

PLAY TO LEARN: PLAYFUL CONTENT, AN EXCELLENT OPTION IN FL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

“Gamification” is a relatively new concept that appeared in 2008, but it is an activity that has been done for a long time in the context of learning. It is very helpful in classroom and it attracts the attention of students to activities that at first may seem monotonous or minimally playful. It also serves to encourage and motivate students who currently are children, youth, or adult heavily exposed to information, technology, and stimulation. Therefore, they look for a learning experience that is far from pure theoretical lessons and lectures. In my paper, I will explain the benefits of using games in the classroom based on theoretical ideas, then link it with practical examples of activities that can be adapted to different languages. With all this, I intend to make clear that the inclusion of playfulness in the classroom will help us to have more motivated students and certainly it will help students to assimilate concepts, forms, and uses almost without realizing it and many other aspects of teaching that will make the learning of a second language more effective.

1. Introduction

When I started working as Spanish teacher, I had a very limited and restricted syllabus, so I introduced games step by step. At the beginning, they were part of my class only as entertainment but with time, I realized that games could work exactly the same way as the rest of activities I did in class. Today, they represent a very big part of the lessons I teach and my students not only consider them a daily activity but also really love them. They have become the main element of my class.

Game is universal, it affects all races and lifestyles and it is also common to all periods of history. It is an characteristic that makes us equal and even in the worst situations, like survival situation, children still play. Since prehistoric times, children have played to acquire the values, knowledge, and abilities to survive. They do not only play to avoid reality, but also they play to real life because games are a way to adapt to the world and life. If playing reflects real life, what could be best for our foreign language lessons than representing real life in another language?

George Eisen in *Children and Play in the Holocaust* (Eisen, 1990) describes how children played during every moment of free time in the concentration camp. They played to handle those horrors, and they played games that represented exactly the same life they were living: war games, stealing, beating, tickling dead bodies, etc. Remember “Life is Beautiful” from Roberto Benigni?

2. Game and history

Games as regulated activities appeared in Ancient Greece and since then, they have evolved to the point of current vidoegames. In the Middle Ages, for fairs they played games, in the 18th century games acquired a political link like in the Goss Game. In the 20th century Buhler, Erikson, and Piaget studied the importance of playing for developing children’s skills. Johan Huizinga, a dutch philosopher, systematized game with his “Homo Ludens” (Huizinga, 2014) and finally Freud highlights the particularities of playing like a pleasure to control traumatic experiences.

Federico Froebel was a pedagogue who created the concept of “kindergarden” and preschool. His work centers around the idea that playing prepares you for real life. Researchers like Maria Montessori followed his ideas and developed very revolutionary theories about playing at school. Educational game was born and it was applied to all educational contexts. However, in Second language acquisition there is still a lack of theoretical literature about playing.

In 2008 a new concept connected to this topic appeared in England: “Gamification”, which involves applying techniques and mechanics of games to encourage and motivate people at their workplace or in the classroom. There are several types of gamification, but the one that applies to learning a language is connected to videogames, social networks, technology, and the internet.

Chapter 7 of The Common European Reference for Languages mentions that the use of game, but they refer only to traditional games or planned games applied to class. Foreign language textbooks still do not reflect varieties of games and they place games isolated sometimes or without an organized link to the content and goal of class.

3. Game in FL context

Playing is a very important part in FL classrooms not only for children but also for adults. It is not a trivial element and we must be conscious of the great value of including games in our classes. The sense of competition is very high in many cultures and it gives a new perspective to lessons where student discover that they can learn playing. It is a strategy of learning where pressure does not exist and where students feel comfortable and relaxed. A game well organized, planned, related and connected to the goal content works for students.

Relation between game and learning is natural, in games teachers are not the center of the class anymore; instead, they are simple helpers and assistants and, therefore, there is an increase teamwork that helps students to get to know each other and to learn faster.

But if playing is important, we should reflect about the advantages and disadvantages in FL classes to understand about the best way to integrate games in class. In my personal opinion, advantages are higher.

Between the advantages, we can name several:

- It breaks routine.
- Class is amusing.
- Promotes interaction.
- Makes passive student more active.
- It helps to assimilate concepts.
- It contextualizes contents.
- It helps to unify the group.
- The teacher is not the center.
- It promotes competitiveness.

Disadvantages exist as well, and they could be:

- It can seem trivial to students.
- It can be unrelated to the content.
- It can take up too much time.
- The result might not be the one we expected.
- Teachers must know how to focus on it in class and when it should be introduced.
- It promotes competitiveness.

