

Game-Based Language Learning: Activities for ESL Classes with Limited Access to Technology

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Abstract: Playing games is often believed to be an educationally unproductive activity in strictly traditional educational settings. The prevailing Indian educational system is no different. It puts a lot of onus on rote-learning which is clearly what Paulo Freire calls the 'banking concept of education' in which knowledge is merely transferred from one person to another. In an ESL class, such an approach reduces language learning to merely a process of re-production and does not allow co-creation of knowledge. Driven by learner-centred pedagogy, we propose adopting game-based language learning for ensuring learner engagement and developing intrinsic motivation. The immense and complex role that learner engagement, autonomy, and motivation have to play in the overall learning process is adequately addressed in game-based learning. This paper presents an argument in favour of adopting game-based language learning in ESL classes. The paper describes the benefits of game-based language learning and three non-digital games that can be used and adapted in ESL classes with limited or restricted access to computers and other technical devices. When carefully blended with text-based instruction, game-based learning can be very useful in enriching ESL learning in mainstream classrooms.

Keywords: ESL learning, game-based learning, learner-centred pedagogy, non-digital games, motivation.

1. Introduction

The traditional concept of education maintains a strict dichotomy between learning and playing and each is often viewed as the opposite of the other. Schools allow greater playtime for young children but play hours are severely curtailed as the students grow up. Playing games is viewed as a non-serious activity which is not promoted in traditional classroom settings in India. Teachers and administrators are often skeptical of game-based learning activities and see them only fit for the pre-school or elementary level learners. Even parents are found complaining that their children are too playful and do not take learning seriously. This is clearly because the immense learning potential of games is yet to be fully explored in classrooms across India. Game-based learning as an emerging approach in learner-centered pedagogy has tremendous potential (Johnson et al., 2011). As a planet, we spend three billion hours a week playing video and computer games (McGonigal, 2011). If we add to it billions of hours that are spent playing non-digital games the figures get staggering. There is no reason that games should be used only for entertainment purpose. The time spent in playing games can be leveraged for educational purposes, thereby developing a very engaging and motivating educational system. Game-based learning can be used in a number of learning environments right from kindergarten to undergraduate level be-

cause of its flexibility, adaptability, and its potential to meet various curricular needs. It can be applied for teaching all subjects including numeracy, literacy, and technical skills.

Though the use of technology in ESL classrooms in India has increased over the past few years, there are still many schools where smart-classrooms are distant dreams. India is a country of villages and small towns where technological advances have not made inroads. Such classrooms can benefit a lot by tapping the immense learning potential of non-digital games. We strongly believe that learning should be rooted in learner-centered pedagogy and that learners should play active role during the learning process. Supported by the cognitive development theory of Lev Vygotsky which underlines the importance of game play in cognitive development, this paper argues in favour of teaching literacy and language skills, especially in ESL classrooms, through games. The paper defines the concept of game-based learning and presents a meta-analysis of the advantages of adopting it in ESL classes. Three game-based classroom activities are also described which can be used for learners of different levels and age groups in classrooms with limited or no access to technology. Though this paper is grounded in Indian teaching context, these activities can be useful for teachers working in similar contexts across the world. Throughout the paper when we mention language teaching our focus is on English language teaching (ELT) but certainly not limited to it. Game-based lessons can be designed for teaching other languages too.

2. Game-Based Learning

Game-based learning (GBL) is one of the ways in which learner-centered pedagogy can be implemented in the classroom in order to engage and motivate learners. It is an approach to teaching which balances the subject content with gameplay in a learning context and which has well-defined learning outcomes (EdTechReview, 2013). It incorporates the use of games for teaching as well as the gamification of learning process. The basic idea is that when a student masters the game, skills and knowledge are also mastered (Farber, 2014). In this context a game is defined as a system in which players engage in an abstract challenge, defined by rules, interactivity, and feedback, that results in a quantifiable outcome often eliciting an emotional reaction (Kapp, 2012). It is important to note that the term '*game*' is not limited to only digital or video games. Games and game-design fall into transmedial category (Juul, J., 2005) and include both digital and non-digital artifacts. The only criterion they must fulfill is that there must be some quantifiable outcome and some learning must take place. The other crucial term in this context is 'gamification' which is the use of game-design elements in non-game contexts (Deterding et al., 2011). Gamification uses games for other purposes than their normal expected use for entertainment. For the sake of simplicity we will use GBL (game-based learning) as an umbrella term for game-based learning activities and gamification of regular lessons in this paper.

It should also be clarified what we do not mean by game-based learning (GBL). GBL does not mean using colourful graphics, videos, or PowerPoint presentations for instructive purposes. GBL is also fundamentally different from edutainment. Edutainment provides thinly disguised educational material as entertainment. It focuses on 'education' and 'entertainment' – things that others provide. Game-based learning emphasizes 'playing' and 'learning' – activities that learners do. The edutainment industry offers a combined package of entertainment

and education of which the learners are passive recipients. This defeats the whole purpose of learner-centered pedagogy which drives GBL. Learner should not be passive recipient of knowledge or unaware of the implications of what they are doing. One is likely to learn the most, and enjoy the most, if one is engaged as an active participant, not a passive recipient (Resnik, 2004).

