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Reasons for Using or Avoiding Games in an EFL Classroom

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Abstract: The aim of this research was to determine the reasons pro and against using games in an EFL classroom, as well as to discover possible obstacles teachers encounter when applying these activities. The study was performed on both teachers and students of English in Leskovac and Niš, towns in Southern Serbia. The total of 197 participants, 178 students and 19 teachers, took part in the survey. The main instrument employed in the research was questionnaire. The research proved that both the teachers and students prefer using to avoiding games in the classroom. During this research we were able to define some obstacles for introducing game in the classroom which must be overcome. The results suggest that games should be introduced in the classroom since both the teachers and students have found sufficient reasons for their usage.

Keywords: educational games, EFL classroom, teachers, students

Introduction

Some authors suggest that language games should be treated as a central, not a peripheral part of the foreign language teaching program, since, besides being fun, they likewise comprise a goal and are governed by rules (Haldfield 1999). S. M. Silvers, the author of the book *Games for the Classroom and English Speaking Club*, says that many teachers often perceive games as the time – fillers and a break from monotonous drilling (Silvers 1992). He claims that many teachers often overlook the fact that in a relaxed atmosphere, real learning can occur, and students are able to use the language they have been exposed to and have practised earlier. Following the definition of Greenall, we may say that games increase positive competition among students participating in a language activity (Greenall 1990).

Lee Su Kim, the author of the work *Creative Games for the Language Class*, states that there is a common perception that all learning should be serious and solemn in nature, and that if one is having fun and there are hilarity and laughter, then it is not really learning (Lee 1995). However, she adds that it is possible to learn a language as well as to enjoy oneself at the same time, and one of the best ways to do so is by using educational games.

The justification for using games in a foreign language classroom can be found in the fact that students can benefit a lot by learning through games. Many experienced writers ensure us that games have educational value. The aforementioned author gives us reasons for using games (Lee 1995): games may represent a break from the usual routine, but they can also be highly motivating and challenging. Furthermore, games are a successful encouragement for students to interact, communicate and sustain the effort of learning and they provide a meaningful context for language use, generate fluency, lower anxiety and introduce fun and relaxation. In terms of characteristics defining a game, we may further add a list provided by Caillois, i.e. games can be fun, separate when it comes to time and place, yet uncertain since the results cannot be predicted; moreover, they are rule-governed as well as fictitious, because they are related to a different reality, but they are also non-productive concerning students' active participation (Caillois 1957).

Games are often used as short warm-up activities or when there is some time left at the end of a lesson. Yet, as Lee observes, a game "should not be regarded as a marginal activity filling in odd moments when the teacher and class have nothing better to do" (Lee 1979: 3). Even if the games result only in producing noise and in entertaining students, they are worth playing since they motivate learners and promote competence and fluency. Moreover, they let students see beauty in a foreign language, not just problems they face with while learning a language.

Unfortunately, some of the teachers think that language games are nothing more than a waste of teaching time and that they do not have educational value. Others use them but they do not give them a central part in the foreign language teaching program, but use them as the time-fillers. On the other hand, teachers who realise all the advantages of using games in teaching English as a foreign language and who are aware of their educational values, are quite rare. There is an assumption that the similar situation the one as stated above, can be found in our primary schools. Because of previously stated facts we have decided to carry out a research to determine the teachers' and students' attitudes towards using games in a foreign language classroom, as well as to determine how often our

primary teachers use games in teaching the English language. The research was carried out in Niš and Leskovac during the 2010/2011 school year.

Reasons for Using or Avoiding Games – Theoretical Considerations

Games Classification

Games can be applied in numerous ways and at different points in a lesson. Consequently, there are diverse game types designed to stimulate and enhance various aspects of language learning. Some authors (Pham 2007) suggest the following classification of games in EFL:

- 1) Structure games which provide experience of the use of particular patterns of syntax in communication
- 2) Vocabulary games in which the learners' attention is focused mainly on words
- 3) Spelling games
- 4) Pronunciation games
- 5) Number games
- 6) Listen-and-do games
- 7) Games and writing
- 8) Miming and role play
- 9) Discussion games

Depending on the application of games and numerous factors influencing successful language learning, the use of games in an EFL classroom may have advantages as well as disadvantages, or less favourable results.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Games in EFL Teaching

