



**ENGLISH  
LANGUAGE  
EDUCATION:  
CONCERNS, MODALITIES AND  
21ST CENTURY PRACTICES**

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## Children's Language Development with Serious Games

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### ABSTRACT

Language learning is a skill that can be mastered only with great patience and consistent effort. This is something that children find very difficult to do in a regular manner. This is more difficult, especially in the acquisition of a language like English that has complicated grammar rules and spellings. This chapter seeks to discuss language games in general and the way in which language games can assist in the language development of children. At first glance, language games seem to the child to be an interesting mode of entertainment, but on a subconscious level, they provide the child with the tools of communication. The chapter argues for the inclusion of language in educational design and the formulation of the curriculum since they ensure the development of the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing and imbue the user with confidence. Games are thus important both for the teacher and learner since they not only facilitate language development but ensure the constant use and practice of the same.

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## INTRODUCTION

Language and its development are something that is essential in shaping the life of any individual. It is a means of communication and self-expression, and it is something that defines personality. It has been proved that the natural means of language acquisition are best achieved in the early years, and thus it is essential to work on maximizing language development right from the early years.

There are many theories related to language learning, but three major ones are usually considered. The first is the nativist theory which proposes that children are born with a set of language learning tools in their brains which Noam Chomsky calls the language acquisition device (LAD). Although there is very little scientific evidence to back this claim of a language organ, it has been observed in people with brain injuries that when certain parts of the brain, especially the left hemisphere, are affected, it results in serious language impairment. For children who have left hemisphere diseases like aphasia have issues with forming sentences and communicating in general. The nativists also believe that there exists something called 'universal grammar', which is common across the majority of world languages, and that is why children are able to pick up many languages at an early age.

The second theory that deals with language development is the learning theory which stresses the fact that a language is learned through constant repetition and practice, just like any skill is learnt. This was propounded by the behaviourist J.W Skinner. Children who speak correctly are appreciated for their ability to express themselves well, and thus proper use of language is reinforced. Thus, it is based on stimulus and response, and the development of a child's language takes place between this parenthesis.

The third important theory in this realm is the social interactionist approach. This also develops from the theories of Lev Vygotsky. This theory states that language is learnt because of the innate desire of children to communicate with people around them. Thus, the language the children learn is based on those they are surrounded by. Their vocabulary is affected by the relationships they have with those in their immediate surroundings. The first words that a child learns are usually those that involve asking for food and other things.

All these theories are acceptable on various levels, and they have all influenced the way language teachers to approach the learning of a language.

All children acquire their mother tongue very early in their lives but usually face a problem when the language they have to learn is taught to them. This can be best illustrated with the examples of children who grow up in big metropolitan cities in India and are surrounded by people who speak many languages. Right from an early age, these children grow up in an atmosphere that is filled with a confluence of languages, and thus most of them become adept at handling languages far removed from their own native tongues. They also manage to learn the common language of communication, which may be either English or Hindi or even the language of the region or state. On the other hand, children who are exposed to just one language in the early years master just that one and usually struggle with others. Thus, it is evident that the best learning, especially with regard to language, develops out of a need or necessity in communicating in that language. According to Lev Vygotsky, "the child begins to perceive the world not only through his [or her] eyes but also through his [or her] speech." A child is inspired by the languages that surround him or her, and language acquisition follows naturally.

This equation changes in the classroom. Within the precincts of the classroom, the child is exposed to a language in a constructive atmosphere. The language is taught, and the child has to learn it. This, though essential, may not be perceived as necessary by the child and can become tedious. This language that is taught often may not be used beyond the classroom, making it difficult for the child to master it. For example, in a state like Kerala, English is a language that is used exclusively only in the formal sense. In many cases, it is reduced to a language that is more written than spoken and this itself restricts the proper development of language in a natural way which is based on listening, speaking, reading and only then writing. A child's exposure to languages is limited exclusively to the mother tongue. This lack of the proper stages of language development has an irreversible detrimental effect on language acquisition. For a child to be inspired to learn, there has to be sown within him or her the seeds of interest, and one of the best ways to do this is through language games.

## LANGUAGE GAMES—DEFINITION

Language is, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, "...a system of conventional spoken, manual (signed), or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves." Games, according to Merriam Webster, are "a physical or mental competition conducted according to rules with the participants in direct opposition to each other as well as an activity engaged in for diversion or amusement." Thus, we can say that a language game is one that engages students in learning the system of language while being actively engaged in an interesting activity that is competitive in nature. It is this last aspect that differentiates language activities from language games. Although both works on providing a fertile environment that is relaxed and inspiring within the classroom, it is the language game that brings with it a fiercely competitive spirit that will pull into the vortex even the most taciturn learner.