3. Advantages of Game-Based Language Learning

Through a meta-analysis of relevant literature, several advantages of game-based learning come to light that strongly suggest that it would create an engaging classroom environment which would motivate learners to reach their maximum potential. Though these advantages can be applicable to any learning context in general, here is how they are especially relevant to language learning:

3.1 Promotes learner-centered pedagogy

Game-based learning promotes learner-centered pedagogy as it allows the learners to be active participants in the learning process. The teacher facilitates game-based activity and then leads a class discussion on both the content and the overall experience (Farber, 2014). Game-based learning helps both the teachers and learners to proceed through the learning process together. This is what Paulo Freire describes as an '*authentic education*' –

“Authentic education is not carried on by “A” for “B” or by “A” about “B,” but rather by “A” with “B,” mediated by the world – a world which impresses and challenges both parties, giving rise to views or opinions about it.” (Freire, 1996, p. 74)

3.2 Ensures engagement

One of the biggest challenges that ESL teachers face is the lack of interest among learners. Either learners are not interested in the learning material or they are too intimidated by it. In order to create effective learning engagement, it is imperative to hold the attention of learners for sustained time periods and make the content accessible. Games with difficult but achievable challenges capture the imagination of learners and keep them engaged for sustained time periods. Learners are not easily bored even if the activity is repetitive.

3.3 Provides motivation

Well-designed challenges and self-rewarding nature of game-based activities spur learners to persevere and give their best. Through continuous feedback GBL provides visible signs of progress, showing the learners how they are moving towards mastering a set of content or a skill. As the learners immediately see the result of their actions, it gratifies their sense of fulfilment and eggs them on to play better. It ensures that the learners carry on playing even if they do not see the far-reaching effects of gaining mastery over vocabulary, grammar, or other aspects of language. This kind of motivation is very important as Gardner and Lambert (1959) showed in their pioneering study that language achievement is not only strongly related to language aptitude, but to motivation as well.

Motivation is also strongly related to choice and challenge. Self-determination theory states that the freedom to choose is a necessary prerequisite for motivation (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Word-games like scrabble or simulation based games allow the learners to make choices for which they are responsible. Challenge is correlated with both intrinsic motivation and motivation related to fostering competence and student efficacy (R.W. White, 1959). Game-based learning challenges learners to give their best and thereby motivates them. If the structure of game or gamification design is too easy, the learners would not be motivated enough. The challenge and reward system should be designed in such a way that the difficulty level is high yet achievable.

3.4 Fosters creativity

In a GBL classroom, there is a lot of scope for fostering creativity and imagination. GBL encourages learners to find outside of the box solutions. Students can design their own games or create variations of old games. Teachers can gamify language activities in many ways. Instead of asking students to memorize five ways of controlling pollution from a text, they can set a task like this – “Imagine that you are the pollution controller of our city. What effective low-cost solutions would you apply for controlling pollution? You gain two stars for each solution you suggest. If you suggest a zero-cost solution you gain five stars!” This activity has real-world concern, is contextualized, and requires the learner to think creatively for finding the solution. As the learners are free to come up with a solution, they may invent one of their own. In a language class there are several other opportunities to foster creativity such as writing stories based on games, making comic strips, creating anagrams, or writing about gaming experiences. Learners will have to use all the new vocabulary that they must have learnt on the way.

3.5 Instils empathy and social skills

In a traditional classroom sharing is often seen as cheating and not a way of bringing every one forward. But in a GBL classroom learners interact to help others or collaborate to get through a difficult task. It is viewed as a way of improving communication and social skills. Learning does not only happen while reading textbooks and practicing written lessons. It also takes place while interacting with people. This is especially true for language learning as Larsen-Freeman points out:

“Language, or grammar, is not about having; it is about doing; participating in social experience.”

(As cited by Meddings and Thornbury, 2011, p. 17)

When multiple players interact through the game, these interactions have impact on players’ social skills. Playing simulated games where learners take on roles of soldiers, spies, or conflict-zone victims develops empathy and triggers discussions about ethics and ethical choices. Teachers can leverage the potential of such games to start discussions about empathy, morality, and ethical values.

3.6 Cost-effective

It may sound unlikely but game-based learning is very cost effective. Non-digital board or block games do not cost much and can be used for various grades. Oral games do not need any material at all. Schools which have access to computers can get digital games that are developed for educational purposes and are relatively cheaper. They can give better value for money if the same game is used across the curriculum and for different grades. Many educational games are available for free download.

3.7 Creates a zone of proximal development

GBL creates a zone of proximal development through scaffolding and mentoring. The 'zone of proximal development' is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). It represents the level of competence that a learner may achieve in near future when he/she tries to solve problems under the supervision of the teacher and with the help of more capable peers. To accomplish that goal the technique of scaffolding was developed. Scaffolding is temporary instructional support that helps learners to understand complex concepts. As the student becomes familiar with the concept and can solve problems independently, the instructional support is slowly withdrawn. Scaffolding is used in GBL in the form of levels which enable learners to move from level to level, achieving success as they progress toward the ultimate goal. In such a context, the teacher's task is to provide scaffolding to the learners which mean providing help as and when required by the learner, making lessons flexible, and always willing to change the plans for the sake of increased learner engagement. According to Vygotsky, this is how a zone of proximal development is established where the teacher and the student co-construct knowledge (Lake, 2012).

