

## **Games in the classroom: more than just having fun**

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### **1. Introduction**

If your students have never asked you to play a game, we can tell you are probably lying. Games and fun activities have always been one of everybody's favorite things to do in a class, both for teachers and students. Nevertheless, they are usually just a way to create a relaxed atmosphere or even because we just could not come up with a better idea for that day. The basic problem with this relaxed or emergency approach lies in the fact that sometimes (in fact, we have noticed that it is most of the time) many games and activities are chosen without considering their pedagogical value. Furthermore, little reflection is made upon how to relate them to a context. This article aims to create awareness of how important it is to link these resources to our programs and syllabi. We also wish to show how these games and activities contribute to the development of a series of skills and competencies, as well as the enhancement of some intelligences. In order for us to do so, we will tackle this issue in three parts. First, we will discuss how games, activities, and materials have promoted human development from an evolutionary point of view. Then, we will intend to redefine a new rationale for choosing games and activities for the classroom. Finally, we will reflect on how to implement these resources by means of a little "game" we have devised for this effect: A View to a Game.

### **2. Rationale For Using Materials In The Classroom**

Authors like Vygotski and Leontiev agree that human beings have a social nature and that everything that is human in us, like language, comes from life in society and from the culture they have created. Therefore, tools became an important element since they were essential in the creation of culture and are now essential for its constant development and acquisition.

Humans are animals, submitted to the biological laws in terms of evolution. For example, if it was cold, they would eventually adapt through time by growing more hair on the skin, but this was too slow. Social-historical laws, to continue with human evolution, replaced biological laws. They are historical laws because they are no longer transmitted through heredity; they are acquired through life, experience, and socially because humans started to produce and create new items due to the use of the first tools and the beginning of work and society. Now they can modify the environment according to their needs, for example, making a coat from animal skin to protect themselves from the cold.

Thanks to tools, work and social activity, physical changes were promoted (in the brain, the senses, language organs, hands, etc.) and language, thought, acquisition of

knowledge and other different skills were developed. In other words, tools are important in the process of acquiring culture. Therefore, in the socio-historical perspective, the development of language and all the psychological functions took place in the process of working (with the use of tools) and social activity. Nevertheless, the development of language in the ontogenesis of children takes place in the process of assimilation of experiences and communication with others.

This is true when we are talking about learning our first or native language, but when we refer to the process of acquiring a second language, the situation must change. It is said that with our left hemisphere, which is mainly verbal, we learn or acquire our first language, and with the right hemisphere, which is mainly for perception, manipulation and movement, we learn or acquire other languages (Target Language or L2). For our first language, the environment is all our material. We are constantly in touch, both verbally and physically, with the language and culture we are learning. On the other hand, for the second language, materials and tools of all kinds (pictures, maps, songs, games) are needed in order to get in touch with the language and culture we want to learn about. It is also necessary to interact and use manipulative and perceptive strategies to acquire it.

In the principles of Whole Language, language should be acquired rather than learned. That is why the use of materials (tools) is very important. The process of acquisition is always an active process that refers to the development of new skills and superior psychological functions. It is a process that is different from learning and more complex. The use of materials promotes this acquisition of known skills as well as the development of new ones

because materials are social objects that hold (accumulate) information, and they have an established use and function given through time and culture and maintained and transmitted from generation to generation.

Materials, therefore, are the tools used in class in order to promote the acquisition of a second language, developing the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), and getting in touch with different cultural aspects involved in the process.

The use of different materials leads to social interaction, group work, development of motor operation skills as well as many other abilities (the development of thought and the possibility to contextualize subjects). It allows the students to be active in their process, to produce and create using their senses and different ways of acquiring and processing the information.

### 3. WHY DO WE PLAY IN CLASS?

Changing our rationale.

3.1 The typical conception, or misconception?

We may think of a number of reasons to play games in our classrooms. Most of the times we choose to play a game for four main circumstances.