Considering language learning in general, we may list several advantages of the employment of games in an EFL classroom:

- 1) Through fun and apparently less demanding practice, games increase learners' motivation and promote learning (Hansen 1994)
- 2) Group and peer work may induce teamwork and enable successful interaction (Rinvolutri & Davis 1995)
- 3) By lowering the affective filter (Krashen 1985), games provide favourable conditions for effective language acquisition (Wierus 1994)
- 4) Through a meaningful context, students are provided with a comprehensible input (Krashen 1985)
- 5) Each of the four basic skills may be practised by the use of games (Lee 1995)

However, some of the disadvantages may be:

- 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.

Methodology

The Research Subject

In order to reveal the teachers' and students' reasons for using games, we have decided to conduct an empirical research, so the subject of our research is to determine teachers' and students' reasons either for using or avoiding games in the classroom, as well as to discover potential obstacles for their usage.

Participants

The research was performed on a group of primary teachers of the English language as well as on a group of primary pupils from the 5th to the 8th grade from schools in Niš and Leskovac during the 2010/2011 school year. The population consisted of 178 pupils and 19 teachers. In this research the availability sampling method was used. The afore mentioned schools were visited and both the teachers and pupils who were available and willing to participate in the research underwent the examination.

Measure

To examine the reasons for using or avoiding games in an English language classroom we employed a questioning technique, i.e. the main instrument was questionnaire. More precisely, there were two questionnaires, one for teachers and another for students. Each of them consisted of fourteen questions, related to the values of educational games.

Procedure

The research was finished during the first half of February 2011. It was conducted between November 2010 and February 2011. The above stated schools were visited and the participants were given the questionnaire to fill in. Finally, the data and the obtained information were processed and interpreted resulting in the present paper.

Statistical Data Processing

All the data gathered were processed in the following way: the data were processed according to coding lists and prepared for analysis by forming a database. Subsequently, the results were submitted to a descriptive analysis in order to calculate the basic statistic parameters (absolute and relative frequency). A chi-square statistics (χ^2) was used to investigate whether distributions of categorical variables differ from one another. The chi-square statistics compares the counts of categorical responses between two independent groups and the test in question can only be used on actual numbers. We have applied the formula

$$\chi^2 = \sum \left[\frac{(f_o - f_t)^2}{f_t} \right]$$

Where: χ^2 - chi square, Σ – sum, f_o – empirical/observed frequency,
 f_t – theoretical/expected frequency,

For contingency coefficient we have applied the formula:

$$C = \sqrt{\frac{\chi^2}{N + \chi^2}}$$

Where: C – contingency, χ^2 - chi square, N – total number of examinees.

Degrees of freedom df for which we have applied the formula $df = (r-1) \cdot (c-1)$, which means (number of columns minus one) x (number of rows minus one).

Level of significance $p = (0.01)$ or (0.05) .

The results and discussion

Reasons for Using Games

The table 1 presents the reasons for using games according to the opinion of the students, which were obtained by answering the Q8 in the questionnaire. The students were allowed to choose more answers.

Table 1. Reasons for using games – students

Reasons	<i>f</i>	%
lesson will be more interesting	133	35.56
helpful in learning	62	16.58
reason for attending the class	47	12.57
because of groupwork	69	18.45
increases competition	33	8.82
the teacher will explain less	27	7.22
some other reasons	3	0.80
Σ	343	100.00

In the table 1, we detect the most important reasons for using games according to students` opinions. The most important reason for using game during language classes is that lessons are more interesting with language games applied, (133 or 35.56%), the second reason is that the students can work in groups (69 or 18.45%), then games can help learning (62 or 16.58%) and finally, the games in language learning process can be a reason for attending the classes (47 or 12.57%).