It promotes competitiveness can be on both lists because it depends on many factors: age, type of learners, goals, etc.

When teachers think of games in class, they can use traditional games, modern games, or create a new game. Normally we have contents connected to language or culture so that not all games work.

The clue to introducing games in class is following these steps:

- Think of the topic: i.e. Prepositions.
- Think of uses or problems with forms: i.e. Verbs with prepositions, different meanings, complex prepositions (*por/para, to/for*).
- Think of types of existing games: i.e. parchesse, chess, Memory, bingo, Monopoly, puzzles, Scrabble, dominoes, etc.
- Can we use one of them?
 - o YES: bingo for verbs with prepositions//Tic Tac Toe for verbs with prepositions//memory for prepositions and different meanings
 - o NO: it is time to invent games.
- Think of the rules and explain them clearly to students.
- Explain the **learning goals** we, students and teacher, pursue with it.

Teachers must be aware of helping student to understand the importance of the game since the beginning. On one hand, they should present clearly the rules and norms of the whole game. On the other hand, it is very important to present games in class with an explanation of the objectives we are looking for with the game. Teachers must reflect about the different objectives the game follows and they should explain to students exactly the same way as if they were colleagues. Always, they should attend to the level of the students and look for strategies of explanations.

Teachers must change their speech; before it was: “We are going to play...”, and now: “We are going to play, with this game I want/follow/look for you to learn/review/assimilate...”

4. Playing with prepositions

4.1 Bingo and Tic Tac Toe

As I mentioned before, we can use bingo or Tic Tac Toe to check or review if students know verbs with prepositions. With this bingo, we give each student or a group of students a card with nine verbs, if they know the preposition related to the verb, they mark it on the box, if not they miss their turn. I want to check if they know prepositions, so the objectives are to review all prepositions and to relate them with each verb.

With Tic Tac Toe we divide the class into two groups and we ask them in turns to say a sentence with the correct verb and preposition. In this second game, we introduce a new goal: placing verbs with prepositions in context.

DEPENDER	SOÑAR	CONFIAR
DESCONFIAR	CONSISTIR	DESPEDIR
DESPEDIRSE	INMISCUIRSE	ENTROMETERSE

Fig.1 Bingo or Tic Tac Toe card

4.2 Tarjeta Roja (Red Card):

In Spanish POR/PARA are very difficult for students, the normal way of teaching and learning is explaining the different uses with written examples. These pairs are a complex part of languages learning and we can play a game that help students to understand the purpose of both. I have reshaped the typical structured activity of filling the blanks by introducing gaming.

Divide the class into two teams, then give a red and a blue card to each member. Project sentences with *por/para* blanks on the screen and ask them about the gap; all students should raise the card individually with the colour that corresponds to *por* or *para*. If the majority of members of the group are right, they add points to their scores. This game can work toward assimilation of *por/para*, it is active, it is a team work, and it can motivate students and promote interest in the topic.

5. Language in context:

We can also think of games where broader topics are included, so more goals are shown.

5.1 El viajero mentiroso (Lying Traveller)

Three students go out of the class with the teacher and they all think about a place, country, town where one of them visited but not the others. Two of them will lie in their presentation. Meanwhile, the other students are preparing questions about the trip of their classmates. Once the three students enter the class, the others must discover who was in that place through questions addressed to one person. Questions and answer should be in the past and very well contextualized.

The goal that is presented is to review the uses of the four past tenses in Spanish, how to ask questions correctly, talk about trips, etc.

6. Playing with content and language integrated learning

In foreign language classrooms, we also link content to culture, history, art, and plenty of other subjects. Playing with culture is also possible and in cases of introducing games of culture we set out: language, culture, and fun.

6.1 Tocado y hundido (The survivor):

In this game all students stand up and the teacher asks questions about the theoretical content. If the student knows; they continue standing, if not they sit. Finally, there will be only one student standing and he/she will be the winner.

7. And what about prizes?

When games are part of class as other normal activity, prizes have no sense. They can be used sometimes but we can also use abstract prizes like “bad prizes” of singing a song in the foreign language studied, telling a story during one minute, explaining rules learned before to the class, etc. “Good prizes” can receiving compliments from others (i.e.goal: students must think about adjectives in the studied language). Abstract prizes work as new strategies of reviewing and learning, therefore, they also have objectives to reach.

Games can and should be part of FL classrooms for children and adults. We, as teachers, must be brave and creative and not be scared of introducing them. We also should encourage our students to develop their ability to play (i.e. forcing them to introduce a game in their oral presentations). If we clarify the rules and objectives at the beginning, success is assured.

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