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THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE: Why and how I use games in my English lessons Nastja Müller

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Abstract. Living in a time of globalisation, knowing foreign languages has become a priority not just for people eager to travel around the globe but also for seekers of employment. Learning a foreign language is hard work, especially for adults, but there are ways to make this quite long process fun and enjoyable. Almost everyone enjoys playing games because there is no “obvious” learning or revision involved. The atmosphere in the classroom is more relaxed, the students are eager to participate and even win. This is why I use every opportunity I can to implement different types of games into my lessons. But the process of choosing the right game, implementing it into the lesson plan and executing it in the classroom is quite challenging for the teacher. In this article I will discuss the obvious benefits of playing games in a foreign language class. I will also write about how I choose a certain game for students and which criteria I try to follow. A very important aspect of playing games in the classroom is also the language of the teacher because it is rich in its potential for learning. There is a vast amount of literature connected to different types of games but I will only focus on the ones that I regularly use in my classroom.

Key words: EFL, games, pleasure principle, classroom

1. INTRODUCTION

I believe games do not have to be used just to fill inevitable moments in the classroom when there is nothing better to do, as Seliškar (1992) puts it. This was a predominant belief in the 90s but through years of experience, the ways of teaching a foreign language have changed and adapted, as well as our perception of games. I see games as an aid to sustain the students' interest and motivation. In order to participate in a game, the students have to listen to me (the teacher) and their classmates, they have to communicate when working in groups and be highly concentrated. Games provide a meaningful practice of a foreign language and involve all four skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Because of all the above-mentioned reasons, games in a foreign language class should function not only as pastime activities but also for presentation and revision of certain topics.

2. The theoretical part

2.1. The pleasure principle

According to Kendra Cherry, the pleasure principle comes from Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality and it is the driving force of the *id*. The latter is the personality component made up of unconscious psychic energy that works to satisfy basic urges, needs, and desires. The *id* seeks immediate gratification of all needs, wants, and urges.

Basically, the pleasure principle drives one to seek only pleasure and to avoid pain. This can also be applied to learning a new language. Many start learning a foreign language but soon stop because they are overwhelmed by either the grammar or vocabulary. To make the task of learning easier for the learners, I use games.

Wright et al. (1986) stress the importance of games in language learning. They claim that it is hard work and one must make an effort to understand, to repeat accurately, to manipulate newly understood language and to use the whole range of known language in conversation or written composition. They suggest that effort is required at every moment. The thing that encourages many students to sustain their interest and work is games.

2.2. Games

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a game as a form of a competitive activity or sport that is played according to rules and as an activity that one engages in for amusement. The authors *Wright et al.* (1986), *Hadfield and Hadfield* (1997) and *Kral* (1994) use the word game as a hypernym for any kind of game, quiz, story or joke and I will use it in this context too. If we accept Wright et al. claim that games are not just an activity that you engage in for amusement but also provide intense and meaningful practice of the language, we can say that they should become a central part of class.

Games do not only help and force students to listen carefully, co-operate with others and express their opinion but they also help me to create real-life contexts and prepare students for real life situations. Books and tape scripts are adjusted for non-native speakers and do not prepare the students for real-life situations where they have to use all of their knowledge, not just grammar or vocabulary. With the help of different types of games, I can disguise education into entertainment.

Many games are also fluency oriented and this is the aspect that the majority of my older students have the most problems with. They understand written text, can answer emails and letters but speaking evokes fear and anxiety because they are more focused on accuracy rather than fluency. The fear of not conjugating the verb “be” right or not using the correct irregular verb form in the past prevents them from saying even basic sentences. But, when playing games, they instantly become fluency oriented because it is fun and it is “just a useless game”. What could go wrong?

There is a need for meaningfulness in foreign language learning. This means that if the learners respond to certain content in a definite way, meaning they are either amused, angered, challenged, intrigued, or surprised, the content is obviously meaningful to them. “Thus the meaning of the language they listen to, read, speak and write will be more vividly experienced and, therefore, better remembered.” (ibid.)

Wright et al. provide a statement that is similar to my belief. They claim that games can be found to give practice in all the skills - in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. They can also be used in all the stages of the teaching/ learning sequence (from presentation to practice and production) and for a lot of types of communication.

Games do not have an age limit but should still be adjusted to someone’s preference, feelings, age, etc. For example, people who are anxious to learn English in order to pass examinations or to improve their job prospects, look on games as unnecessary. Early teenagers also tend to be more self-conscious. Here, I, as a teacher must show my belief in the usefulness of a game in the classroom and present how playing this game will bring us one step closer to our goal. However, in my experience, the majority of learners find joy in playing games, if they are adapted to their age.

