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GAME AS A POSITIVE FORCE IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

This study aims to look at the impact of games on second language learning. It will focus on the pedagogical value of the games in language learning. This paper inquires how games affect learning a foreign language. Wright, Betteridge & Buckby (2006) stated that “language is hard work... Effort is required at every moment and must be maintained over a long period of time” (p. 2). Interesting games are a valuable resource in sustaining the necessary interest that second language learning calls for. Sometimes learners feel stucked and would not be able to learn the language due to the demand and stress of language learning. Games provide an opportunity to reduce the anxiety of learners. Köksal, Çekiç & Beyhan (2014) consider games as essential as food for enterprise, ingenuity, and naturalism (p.82). Some teachers and educators may think games as time consuming and waste of time. Since some underestimates the games and the edutainment concept, they avoid this tool but the study will raise awareness of games and advocate for their proper use in second language teaching. “There is a common perception that all learning should be serious and solemn in nature, and that if one is having fun and there is hilarity and laughter, then it is not really learning” (Kim, 1995, p. 35). This paper aims to question this misconception about games and reconsider games’ significance in terms of authenticity, participation, practice and motivation in the language learning process. This literature review will look at previous research on games’ conceptualization and language learning, and thus will highlight lessons for future directions in order to better our teaching practices.

The Impact of Games on Learning Second Language

In order to understand the value of games in language teaching, we have to define what game is. Game is not played only for passing the time during a class session. According to Toth (as cited in Mei and Yu- Jung, 2000), game is an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun. Wright, Betteridge & Buckby (2006), explained game as an activity in which learners play, entertain, engage and interact with others (p. 1). In other words; there needs to be a goal, some rules, some kind of interaction and some fun element in games, which will set the scene for language learning. The teacher must specify the goal, set the rules clearly and should add some joy into the learning process, and then language use comes naturally.

Input and interaction are key elements of second language acquisition. Games offer rich input opportunities and provide possibilities for learners to interact with each other to win and provide mental processing of the language used (Tomlinson and Masuhara, 2009:2). Assuring the need for using games, we should mind Vygotsky’s theories. As a prominent figure in child development and language acquisition, Vygotsky (1978) stressed the importance of play in both child and language development explaining play is the leading factor of childhood (p. 101). Play constitutes wish fulfillment for children. In play children create an imaginary situation. This imaginary world generally has rules of its own which is similar to real life. When children act on this simulated world, they practice rules from daily life and prepare themselves for the social rules of the real world. In this imaginary world child regulates the rules of the outside world at free will as s/he adapts to the expectations of the social world and thus internalizes these external processes (Read, 2006; Blake & Pope, 2008). There is ongoing dialogue and interaction between the child and other team players during the play. Social interaction is at the center of the Vygotsky’s social development (Karatepe, 2012). Imaginative play enables the child to practice rules of the grown ups’ world and make sense of the world. Imaginary play does not only encourage child’s cognitive and social development, but also initiates thinking skills and language acquisition. Playing games helps children to be more competent language users and helps them to learn to regulate their thought processes and manipulate their environment for their purposes. With this in mind, language is much more than a communicational tool. Language has symbolic power which transmits culture and history in its practice (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). According to Vygotsky all children have an innate ability to learn languages. Yet, a supportive environment is necessary to actualize the learning process and reach their top potential. Interaction is at the center of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. Games appear as invaluable resources for raising students’ potential to higher levels. From an ecological perspective, environment is paramount for the success of the learner. Similar to Vygotsky, this approach also embraces game playing as a positive force in the learning process. Practice opportunities, participation prospects and motivational enhancement are some of the strong elements of ecological framework that affect success in education.