Set a relaxed atmosphere: There are times when either our students or we may be tense or tired. What is better than bringing a fun activity for all of us to enjoy.

Add variety: To avoid monotony, we decide to play something. That way our students will think that our classes are more 'dynamic' and 'interesting'. (We use the quotation marks because, as we will see

later, playing games is not a synonym of dynamic or interesting).

Reward the class: Yes, your course seems to be working fine, they participate a lot, and do their homework. A game is a good alternative to keep them motivated.

Forget to plan: Well, it's time to rely upon the ultimate classroom resource: Take a game and play during that class.

We all have done this sometime during our teaching careers. And in these moments a game has surely saved the day. However, there lies the main problem with using games in such a fashion. We are underestimating the value of games, reducing their pedagogical utility. Let us discuss why:

What happens in these circumstances is that we play the game for a period of time and then we move on. There is no follow-up to that game, we never do a language feedback or analyze what we just did with them. In fact, even though anytime is good to play a game, sometimes that time usually coincides with the last class of the week or the month, it is not related to the course syllabus.

It is true that while playing a game your students have a good time and they may practice English. But using the game just for the sake of playing makes that time unproductive as there are better ways to practice the language without bringing a game.

Using games as prizes or last-minute resources leads to lack of seriousness in their use. That is, students will never see them as valuable learning activities, just as ways to avoid more serious work (especially if the game is merely played

'because students are bored' or 'because they deserve it'). Remember that students get bored in badly-planned classes, and what they actually deserve is quality teaching. In addition, not planning when to bring the game will show lack of preparation on your behalf and, even though you find it as a good alternative, it will eventually backfire.

In the end, these approaches may be partly true and beneficial, but without a clear pedagogical reflection they do more harm than good. If we play a game and there is not any growth in the student's learning process, then that game should have been avoided.

### **3.2 Toward a new vision for games in the classroom.**

What we have previously discussed is just the beginning of a reflection process. We do believe that games in a classroom are useful and even necessary. What we question is how we are using them. What we wish to propose is a new rationale for their use in which they are properly integrated to the syllabus and curriculum complementing them. In order for us to do so, we are going to discuss what games can do for you and how they can help you.

#### **3.2.1 The REAL advantages of using games.**

We have always believed that games are good to change the class pace or have some fun. Nevertheless, games do more than that for your students, as follows:

Games promote socialization, group work, and the creation of values. As games imply following rules, players realize the importance of mutual respect and cooperation as keys to succeed.

Games enable students to gain self-confidence, as they feel interested in participating. Therefore, classroom interaction becomes more natural and more people get involved in it, not just the same people all the time.

When properly chosen, games help develop critical thinking. In most games, you need to find, categorize, codify, and decodify information, solve problems, or make decisions. These skills are, in the end, the basis of critical thinking processes. Games make room for a more natural use of the L2, as all participants need to use the language so they can play well.

Games lower tension and anxiety in students. That helps create a better classroom atmosphere where more learning processes will take place.

In general, games are flexible enough to suit different ages or proficiency levels. They can be easily integrated into the syllabus. Moreover, games do not go out of

fashion as fast as textbooks or other materials do. What happens is that we like to use the latest games on the market or state-of-the-art materials, forgetting about the rest. Sometimes we do not need to buy more games; we need to find more ways to use the ones already existing. That is, upgrade the ones you have first and then buy if it is necessary.

### 3.2.2 Games promote the development of competencies and the use of multiple intelligences.

According to the Ministry of Education, there are six competencies to be developed by students as part of their learning and schooling process. Looking at games, we noticed that games promote the development of five of them. We are going to briefly define them (see Chart 1), then we are going to relate them to Multiple Intelligences while we show you some examples of games that can be suitable to develop competencies and use MI (see Chart 2.)