Finding the right game that will evoke motivation, interest and also be fun for my students, a game that will cover the topics we are working on, simulate real life situations and be meaningful to students is one of the most difficult tasks I face when choosing games. Here I always follow Wright et al. guidelines.

They explain that questions like “*Which age groups are games for?*” or “*Which level?*” are too basic and much more specific questions must be the guidelines for teachers to choose a particular game:

- “1. *Will the game take you a long time to prepare, compared with the amount of useful work you will get from it?*
2. *Will it be relatively easy for you to organise the classroom?*
3. *Is it likely to interest the particular group of learners you have in mind?*
4. *Is the language or is the language skill you are concerned to teach intrinsic to the activity? Or are you (honestly!) forcing it into the game?*
5. *Is the amount of language and the type of use enough to justify the use of the game? Or do you have another good reason for introducing it?”*

(Wright et al. 1986: 3)

Only if my answer to all these questions is yes, then the game is a highly efficient means for satisfying my learners’ needs. Here we can see that just the decision which game to choose depends on a lot of factors and is not as easy as it seems. The teachers must not only take the age of the group or their level of knowledge into account but they also have to pay attention to the preparation and organisation of the game, to the language used, and to the benefits that students can acquire.

2.3. Language for the organisation of games

The language used by the teacher is also very important. Wright *et al.* found that general language that is used to organise and comment on games is as rich in its potential for learning as the specific language of any particular game. They divided the language into four groups:

a. General commands, instructions, etc.: the teacher’s language should consist of short commands and suggestions to students (i.e., *Take your time. Look. Listen. Stand in a line.*)

b. Organisation

1) Things required for the lesson: the teacher’s language should contain different auxiliary verbs, the adverb *please* or the phrase *will you*. The language should also direct the students’ attention to particular exercises, objects or groups. (i.e., *John, could/ would/ will you give out the pencils, please?*)

2) Arrangement of the classroom: the teacher should use commands (i.e., *Move your chair back where it came from.*)

3) Grouping of the learners: the teacher should suggest or command the division into groups while taking time and the ability of the students in consideration (i.e., *Work with the person sitting next to you. Split into your groups (now), please. John, (would you) sit next to Peter, please? You be the group leader.*)

4) Organisation of the game: the teacher should give clear instructions and offer his/her help (i.e., *First, ... Who hasn’t had a turn yet? When he... then you must...*)

c. Praise, blame, and evaluation: the teacher should evaluate each activity with praise or blame if the game was not executed correctly. i.e., *I think this one is better than that one. Good. Great. Wrong. Not right.*)

d. Interpersonal exchanges: the teacher should offer his/her help if the students seem confused or lost (i.e., *What’s wrong? Can I help you? All right*)

3. The use of games in my classroom

3.1. Grammar games

According to Rinvoluceri (1992), grammar games fit into particular parts of a teaching programme.

- “a) diagnostically before presenting a given structure area to find out how much knowledge of the area is already disjointedly present in the group
b) after a grammar presentation to see how much the group have grasped
c) as revision of a grammar area.”* (Rinvoluceri 1992: 3)

I think that grammar is one of the important parts of learning another language but most students are not fond of all the rules that have to be learnt by heart. This is why teachers should explore any possible method of teaching or activities that would “focus student energy on the task of mastering and internalising it.” (Rinvoluceri 1992: 3) I try to exchange the drill-exercises with interesting games connected to grammar. I also check the students’ knowledge without them realizing it. This way, students will focus more easily and for a longer period of time in order to finish the games. Here are the games that I try to incorporate into my lessons for revision of grammar.

3.1.1. Competitive games

SNAKES AND LADDERS

I use this game mainly to practice any tense or the use of prepositions, phrasal verbs, etc. With this game students do not only practice tenses but also have to listen to each other in order to spot mistakes. It is a simple game that does not need a lot of preparation from the teacher and my students love it.

I divide students in groups and give them a dice. Through years of playing games in my class I have quickly realized that the division into groups must be done by the teacher. The students are forced to work with someone they do not usually communicate with, someone whose English is lower or higher and this forces them to adapt to the situation, to help others in their group, to learn something from their peers and to teach their peers something. For the division I always use a different process, either by their dates of birth, year of birth, colour of T-shirt, giving them numbers from 1 to 6 etc. This way they cannot predict who they will be paired with and this forces them to adapt.

3.1.2. Awareness activities

FROM PUZZLE TO PUNISHMENT

I also use this activity to practice any kind of tense (i.e., past perfect and past simple passive). The teacher divides the class into groups and dictates a part of a mystery story. The groups have to work as detectives and ask the teacher questions in the correct tense.

For this activity I form smaller groups and have them write the questions down before answering them and they are allowed only yes or no questions. If my answer is affirmative, the group can ask a second question, if it is negative, it is the next group's turn. The group can only speak English. If they use their mother tongue, they lose a point.

