



The Iranian EFL Journal August 2014 Volume 10 Issue 4
Iranian EFL Journal



ISSN On-line: 1836-8751

ISSN Print: 1836-8743

The Iranian EFL Journal

August 2014

Volume 10

Issue 4

Chief Editors

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Title

Improving the Proficiency of Iranian Students in Learning English by Using Games

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Abstract

One of the major problems of contemporary education is to motivate students, so motivation plays an important role in teaching especially learning English. There are several ways to motivate students. One of them is using games. Games are by definition fun and nearly everyone would agree if learning can be made enjoyable, then students will learn more. Therefore, my work is limited to use games to motivate students. In the first part of my article I will mention different kinds of motivation. I will also have a brief hint to different ways of improving motivation such as using visual aids, songs, games, etc. In the second part, the use of games in different skills and in vocabulary and grammar is briefly mentioned. In recent years teaching speaking skill has received great attention and methodologists suggest many ways to improve it. Also introducing speaking skill at the beginning of the course is a motivating factor. Since speaking and listening skills are interrelated, they are considered together. Therefore in the third part, I will suggest games to improve these two skills. In the last part, the use of games at Iranian schools has been examined. I have prepared some questionnaires and asked the

opinion of some students and teachers about using games. Since Iranian schools are crowded and any game cannot be used there, several usable games are mentioned. There is no work written specially in the use of games to improve these two skills.

Keywords: Proficiency, Iranian students, Learning English, Games

1. Introduction

Motivation plays a dominant role in education. Teachers agree that motivated students are more pleasant to teach and achieve more success than other students. Badri Moghaddam (1363,p.90)points out that" motivation is a very important factor in learning. Most students enjoy normal intelligence, but they fail in their studies for lack of motivation."

Motivation does not imply fun, nor is it synonymous with either noise or silence. Chastain(1976,p.172) indicates "motivation implies some incentive that causes the individual to participate in activity toward a goal and to persevere until the goal is reached.

1.1 Kinds of Motivation

There are two kinds of motivation"integrative" and"instrumental" motivation. When students study a foreign language if they admire the culture and wish to become familiar with the society in which the language is used, they are most successful. This is called integrative motivation and is distinguished from instrumental motivation in which the purpose of foreign language study is meeting a graduation requirement. Integrative motivation is more commonly found in the foreign language situation, where a person has limited exposure to target language. For example a person studying and using a language in the country where it is spoken, is likely to have integrative motivation. As Julia Falk indicates" students with integrative motivation can achieve success in a foreign language situation, whereas those with instrumental motivation may learn little even on a second language context." McClelland and Watson mention (1973,p.173)these kinds of motivation:

Some students are motivated by a desire to know. For them learning is a goal. Others are motivated as a means of enhancing their self-concept. Some students are motivated by social factors. They are working to attain a certain power status in group.

Consequently motivation is affected by students' self-concept, values, needs, goals, social environmental of the class, and by teacher's behavior. Students with different kinds of motivation react in different ways toward classes, so it is teacher's duty to arrange a syllabus meeting different students' needs. Shariatmadari (1369,p.360) indicates" if learning materials

are according to student's need, he will learn and remember them better. If a student is interested in the lessons; the teacher does not make him learn them.

1.2 .Improving Motivation

To attain the goal mentioned in the previous section, the teacher should consider different ways of improving motivation. He should recognize that to improve motivation, he will be dealing with cognitive, affective and social variables.

Three factors should be considered in dealing with cognitive variables. Firstly, the teacher should clarify for the students what the goals of the course are and what they should do to achieve these goals. Secondly, learning the new material should begin with what students already know. Lastly, the teacher should enhance the student's creative learning. Affective variables are one of the other important factors in improving motivation. These variables consist of several components. Firstly, audio-visual aids are one of the important components of affective variables. Rivers(1981,p.207) writes that "student motivation is also considered to be a strong factor in favor of audio-visual approach." Young people today are used to looking and listening for long periods with well constructed pictures or films; they find language classes more interesting. Secondly, the teacher should take use of any opportunity to arouse suspense and curiosity. He can use puzzles in this case. Thirdly, the teacher should use learning games and songs in appropriate situations to improve motivation. Using songs in the classrooms can be both enjoyable and educational. Celece-Murcia points out(1988,p.116) that "songs can be utilized as presentation contexts, as reinforcement materials, as vehicle through which to teach all language skills, and as a medium through which to present some of the most cultural themes". Social variables should also be considered. The use of small groups in classes increases participation.

2. The Use of Games

Games are one of the best learning activities to improve students' motivation. Language learning is a hard work. Effort is needed at every moment and must be maintained over a long period. Games help and encourage many learners to keep their interests. Gasser(1979,p.54) argues that games have a goal, are organized according to rules, and are meant to be enjoyable. The use of games depends on the teacher's purpose, the level of the class and nature of the game itself. Most games contain an element of competition. When individual students are playing, it is better to avoid having winners and losers because the weak students may become discouraged by never winning. Games can teach, and there is no reason why

they can not be included as an integral part of a lesson. Wright(1984,p.1) points out that" games can be found to give practice in all skills, reading, writing, listening and speaking, in all stages of teaching learning sequence and for many types of communication." Many games provide more practice than conventional drill exercises. With a little thought, the teacher will find that many repetition and pattern drills are easily converted into games. Wright names one of the games practicing grammatical structure:

This game called "visual perception of length" uses comparatives and superlatives, possessives and name of colors. It is good for beginning students, and lasts about twenty minutes. In this game four or five learners take it turns to draw a line on the board. Each line should be in different length and color. The teacher asks students to judge which is the longest, and shortest line. The teacher can say: I think the blue line is longer than brown one. What do you think David? David can say: I think it is shorter.