**CHART 1 – COMPETENCIES (According to the Ministry of Education – Curricular Guidelines)**

COMPETENCY	DEFINITION: It is the compound of processes and knowledge and diverse skills that...
BODY	...allows the person to improve the way he/she interacts with the context and surroundings.
COGNITIVE	...enables the person to learn meaningfully discourse that is appropriate to the context, as well as solve problems.
COMMUNICATIVE	...is required to produce proper messages. It is also related to the development of the 4 skills (listening/ speaking/ reading/ writing).
ETHICAL	...implies moral options around decisions which strengthen social connections through the exchange of ideas.
AESTHETIC	...is needed to produce, transform, and give more sense to beauty, as well as to holistically capture the quality of its surroundings.

**CHART 2 - COMPETENCIES, THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES AND SOME EXAMPLES OF GAMES THAT ALLOW THEIR DEVELOPMENT.**

COMPETENCY	INTELLIGENCE(S) IT IS RELATED TO	EXAMPLES OF GAMES (OR ACTIVITIES) YOU CAN USE TO DEVELOP THEM
BODY	BODY-KINESTHETIC, SPATIAL	TPR, Boggle, Search-a-words,
COGNITIVE	LOGICAL-MATHEMATICAL, LINGUISTIC	Problem-solving activities, trivia, grammar and vocabulary games, crossword puzzles.
COMMUNICATIVE	LINGUISTIC	Picture-sequence games, information-gap activities, role-plays, debates, Guess who, Taboo, 25 words or less, Catch Phrase, Tell us about
ETHICAL	INTERPERSONAL, INTRAPERSONAL	Problem-solving, Rumors, A Question of Scruples, Debates, The Book of Questions, Tell us about
AESTHETIC	MUSICAL, SPATIAL, BODY-KINESTHETIC	Pictionary

### 3.2.3 Games related to learning styles

In a classroom, we have to deal with different kinds of learners and learning styles. Now, more than ever, teachers are more aware of the need to plan lessons that allow good interaction among the different styles predominant in our students. Games, when properly selected, contribute to this idea. Some ways in which games do so are:

Games provide a good balance between field-dependent and field-independent learners. Combining students who are global learners with those who are analytical in a game allows for both kinds to contribute to the solution of the game. Also, field-independent learners can help the others grow in their language development.

Games help develop right brain hemisphere skills. Problem-solving and creativity are two necessary items when dealing with the language in real contexts. The right hemisphere is the one that allows

the learner to develop these two. Games require you to solve problems and find creative ways to do things. Besides, if you choose games in which players have to make teams, you're promoting a bigger degree of collaboration among peers. This social orientation of a game also promotes the development of right-hemisphere skills.

Games offer opportunities for visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners to interact, strengthen their predominant learning style, and improve the others. The fact that you prefer (or tend) to learn in one particular way does not exclude you from allowing yourself to learn in a different way. Games which emphasize a certain style or mix them in diverse tasks are a good option to promote good interaction among teammates.

### 3.2.4 Lesson planning for games.

As we have seen, games allow for a number of opportunities for group interaction and the development of

different skills. That has made us wonder why games do not seem to be planned as carefully as video or multimedia lessons or library visits. Schools and institutes require you to submit lesson plans for such activities, but nobody asks for any planning when you want to play a game. We would like to think of a different way to plan game lessons, using the Preview/View/Review approach, as follows:

**Preview (Pre-playing):** Preparation to the game. It could include consolidation of structures required for the game, vocabulary practice, or an introductory discussion about the game itself.

**View (Playing):** The act of playing the game itself. The teacher should pay a lot of attention to the use of the L2 throughout the game.

**Review (Post-playing):** Further feedback and reflection about the game: Achievements after playing, written or oral work, etc.

This lesson planning, along with setting clear purposes for the game will enable your students to benefit more from them as well as acknowledge them as just another part of the class with the same value as the other activities you plan for them.