Theoretical Framework

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and recent ecological trend in ELT are discussed as two interrelated approaches as we inquire the place of playing games in the ELT classroom. First, sociocultural theory, especially its relevance to language learning is discussed in terms of scaffolding and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Secondly, ecological approach is discussed in relation to environment's connection to learning. Sociocultural theory (SCT) had considerable impact on education. Vygotsky did not directly write about Second Language Acquisition (SLA). However, his analysis of how people acquire cognitive development and develop communicative abilities in their first languages hints implications for SLA that requires our attention (Blake & Pope, 2008; Zabitgil Gülseren, 2015). Language has an important place for sociocultural theory because of the mediating role of language in our everyday interactions. According to Vygotsky, language enables the child to make sense of the world since "development and learning were two parallel and integrated processes" (Karatepe, 2012:8). Just like a small child learns the social norms of the world through language, L2 enables the learner to think of a new way of thinking and understanding. The child creates characters with already known vocabulary and name the world with new vocabulary in their pretended world. Similar to young child's social and cognitive development through the creative power of playing, games also trigger language development for the learner. Like a child who practices his/her contribution in the social world through a pretend play, playing a game in a language class enables a simulated world of English where they practice their contribution. In a language classroom, games provide children the opportunity to make sense of the new language and rethink their world in a new language schema. Vygotskian perspective views education as a social and cultural practice. Playing games while teaching language does not only encourage collaborative learning, but also initiates surpassing of one's present performance level to higher levels. Vygotsky puts 'instruction' and 'interaction' at the heart of development (Karatepe, 2012:9). In his conceptualization, individual abilities of learners only show part of the potential, because interactive power of learning through supportive guidance can optimize their utmost performance (Read, 2006; Karatepe, 2008; Zabitgil Gülseren, 2015).

Play is a path we can use to reach to the zone of proximal development, which is the distance between the existing developmental level and the probable level that will be learned with the help of others like adults or peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Zone of proximal development (ZPD) can be actualized through a process called scaffolding. Every learner has a present level of knowledge known as actual knowledge, which is referred to as the Zone of Actual Development (ZAD). The goal is to reach a higher level of performance for the child. This higher level of performance potential is known as the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Scaffolding can help language learners to reach their highest potential in language learning. Learners can be scaffolded by the help of others like peers, adults, and teachers to gain and internalize new knowledge and optimize their language potential. The importance of interaction with more knowledgeable others in supporting a child's learning potential is paramount. Unlike Piaget who focused on individual abilities and biologically determined stages of development, Vygotsky believed that a child can do much more than s/he is capable of if s/he has the support of a mentor or more knowledgeable other (Read, 2006; Blake & Pope, 2008). This support by a more knowledgeable other (mentor, parent, teacher etc.) is known as scaffolding since they scaffold (raise) the child to a higher level of performance. What the child can do with their help at the moment, s/he will be able to achieve independently later on. This highest level of potential for the child is known as the zone of proximal development. "With this construct, he underlined the fact that intelligence was not to be measured as the child's individual performance as single snapshots" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 207). Similarly, Karatepe (2012) argued that "a child's intelligence was understood better while the child was performing with the help and guidance of another person" (p.9). In this conceptualization, interaction is very important for the learning of children and thus, games provide ample opportunities of interaction and instruction for language teachers and educators. Games provide the extra extension for higher levels of language performance for children.

Games are instructional and interactional tools in supporting the development and learning in the second language. Games help learners use their actual knowledge and support their learning process by the help of interaction with student peers. Language acquisition is activated by collaboration with peers as they practice what they already know. On top of this learners acquire new knowledge through interaction and collaboration with more capable peers and reach their zone of proximal development (Peterson, 2010). Also, not only group games but also the rules of games can be considered as scaffolding since they point the direction of learning and enhance the learning goal. Play occurs within an area described as the zone of proximal development (ZPD) where the learner gets the new behaviors with suitable scaffolding (Cook, 2000: 175). Teachers are particularly important in providing scaffolding in planning appropriate games and organizing group work where children contribute to each other's learning.

