined relationship between language, play and creativity. It also raises the question whether creativity is not in itself a crucial component of all categories and whether it should be introduced separately. That the definition and role of play are still unspecified, as Silva (2008: 21) appraises, becomes evident through the evaluation of answers provided by students attending the class *Games as a didactic tool*, which will be analyzed in the final portion of the article. When the students of the class/course were asked about their experience with games in the classroom, several answers were provided, enumerating all activities not presented to them as serious work, for example theatre performances, various techniques of creative writing and role play, a standard component of foreign language learning. Such activities undoubtedly bring a positive contribution to classes and can stimulate the students' motivation, but they can hardly be regarded as games. Silva (2008: 14-19) defines games with four parameters, also named the *four metaphorical regions of play*: game materials (matériel ludique), game structures – game rules (les structures ludiques), the context: embracing the game, various sociocultural rules and customs, the atmosphere in the classroom (le contexte ludique), and the attitude towards games (l'attitude ludique).

Within the school environment games are usually connected to younger students: “Especially in pre-schools or elementary schools, games in language classes or classes in general are considered the activity that is spontaneously used by children in discovering the world” (Vanthier, 2009: 57). Games are used to a significantly lesser degree by young adults and adults (Silva, 2008:19), even though they could have even more positive effects, as older students normally have more problems in oral expression than younger ones, primarily as they feel less exposed and thus more open to expressing themselves (Petitmengin and Fafa, 2017:5).

## **1 The advantages and disadvantages of games in foreign language classes**

Pedagogical play is compatible with the action-oriented approach defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Thue Vold (2016: 39) finds that CEFR treats the focus on not only the individual student but rather the whole group as one of the central topics. One of the essential benefits of games is the fact that they are performed in groups and therefore have significant

influence on the students' interaction. Play has a significant effect on socialization, as it enables us to include those students who are otherwise excluded from the group for various reasons, gives the students the means to use the given foreign language spontaneously, relaxes the atmosphere in class, and aids in the less tragical perception of errors and mistakes (Silva, 2008). Playing is thus considered to be an authentic situation in which the use of the authentic "self" (=le "je" authentique), mentioned by Tagliante (2006: 97), is triggered, and the student is motivated to use various linguistic means in order to reach a particular goal, all the while using the foreign language in new, more or less real communicative situations (Franchon, 2016:120). In their research involving grammar school students, De Domizio and Mertelj (2015:208) came to the conclusion that didactic games are, besides audiovisual materials, the activity that motivates the students the most.

It is important, however, to point out the negative effects of games in class. Some weak points are connected to the learning situation: games during class can be perceived as unserious and teachers are consequently convinced it is a waste of time, especially due to the large difference between regular classes and play. Technical difficulties might arise with certain games, such as too small or inadequately equipped classrooms, issues with performing the actual game, or even too much noise. According to Silva (2008: 28-35) the third group of difficulties is associated with the modified role of the students and their teachers. The students might not be up to participating as they wish to remain unexposed, are shy, or simply tired and unmotivated. The teachers may be similarly apprehensive, especially those who fear losing their authority by participating in this unconventional teaching process.

## **2 The optional course *Games as a didactic tool*: an introduction and its goals**

The article aims to present the various standpoints of students of pedagogic programs at linguistic departments of the Faculty of Arts concerning the optional course *Games as a didactic tool*. At first a brief description of the course is provided, along with its structure, goals, intended attendees, and the actual process of implementation.

*Games as a didactic tool* is one of the elective courses of the pedagogical module that is intended for linguistic program students or, in other words, future teachers. It is included into the curriculum of the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures in alternation with other elective courses and is thus not carried out every year. In 2017/2018 the course was chosen by 28 students (26 female and 2 male students) of pedagogical programs at various linguistic departments. All students were enrolled in double-subject programs: 14 studying two languages (12 studying two foreign languages and two studying a foreign language plus their mother tongue), 9

studying a foreign language in combination with Pedagogy or Andragogy. The remaining five were enrolled in double-subject programs, combining a linguistic program with a non-linguistic one (two of them combining a linguistic program with History, two with Sociology and one with Philosophy).