#### 4. A VIEW TO A GAME: A game about games and activities.

Now that we have some clear criteria about what games can do in our classes, we have decided to extend the discussion a little further. We have never intended to create new games or activities. Instead, our reflection leads to better usage of the ones existing. (We have noticed that devising new materials without realizing what we

have in the first place only leads to wasting them, as we never learn to use either the new materials or the ones we already have.) In order for us to maximize the games and activities available, we are going to generate discussion by means of a game we called *A View to a Game* (The name is inspired by a James Bond movie.) To explain the game, we inspired ourselves with some games we had on hand:

#### *A VIEW TO A GAME - Playing Guide.*

1. Game overview: You are going to reflect on how to integrate different games and activities more effectively into your school syllabus. To do so, you and your team have to choose three games or activities, get familiarized with them (and if possible, try and play them) and fill out the grid as thoroughly as possible. Then, share with your colleagues what you found and listen to their findings. Needless to say, if all participants play this game carefully and conscientiously enough, YOU WILL ALL WIN!

2. Number of participants: As many fellow teachers as you can integrate (assuming you wish to share this with your colleagues at your institution). Then, split themselves into small groups.

3. Contents: Games and activities available at your institution (or that you have tried before), a grid with some information to fill out.

4. Setup.

✘ Decide who you are going to work with. Preferably, make sure your team includes teachers from different levels (pre-school, primary, secondary/basic, intermediate, advanced): the more, the merrier.

✘ Each team will select or be given three games and/or activities so that they analyze

them. If time allows, try to play them so you know what they are all about.

✱ After you have familiarized yourselves with them, proceed to fill out the following grid:

than just having fun, we realized that several doors opened. We saw more chances to improve the way our students learn, we understood that thought about our daily labor has to be present at all times, and once again we reminded

NAME OF GAME	STUDENTS' LINGUISTIC LEVEL	LINGUISTIC MODE TO PRACTICE	STRUCTURES	SKILLS, COMPETENCIES, OR LEARNING STYLES ENCOURAGED	INTELLIGENCE(S) INCREASED BY GAME
1					
2					
3					

Once you have completed the requested information, share your ideas with the remainder of your colleagues involved in the game.

### 5. CONCLUSION

One thing we have learned as teachers is that our classes should be varied, offering different options for our students to practice the language. The problem starts when we focus on the fun part only, bringing fun materials and activities and forgetting about the real function of our class. Before being entertainers, we must remember that we are **educators** in the first place. That implies a lot of reflection upon the value and consequences of everything we do in our classes. Not only are we teaching a language, we are trying to show our learners a culture and a set of values as part of a different and better society.

Games have been and will always be an important part of learning a second language. That is why they cannot be used away from the reality of our curricula and syllabi. Instead, they have to be related to them opening other opportunities to educate our pupils.

When we discovered that games are more

ourselves of our function in the classroom: Help our students be better. If games can help you and your students grow as speakers of a language and, above all, as human beings trying to make a better world, even if it sounds like a small contribution, then you and they invested class time wisely. And, a game played under those conditions is well worth repeating.

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**GAMES IN THE CLASSROOM:**  
**MORE THAN JUST HAVING FUN.**  
**A VIEW TO A GAME: A Game about**  
**Games and Activities**

<i>NAME OF GAME</i>	<i>STUDENTS' LINGUISTIC LEVEL</i>	<i>LINGUISTIC MODE TO PRACTICE</i>	<i>STRUCTURES</i>	<i>SKILLS, COMPETENCIES OR LEARNING STYLES ENCOURAGED</i>	<i>INTELLIGENCE INCREASED BY GAME</i>
Boggle	Preferably Intermediate to Advanced (Teens/Adults)	Speaking Reading	Vocabulary Practice, Review and Learning	Visual Skills Body Competency	Spatial, Body-Kinesthetic & Linguistic
Farm Families	Early Beginners (4 - 8 years old)	Speaking	Vocabulary recognition and/or review	Body Competency, Aural skills	Body-Kinesthetic, Linguistic
Guess Who?	Any level (at least 6 years old)	Speaking Listening Writing	Simple present, descriptive vocabulary & expressions	Communicative & Cognitive Competencies	Linguistic, Spatial, Logical Mathematical, Interpersonal