USING GAMES TO MOTIVATE CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS’ INTEREST IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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Abstract

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This paper explores the use of games as a teaching strategy for motivating Chinese college students’ interest in learning English. The paper reviews definitions of ESL games, benefits of using ESL games in English language teaching, types of ESL games, and factors that influence the effectiveness of ESL games. In view of the current problems and challenges in college English teaching in present-day China, the paper argues that it is feasible to use games to motivate Chinese college students. Both teachers and students can benefit from ESL games in that they can lower students’ anxiety, sustain students’ interest in learning English, and help them learn the language. The paper concludes with recommendations for college English teachers in China.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Interest, as the old saying goes, is the best teacher. If students are interested in English, they are more likely to overcome the difficulties they may encounter in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). If students are not interested in English, they may not learn it well or feel it is very difficult to learn it.

In China, college students (non-English majors) must pass the CET-4 (College English Test-Band 4, a national English examination for non-English majors) or the CET-6 (College English Test-Band 6, a national English examination for non-English majors) before they graduate; otherwise, they will not get an undergraduate diploma. Under such pressure, college English teachers in China tend to adopt a textbook-centered teaching approach; as a result, the classroom atmosphere is often dull and inactive, and students are very passive and often silent. In the past decades, more and more Chinese college students found that they lost interest in learning English, and they could not use English proficiently for communication purposes although they have learned English for many years. They spent a lot of time on passing the exams and improving their writing and reading skills at the expense of learning English for real communication.

Given these circumstances, how to arouse Chinese college students’ interest in English and improve the class atmosphere is of great importance. There are many ways to teach English as a foreign language, but one of exciting and rewarding ways is to use ESL games. Appropriate games can lower students’ anxiety, sustain students’ interests in learning English, and help them learn and retain the language such as new words, new concepts, language points, and grammar in a fun way. However, ESL games are not just activities
aimed at breaking the ice between teachers and students. For an ESL game to work in a college English class in China, it should be a well-organized activity that allows college students to practice English; it should also be appropriate for college students with their learning styles and English language proficiency being taken into account.

Statement of the Problem

The problem expressed as a question is as follows: How can ESL games be used to effectively motivate Chinese college students’ interest in learning English?

Definition of Terms

EFL: English as a Foreign Language
ELT: English Language Teaching. It specifically refers to the teaching of English to students whose native language is not English.
ESL: English as a Second Language
ESL Game: An ESL game is a structured activity with a set of rules and a competition component. It is usually used as an educational tool and sometimes also adopted for entertainment purposes.

Delimitations of the Research

The research has been conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville over eighty-eight days. Primary searches were conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Wilson databases, Academic Search Elite, Google and Google Scholar. Key search topics included “EFL,” “ESL,” “ESL games,” and “ELT in China.”
Method of Approach

A brief review of the literature on the relationship between ESL games and English learning was conducted. A second review of the literature on related issues, including types of ESL games, features of effective ESL games and ELT in China, was also conducted. The findings were summarized and recommendations were made.

Summary of Results

College English teachers in China are faced with the challenge of improving college students’ interest in English because only when the students have motivation and interest in learning English, will they learn it well. The review of related literature shows that teachers can use ESL games to deal with the challenge to a certain extent and that only appropriate ESL games allow them to attain their teaching goals.
Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

This chapter reviews definitions of game and benefits of using ESL games in language teaching. It also reviews studies on types of ESL games and factors affecting the effectiveness of ESL games. It also provides an overview of College English Teaching in China.

Definitions of ‘Game’

There are multiple definitions of “game.” All available definitions seem to be descriptions of the most common characteristics of games. A game can be defined as a fun activity with a set of rules and a competition element (Allery, 2004; Hadfield, 1990; Oxford Dictionary, 2001).

With regard to ESL games, Kramer (2000) argues that they should have specific rules and be fun to participate in. A similar idea is also forwarded by Byrne (1995), who defines ESL games as a form of play governed by rules.

Then what is a good ESL game? Tyson (2000) defines a good ESL game as something enjoyable for all participants, competitive but friendly, keeping participants involved with the English language, helping students focus on the use of the language, and of course allowing students to learn.

In brief, ESL games are not just activities mainly aimed to break the ice or to kill time during a class. A well designed ESL game is rule-governed, has specific pedagogical goals, and enhances language acquisition.

Benefits of Using ESL Games: Theoretical Perspectives

Various benefits come with using ESL games in English language teaching. ESL
games can be both beneficial to teachers and students. ESL games can help teachers introduce new concepts, vocabulary, and grammar points. To some extent, they not only can enhance students’ affective and cognitive development, but also can improve class dynamics (Hadfield, 1990; Uberrnan, 1998; Lengeling & Malarcher, 1997).

