

ACADEMIC GAMES FOR ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS:
AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

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ACADEMIC GAMES FOR ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS:
AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

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Li Mi (Wayne)

Under the Supervision of Professor Dennis Ciesielski

This paper includes a brief review of literature about academic games and an action research study on using academic games to enhance the learning experience in the foreign language classroom. Although this approach works well with all languages, this paper will discuss the teaching of English using academic games in two courses at South-Central University for Nationalities of International Education Institute in Wuhan China.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPROVAL PAGE	Error! Bookmark not defined.
TITLE PAGE	Error! Bookmark not defined.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT PAGE.....	3
ABSTRACT.....	4
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	5
CHAPTER 1	
INTRODUCTION	6
Statement of the Problem	7
Definition of Terms.....	8
Delimitations of Research	8
Method of Approach	8
CHAPTER 2	
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE	9
Definition of the Academic Game and Extending Boundaries	9
The Current Situation of Academic Games Used in China	11
Factors Affecting Academic Games	12
CHAPTER 3	
METHODS	15
Academic Games.....	15
Class Information	17
Expectations of Students	18
Permission Information	19
Treatment	19
Data Collection.....	22
CHAPTER 4	
DATA ANALYSIS.....	23
Data Analysis	23
CHAPTER 5	
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	28
Conclusions	28
Recommendations	29
REFERENCES	30

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As an old saying goes, “all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy; all play and no work makes Jack a mere toy.” This saying reminds us of the importance of achieving a better balance between work and play. This paper will address the place of play in the learning experience. As we all know, children learn much faster when they play and that playing enhances their effectiveness and develops their talent.

Viewing the world’s second language teaching, one can quickly conclude that English education has become one of the most basic courses in most countries. English is as important as their mother tongue or even more significant than their first language in an international context. Indeed, language is no longer for simply reacting to the conditions, but also for communication and for the exchange of ideas. People from different countries would meet many obstacles when communicating with each other; the culture difference is most obvious, but the language differences might bring more trouble. So learning English is important.

In China, English was set as a primary curriculum for all students in the education system from elementary school to college. The English language course is absolutely necessary for every student who wants to get an undergraduate diploma, because there are two tests known as CET-4 (College English Test-Band 4) and TEM-4 (Test for English Majors -Band 4) that without passing, one will not graduate. Under such with the tremendous pressure and the traditional English Teaching Model, teachers are the master of teaching and learning activities, but they also may be ignoring instructional design and providing students with few positive

learning opportunities. Therefore, the stress of the test may make it difficult to adjust to the atmosphere of the classroom. As a result, students will complain about the tedious classroom teaching. Given the importance of the tests for graduation in China, it is important that any innovation addresses a research base to assure that there is promise in new methods and techniques. Consequently, this paper includes a brief review of literature and an action research study that will address using academic games of two overseas student's classrooms in International Education Institute of South-Central University for Nationalities (SCUN). The observation and the analysis of the English classroom's situation and the interaction in comparison with the basic types of classroom atmosphere will be done. In addition, through the students own account and by way of a questionnaire survey of English classroom atmosphere, the feedback will be collected. Finally, that feedback will be used to find out what kinds of academic game could create a good classroom atmosphere and why games work as a teaching tool.

Statement of the Problem

The problems to be addressed can be seen in the following questions:

- What role do specialists suggest for the use of games as a tool for English as a Second language learning?
- What are examples of games for English as a Second language that appear in the literature and in action research?
- Why does gaming improve the learning process?
- How are academic games of English as a Second Language viewed by participants in everyday courses?

Definition of Terms

ESL: English as a second language.

Academic Games: Games that are recognized as instructional when they facilitate learning and improve skills or knowledge (Lepper & Chabay, 1985; Marzano, 2001).

Classroom teaching: Classroom teaching is the design of classrooms — the places in which people are educated ("Classroom design," 2010).

Delimitations of Research

The research has been conducted in and through the International Education Institute at the South-Central University for Nationalities. Primary searches were conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Wilson databases, Google and Google Scholar. Key search topics included “academic game,” “ESL,” “games,” and “teaching in China.” In the meantime, an experiment of two overseas student’s classrooms aged from 18 to 24 was held in International Education Institute of SCUN.