The course is carried out in the first semester with two lessons per week. Due to the specific needs regarding space, the classes can take place only in the evenings. The course is practically oriented: after a few opening lectures introducing the history of play, the basic theoretical concepts and the possibilities of using games for educational purposes, the students present and perform their own game and get feedback from the teacher as well as their peers. In addition, the students had to study two books in the Slovenian language (Mrak Merhar et al., 2013, Umek et al., 2013), translate an article or a segment which touches upon games as a didactic tool from “their” language into Slovene<sup>2</sup>, and, finally, write an extensive reflection when the course was concluded.

### **3 The analysis of the students' reflections**

24 reflections (22 by female students and 2 by male students) were handed in before the first exam deadline, ranging from 1500 and 2200 words. The contents were analyzed by determining the expected answer categories and encoding them. In the instructions for writing their reflections, the students were advised to start with a summary of the studied literature, proceed with an evaluation of their performance and finish with an overview of the course *Games as a didactic tool*. Besides the relevant literature overview the expected categories were the evaluation of their game/performance and the course; however, other topics were expected, e.g. comments on the suitability of games for different age groups, the relevance of games in forming groups and learning by doing. It was our hope that suggestions for further improvement of the course’s content and implementation would be provided, as they would be incredibly useful in future implementations.

From the reflections the following categories were formed: the advantages of games in foreign language classes, the advantages of the course in general, the analysis of one’s own game/performance, the suitability of play for different age groups, learning by doing, the importance of feedback and the relevance of constructive criticism, group formation, the negative aspects of the course, and improvement suggestions.

Due to limited space only a handful of typical examples is presented for each category.

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<sup>2</sup> The task was introduced to increase the number of sources available in Slovenian language for those who do not speak foreign languages.

#### **4.1 The advantages of games in foreign language classes**

As was expected most students approve of using play in classes. They expressed their viewpoints either by summarizing the studied literature and providing citations or by expressing their personal opinions, which they had formed throughout the semester.

“Games have a strong motivational function, offering a real-life experience which is much easier to memorize than material provided in writing”. (ST1)

“Games encourage (positive) competitiveness, persistence, quick reactions and decision making, they stimulate interaction among players and improve rapport”. (ST2)

“Games are also important in foreign language classes as they reflect the reality through which the mother tongue is normally learned. We can get better acquainted with the foreign language in this fairly natural manner”. (ST16)

“(…) In the digital age games stimulate creativity and offer an escape from the pre-programmed, predictable, uncreative computer games for children, young adults or adults. The encouragement of (didactic) games is in fact the encouragement of creative thinking”. (ST17)

“I realized a few years ago that games are not merely for fun and relaxation but a useful tool to learn with”. (ST17)

#### **4.2 The advantages of the course**

The students appreciated the practical approach to the course and enjoyed the opportunity of testing games in practice. They furthermore complimented the positive atmosphere and took pleasure in being active during the actual course. What the students also observed as positive was providing study materials for each other, learning to prepare a lesson and presenting their respective games. One of the students appreciated the translation of texts into Slovene; she found this yielded more material in the said language and experienced the task as a useful linguistic exercise.

“It has turned out that the course is quite practically oriented, which I found positive, especially due to the fact that the curriculum does not contain enough practical programs”. (ST5)

“Most pedagogical courses are theory-based without practical application, whereas this particular course is quite the opposite”. (ST11)



“I enjoyed the enthusiasm and engagement of the participants in this course, as we are all too often very passive, sedentary and obsequious during our years of studies”. (ST1)

“This was a novel experience of conducting activities in class, which I found very useful for us as future teachers. We took another look at the structuring of lessons, the process of providing criticism and grading”. (ST4)

“I learned how to structure a lesson, outline instructions, and give adequate explanation prior to a performance, during which something unexpected might happen, so it is important to have a *contingency* plan”. (ST15)

“At the beginning I was a bit reserved, merely because I had never participated in a similar course during my years at the faculty, but became more and more relaxed and ended up quite enjoying myself. I loved coming to classes and always left full of energy and positive impressions, which furthermore affirms the positive effect of didactic games in class”. (ST5)

### **4.3 The evaluation of the students' respective games**

The students' main problem was giving clear instructions at the appropriate time. In their reflections 10 students, slightly less than a half, mentioned having problems with providing instructions. Three typical examples are listed: “There was some trouble with instructions, which were carefully planned, but not introduced appropriately” (ST1), “My instructions were unclear and drowned in noise when provided” (ST10), “Although the game was simple, I had some trouble writing instructions” (ST18).