As we looked at the concept of games in relation to sociocultural theory we realize the importance of a supportive environment in the optimization of learner performance. Ecological approach also highlights significance of environment in the learning process. As a new trend in ELT, affected by biology, ecological approach in its simplest definition refers to the relationship of an organism [learner in ELT] with all other organisms around it with which they are in contact (van Lier, 2000). With regard to ecological approach, learning environment should be suitable for agency. Agency is a central term in ecological approach that is related to the terms autonomy, motivation and investment. These are key terms for the independent learning of children. As sociocultural theory implies, scaffolding is a temporary help for the learner until they are capable of achieving the given task independently. The agency rich environment can be provided with the help of games (van Lier, 2010). Interaction as a central ingredient in both sociocultural theory and ecological perspective is available through games (van Lier, 2000). Like in the other communicative approaches, also ecological approach focuses on the environment. Language games in class provide the needed stress-free

environment which consists of rich agency, input and affordances. Students are guided by teachers and collaborated with more knowledgeable peers to reach higher levels of performances. Games provide perfect platform for the extension of student capabilities through a supportive environment. And yet, the scaffolding should be temporary only until the child reaches their zone of proximal development which is the ultimate goal of learning. Both of these approaches unite in the beneficial power of games. Although many people underestimate the contribution of games to the education, they can be convinced when they see the impact of learners' participation, motivation, and success on their language development. Games can successfully connect language and acquisition in its practice. The following section will discuss how games affect learning in terms of sensible use of language, participation, practicing and motivation in classroom practice:

Sensible Use of Language

Learners tend to use their L1 a lot when they have fewer opportunities with the target language. As Tomlinson and Masuhara (2009) stated "learners need opportunities to use language to try to achieve communicative outcomes" (p.10). They need reasonable practice in class; pointing to a pencil and asking what it is, is totally unreasonable and this creates a dull learning environment. "Language and activity is an authentic combination for these learners [young learners] – it is one they use in L1" (Roth, 2007, p.26). Authenticity brings interest and enthusiasm into the language classroom. As Roth states games create authenticity and this leads a sensible use of language. Language in games is meaningful and contextualized. Also, we can repeat games several times in various ways and the language used in games is semantically focused and meaningful to learners (Tomlinson and Masuhara, 2009). Games also combine form and function of grammar in TL (target language). This means communicative aspects of the language can be achieved by emphasizing both fluency and accuracy. Students gain both accuracy and fluency since real life like materials embedded in games contain both of these elements (Köksal, Çekiç & Beyhan, 2014, p. 83). Games enable learners and teachers to go beyond traditional methods and use the learned language point in real life context. Tyson (1998) said "a successful game should encourage students to focus on the use of language rather than the language itself" (para. 1). Language games are ideal tools to make learners use the language. They produce new utterances instead of memorization of phrases. They do not just memorize how to fill in the blanks or write a sentence in simple present tense, but also communicate in the target language. This is because they want to be active in the learning process. Wright et al. (2006) stated "games provide one way of helping the learners to experience the language rather than merely study it" (p. 2). When a teacher brings old fashioned language practices to the class such as filling in the blanks with the correct word form, language becomes artificial. These outdated practices do not inspire students and make them memorize the language items out of context. Learners cannot figure out how to use this memorized language in real life situations. Games provide meaningful and real use of language. Roth (2007) also claimed that: "Playing is a child's natural way of learning. A game with all its rules and interaction is a mini social world in which children prepare themselves, little by little, to enter society. Games also develop the child's automatic use of a foreign language, coordination, cognitive thought, etc." (p. 26). Just like a child learns step by step to act in society, a learner also practices its position in the second language in a pretend situation. Thus, games increase the meaning of language because it is the participation of language which makes us understand why we learn what we learn.