Method of Approach

The primary researcher from the action research project added academic games into the classroom and then applied methods of observation and an analysis. The researcher then compared that analysis with traditional types of classroom atmosphere. In addition, through the students’ own feedback and a survey regarding English classroom atmosphere, researchers tried to discover what kinds of academic games could create a good classroom atmosphere and a positive learning experience.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This is a literature review of the various games used for learning English as a second language. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief review of the literature and research on the use of academic games to teach language, the current situation of academic games used in China, and the factors that will affect academic games and how they can be used to teach a foreign language.

Definition of the Academic Game and Extending Boundaries

Playing games is a part of the human experience. Everyone plays games. In fact, it is through the playing of games that children learn to fit into their community, especially in the acquisition of their native language. This play theory can be extended to learning in general, but its importance to the learning of a second language has been proven beneficial. For students, games particularly play an obvious role throughout their schooldays; they play games when they have class and after class, all day, sleep, and play games again. So it makes sense to use games in the classroom because students are open to them.

As for the definition of an academic game, it is a fun activity with a set of rules and a competition element (Allery, 2004; Hadfield, 1990; Oxford, 1989) and recognized as instructional when they facilitate learning and improve skills or knowledge (Lepper & Chabay, 1985; Marzano, 2001).

Mongillo(2010) maintains that a good academic game can provide a relaxed setting where

students can play with words, express personal knowledge, and venture guesses in a non-threatening situation.

A similar perspective by Tyson (2000) notes that a good academic game is also something enjoyable for all participants, is competitive but friendly, keeps participants involved with the English language, helps students focus on the use of the language, and of course allows students to learn. As argued by Pelletier (2008), “The implications for understanding the relationship between games and learning...are that games need not be defined as a set of forms, or a type of content, but as entities whose forms and meanings are both situated and strategic”.

Bergstrom and Miller (2000) have high praise for the effect of classroom experiments on both the students and the instructor:

We have tried it and it works. . .they [students] are enthusiastic about what they are doing. They love getting involved with markets and then figuring out what happened rather than simply being lectured at. They have fun. As instructors, we feel the same way. This classroom experience is a lot more rewarding than trying to interest sleepy students in abstractions with which they have no experience. Evidence from their performance on homework and examinations suggests that students are learning well. (2000, vi)

Gaming may be most effective as a leading activity for academic practices. Participants became experts in particular strategies or approaches, students developing and following unique learning interests, developing differential levels of expertise, and having significant autonomy in pursuing their learning interests (Squire, DeVane, & Durga, 2008). Paul Pivec (2009) points out that the game environment provides the motivation necessary for persistent re-engagement by the player and hence achieves the “practice makes perfect” scenario.

In general, an academic game is not only a fun activity with some set of rules; it also functions as an ice breaker in the humdrum classroom. In addition, games are recognized as instructional and provide a better atmosphere for students to improve their intensity of learning motivation and learning efficiency. Educators and students need to understand the value of the game experience and recognize its role in helping students contextualize information in meaningful, relevant ways (Abrams, 2009).

The current situation of academic games used in China

Academic word knowledge has the potential to increase access to academic texts for all students, and the games and activities are effective approaches for building that knowledge (Townsend, 2009). In the past ten years, Chinese teachers have begun to introduce the game, which is mankind's oldest happiness, in the second language classroom. Teachers are encouraged to speak mainly English in the classroom and to use activities like pair work and games, which encourage creative use of the language as a small part of their instructional curriculum. However, games are becoming widely viewed as entertainment, much to the neglect of their educational value (Abrams, 2009) and run the risk of becoming removed from the traditional learning process. Thus, Durham, McKinnon, & Schulman's (2007) survey studies indicate that traditional lecture methods still dominate university classrooms. What's more, some Chinese teachers' salaries depend on student performance or entering higher schooling; under intense pressure they just do not use the academic games because of the extra work involved and fall back to traditional and less efficient methods.