Some students mentioned the unpredictable responses of their classmates: “In the case of some students the game brought forth competitiveness, playfulness, joy, disappointment, and even harmless cheating” (ST1), “I was thus faced with the essential dilemma whether to treat my classmates as students or as test players/critics of my game. When they were full of energy and chatting to one another, I was not sure whether to adopt the stance of their teacher and calm them down, or treat them as my classmates, future teachers” (ST4).

The students also revealed the importance of a well-structured lesson plan: “I got to experience firsthand the significance of the teacher's presence, guidance, and the actual lesson plan, which serves as the foundation for future implementation” (ST19).

A crucial factor was the possibility of testing their respective games: “It enabled me to quickly and efficiently find the weak spots of my game, adjust the rules and experience the unpleasant situations that might occur while playing” (ST16), “This

was the case with one of our classmates whose game was well prepared, but the performance did not go as planned. It was a lesson for her as well as for ourselves” (ST11).

#### **4.4 The suitability of play for adult students**

The students discovered through introspection that adults can learn through games as well. Even though this did not come as a surprise, seeing that it was already mentioned in the prescribed literature, some students put it in writing: “I realized you are never too old to play” (ST1), “We demonstrated that games are an appropriate didactic means in teaching adult students; as active participants we enjoyed ourselves, got the chance to relax and learn, acquired new lexicon and directly experienced the positive effects of games” (ST18). One of the students shared an interesting personal experience: “I teach Italian as a volunteer at a day activity center for senior citizens and can confirm the elderly show incredible enthusiasm towards games. They often comment: “How exciting and completely different from what we are used to doing! We are having so much fun, we are playing, but also using Italian!” The elderly know they need to activate numerous functions to participate in a game. What surprises me is their level of competitiveness. Regardless of their age they still like the feeling of winning and show great remorse when they loose” (ST7).

#### **4.5 Learning by doing**

In the students' written reflections the most attention is given to their feelings when testing the games. They found it important and useful to be in the role of students – game testers: “It would be beneficial for teachers to continuously put themselves in the students’ shoes, as it would enable them to improve their teaching, easily recognize the students’ needs, help them motivate more efficiently, and ameliorate their general understanding of their students” (ST4). In most cases the students enjoyed playing games, felt content when winning and experienced regret when losing: “Once you are part of the game you cannot help but feel competitive; you do not think about the language you are using, but rather focus on what needs to be done for you or your team to score a point” (ST7), “I usually felt perfectly fine as a student, which ultimately depended on the game. Whenever the instructions were clear and the game was well performed, I enjoyed myself. However, when the instructions were complicated or unclear, I often did not know what it was I should be doing (...) I felt even more frustrated in cases of unfair evaluation” (ST11), “(...) I did not feel good, included or respected in such cases, which was reflected in the final result. The game was completed, but with great discontent” (ST3). “This practical experience made me realize that games have the ability to entirely absorb us. It made it easier for me to get a better hand of both my past and present practical experience” (ST19).

#### **4.6 Getting and giving feedback**

As is often the case with other courses, the students are reluctant in offering their opinion; it is difficult for them to express it in a constructive and reassuring manner. After every game the critiques, written by the teacher and the students, were handed to the performer, who went through them at home and reported back to the group during the next class. The students were encouraged to express their opinions respectfully, which they ultimately found extremely useful: “I learned to give and accept constructive criticism” (ST3), “I would like to point out another positive aspect of the course – the immediate feedback on the game, which opened up new horizons concerning the planning process, and the offering and receiving of constructive criticism” (ST19), “The evaluation and the impressions of my co-players were extremely useful, as they pointed out future improvements” (ST16), “After each performance the students received written feedback with a list of positive and negative aspects, as well as advice on possible corrections. This enabled all of us, including the performer, to rethink the game; the performer then prepared a brief summary of the feedback provided and shared it with the group” (ST9), “I must finally say that I thoroughly enjoyed reading my classmates’ reflections on my game. I was faced with fresh viewpoints, ideas and creative suggestions which did not cross my mind before” (ST24).

#### **4.7 Group formation**

Surprisingly only nine students wrote opinions concerning the positive effects of games on group formation. They showed appreciation for meeting students attending different linguistic programs during class: “At this course students of different programs met, interacted and shared ideas” (ST18). “I must point out the relationship between students of different study programs. Even though we have our own separate studies, we got to know each other in a short amount of time and really connected. The main reason for this is the participation in games but also the competitiveness that sometimes arose” (ST20), “While most of us did not know each other, we got along very well, which also made the atmosphere during classes much more relaxed” (ST6).

