

A STUDY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS (ELL) GAME

ACTIVITIES: MOTIVATING CHINESE ELEMENTARY

STUDENTS' INTEREST IN ENGLISH LEARNING

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Han Dong

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Abstract

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Han Dong

Under the Supervision of Dr. Daniel Leitch

The purpose of this study was to draw attention to the use of games in ELL teaching and learning and to determine how ELL game activities are effectively used to motivate Chinese students' interest in English learning at the elementary school level. This article mainly describes the benefits of incorporating game experiences into daily instruction and provides practical activities for classroom implementation.

It is proved that games are powerful tools to create a relaxed and happy atmosphere in the process of English teaching and learning. Using ELL game activities can motivate students and raise their enthusiasm to learn English well. Instructors should choose and apply the most suitable games for different teaching purposes. By designing interesting English language games, teachers will increase students' active participation.

Games play an important role not only in motivating students, but also in improving elementary students' language application skills. The process of playing games assists in improving listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. With the

help of ELL learning activities, students could better learn English in the relaxed atmosphere of “playing games.” This is important because more effective long-term learning occurs when students are not stressed.

The writer provides definitions of games, classifications of games, the advantages of using ELL game activities, and then the writer gives some examples of ELL games that could be used in Chinese elementary English classes. Finally, the writer concludes that it is necessary to take games into the elementary school English classes. In a word, ELL game activities help to enhance the enthusiasm of students to learn the English language effectively in a relaxed atmosphere.

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Chapter I Introduction

Albert Einstein once said, “Interest is the best teacher.” The quote reflects the greatest struggle, though often the most rewarding, that teachers face: the struggle to keep students` interest. ELL teachers understand that students learn better if they find the subject engaging. Interest is also the best teacher for English learners. If the students are interested in learning English, they will study hard to be good at it, thus finding more happiness from learning English. Only when students are interested, will they take the initiative to learn and overcome difficulties associated with learning English. According to many related studies, learning motivation is one of the most significant factors in language acquisition.

In China, elementary students learn English as a school subject. Historically, in English teaching as a foreign language, teachers have focused on motivating the students` interest and making them eager to learn. Teachers often use ELL game activities as a powerful tool to make students actively participate in the process of English learning.

A teachers` most important task is to increase students` motivation and to keep their interest in learning English. As Hansen (1994) states, “Games are highly motivating and entertaining, and they can give shy learners more opportunity to express their opinions and feelings” (p.118-121). Teachers who use games realize that students will master the language better if they study hard. It is necessary to study hard in order to have a good mastery of the language. A good game is valuable

because the game makes students feel relaxed and they practice their skills spontaneously.

In Chinese elementary schools, teaching English with games involves a wide range of uses and plays a significant role in motivating students and developing the students' ability and skills of language learning. Teaching through English games positively impacts the teaching of language. It is attractive to the students and inspires their motivation to study and to absorb the language knowledge on their own. Therefore, English Language Learner (hereafter referred to as ELL) games are one of the most useful activities in English teaching and they help to improve the effectiveness of teaching. In order to enhance the understanding of how teachers motivate students in the classroom, a review of literature on the subject was conducted.

Statement of the Problem

The problem, to be expressed as a question, is as follows:

“How can ELL game activities be effectively used to motivate Chinese students' interest in learning English at the elementary school level?”

Definitions of Terms

- ELL: English Language Learner
- EFL: English as a Foreign Language
- ELT: English Language Teaching specifically refers to the teaching of English to students whose native language is not English.
- ESL: English as a Second Language

- Motivation: An internal state or condition (sometimes described as a need, desire, or want) that serves to activate or energize behavior and give it direction.

(Kleinginna, 1981, p. 345-379).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore how ELL game activities can motivate Chinese elementary students` interest in English learning. Therefore, the objectives of this study were as follows:

- First, investigate the theoretical basis for the study of ELL game activities, including the definition of games.
- Second, introduce the classifications of games that are often used in language teaching.
- Third, make a statement of the advantages of using ELL game activities.
- Finally, introduce some ELL games in Chinese elementary English classes.

Significance of the Study

An old saying is that nothing is more interesting than games in the eyes of children. The use of games in the classroom has a long-standing history, yet it has only recently been heavily studied. In recent years, the English language teaching theory emphasized the importance of exploring elementary school students` interest and motivation to learn. Unlike the traditional boring style of teaching language through lecture, the game teaching methods are useful activities to help cultivate the students` interest to learn English well and to improve effectiveness.