A more mundane explanation is that there are no appropriate surroundings and suitable games for teachers to operate that fit in with the teaching plan in China. It seems like Chinese

food is well-received all over the world, but Chinese people often don't take well to the food of other cultures. Much like foreign foods, as is shown in Xinrong's (2010) investigation, many of the foreign examples of games in the classroom have failed when tried in Chinese classrooms. Therefore, efforts from teachers to make some changes are not enough, it must depend on the supports of school administrators, society and the parents. As a popular Chinese saying goes, "It is lack of experience that makes a young man do what older men say is impossible." But it is also because of lack of experience that newer teachers adopt older lesson plans and don't create new curriculums with games. Games in class should have a limit; they can work if teachers have the right balance between games and traditional work (Ip, Jacobs & Watkins, 2008). While a lot of Chinese teachers have already viewed references about academic games in the classroom, they are still an armchair strategist without any effective practices. In order to solve the above problems, setting up the well-developed research to meet the demands of the transformation of education is particularly important.

Factors Affecting Academic Games

There are many kinds of Academic Games for English teachers to choose for their class, but just like letting students use calculators in the math class, students will think that computers can do all things for them. If teachers rely too heavily technology, student might have trouble learning to count. Teachers need to be aware of several factors that may affect the effectiveness of the academic games they adopt in the class. Mongillo, G. (2010) insists that the comprehension of scientific language is necessary to become literate in the domain. It is vital that students exhibit proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking in the language specific to the subject area (Alvermann, 2004; Lemke, 1990; Moje et al., 2004).

Today's students are more familiar with the modern world than previous generations. They not only have numerous ways for knowing various kinds of new information of the world, but they also have experienced more entertainment than their predecessors by using technology such as X-box, PS-3, PSP, PC games and so on. Common amusements do not stimulate one's interest enough in the daily lesson, thus teachers must become proficient in the outside skills their students respect.

Because technology and cultural experience (and games) are in constant flux, there are no regular rules for academic games. Quite a large sum of games are designed for the content of the courses as a gift for the students who must perform well, or the games can let the students answer questions directly to introduce the courses' next sections. If the connecting link is not prepared well, students will get less from the class and have a overview rather than proficiency. Therefore, their ability of analyzing and solving problems is not really receiving good training and they also feel a lack of enjoyment and innovation in the so-called "game".

The advantage of academic games lies in the creativity of the teacher. Every student is an individual to the point that that no one mode of instruction is effective for all (Drea, Tripp, & Stuenkel, 2005). Different students have different learning styles (Vernon, 2008). Every individual student has his or her learning style, one method can never meet all requirements, and different learning styles have different impacts on the effectiveness of a game in different ways (Zhang Youxin, 2010).

In general, learning is a very personal matter. Students learn best when their learning environments are consistent with their learning style (Drea, Tripp & Stuenkel, 2005). There is not one study skill or learning strategy that works for every person in every situation. Helping students to benefit from games is challenging because academic game use is a very novel topic in

China. The situation in China is that people take more care about the content of the classroom, but ignore the classroom climate where academic games could display huge function.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This chapter introduces academic games that will be added into the classroom. It then provides the class information, expectation of students, permission information regarding obtained from schools where research occurred, treatment and the method of data Collection.

Academic games

The academic games that were used in the class were easy and friendly to the learner. All the games are popular among students and can be found on television shows or familiar childhood activities. Some examples follow:

- **Group work.** In this day and age, with the development of science and human civilization, no one can whistle a symphony; it takes an orchestra to play it, which means “As a social being, without cooperation, you cannot do it.” First, divide the whole class into four or five groups, each group at most will have five people, at least four. Second, set four or five roles for group members to choose that the students want to play, those roles are Group Facilitator, Group Recorder, Group Reporter, Timekeeper, and a Wild Card. The Group Facilitator is responsible for moderating team discussions. The Group Recorder has to collect and distribute materials carefully every day. The Group Reporter holds the duty on group’s voice and he or she should assist the group recorder with the preparation of reports or

worksheets. The Timekeeper should be in charge of the time and keep the group always on task. The Wild Card could act as group skeptic or X factor. This proper role allocation within the group will affect students' cooperative learning results and improve students' ability to cooperate. Everyone is in, no one can hide.