I usually use this activity with older students as it is quite difficult gathering all the clues, trying to solve the mystery and using the right tense. My students quickly forget about accuracy and start asking questions. Within the group they correct each other and get used to using different tenses in conversations.

Example:

“Crime and Punishment

A man got on the train and sat down in a compartment which was empty except for one lady. She took her gloves off. A few hours later the man was arrested by the police. They held him for 24 hours and were then logically forced to let him go free.

GARDEN
LOVER
30 YEARS
VANISH
JAIL”

(Rinvolucris 1992: 106, 107)

Grammar through drama

EXPERIENCES

This game is very good for practicing the present perfect interrogative, past simple, future or second conditional, etc. and takes up only a short period of time. The teacher asks one student to leave the classroom. The remaining students designate another student as ‘it’. When the student, who is standing outside, comes back into the classroom he has to ask present perfect questions about the designated person’s experiences (i.e., Have they been in this class since September?) The class answers with yes or no and when ‘it’ is identified, the students can change roles. (Rinvolucris 1992: 123)

3.2. Vocabulary games

The book *“The Lighter Side” of TEFL* (1994) divides games appropriate for a foreign- language class into 8 different sections. The first section is about practicing vocabulary with the help of word games.

The authors suggest that vocabulary can be reinforced by using a variety of game formats. The focus can be placed on word building, spelling, meaning, sound/symbol correspondences, and words inferred from sentence context. According to the instruction, the only way to achieve the full communicative potential of these games is through a good spirited team competition and working in pairs or in small groups.

3.2.1. Word games

MIND OVER MATTER

Using the position and arrangement of the letters and words in each box, find the English word or phrase the picture represents.

I chose this particular activity because I have never played a game like this during my education and I found some examples really difficult and fun. This activity is perfect for visual learners to acquire new words or phrases. Choosing games based on the type of learner also forces the students out of their comfort zone. In my experience, some students that struggled otherwise, were incredibly successful in this activity just because of the visual component. This forces students to adapt to different circumstances. Focusing on the type of learner also raises their level of confidence, especially for those who struggle with learning a new language.

3.2.2. Idioms

In order to truly acquire a new language, the students must understand and use idioms because they cannot be understood literally. The authors advise against learning some idioms that are so widely used that they are clichés but they agree that idioms are a part of the English-speaking community and thus cannot be ignored.

“ANIMAL WORDS

I. Match each word or phrase in the first column with the word or phrase in the second column that produces a proverb or idiom.

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------|
| 1. A barking dog | the |
| cat | |
| | the |
| cat | |
| 2. Never look a gift horse | new tricks |
| 3. Curiosity killed | never bites |
| 4. Dog eat | dog |
| 5. You can't teach an old dog | lie |
| 6. Let sleeping dogs | in the mouth" |

(*The Lighter Side* of TEFL 1994: 70)

This activity can be done in pairs and the students need to find the correct idioms, provide a situation and a sentence in which they would use it. Idioms are an important part of every language and students should know a lot of idioms so that they can communicate with native speakers. My students love this one because they do not only learn new idioms, but they also create new ones that usually make everyone smile. This is an easy exercise especially if you also ask your students to create new idioms and give them meaning and tell them to present in what situation they would use them. The students are incredibly creative, practice speaking and writing skills as well as listening skills that are necessary to understand the idioms. This is my students' favourite.

3.2.3. Jokes and riddles

According to *The Lighter Side* of TEFL (1994) jokes and riddles can be used as short, simple dialogues for listening practice with students of various ages and proficiency levels. They are intrinsically motivating because students want to listen, guess and laugh. A lot of jokes consist of “playing” with language, like puns. The latter are harder to understand for non- native speakers because the meaning of the joke may not be immediately apparent and it will not be funny anymore. These are for more advanced students; I usually use them when my students are individually doing exercises and some of them finish early.

“7. A doctor had an urgent call.

Can you come immediately, doctor?

My little son has just swallowed a fountain pen.

I'll be there right away. What are you doing in the meantime?

Oh, I'm using a pencil.”

(*The Lighter Side* of TEFL 1994: 88)

“16. What am I? I have a head, but I do not have eyes or ears. I foam at the mouth, but I never bite. I roar, but I have no tongue. I lie in a bed, but I have no back. I rise, I fall, I rush and run, but I have neither legs nor feet. I was born in the mountains, but I go down to the ocean whenever I can. I cannot keep still for a moment. I am as restless as can be. What am I?”

(*The Lighter Side* of TEFL 1994: 89)

3.2.4. Puzzle stories

The authors describe puzzle stories like “thinking games” because they get students to think about what they are hearing or reading. Puzzle stories can also be used for listening comprehension/ speaking practice. In order to discover the solution, students can be divided into groups and they can ask a limited series of yes/ no questions.