Participation in Class

In every class there are reluctant and shy students which makes teachers have difficulty teaching them. Teachers can observe how games change the participation of such learners because games reduce timidity. Young learners are eager to answer the questions in games even if they are not normally (Çakır, 2004). Steinberg (1986) also explained games make shy or linguistically weak students participate especially when the object is just to have fun, not to win. Moreover, an active language learner will get the linguistic affordances [mutual relationship between an organism and the feature around it] which help them to enrich their experience of language practice and use them for linguistic action (van Lier, 2000: 252). There are precautions to consider for teachers when they call on participation. Teachers must be wise about correcting mistakes during games in class. A teacher should not interfere too often to correct errors. Some mistakes can be negligible so as not to discourage participation. The aim of the activity is to use the language, not to be fixated on the rules. So, if the correction is less frequent, participation will be more commonplace. According to Wright et al. "The greatest mistake (if oral ability is aim) is for the learner not to speak at all" (2006, p.3). Especially young learners are good at learning unconsciously. If they feel that they are having fun, they will be eager participants. Erdoğan (2015) suggested in the interview with young learners in his research even the unwilling learners take part in the language activities and feel positive attitudes towards the class while participating in language games. This is because language games change the negative atmosphere of the class (p. 98). Furthermore, they will start using the language automatically. Tyson (1998) also emphasized "a language game should keep all of the students involved and interested" (para. 1, www.english.daejin.ac.kr). Once the language is used, the language point will be learned in real practice and thus, more frequent participation means higher levels of language performance.

Practicing

Practicing the language by following just the course books is not enough to learn the language. One needs to practice all four skills, reading, and writing, listening and speaking. Language games provide opportunities to practice all four skills. Surely games should

not form the whole syllabus, teachers had better bring games into class after they introduce the topic. Games should serve as repetition and practice purposes. Using games for rehearsal lets the learners compare their interlanguage with the newly learned knowledge in a stress free psychology (Lantolf, 1997, cited in Warner, 2004, p.70). Teachers can organize games for skills s/he wants to teach and practice. According to Piirainen–Marsh and Tainio (2009) “game playing is an informal learning environment that enhances the development of certain skills” (p. 180). Games also provide teachers opportunities for repetitions. Sole repetitions and practices will make the learning dull whereas games bring color and excitement into this process. Roth (2007) supported the idea “as children will happily play games again and again, they are ideal for practicing new vocabulary and structures and for varying with different language” (p.26). Also, some language points are too complex or too boring for children. In these cases, language areas that provide challenges for children will be recovered with games. Learners will overcome new language points and memorize new vocabulary with little effort due the unconscious power of games.

Motivation

Success and happiness will arise in an atmosphere where there is joy and there are not any losers. Success and happiness will inspire student motivation. “Motivation has been widely accepted as one of the key factors that influence success in second/foreign language (L2) learning” (C. Ng & P. Ng, 2015). Motivation is the desire to learn. Paris and Yussuf (2012) asserted learners’ enthusiasm towards games as an internal drive which helps students practice both form and function. Similarly, Ersöz (2000) expressed “games are highly motivating since they are amusing and at the same time challenging. Furthermore, they employ meaningful and useful language in real contexts”. According to Ersöz games are motivating because of the fun factor. Motivation that comes with game playing is highly valued in language teaching, because it reduces language learning anxiety. Anxiety is a serious affective filter that gets in the way of learning. In this respect, Steinberg (1986) added that “playing games takes the drudgery out of learning and, thus, provides motivation” (p. x). Upon creating a happy class atmosphere, learners will have a positive attitude towards learning a language. In such a pleasant learning environment the stress factor will be limited. Teaching language in an enjoyable atmosphere through games will enable continuity of learning activities which will lead to more language exposure. This means an increased language input for learners which is fundamental in both language learning and acquisition (Çakır, 2004, p.103). In a qualitative research (Köksal, Çekiç & Beyhan, 2014), students expressed their motivation raised their enthusiasm towards English classes positively and enhanced their inner strength (p. 87). Learners feel relaxed through games and they are not depressed as there will not be any fear of failure. Using games in teaching second language also lowers learners’ affective filter. Çakır (2004) claimed “creating a psychologically secure setting in the classroom enhances learning no matter how difficult the subject or what the level of student are” (p. 104). In the interview by Berkant & Arslan Avşar (2015) students of the experimental group expressed they started to love EFL classes thanks to the games and they also added that games helped them remember learned topics in the exams (p.189). These points highlight the positive impact of games on motivation in a language classroom.