- ***Describing words.*** This is a game for the whole class that encourages students to study and review their vocabulary words. Everyone in the team practices their expressive ability and trains their associative ability. A chair will be placed in the front, with the back of the chair to the board. Every team sends one person to the front to sit in the chair. The teacher then writes a word on the board. Group members try to make the participant say the word without anyone in the team saying it themselves. The tricky part is that they cannot use any body language and the teacher will provide five more words that they cannot use. The only way they can make this person say the word is by using synonyms or explanations. It is a great game for challenging the students.

- ***Role-play.*** After the teacher teaches the whole class about the lesson, they can ask students to play it out. Students should reread what they learned in class and make sure they forgot nothing for when they play. Role-play can facilitate students to work together and think together. If students can give some different thoughts or ideas, that is great. Teachers can check students' understanding about what they learned in class and also practice their reading and speaking ability.

- ***Thinking fast.*** Pieces of paper will be folded into the form of an airplane.

The teacher will then say a topic and throw the airplane to a team. The team has to say a viewpoint related to the topic in less than 10 seconds. When they say a viewpoint, they have to throw the airplane to another team and they also have to say a viewpoint about the topic. This goes on until someone loses, in which case they get a negative point. When a team gets a certain amount of points, they get a punishment. This game stimulates imagination and develops students' motivation. The students' oral language improves as they express and describe the ideas.

Class information

The classes were given in a blooming spring afternoon in April 2011, every Monday and Thursday for one and a half hours. Participants were two overseas classes in the International Education Institute of SCUN. They come to China to study Chinese mandarin, which means their mother language is their first language, Chinese is their second, and English is their third. Thirty-five overseas students were divided into two classes. Twenty-four of them were from Korea, six from Kazakhstan, three from Japan and two from Tadzhikistan. The average age of the students in the class was twenty-one, and the youngest student was a Kazakhstan female aged 18 and the eldest was nearly 25.

Table 1 Students Distribution

	Korea	Japan	Kazakhstan	Tadzhikistan	Total
Class A	12	0	3	2	17
Class B	12	3	3	0	18
Total	24	3	6	2	35

Table 2 Students Gender and Age

	Male	Female	Youngest	Eldest	Average
Class A	5	12	18	25	22.1
Class B	6	12	19	24	21.6
Total	11	24			21.8

Expectations of Students

The lessons receive no credit toward a degree and instruction was not related to any concern about performance or marks. The motivation was simply to improve English proficiency. With the acceleration of globalization, their mother tongue and Chinese Mandarin is insufficient to communicate effectively with others around the world. English, as an international language, is playing a more and more important role in people's daily life. Standing on this point of view, students should learn some basic English for a rainy day.

Permission Information

This action research was authorized by both the University of Wisconsin – Platteville Institutional Review Board (Teaching Improvement) and the South-Central University for Nationalities (SCUN). Professor Dennis Ciesielski supervised the project. Professor Ruan Zhijian, the Director of the International Affairs Office and the President of the Confucius Institutes in Platteville, was the immediate supervisor at SCUN.

Treatment

Thirty-five overseas students at the SCUN campus were divided into two classes randomly, Class A and Class B. Furthermore, for the schedule of the class, every class has two lessons per week; there were one hour and thirty minutes for each lesson and one or two five minutes breaks every lesson. Class A started on April 4th and ended on April 28th for eight lessons. While Class B began on April 5th and finished on April 29th also for eight periods. All the classes were taken in the afternoon at SCUN.

Moreover, for teaching materials, a textbook which specializes for Chinese senior high school published by People's Education Press were used. Two units for teaching were chosen, which were "Why do you like koalas" and "Where the post office is". The two classes' content is completely the same.

On the top of that, the two classes were treated in two different ways; one way was to have no games in Class A. This means Teacher-Centered class rules were followed to teach the lesson for Class A and the other way was to add some academic games appropriately into the class regularly and implement Student-Centered methodology in the daily lesson for Class B.

Figure 1 Why do you like koalas?