“THE CROSSING

A farmer must transport his dog, a duck, and a bag of corn across a river. The boat he has to use is very small- so small that he can take only one of the three in the boat with him at the time. If he leaves the dog alone with the duck, the dog will kill and eat the duck. If he leaves the duck alone with the corn, the duck will eat up the corn.

What is the least number of trips the farmer must make to transport all three across the river safely?”

(*The Lighter Side* of TEFL 1994: 105)

This game is really interesting, hard and especially time consuming, this is why it should be used as an ice- breaker on the first or last day of school, or when substituting another class.

3.3. Reading games

Another important part of acquiring a new language is reading. In their book on reading, Jill and Charles Hadfield (1997) connected the reading of a text with the communication of information found in it. The students practice not only their reading skills but also their speaking skills.

“The activities provide practice both in reading skills and in oral expression, training students in the ability to extract essential information from a text and to give an oral summary of its contents. They provide a stimulus for natural and meaningful communication: giving both a reason and a motivating and enjoyable context for sharing information. When integrating skills in this way, the reading skill feeds directly into the speaking skill: new words and expressions are often absorbed almost effortlessly from the text by a kind of osmosis and students’ fluency and confidence in speaking are improved.”

Hadfield and Hadfield (1997: 5)

GHOST STORIES

I use this game to practice narration and to teach new vocabulary. I divide the class into two groups: A and B. Group A gets one ghost story and group B another. After reading, the groups need to come up with a suitably chilling ending. I then give group A the ending of group B and the other way around. The students are then regrouped into pairs and tell their imagined and real ending to each other. (Hadfield and Hadfield 1997: 18)

I think that this activity is really interesting because students practice reading, speaking and they can use their imagination. Students do not get a lot of opportunity to speak in class and with this activity every student is forced to say at least one sentence or two.

FAMOUS LAST WORDS

With this activity students can practice reporting what other people said. The structures that they need to use are past tenses and reported speech. This activity can be played in a lot of different ways. The students have to connect famous last words to the person who said them, or each of them gets different sayings and they use reported speech to explain them to each other. They can also be connected to a story- one student gets the story, the other famous last words and they need to match the story to the words.

This game is quite difficult and I usually play it with the students that come after class for additional lessons as it is hard to motivate the whole class. In the future I plan on doing this with famous quotes from popular songs or youtubers, to cater to a different generation than ours.

“Sir Noël Coward

Terribly, terribly witty actor/ playwright

3. A dim-witted impresario, no friend of Coward's, blew his brains out. When told. The playwright remarked, '.....'.

4. Asked his opinion of a play featuring a child 'prodigy', Coward remarked '.....'.”
(Hadfield and Hadfield 1997: 9)

“Oscar Wilde

Aesthere, writer, wit

5. Wide, like Churchill, could make a would-be insulter look quite foolish. Receiving bouquets in a theatre foyer one night, he suddenly found himself presented with a rotten cabbage. He took it, smiled and said, '.....'.

6. A customs officer once asked him if he had anything to declare. '.....'.

7. Asked his opinion of a truly awful play, he replied, '.....'.”

(Hadfield and Hadfield 1997: 9)

a) 'He must have been a marvellously good shot.'

b) 'You will, Oscar, you will.'

c) 'Two things should have been cut. The second act and that youngster's throat.'

d) 'Thank you my dear fellow. Every time I smell it I shall be reminded of you.'

e) 'Thank you.' “

(Hadfield and Hadfield 1997: 9)

Conclusion

I truly believe that games do help to sustain the students' interest and motivation. They provide practice of all four skills that are necessary to acquire a new language and they are really fun, but only if they are chosen properly, executed following certain rules and if the goals are achieved. These three factors depend on me, the teacher. I have to choose a game that is suitable for my students and for the topic we are discussing in class, I need to give clear instructions so that the activity can be executed properly and I have to set goals which I want to achieve with this activity. If I want a particular game to be productive, I have to invest a lot of my own time into it. Copying worksheets from a book with exercises is easy but choosing an activity that will interest and motivate the whole class, that is connected to the topic discussed, that involves at least three skills and the preparation of this activity is time consuming but the pay-off for the students is definitely higher. This is what makes it worth the while for me personally.

Future research can also be connected to online games that students can play either in the classroom or at home. I think that this field already has a lot to offer and has a lot of potential to achieve so much more.

I always try to adapt to new technology, devices, and social media but I still see advantages in the good old "let's sit down, play a game of ludo and talk to each other" principle. This is especially important in the times we are living right now with the epidemic, distance learning etc. Here is where I see advantages to real life games in comparisons to online games.

I hope that one day games are going to become a normal part of teaching in a classroom and that the students will perceive the learning of a foreign language, even grammar, as fun.

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