These are the students` opinions yet it is almost certain that teachers would not use games merely because they make a lesson more interesting. The teachers need more convincing reasons for using games. Hence we also examined teachers` opinion about the reasons for using games in teaching. The results were gained by answering Q10 in the questionnaire. The teachers were allowed to choose more answers. The results are shown in the table below:

Table 2. Reasons for using games - teachers

Reasons	<i>f</i>	%
they are motivating	14	13.08
present language in meaningful context	10	9.34
students by themselves practise the use of language	13	12.15
easy groupation of students	5	4.67
learning grammar is easier	11	10.28
new vocabulary learning is easier	13	12.15
for presentation of a new lesson	9	8.41
warm up	14	13.08
as a reward	5	4.68
better communication	12	11.22
other reasons	1	0.94
Σ	107	100.00

From this table we can formulate a list of top five reasons for using games according to the examined teachers. The first place according to teachers' opinion belongs to the fact that games are motivating and that they are good as warm – up activities (14 or 13.08%), then students by themselves practise to use language and it is easier to learn new vocabulary through games (13 or 12.15%). The third reason the teachers stressed is the fact that games enhance more successful communication (12 or 11.22%). The following fact underscores that learning of grammar is easier through games (11 or 10.28%), and finally, the last most important reason mentioned by the teachers is that it represents language in meaningful context (10 or 9.34%).

As we can infer from the previous tables, teachers' and students' opinion about the reasons for using games differs, and this can be explained by the fact that teachers are more experienced and they are able to realise the value that a game has and use it properly, while students only see those values that are preferred by themselves or their peers. On the basis of the obtained results, we may conclude that the facts mentioned in the theoretical part about reasons for using games have been confirmed.

Reasons for not Using Games

In the table 3, the results we got after the students answered Q9 in the questionnaire are presented. Having processed the results, we presented them in the following table:

Table 3. Reasons for not using games – students

Reasons	<i>f</i>	%
uninterested	8	11.78
prefer learning to playing	8	11.78
distract in learning	5	11.11
prefer some other activities	5	11.11
don't know	16	35.56
other reasons	2	4.44
Σ	44	100.00

Considering this table, we may conclude that the majority of students who would not use games do not know the reason for this (16 or 35.56), but still there are the students' who are not interested in this method and who prefer learning to playing (8 or 11.78%). The second reason for not using games according to the students' opinion is that the game distracts learning or that the students prefer some other activity (5 or 11.11%). The explanation for such results can be found in the fact that these students who are not willing to use games have not been exposed to them or are used to the old traditional way of learning and to other activities, so now they fear that the class may transform into playing only and that in such circumstances learning can not take place.

Although we have got results that all the teachers are either willing or positive about using games in the classroom, however, those who are uncertain stated the following reasons for not using them. The results were

gained by answering Q11 in the teachers' questionnaire. Having processed the results, they have been shown in the table presented below:

Table 4. Reasons for not using games - teachers

Reasons	<i>f</i>	%
a game doesn't have educational value	-	-
there are better methods than this	1	12.5
makes a mess in the classroom	5	62.5
teachers can't follow the work of the students	2	25.00
other reasons	-	-
Σ	8	100.00

From the previous table, we can deduce that the teachers are mainly preoccupied with the fact that where playing takes place, we can also find mess. That is mainly the reason why such a large number of teachers avoid using games. Another important reason is that they are not able to follow the work of their students, and this can be related to the previous reason: if there is a mess in the classroom teachers would not be able to follow students' work because of losing control over the class. That is why many teachers refuse to use games in a foreign language classroom.

Obstacles for Using Games

Up to this point, we have been discussing the reasons for using or avoiding games according to students' and teachers' opinion, nevertheless, there are certain obstacles which do not depend on teachers or students but of something or somebody else. Thus, in this research, we discovered what these obstacles can be. This subject was not planned in the research tasks but since we got that information we have decided to present it and discuss it, hoping that this discussion may open some important questions for further discussion. The results were obtained by answering Q12 in the teachers' questionnaire and the results are presented in the table below.

As we can see from the table 5 the main obstacle is the lack of time (14 or 40%), moreover, there are the curriculum and unfamiliarity with this method (5 or 14.28%). Unfortunately, we can still find those teachers who are worried about parents' opinion and their colleagues' remarks (3 or 8.57%). And finally there is a small number of teachers who think that the school would not permit the usage of game in the classroom (1 or 2.86%).