Different versions of a specific game can be derived from. I suggest the variation of game mentioned here. Each learner draws with a ruler a number of colored lines on a piece of paper. Below the lines she writes a number of sentences, some true and some deliberately false sentences concerning the relative length. For example, the red line is longer than the green line. The pieces of papers are then interchanged and receiver must decide which of the sentences are true or false. Students need to learn how to incorporate vocabulary to long-term memory. This does not necessarily mean memorizing. Teacher should arouse a desire to store and remember by providing games through which students can demonstrate what they know and learn from each other. One of the games in Persian about vocabularies can be used in English. I suggest a new game by changing it to some extent. The teacher can think of a five letter word and draw the number of dashes on the board. The learners say words of five letters. If any of these words contain a letter which is the word the teacher is thinking of, and is in the same position, then he should write the letter on the board over the appropriate dash. For example, the teacher is thinking of the word "mouth" and a student says the word "teach". The letter H is in both words and in the same position, so he writes " _ _ _ _ H".

It is possible to create games by which either one skill or all skills can be practiced. In the games mentioned here up to now listening and speaking skills were practiced. Games can be specially created to practice writing skill. One of the most famous games in this case is "Treasure hunt". Groups of students are given an object which they hide somewhere in the class. Then, they write instructions for another group to find the treasure.

3. Improving Speaking and Listening Skills

The early introduction of the speaking is an important motivating factor. Students study another language with the idea that language learning means the ability to speak that language. They are often discouraged when they find that it is just like other subjects. So auditory abilities (speaking and listening) are a good starting point for any language class. Speaking and listening are interrelated and cannot be separated from each other. One of the best ways for improving these two skills is using games. Rivers(1981,p.228) points out that" in a game the element of a competition and excitement forces out oral expressions so that students forget their inhibitions about making mistakes and being embarrassed n front of their friends ".

Listening skill is practiced in games devised for speaking skill, but it is possible to create games in which only listening is emphasized. One of the games involving listening comprehension is called commands. This is the simplest game performed by teachers in classes. In this simple game the teacher gives commands which the students must obey.

There are two kinds of commands which can be used in this game. Those which need physical response; for example, stand up, sit down and those which need students to write or draw something. This game is well suited to practice with prepositions; for example, put your pencil in/ on / your hand. One of the most popular games used in Persian and any other language is "Twenty questions" game. In this play, a slip of paper with a word on it is given to a student. The student writes down his or her own word. It may be an object in the room or a job or a famous person. The other student must then ask him or her in order to guess the word. Students can ask twenty questions, and that person should answer using Yes or No. Simple present tense can be practiced in this game. For example, one student can ask this question" Do you work in an office?" Listening and speaking skills are practiced in this game. One of the useful games used for practicing speaking skill is mentioned by Matthews:

In this game different controversial statements are written on pieces of paper and put into a box. For example, on one paper may be written: Brothers are responsible for their sisters. Students are told to pick out a statement and spend a few minutes preparing arguments to defend it .All students then have to present their argument in turn, answer questions and defend themselves from attack. One person can be made chairperson. In the end, there can be a vote to most convincing defense. It is likely that free discussion will quickly begin. This game is more effective than formal topics which can be rather tiresome.

4. The use of Games at Iranian Schools

Are Iranian students interested in games? What is the teachers' opinion about games? In order to find the answer to these questions I prepared some questionnaires and asked the opinion of 120 students on 3 levels: elementary, junior and high school. About 80% of students said that their teachers have never used games in teaching and about 90% of students showed tendency to use games. Some of them argued that "using games helps us to learn the new material in an interesting way." I also asked the opinion of 10 teachers in using games. Some of them said that it is not possible to teach through games. Most of them found it a good idea. So, both teachers and students agree with using games. Now the main question is put forward here: Are games really usable in Iranian classes? It is clear that most games are not usable in Iranian classes, especially games in which only several students are involved. In order to find the answer to the above question, I created a game and performed it on third grade students in high schools. I wanted students to practice speaking skill. First, I asked them to talk about the hobbies they have, but only few students participated in discussion. Then, I performed my game. I divided the class to 2 groups. The class had 30 students sitting in 2 rows of benches. I arranged 15 students in each row. They should remain in their seat. I asked each group to choose a hobby among themselves. For example drawing, sewing, etc. In order that each member of the group become aware of each other's decision, I asked them to choose a head person in middle row among them, then each member of the group should give some characteristic of that hobby and the other group members should guess it. I saw that nearly all the students participated in this game. Then groups changed turns. Later, I asked their opinion about games. Most of them confessed that it was an interesting game, and they enjoyed it very much. One of them said: "I really spoke English in the class and forgot being embarrassed in front of students. I performed another game on other class. I asked them to tell a short memory to class. No one spoke; then, I said I would begin a memory and each of them should add one sentence to it. In this way we built an interesting story altogether. All students participated actively in the class. Therefore, I reached to this idea that games are usable in Iranian schools provided that the teacher creates a game according to the content of the lesson and students' needs. Some games mentioned before such as twenty questions and vocabulary games are also usable in Iranian schools.

5. Conclusion

I examined during this research that if learning can be made enjoyable, students will learn more. So, games are as a means to achieve this end. Games are not used in classes as a teaching device. The teacher can use them as integral part of the lesson to teach anything especially to improve speaking and listening skills. Finally, I came to this conclusion that motivating students to improve speaking and listening skills can be achieved by using games.

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