3.8 Co-creation of knowledge

In a GBL classroom the teacher and learners are co-participants in the creation of classroom discourse. Everyone is both a teacher and a student. Both the teacher and learners are free to utilise any learning opportunities that arise out of games. It resembles what Paulo Freire (1996) described as a class where "knowledge is sought and not where it is transmitted".

4. Three Games for Classrooms with Limited or no Access to Technology

Teachers can develop and use various games for classroom activities that do not require the use of computer or any electronic device at all. Here we describe three games that we have found particularly flexible for learners of different age groups or ability and generative in terms of language emergence.

4.1 Flipped Spelling Bee

Learning the spelling and meaning of new words often becomes a monotonous task for most ESL learners. But this task can be flipped and turned into a fun game. Best played individually, the student has to spell a word aloud by listening to its meaning. Speaking slowly and clearly, the teacher announces the meaning of a word.

The student has to listen carefully and spell the word correctly within a pre-decided time limit, say 20 seconds. The student may ask for the meaning to be repeated if necessary. She must say it loud enough for the teacher to hear it, who decides whether the spelling is correct or not. If the correct spelling is given, the student remains in the game. If the spelling is incorrect, she is eliminated from the game. The teacher tells the correct spelling of that word and then reads a new meaning to the next student. The game goes on till only two students are left. If one player misspells a word, the other player must spell that word correctly, plus one more word to be declared the winner of the spelling bee. The teacher can add rules or increase difficulty level to make the game more challenging.

4.2 Anagrams

Anagrams are words or phrases formed by rearranging the letters of others words or phrases by using the original letters exactly once. Easily adaptable for individual, pair, or group work; anagrams help the learners to think creatively, build vocabulary, and have fun. The teacher writes an anagram on the board; for example, 'LOW TITLE MEN' and provides a clue, 'the name of a novel'. The students work in pairs/groups or individually to solve the anagram in a limited time. If it is correctly solved then the teacher provides another anagram and the game goes on. The pair/group or person who solves maximum number of anagrams in the given time becomes the winner. It is fine if more than one student or group wins. The purpose of the game is not only to engage students, but also to create an encouraging classroom environment where every student is willing to take risk and participate. It is advisable to keep a list of anagrams with clues at hand, so that the game proceeds smoothly if the learners come up with quick answers. It is a good practice to use words that relate to the topics which students have recently studied. The difficulty of anagrams can be adjusted as per the level of the learners. Remember to display the name of the winners on the classroom notice board till next game. In a variation of this game, the students can form teams and take turns to ask anagrams to each other. The team which cannot solve a given anagram loses a point. The team which scores maximum points becomes the class winner.

4.3 Complete the story

This game is aimed to help students think creatively and produce connected sentences. Write an intriguing sentence on the board that may lead to a variety of follow up sentences. For example, 'Lenny was in trouble.' Students work in groups or pairs, taking turns to write a new sentence until a short story is completed. Fix a time limit so that the students finish in time to share their stories with the whole class. Encourage the students to use their imagination and creativity freely. Any story is acceptable as long as the sentences are coherent and connected through a core theme. The story that is liked best by the class wins the title of 'Story of the Month'. A copy of the story may be displayed on the classroom notice board. Depending on the age and ability of students, adding some other dimensions can make the game more challenging and fun. For example, the story must have two animal characters or the story must be on the theme of friendship.

5. Conclusion

Game-based learning is an excellent way of making classrooms acquisition rich. It supports schools and teachers in making the most of the technologies they already possess and works for those who teach in low-tech situations. It is well understood that introducing GBL in a traditional school system might be a tough challenge because generally teachers do not design the course syllabus. The administration and parents may be skeptical about the effectiveness of GBL and may not be supportive. In order to have the best of both worlds, it is a good idea to blend GBL with the traditional text-based instruction. This practice would be of help to those teachers who may need time to develop new GBL lessons. It would also allow them to compare the outcome of both methods, reflecting upon which they could develop contextually relevant blended lessons.

The future holds a bright prospect for innovative game-based learning practices. As teachers and educators we need to use GBL in innovative ways. Games will keep evolving and so will game-based learning. Pilot studies and further researches should be conducted in India in order to analyse the effectiveness of game-based learning in Indian scenario especially in ESL classrooms. In conclusion, there is one point which must be emphasized. Game-based lessons must be designed to motivate the learners to continue the learning process. Such a lesson should not be like *chocolate covered broccoli* as it would quickly deflate the motivation bubble in the classroom (Farber, 2014). It should be also kept in mind that any class consists of learners of different abilities. Therefore games must have different difficulty levels to choose from. GBL hones the talents and skills of learners for meaningful purposes which results in highly motivated, engaged, empowered, and happy learners. There is immense learning potential that is just waiting to be tapped. It is time to make a smart move and join the game.

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