First of all, ESL games can provide students with opportunities to use English for real communication. Playing games in the classroom can not only increase students’ ability in using language, as students get more chances to speak English with a situated purpose, but it can also connect them to the real usage of language outside the class (Hatch, 1998; S. K. Lee, 1995; Deesri, 2002). Hadfield (1990) suggested that games be used to develop students’ skills if they are willing to participate. His study shows that students can both enjoy themselves and learn some grammatical rules in class, and they also have a chance to practice and use English with a purpose. ESL games can be very effective in developing students’ language skills and proficiency.

Secondly, ESL games can lower students’ anxiety. Stress is the major barrier for language learners especially beginners. Beginners may have to deal with various unfamiliar words and grammatical structures. They may feel uncomfortable and insecure, which affects their ability to learn. Schultz (1988) argues that the only way to help students forget their nervousness is to give them some easy tasks such as games. W. Lee. (1979) and Richard-Amato (1988) agree that games are a good learning tool for students who just start to learn a new language. Games can contribute to a relaxed environment, which can help learners remember things faster and use the target language rather than think about its form (W. Lee, 1979). Schultz (1988) also believes that students may stop thinking about language
and begin using it in a spontaneous and natural way when they play games, because they are relaxed and have fun from those games. Nguyen and Khuat (2003) also state that ESL games can make language learning fun and relaxed. Sometimes teachers can use a game to “trick” students into learning. As Oxford and Crookall (1989) stated, it is natural that language teachers incorporate games into their class.

Thirdly, ESL games can arouse students’ interest in learning English. ESL games can attract students’ attention (Deesri, 2002) and also create a competitive environment that keeps them interested (Nguyen & Khuat, 2003). Richard-Amato (1996) argues that students will definitely participate in games because they will try to win the games.

In addition, ESL games can be used to engage students in cooperative and team learning (Ersoz, 2000). They are good ice-breakers from usual routines of a traditional class as well.

**Types of ESL games**

It is difficult to categorize games because categories often overlap. Shie (2003) confirms the difficulty of categorizing games. Scholars classify games according to different criteria, such as functions, student levels, and learning styles.

This paper thus adopts Hadfield’s (1999) classification of ESL games. She purposes two ways of classifying ESL games. Her first way is dividing games into two types: competitive games and cooperative games. In the former type of games, participants try to reach the goal of a game first. In the latter type of games, participants work together to reach a common goal. Hadfield also mentions linguistic games and communicative games. Linguistic games focus on accuracy, such as the correct usage of each single word, whereas
communicative games focus on fluency. Communicative games give priority to successful communication rather than to correctness of language.

According to the second taxonomy proposed by Hadfield (1999), there are many more categories of ESL games. Depending on the technique used, there are ESL game such as information gap, guessing, search, matching, exchanging, collecting, combining, arranging, card games, board games, puzzles, and role-playing. Students can play games in pairs, in groups, or with the whole class; and through the games, students can learn how to cooperate with their partners or team members.

In addition, De Jager (2009) points out that games can be divided into mental games and physical games, ranging from active to more quiet, and from basic to advanced. Mental games keep students mainly focused on speaking and producing the target language, whereas physical games keep students concentrated on their own answers.

**Factors Affecting the Effectiveness of Games**

ESL teachers have a variety of choices to make on which games to use in a specific class and which games will be most appropriate and successful with their students (Carrier, 1990). It is difficult for ESL teachers to find a perfect game that meets all requirements (Deesri, 2002). There are four main factors that can influence the effectiveness of an ESL game: students’ English proficiency, students’ characteristics, students’ learning styles, and the feasibility of the game (Deesri, 2002; Carrier, 1990).

First, ESL teacher should take the level of students into account when they design games for a class (Deesri, 2002). If a game is appropriate for the level of students, it will help them learn English. If a game is not appropriate, it will be a waste of time. Even it could
Second, different students have different features in terms of motivation and attitude
(Deesri, 2002). They maybe “serious-minded or light-hearted;” they maybe “highly
motivated to learn or not” (Deesri, 2002). All these features could influence the effectiveness
of a game. Students’ motivation plays a significant role in second language learning. If
students do not seem motivated to learn, how can this game be effective? ESL teacher should
find out what students are most interested in and design a game that caters for students’
tastes.