Children playing language games often do not realize that they are learning anything but are rather fully immersed in the game itself. The term language game is a concept that was developed by the German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein who interwove language elements into daily activities to bring about language learning. He called it *sprachspiel* in his own native tongue, German and said that "The whole, the language and the activities with which it is interwoven: this I will also call the "language game."

Wittgenstein catalogued his thoughts in the form of lecture notes for his students that were collected in two books, *The Blue Book* and *The Brown Book*. It is the latter that, however, focuses more on language games. He illustrates through examples of how games can be held to develop vocabulary as well as present a wide variety of meanings. The language game, however, has come far from the time of Wittgenstein, who wrote about a century ago. Today the language game is more widely used in the classroom by the discerning teacher.

## THE USE OF LANGUAGE GAMES IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

The very idea that a language is taught in a classroom goes against the natural way a language is imbibed. In most cases, a simple change in the classroom transaction can bring about a quantum difference. This is where the language game comes into prominence. The circumstance of

the game creates in the classroom a natural environment that inspires the students to communicate with each other. They forget their inhibitions about the language and become so caught up in trying to do better than one another that the language flows back and forth, creating a beautiful and meaningful exchange of words. According to Avedon and Sutton-Smith, "the main reason why games are considered effective learning aids is that they spur motivation and students get very absorbed in the competitive aspects of the games; moreover, they try harder at games than in other courses." The instructions of the game, the game itself and the dissection of the result all provide them with a wealth of vocabulary and useful expressions that will stand them in good stead in their daily communication. The atmosphere that the game brings into the class makes the learners emotional and lends appeal to the class, which may otherwise have been monotonous.

It is possible for language games to inspire even the most reticent learner to participate, especially if it is a group that is limited in number. A game will automatically lower the inhibitions of the children and build confidence in them, not just in language use but also positively reinforce their personalities. In the conduct of such games, teachers take on the ideal roles of facilitators, and the learners move centre stage. This changes the equation in the classroom, and the learners become very active. Thus, the best ambience for language learning is developed effortlessly and even without the active knowledge of the learners.

Through language games, the teacher will develop the curiosity of the students in the subject and the interest thus generated will be sustained. Such a sustained effort is essential in the learning of a language and will ensure that the learner masters the same.

According to Hadfield, J (1999), "Games can be used at all stages of the progression from controlled to free practice, serving at one end of the range as a memory aid and repetition drill, at the other as a chance to use the language freely and as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. They can also serve as a diagnostic tool for teacher, who can note areas of difficulty and take appropriate remedial action."

## **CLASSIFICATION OF GAMES**

There are many ways of classifying language games. One is based on the function of the game or rather what the game proposes to undertake. With this, it is possible to have two major divisions, i.e., games that

build vocabulary and those that work on grammar. But this is a very rudimentary division, and the more accepted division is as follows.

(i) **Communicative games** in which the focus is more on the process of communication. In such games, the learners seek to exchange information or go into discussions and descriptions. This is a more general kind of learning and builds on the basic knowledge of the learner. Communicative games can be further divided into many types, namely:

- a. **Guessing games**—These kinds of games provide an information gap that is filled by guesswork. One learner may have information that the other one is trying to guess, and this may require a series of questions like the game “Twenty Questions”. Also, a game like “Pictionary” where one learner tries to pictorially represent a word to the other, and there is a stipulated time for this guesswork to happen in. Even a game like “Hangman”, where the missing letters of a word are supplied, and every wrong guess leads to the drawing up of a hanging.
- b. **Sorting, Ordering or Arranging games**—these kinds of games usually involve the use of cards, or pictures or even objects. The learners may be presented with an amalgam of cards or objects, and they may have to find a correct order or sequence for them and explain the arrangement. The Montessori system of education uses this kind of game right from the beginning. Thus, toddlers may begin with pictures of objects that they have to rearrange like a puzzle and then name the objects, and they will progress ultimately to story sequences or the arrangement of objects in public places like a hospital or railway station. The element of timing will result in a competitive spirit. This will lead to an enrichment of the vocabulary of children.
- c. **Search Games**—these games are also similar to the guessing game where learners try to uncover some kind of information. This can be seen in a favourite ice-breaking activity where all the students in the class have to write down a unique fact about themselves on a piece of paper. These slips are mixed up and distributed, and each one who gets the slip should move around the class and find the person whose unique fact is on



the slip. Even a "Treasure Hunt" with a tricky wordplay on the clues can be an example of this.