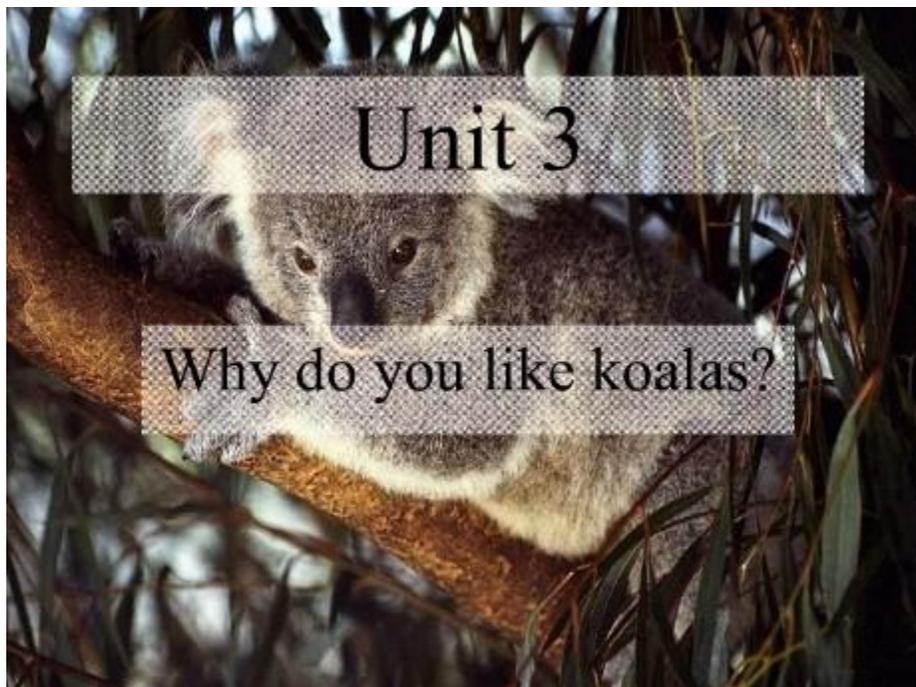


Figure 2 Where is the post office?



Table 3 Class Schedule

Week	Class	Date of class (2:30-4:00 a.m.)							
		Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
Week 1	Class A	April 4th	April 7th						
	Class B	April 5th	April 8th						
Week 2	Class A			April 11th	April 14th				
	Class B			April 12th	April 15th				
Week 3	Class A					April 18th	April 21st		
	Class B					April 19th	April 22nd		
Week 4	Class A							April 25th	April 28th
	Class B							April 26th	April 29th

Data Collection

Data was collected from questionnaires, feedback, quizzes, and the instructor's daily records. The questionnaire was taken before the action research for a brief understanding of the class about their English language proficiency, gender information, attitudes towards English studying, and the weak part in the process of learning English. Feedback was set for every student to write something in a notebook which included their thinking about what they learned today, suggestions to previous lessons, and problems they encountered. Quizzes were employed to check learners' understanding of the lesson and also to record the grades to make a comparison not only latitudinal, but also longitudinally. Also, the instructor of the class kept complete notes of all particulars and carefully checked and verified all of the data.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter shows some information from the questionnaire, feedback, quizzes, and instructor's daily records. With this information, the researcher can obtain results of what Class A and Class B really do.

Data analysis

Table 4 Game frequency in Class B

	Day1	Day2	Day3	Day4	Day5	Day6	Day7	Day8
GW	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
DW	√				√			
RP		√	√	√		√	√	√
TF			√	√			√	√

Note: GW=Group work; DW=Describing word; RP=Role play; TF=Thinking fast

In order to find out some strong evidences to prove that academic games are truly effective in the teaching process, games were frequently used in Class B. The “Group work” activity remained in every lesson; the “Describing word” activity was a game specially design for memorizing vocabulary, so it was only taken at the beginning of each unit; the “Role play”

activity was a very useful game to practice the sentence structures and strengthen student's confidence in English acquisition; the "Thinking fast" activity was functioned as a tool to enhance students reaction rate in English and deepen learner's impression with the knowledge they learned. On the contrary, Class A had no academic game at all during the class.