Third, different students have different learning styles (Vernon, 2008). It is important
for ESL teachers to understand ESL students’ learning styles so as to reach students more
effectively. Different learning styles have different impact on the effectiveness of a game in
different ways. Vernon (2008) states that there are four basic ways people process
information, accordingly, four learning styles (i.e., auditory learning style, visual learning
style, tactile learning style, and kinesthetic learning styles). Auditory learners “enjoy verbal
games in a group setting;” visual learners prefer a quiet approach; tactile learners “benefit
most from hands-on instruction;” and kinesthetic learners like to involve their whole bodies
(Vernon, 2008).

Fourth, students’ age is another important factor. McCormick (2009) divided ESL
learners into five groups: toddlers, elementary students, junior high school students, high
school students and adults. For toddlers, it is better to choose ESL games that focus on
recognizing vocabulary because they probably are not yet fluent in their native language. For
elementary students, it is better to choose ESL games that focus on recognizing vocabulary
and practicing simple three-to-five-word sentences. For junior high school students, it is better to choose games that focus on teamwork or cooperation because they are probably shy and afraid of making mistakes in front of their peers. For high school students, it is better to choose games that focus on their independent ability. For adults who need conversation skills for work, business, or travel, it is better to choose games that focus on real communication to give them authentic experiences.

Finally, the feasibility of a game in the classroom setting affects the effectiveness of a game to the greatest extent. Carrier (1990) states that there is a big difference between using a game “in the morning or in the afternoon, on Monday or Friday.” The same game used at different times or in different classes may work out differently.

**College English Teaching (CET) in China**

English Language Teaching (ELT) was started in China in the 19th century when foreign missionaries came to China (Boyle, 2000). ELT entered into the formal educational system in the early 20th century. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the government came to realize the importance of foreign languages in the education of professionals and in the development of science and technology. However, there was a mass anti-English movement during the Cultural Revolution because English was perceived as the language of capitalist countries. After China adopted the open door policy, it began to realize that it was absolutely necessary for its citizens to learn other foreign languages, especially English. The growing need of the country’s involvement in international affairs placed great demands on English language teaching.

Before 1982, ELT in China was heavily influence by a teaching approach originated
in Russia, which attached importance to textbook-centeredness, teacher-centeredness, and classroom-centeredness. This kind of teaching approach was nicknamed as a spoon-fed approach in that students passively listen to lectures and take notes.

In recent years, especially since China won the bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games, China has seen an explosion in the demand for English (Zhu, 2007). More and more Chinese people are eager to master one second language, especially English. They not only want to learn it, but also want to use it fluently and accurately. There are now more teachers and learners of English in China than any other country. Learning English has become a trend. People have a strong motivation to learn English and communicate in English. Meanwhile, because of the influence of communicative language teaching and other language teaching approaches from outside the country (Jin, 2002), ELT in China has experienced many reforms. ELT has shifted its focus from developing students’ reading and writing skills as well as teaching grammar and vocabulary to developing student’s communicative competence, arousing their interest and encouraging their participation. In addition, China has made great progress in terms of curriculum, textbooks, and teaching methods.

Problems in College English Teaching in Present-Day China

Despite the reforms and achievements, ELT in China has encountered problems. Boyle (2000) mentioned that more and more English learners found that they could not use English to communicate skillfully although they have learned English for many years. Hadfield (1990) points out that one of the problems with college English teaching in China is that most college students could not use English proficiently for communication purposes despite the fact that they have attended many years of English classes. As a result, they all get
bored and lose their interest in learning English.

The problem is largely due to the requirement that college students in China must pass the CET-4 test or CET-6 test to get their undergraduate degrees. Many students who could pass the tests still cannot communicate with others in English. College students always complain that teachers pay more attention to preparing them for the tests while neglecting to cultivate their ability to speak English. When teachers place more stress on the tests, students may lose interest in learning English. Meanwhile, students spend a lot of time memorizing words and phrases in order to pass the tests, but they cannot use English appropriately in practice. Some students have no chance to improve their listening and speaking skills because their universities have no language labs or multi-media facilities.

Another problem is that a large proportion of college English teachers in China only have a bachelor’s degree without appropriate training. Lin (2002) emphasizes that the “quality and the quantity of English teachers need to be improved” (p. 2). Universities should pay more attention to English teachers’ pre-service and in–service training.

Chapter 3 Recommendations and Conclusion
The review of related literature shows that ESL games are of great benefit to both English teachers and students. Besides motivating students to learn English in a meaningful and fun way, ESL games also give opportunities for students to explore the English language itself.

**Recommendations**

Constraints on using ESL games in the Chinese classroom are discussed before suggestions are made.

