

УДК 17.51

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TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES TO YOUNG LEARNERS THROUGH COMMUNICATIVE GAMES

Summary: This article deals with the importance and benefits of using communicative games in teaching foreign languages to young learners.

Key words: young learners, short attention spans, communicative techniques, competitive games, cooperative games, linguistic games, communicative games, a non-threatening way, skills of initiative, problem-solving, self-awareness, working cooperatively in teams.

Teaching English to Young Learners is a rapidly growing field around the world, and English education is increasingly found at the primary levels. The main goal of teaching young learners is to encourage children to use the target language in their life. It means developing their communicative skills, competency and culture.

Communicative approach contrasts sharply with the traditional approach to language teaching. This is an approach to language teaching that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of study. Communicative activities include any activities that encourage and require a learner to speak with and listen to other learners, these activities have real purposes: to find information, break down barriers, talk about self, and learn about the culture.

Young learners tend to have short attention spans and a lot of physical energy. In addition, they are very much linked to their surroundings and are more interested in the physical and the tangible. As Scott and Yetrebeg describe, "Their own understanding comes through hands and eyes and ears. The physical world is dominant at all times."

Young children are extremely imaginative and fantasy is very much a part of their world, therefore game activities are considered to be a very effective way of learning a foreign language, because games can play a big part in helping participants build relationships, and to feel equal, and, of course, they help activate pupils who may have been inactive before, due to lack of interest. It is easier to open up and forget the shyness when playing a game because the atmosphere is not as serious and more emphasis is put on fluency rather than grammatical correctness.

Games are not just time-filling activities but have a great educational value and it can be used in the classroom to make learners use the language instead of just thinking about learning the correct forms.

There are different kinds of games: *competitive games*, in which pupils work in a group and race to be the first to reach the goal, *cooperative games*, in which pupils work in a group together towards a common goal, *linguistic games*, the goal of which is linguistic accuracy, that is producing a correct structure, remembering the correct word, and *communicative games*, in which pupils are very involved the carrying out of a task such as drawing, matching, rewriting, filling in a chart, etc.

Games are used for three purposes:

- to warm up the class at the beginning of the lesson
- to practice language or a structure which is being studied in the lesson
- to recycle the learnt material

The following games are mostly used in a language classes: Find someone who, Fly Swat, Line ups, Puzzles, Puzzle-solving, Miming, Can I cross the river?, Bingo, Listen and do, Guessing, Matching, Board games, Card games, Role plays and etc.

Games have *memorizing* and *communicating* stages:

Memorization games (or in memorizing stage) are designed to fix the meaning of the word in the learner's mind and their focus is on accuracy rather than fluency. The games used in this stage are very simple versions of matching, guessing, miming and their aim is to get the learners to remember and to produce the right word.

In *Communication* games (or in communicating stage) the focus is on successful completion of a goal such as finding a person, solving a puzzle, rather than on correct production of lexis and structures. In this stage, language is less controlled and there is more flexibility and creativity required.

Let's analyse some games for young learners.

1. Card game: ALPHA-FLIP

"Alpha-Flip" is a fun card game designed to teach young learners the sounds and written forms of the English Alphabet, and to directly associate the letters with the initial sounds in vocabulary items. Each alpha-flip set consists of 26 alphabet cards and 26 picture cards. This is basically a memory game where all of the cards are placed face down on the floor or table. Learners take turns, and they are allowed to turn over two of the cards. If they turn over a letter and a picture that employs that letter as its initial sound, they can "keep" the cards and score points. If the cards do not match up, they must turn them over again and it becomes the next learner's turn. Obviously the way to win the game and obtain the most cards is to watch the cards others turn over and try to remember:

- a) what sound that word begins with
- b) what vocabulary item goes with that letter
- c) where the cards are!


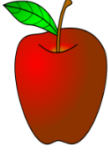

It is an excellent game for introducing alphabet and alphabet vocabulary to new learners in a fun and engaging way, and as they become more proficient additional sets can be introduced or combined.