Table 5 Classroom Atmospheres (A-B-C-D-E)

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
Class A	C	B	B	C	C	D	D	C
Class B	C	B	B	B	B	B	A	A

Note: A=very good; B=good; C= medium; D=bad; E=very bad

Approximately ninety percent of lessons for Class B were in a satisfactory atmosphere with a B level classroom mood and two days obtained an A level classroom mood. Beyond that, everybody was lively and active. The situation is very different in Class A, where students' performance was the same with Class B as usual at the beginning, but the conditions get worse after 3 lessons because the students in the class were unwilling to express themselves with a tedious surrounding.

Table 6 Rate of Attendance

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
Class A	100%	100%	100%	94%(1)	88%(2)	88%(2)	70%(5)	88%(2)
Class B	100%	100%	94%(1)	100%	100%	89%(2)	100%	100%

Note: The number in the parentheses is the number of students who were absent from class that day.

This action research provided a voluntary English class for foreign students which mean all of them can leave voluntarily as no one can force them to do anything. In other words, if they feel bored or have conflicts with the class, they can cancel the lesson without anyone's permission. Table 6 reveals that the rate of attendance in Class A was not very good, the students attendance decreased continuously. Per contra, there was quite a good attendance rate in most of the classes for Class B, only a few days were not perfect, but still very good.

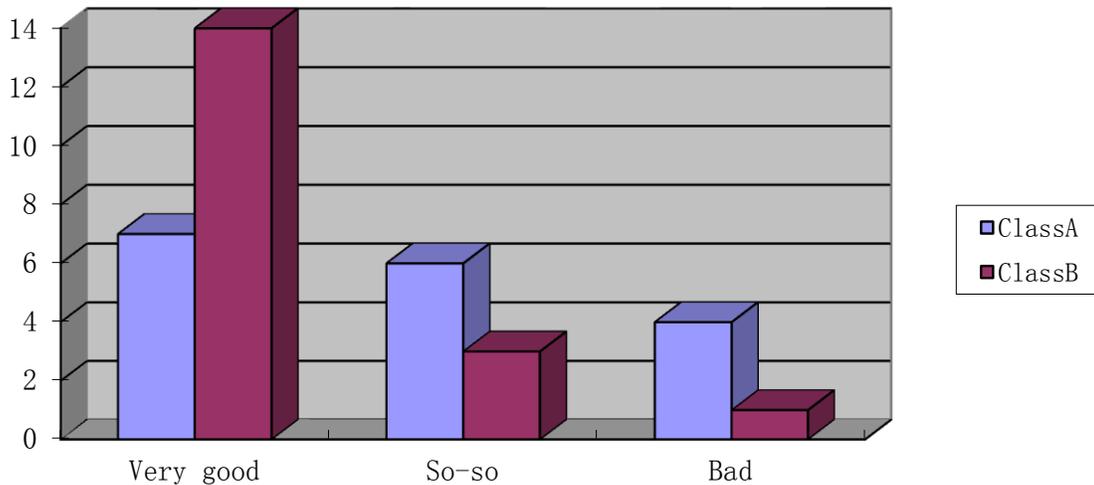
Table 7 Quizzes

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Class A	81.4	81.6	75.3	77.9
Class B	76.2	84.4	82.4	85.8

Note: The full mark of the quiz is 100. The scores are averaged.

To explore the differentia of these two classes, four quizzes were made to exam the ravine. For Class A, the grades were good at first but as the time went on they improved slowly and even retrograded. In contrast, Class B was not doing well at the very start, however, it should be noted that their latter performance gave us a pleasant surprise.

Table 8 What do you think of the class?