Table 5. Obstacles for using games

Obstacles	<i>f</i>	%
the school doesn't permit this method	1	2.86
because of the curriculum	5	14.28
lack of time	14	40.00
unfamiliarity with the method	5	14.28
students' negative attitude	-	-
parents' opinion	3	8.57
the remarks of the colleagues	3	8.57
no obstacles	4	11.44
Σ	35	100.00

Considering the previously stated facts we can conclude that teachers should organize their classes more effectively, and find a few minutes for introducing games in ELT. Yet, there is a problem with the curriculum and it can be solved only if the teachers and the school principal make a compromise for using games and try to find a solution how to place games in the school curriculum. The problem of unfamiliarity with this method, can be explained by the fact that either teachers are not interested in these new methods of teaching, or the school has not organized teacher training yet. Concerning parents' and their colleagues' opinion, the teachers can solve that problem by introducing parents and their colleagues to the benefits and advantages of this method.

Teachers' Opinion about the Educational Value of Games According to their Usage

For this task it was compulsory to make a contingency table. We used it to connect two variables: Q7 and Q13 from the database for teachers' questionnaire. The results that we got are shown in the following table.

Table 6. Teachers' opinion about educational value of games according to their usage

The usage of games	Educational value			Σ
	Very big	Big	Small	
Always	1 16.66	4 66.68	1 16.66	6 100.00
Rarely	2 15.38	3 23.08	8 61.54	13 100.00
Σ	3 15.79	7 36.84	9 47.37	19 100.00

We have obtained chi square statistics ($\chi^2 = 3.865$) and predetermined level of significance (0.01), and degrees of freedom ($df = 2$). Entering the chi-square distribution table with degree of freedom and reading along the row, we find our value of χ^2 (3.865) lies between 5.991 and 9.210. Since our probability level (2.42) is lower than significant levels (5.991 and 9.210), we can conclude that there is no statistically significant differences in the opinion about the educational value of games among teachers who use game constantly and those who use them rarely.

From the previously presented table, we can conclude that those teachers who use game constantly in teaching English as a foreign language, are more aware of the educational value of games than those teachers who use them rarely. This can be explained by the fact that those teachers who use game in education, have probably noticed that the students make some progress in learning when they are learning through games, while the other teachers have not realised this. They might be afraid that teaching may transform into playing and that students will not be able to learn anything.

Finally, we can conclude that our hypothesis, that teachers who use games constantly realize the educational value of games and their advantages unlike those teachers who use it rarely, has been confirmed.

Conclusion

In our research, we sought to disclose teachers' and students' reasons either for using or avoiding games in an English language classroom.

The initial assumption was that some of the English language teachers have negative attitudes towards using games as a teaching method. Some of them think that the language game is nothing more than losing time and that it does not have any educational value. The others believe that a language game has its educational value, but use it rarely in their classes. Finally, there are only few teachers who recognize all the values and advantages of language games.

This research has likewise been based on the supposition that although game means fun, it also has its educational value. And for this reason it should be introduced in language classes. Through games students are able to realise their own as well as their classmates' progress in learning language. This type of activity can also be a perfect way for practising and learning a language since it usually includes a variety of language structures that students will later use in every day situations. Consequently, a language game can be used for presentation, as a warm-up activity, for practising and learning vocabulary and grammar, for improving language skills or simply as a break from drilling and finally, as a reward.

The previously presented study has the following features: it was performed according to the research problem and tasks and since we could not find numerous types of research on this problem, our research proved that research of this kind can be successfully carried out. It also proved: that there are significantly more reasons for using games than for avoiding them, that both teachers and students are aware of the advantage of this method of teaching or learning, that there are certain obstacles that must be overcome if we want to introduce this method in teaching, and finally that the teachers who use games constantly are more aware of the educational value of games and their advantages in comparison to the teachers who use it rarely.

We may assume that some of the examined teachers will use language games but according to their opinion there are certain boundaries to overcome. Possible ways to overcome the difficulties in question are:

- to introduce teachers with this method of teaching (the best way is through teachers' training);
- to find a compromise with the school about this method, which means that both the school and language teachers should try to introduce and provide games with a part it deserves in the curriculum;
- to attempt to disregard their colleagues' negative remarks about this way of teaching.

The conducted research may be a minute contribution to the improvement of teaching in a foreign language classroom, yet it may raise some important issues and stimulate further research on the subject. We hope to entice

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teachers to consider the possibility of using games more frequently than they do. Finally, taking the educational value of language games into consideration, it may be interesting to perform a research in due course which will examine students' progress in learning English as a foreign language with games representing an integral part of the lesson.

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