Disadvantages

Despite many advantages of games as a learning tool, games also have some disadvantages to bear in mind if they are not used properly. There are some points that teachers should watch out before applying a game in their learning context. First, they must be suitable for learners’ level and aim of the learning situation. Simpson (2011) clarified “suitability can of course refer to many things, such as level of difficulty, complexity or the amount of class time they consume” (para. 15). Instructions should be clear, and understandable so that the learning goal of the game is reached. Games should be appropriate for the target, because inaccurate choice of games would do more harm than good. Teacher has an enormous role in the application of the game in the language classroom. Games are not the task explainers on their own; they are the ways to practice the tasks through the guidance of the teacher. Simpson (2011) warned against the frequent use of games. Frequent use of games can hinder its pedagogical value. Games are effective when they are used at the right context and at the right time. Using games all the time makes learners feel that they are not learning anything, so balance is the key in game planning. Learners can consider games as just games but games are loaded with learning if practiced mindfully and that’s why preparing games are usually much more time consuming than just explaining a language point. With this in mind, teachers need to plan games carefully and explain their learners what they will gain via that game, and this way their language awareness can be raised.

Conclusion

Games are invaluable resources for any classroom, but especially for language classroom. Despite the importance of games in second language learning, there is not much literature on class games for language learning. Although it arises as a new trend in teaching young learners, still novice teachers do not know their value and how to use them in their classes. Games are mistakenly thought as a tool to have a rest from everyday teaching practice. Sometimes inexperienced teachers have no idea what it can bring to class. Games are beneficial tools to be used in favor of not only language education but all areas of education. Teachers should be mindful of what their target is in planning games for their classes and how games can serve these purposes. Language games can be used in various situations depending on the goal of the teacher. For instance, games could be used for introducing a new language item, practicing and revising already learnt themes, relaxing the class after an intensive language practice or utilizing it as

a warm up activity. In general, games help learners enjoy the learning process and increase their participation in the language class. Participation of students is particularly important in games because they make sense of language in use. Games create a real life context for the use of real practice. Learners experience success when they play games because they have fun and they do not feel failure. In games everyone has something to gain. Success is the reason for intrinsic motivation which triggers learning. Teachers can review language points they teach in the class through games. Vygotsky (1978) stated “as in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development” (p. 102). Vygotsky emphasizes importance of games in cognitive, social and cultural development of children (Vygotsky, 1978). We cannot separate language and thought from each other. There is an interrelationship between thinking processes and language processes as the individual participates in meaning making in the social world (Zabıtgil Gülseren, 2015). Several experimental studies (Berkant, Arslan Avşar, 2015; Erdoğan, 2015; Tengku Paris, Yussof, 2012) show the positive effect of games in a language classroom. In the light of these studies, games should be taken seriously and placed in the teaching and learning processes. To sum up with Tomlinson and Masuhara’s (2009) words, games offer extensive and logical input, encourage affective and cognitive engagement, arouse positive attitudes towards the language, provide learners to deduce the form and rules of the language, increase self-esteem, and give immediate feedback. Surely games have some drawbacks when they are not used properly. Careful consideration and planning will straighten these drawbacks for positive outcomes. One precaution is not to overuse games and the other is to explain learners what they will gain as a result of game participation. Also, choosing games in line with students’ proficiency level or slightly above their current level will increase their performance in the target language. If all these points are considered mindfully, teachers can take invaluable pedagogical advantage of language games in their teaching practices.

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