2. Find the word.

"Find the word" game is considered to one of the most interesting and favourite games of young learners. Teachers can use this game at all stages of the lesson: at the beginning of the lesson this game can be used to predict the topic/theme

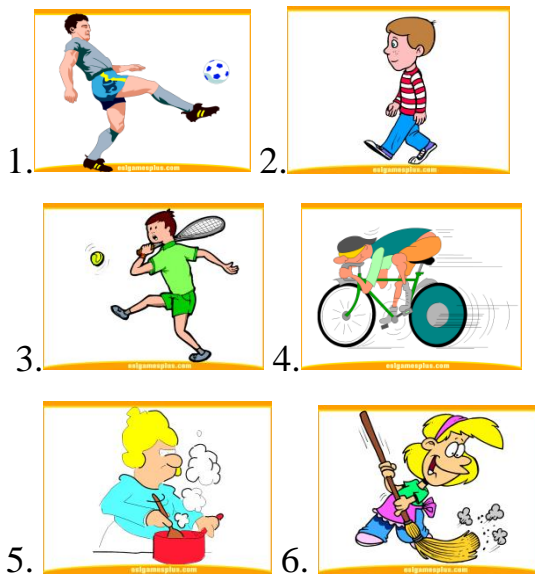
of the lesson, after presentation of the new theme it can be used to practice the words learnt.

Teacher will show a handout with different pictures. Pupils should think logically and guess what word is hidden there. In this way they can find out the name of the theme of the lesson.

					
F	A	M	I	L	Y

3. Matching game

Pupils are asked to match the pictures with the sentences by guessing the meaning. This game is much more fun than the traditional method in which the teacher gives the translation of the new words. It also helps to develop learners' cognitive skills:



- a) I can ride a bike
- b) I can sweep the floor
- c) I can cook
- d) I can play tennis
- e) I can play football
- f) I can walk

KEYS:

1-e, 2-f, 3-d, 4-a, 5-c, 6-b

This game helps young learners not only to have fun and guess the word, but also to reinforce previous grammar rules and vocabulary.

4. Miming

Someone mimes an action and the others try to guess what it is. This game can provide further practice of a wider variety of lexical and grammatical units. One pupil choose a card and mimes a typical activity that it involves. The others try to guess it by asking questions.

Example: Pupil chooses a job and mimes it, the others will ask questions, such as:

- *Do you work at school?*
- *Do you teach children?*
- *Are you a teacher?*

This game can be used as a guessing game. The wordless activity leads the learners to talk quite naturally.

Games can lower anxiety, encourage, entertain, teach, and promote fluency. They are highly motivating and entertaining, and they can give shy pupils more opportunity to express their opinions and feelings. They also enable learners to acquire new experiences within a foreign language which are not always possible during a typical lesson. Young learners may wish to play games purely for fun. Therefore teachers need to consider which games to use, when to use them, how to link them up with the syllabus, textbook or program and how, more specifically, different games will benefit pupils in different ways. They might consider the following questions as they choose a game:

Which language does the game target?

Which skills does it practice? The language skill focus could be any one of the major skills of listening, speaking, reading or writing.

What type of game is it?

What's the purpose for using it?

Does it fit the pupils? How can it be simplified or made more complex if necessary?

How much interaction and participation is there?

If games are to bring desired results, they must correspond to either the pupil's level, or age, or to the material that is to be introduced or practised. Not all games are

appropriate for all pupils irrespective of their age. Different age groups require various topics, materials, and modes of games. Many games require modification in use when the pupils' need is taken into consideration and, of course, teachers must be very attentive while giving instructions if they want to encourage their pupils to learn more. When giving instructions to younger learners, a few words in the mother tongue would be the quickest way to make everything clear, as games are best set up by demonstration rather than by lengthy explanation and it is very important not to play a game for too long, because they will begin to lose their interest. It is best to stop a game at its peak. *The key to a successful language game* is that the rules are clear, the ultimate goal is well defined and the game must be fun.

In conclusion, we want to say that the benefits of games are great not only for learners but also for teachers, because using games in teaching:

- lowers affective filter, encourages creative and spontaneous use of language
- reinforces vocabulary/ grammar and focuses on them communicatively
- promotes communicative competence and healthy competition
- motivates, fosters whole class participation, builds class cohesion
- utilizes all four skills and requires minimum preparation after development

A game should be planned into the day's lesson right along with exercises, dialogues and reading practice. It should not be an afterthought.

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