**Constraints on Using ESL Games in the Chinese Classroom.** Vernon (2008) identified three major problems in relation to ESL games: 1) problems with planning a lesson, such as lack of time or new ideas; 2) problems with materials, such as difficulty in finding or adapting materials; and 3) problems with classroom management, for example, when students are uncooperative or inattentive, or they are of mixed levels. Games sometimes do not work very well due to students’ different learning styles and preferences. Because of the limitations of class time and class size, it is not always easy to incorporate ESL games into a class.

The Chinese English classroom has its own issues in using ESL games due to the fact that the Chinese education system is very different from Western education systems. Constraints on using ESL games in the Chinese classroom are discussed below.

First, students’ expectations and attitudes play an important role in learning English. Most students maybe willing to join games, some maybe reluctant to play games with their team members, and the rest may state directly that they do not like games.

Second, students may speak Chinese when they play ESL game. It is hard to control the use of the first language when teachers use ESL games as a tool to have students practice
their English. Students, especially because they speak the same language, may prefer to speak Chinese rather than English.

Third, many universities lack language labs or multi-media facilities due to lack of funding. Teachers may find it difficult to employ or carry out ESL games that require modern facilities. They may thus have a smaller pool of ESL games to choose from.

Finally, a further problem is that the CET-4 and CET-6 tests defeat the purpose of learning English for communicative purposes. College English teachers in China may not afford to adopt ESL games due to the pressure from preparing students for the tests. Students may be concerned about exams as well and want their teachers to help them pass the tests.

College English teachers in China should be aware of the above constraints on using ESL games in the classroom. Despite all the constraints, college English teachers should find ways to incorporate ESL games into their classroom so that their classes can be more meaningful, effective, and fun. Whether an ESL game is effective or not depends on several factors as mentioned in the previous chapter.

**Suggestions for Using ESL games in the Chinese Classroom.** Below are general principles that college English teachers in China can follow when using ESL games:

- Find out students’ proficiency level
- Identify students’ characteristics
- Choose or design games appropriate for students
- Consider how to carry out games

Besides the above general principles, college English teachers should be especially aware that the effectiveness of an ESL game depends on how it is designed and whether it is
appropriate. Some games must be adapted in order to fit students’ language levels, characteristics, and learning styles. It is teachers’ responsibility to choose proper games according to specific situations in order to achieve the maximum effectiveness of the games. Teachers should choose games that meet the objectives of a class, considering students’ age, attitude, and motivation, and decide when to use ESL games because timing is important.

When college English teachers choose games for their students, they should follow some criteria. Tyson (2000) gives some tips for ESL teachers to choose games: a game should be more than just fun, include “friendly” competition, and keep all students interested and involved; the game should also provide a chance for students to use the target language and keep students concentrated on meaning rather than on language forms.

College English teachers may also find Kopecky’s (2009) suggestions on how to design games useful.

First, ESL teachers should set a clear teaching goal for a class if the class has a game. They should make sure all students know the goal of a game and help them keep in mind the goal during the class. Teachers may give a demonstration if necessary to help students understand how to play the game.

Second, ESL teachers should understand students’ interest. Interest plays a significant role in second language learning. Whether students can accept a game as a classroom teaching tool or not mostly depends on their interest.

Third, ESL teachers should monitor their class time effectively to make sure everyone takes an active part in a game. Teachers should keep students busy and do not give them chances to wait, sit without doing anything, or simply waste time. If some students finish the
game earlier, teachers may give them extra work to do while they are waiting for others to finish.

Fourth, ESL teachers should require students to speak English only in class time. Sometimes, when students play a game, they may switch to their mother tongue to communicate with their peers. Creating an English-only environment is significant for language learning.

Finally, ESL teachers should be enthusiastic in front of the class. Enthusiastic teachers generally can motivate their students. Teachers and students could have a good interaction through playing games in class.

**Conclusion**

ESL games can be a good teaching tool for most ESL teachers and help students learn more effectively. ESL games may motivate students to cooperate and try their best to make great progress in language learning. It is absolutely vital for ESL teachers to choose appropriate games for particular students. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers try to figure out students’ proficiency and characteristics and gain a full comprehension of students’ learning styles before using games.

Given the current situation of ELT in China, we can draw a conclusion that it is feasible for college English teachers to motivate Chinese college students to learn English via ESL games. Using ESL games can provide Chinese college students a relaxed and authentic language environment to practice their English skills. ESL games may also allow Chinese college students to be absorbed in learning English, feel less stressed, improve their learning strategies, practice all language skills, and gain confidence in using English for real
communication.

Further studies are needed to examine how college English teachers and students in China react to ESL games and how effective ESL games are in the Chinese classroom.

Answers to those questions may help improve college English teaching in China and enhance student learning.
References