- d. **Matching Games** – as the name suggests, these are games that work at matching objects or cards. At a very young age in the Montessori classroom, we can see learners matching the pictures of similar objects and naming them. As their knowledge base grows, this matching moves on to pictures being matched to words and entire scenes being named. This activity can be arranged as a contest between two learners to introduce the spirit of the game.
  - e. **Labelling Games** – this is also a game that is very similar to matching but requires the participants to use a label and match it to a picture. The Botanical Cabinet with leaf pattern cards and the landform cards from Montessori are excellent examples of this kind of game. Using this as a team game will inspire learners to internalize the necessary vocabulary.
  - f. **Board games** – this is a set of games that everyone is familiar with. "Scrabble" is perhaps the most familiar game in this category, and it requires the learners to create words from the alphabet chips they get. Conducting a Scrabble tournament in class is a wonderful way to build vocabulary. Other such games are "Taboo" and "Scattergories" among many others.
  - g. **Role-play Games** – these are games where students act out certain roles. This can be done in the class by dividing the learners into smaller groups, giving each of them a unique situation to which a script needs to be prepared and acted out. The team which puts up the most realistic performance can be appreciated for their efforts.
- (ii) **Linguistic games** are those that target a very specific kind of information. These are games that require the learner to provide particular classes of words such as adverbs or adjectives. These kinds of games require the learner to have a very specific knowledge that is tested. A game that provides the learners with a list of words to which they have to find antonyms or synonyms; the correct use of suffixes and prefixes, sentence completion exercises using specific rules all fall under this category. A good example

of this kind of game is the "So... But Game". One learner begins with a premise, for example, "I was feeling hot, so I switched on the air conditioner." And the next learner completes the sentence beginning with a 'but' like " , but there was no electricity", and the next learner continues the premise using the word 'so.' This is a game that tests the imagination and creativity of the students, and the one with whom the thread ends becomes the loser.

### **HOW TO USE LANGUAGE GAMES EFFECTIVELY**

Students, irrespective of their age, gender or race, tend to talk a lot in class. It is up to the intelligent teacher to use this tendency to his or her advantage. Language games can be used to channelize this excess energy and utilize it to effectively transact knowledge about the language. Although language games need to be used, the selection and timely introduction of these games are of the utmost importance in bringing out their effectiveness. The choice of the game needs to change according to the proficiency of the learner. For example, games that work on spellings or simple vocabulary building may be very effective for learners who are novices but cannot generate any kind of interest in higher classes. Similarly, games that use physical objects may not bode well for older learners of the language. It is important that the game is treated with respect and seriousness by the learners, and for this to happen, it is essential that the students feel that it is relevant to them.

The rules and distribution of points should be made very clear at the beginning itself so that all disputes can be amicably resolved. While the game is progressing, it is important that the teacher encourages the players, and once a winner has been declared, the teacher must congratulate the winners and inspire the losers. One of the main objectives of a game other than teaching the target language is to foster a sense of unity among the students. Thus, it is very important to reconstitute groups for each activity so that the class is not divided into warring factions. This reconstitution is also very important to make students step out of their comfort zones and take on challenges. As they move from group to group, the most passive members may be forced to take on the role of leaders, and this will truly result in the efficacy of the game. It is also important for the teacher to never allow the students to lose sight of the fact that competition at all times

needs to be compulsorily healthy. Winning should never be seen as a matter of life and death.

Although employing a language game in class is an effective procedure, it is something that can be quite noisy and disruptive. The teacher needs to devise his or her own set of rules to keep the decibel level in the class relatively low so as not to disturb other classes. This can be done most effectively by including propriety as one of the scoring parameters. The teacher also needs to continuously change the games being used and to try and avoid too much repetition so that learners do not get tired of it. A game is a tool used to relieve the monotony of the class; it should on no account become monotonous itself.

## CONCLUSION

Teachers are becoming increasingly comfortable with the use of games in the language classroom but are often in a quandary deciding on when it should be used. Hadfield, J (1999) points out that "A game is an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun... Games should be regarded as an integral part of the language syllabus, not as an amusing activity for Friday afternoon or for the end of the term." It can and should be used anytime in the class. For example, a game can be used as an ice breaker and even to introduce a new concept and set the tone for the rest of the class. It can be used to also revise the knowledge gained in the previous class. While a particular area is being dealt with, a game can be used to evaluate the students as a method of revision or as a drill. It can even aid in concluding a particular session in an interesting manner. Thus, the language game is not something extraneous but a positive element that can effectively contribute to any part of the learning process.

All the language games used by the teacher need to be synchronized with the educational objectives of the course and should be chosen judiciously. Language teachers need to be well educated about different kinds of language games and should also have the training to develop or change the existing games to suit their requirements. This kind of training should be mandatory at the policy level, so that language games are able to become part of every language classroom all over the world. It is only through the language game that a natural and fertile atmosphere for the nurturing of a language can be created, and

this creative space needs to be in a constant state of change so that it can inspire learners constantly.

Through the effective use of language games, the importance and significance of English as a global language can be reinforced. With the constant exchange of ideas during games, learners will overcome their apprehensions about using the language. Intrinsic motivation will evolve within the learner, and the teacher will effectively be able to ignite the fire of passion for the language. The language will be pursued by the learner not out of a sense of inevitability or force but out of a zealous craving induced by the language game.

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