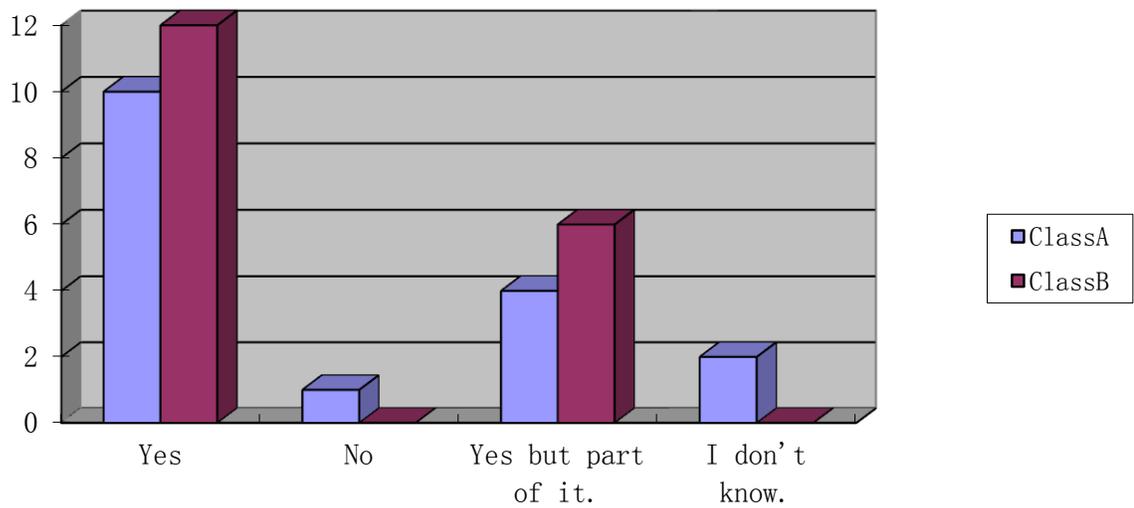


Note: The data is from the feedback.

As emphasized at the beginning of this paper, the students can quit the lesson without

anyone’s permission and the student who does not attend the last class is assumed to have an answer of “Bad”. It was easy to discover that most of the students in Class B were satisfied with the lesson they learned, especially in contrast to Class A. But the class could not please all, as there were still one third of students that felt disappointed.

Table 9 Do you think that the games really help your learning?



Note: The data is from the feedback.

Seeing this, it is not a shocking consequence. Class A and Class B reach an agreement on this occasion. The vast majority of students consider academic games to be beneficial in academic learning and the minority of students feel “Yes, but only part of it.” Only one student said no to the game. The students who are not attending the last class are assumed to have an answer of “I don’t know.”

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

There is no doubt that academic games play a unique role in modern classes. More and more educators realize that with the development of the modern world, teaching methodologies also need to be changed. That is why many teachers introduce academic games into the class and result with a great harvest.

From the data in the chapter 4, it was easy to discover that academic games can readily create a better classroom atmosphere than the class with the traditional teaching style. Because of improved motivational tools, students are more likely to achieve a better understanding of what they learn and absolutely get a better grade as a result. The students who study in Class B with regular academic games seem to have more initiative to acquire new knowledge and more enthusiasm in the everyday class. What happened in Class A is contrary to what happened in Class B and this is demonstrated by one of the students in Class A who said that “The lesson is monotonous, lacks the sense of achievement and the passion.” That can be a sort of explanation for the continued decline in rate of attendance which occurred with Class A, also showing us why the students in Class B can retain a high level of attendance, students in the class can not only practice their English, but also learn in a relaxed environment with pleasurable humor.

In a class with academic games, students will be able to accept theories or concepts faster and easier, while games with new ideas would put their brain in motion. Academic games are like a tourist guide that can show the students the way from here to there. With different

guidance and under the different suggestions a tourist could quickly become familiar with the city with no difficulty, and so it is with language as well.

Recommendations

Even though it is well known that using academic games in the classroom can have positive effects for the studies, there are some negative potential effects upon instruction and learning. As a result, there are some recommendations that should be followed.

Less competition. The aim of the academic game is to enhance students' interest or understanding of the content of courses, not to decide who is better. If needed, let the competition be fun, make the rewards easy and small, and give everybody the chance to win. Games should not be related with the final grade or students will be irresolute and afraid of making mistakes when they play. To be fair, it is only a game.

Focus on the teaching contents. No matter how meaningful or interesting the game is, the teacher should not adopt it if the game does not relate enough to the teaching content.

Feedback from the game. Everyone is individual. There will be some errors which are easily missed during the game and teacher should be asking for feedback from students every day.

Time for revision. Rome was not built in a day. Students sometimes cannot get an accurate acquaintance with the knowledge while in the process of learning it. They need time to consider their understanding and change the wrongs to right outside of the classroom. Teachers should be available to provide necessary help and appropriate guidance.

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