#### **4.8 The disadvantages of the course**

According to the students the group was too big and the hour of implementation too late, which is something we cannot exert any influence on. They furthermore noted that the time appointed for each game was too short due to the large number of enrolled students. Some students were taken aback by the sheer competitiveness of their classmates: “The atmosphere in *Games as a didactic tool* was relaxed and creative, however, I do think it was too competitive at times. We forgot we were no longer children but, rather, students working together in order to learn the process of

preparing and performing games we would one day present to our future students” (ST24).

## 5 Conclusion

The opinions written in the students' final reflections can be arranged into three large categories: the comprehension of the function of play in foreign language classes, the evaluation of the course *Games as a didactic tool* and the evaluation of their own respective games.

*Games as a didactic tool* did not attract any students with a negative attitude towards the use of games in foreign language classes, which is understandable, as there are several elective courses to choose from. Nevertheless, their students' viewpoints altered as the course rolled on. At the beginning of the semester the idea of using games in class seemed quite appealing and the task of preparing their own game did not appear too difficult. The reflections handed in at the end of the semester revealed that preparing their own games took a lot of time, effort, thinking, and testing, which ultimately led them to believe games in classes were in fact a serious activity, as was noted by Petitmengin and Fafa (2016: 4). Through the observation of themselves and their classmates, the students realized that games were suitable for all ages, not just children.

The students complimented the practical orientation of the course and made it clear multiple times it was something they missed with other courses. Thue Vold (2016: 37) comes to a similar conclusion: “Training programs for prospective teachers of foreign languages are frequently criticized for being too academic and lacking in practical work”. The major disadvantages were the late hour and the large number of students enrolled in the course, but these issues are beyond the power of teachers; the faculty only has one lecture hall that is suitable for a course like this, and we do not wish to limit the number of students too rigorously, as the course is not implemented every academic year. According to the attendees the most valued experience was the opportunity to prepare their own game, carry it out, and at the same time participate in the role of a student to observe their reactions. Some were negatively surprised by the level of competitiveness among students. Unlike our expectations only a small number of students mentioned the influence of games in group formation and the establishment of group dynamics; they did, however, stress the importance of feedback. Students often have issues with giving constructive criticism, so the course was a good opportunity for them consider this phenomenon from both perspectives: as the givers and receivers of criticism.

Their written reflections are largely occupied by their own respective games. All phases are mentioned, from the basic concept, the preparation, the performance and

the final feedback. Most students found the preparation more complex than expected; they often found it difficult to choose or create a suitable game. What especially took them by surprise was the importance of short and clear instructions. Some were disappointed by their performance; even though their game might have been well structured, the actual implementation was imperfect. Surprisingly not much was written about the objectives of individual games, as it is often the case that young teachers find it difficult to establish the objectives of an individual lesson. The students also reflected on themselves as teachers, how they managed to overcome stage fright and how they responded to praise and criticism.

Reflection writing turned out to be an appropriate task at the end of the semester, as it yielded considerable feedback on the execution of the course, and at the same time enabled the students to reflect on their own opinions on games in foreign language classes, realize that even though such chores might be fun for the pupils, they are in fact a serious and demanding task for the teacher.

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## Summary

For a long time games have been used by teachers of foreign languages as a fill-in before the end of classes or in the days preceding holidays. At the present moment, thanks to some research, games are increasingly used as a legitimate means for reaching various goals; when teaching foreign languages teachers use games to acquire or refresh some topics. Games can also be used to reach other goals, such as forming teams for teamwork or increasing the students' motivation for learning.

The article introduces the viewpoints delivered by postgraduate students (future teachers of foreign languages) after studying games functioning as the didactic means of teaching for one semester of their elective course. The students' work was mostly practical. Each student had to prepare, perform and analyse a game suitable for language classes.

At the end of the course the students were asked to express their reflections on the topic and the analysis shows that their opinion changed during the semester. In their written assignments the students assess games as a positive aid in teaching, but they also recognise the possible risks of using games during lessons.

**Key words:** games in foreign language classes, reaching goals with the help of games, attitudes of prospective teachers of foreign languages