Delimitations of the Study

The research, which lasted approximately over ninety days, was conducted in and through the library at the South-Central University for Nationalities in China and Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. Primary searches were conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC and Wilson databases, Academic Search Elite, and Google/Google Scholar. Key search topics included “motivate students` interest,” “games,” “ELL,” “English teaching”, and “elementary schools in China.”

Methodology

A brief review of literature relating to the relationship between ELL game activities and English learning was conducted. A second review of literature on related issues, including classifications of games, the advantages of using ELL game activities, and examples of ELL games in Chinese elementary English classes, was also conducted. The findings were summarized from recent relevant studies and recommendations.

Chapter II Review of Literature

This chapter includes the definition and the classification of games, and also the advantages of using ELL game activities in language teaching and learning. A review of ELL game activities in Chinese elementary English classes with a practical perspective is also included.

Definition of Games

What is a game? The word game has a lot of definitions. For instance, games can be defined as interesting activities that have competitive elements and participants must obey the rules (Allery, 2004, p.504-505; Hadfield, 1990; Oxford Dictionary, 2001). According to Byrne (1995), games are playful, fun activities that should follow some rules (p.101-103).

Hadfield (1999) also emphasized the significance of games in the teaching process. She believes that a game is an amusing activity with rules which should be used in language teaching. Hadfield believes that games are an effective way that students can take part in the language classes so that language learners have opportunity to practice and use language. Games as learning tools have potential use in English Language Learning.

Based on the above points of view, one can consider that ELL game is an activity which has specific goals and combined content because game authors have compiled certain rules, used vivid and interesting forms of activities, and created real circumstances to encourage all students to learn. Not only will students be amused by

the games, but they will also improve their language proficiency and learn knowledge during the game activities.

Classifications of Games

Due to a variety of purposes and intended outcomes, a wide variety of classifications exist for games. Though it is difficult to categorize games, they are usually categorized by their functions, students` proficiency, purposes, and so on (Shie, 2003). Hadfield`s (1999) opinion of classification of games is to divide games into competitive games, which focus on the dualities of victory and failure, and cooperative games, where the students work together to reach a common goal.

According to McCallum (1980), games are classified into seven categories, including vocabulary, writing, spelling, structure, number games, role play games, and conversation games. De Jager (2009) confirms that games can be classified into two kinds of games, which are physical and mental games. Physical games make students active and keep students` attention focused, and rely more on intellect, not physical ability, to master a potentially more complex set of rules.

Because there are many kinds of games according to different situations and functions, teachers should be careful to choose different games for different learning purposes. With the proper selection of classroom games, English language learners will benefit greatly from these ELL game activities.

The advantages of using ELL Game Activities

Students in elementary schools are generally keen to learn and want to soak up new information daily, but they have a short attention span. For the vast majority of

people, language itself is not very interesting, and it is not easy to sustain motivation for most people (Song, 2006, p.417-431). English can be a difficult language to learn for anyone, especially for children, so if English is not the students` first language, it can make their life in the classroom more stressful. They may consider it very boring to only sit there and listen to the teacher without any participation in class. However, games can improve attention and memory and enhance abstract thinking.

It is best to use games for elementary school children to encourage them to use English and practice it as much as they can. Also, playing games makes English learning more fun for them. Game activities play an important role in learning English, and students can participate more in the class. To some extent, game activities not only can improve student` ability of cognizance, but also can make the class vivid (Hadfield,1990; Uberman, 1998; Lengeling & Malarcher, 1997).

Unmacht (1999) stated that games that have specific activities meet the needs of students. Games should be frequently used in classroom learning and teaching to improve students` laughter and smiles (p.178). “They are highly motivating and entertaining, and they can give students more chance to express their opinions and feelings” (Hansen, 1994, p.118-121).

Students and teachers can both learn from games. On one hand, it helps students to develop their interests to learn a language. On the other hand, gaming can create vivid situations for which children will learn. According to Wierus (1994),“With the relaxed atmosphere which is created by using games, students are able to remember things faster and better”(p.218-222). Students enjoy games because games are

challenging and interesting. Games can enhance students` creativity and cultural awareness. Furthermore, games offer actual situations to use language, which is meaningful and helpful, and also enhances many chances for students to cooperate with other classmates.

A summary of the key points includes: First, ELL games will increase students` motivation, encourage more communication among students, and form a cooperative and competitive atmosphere. Motivating students` interest is important because it is one of the key factors that influence the learning of English language. With proper motivation, the learners may find success easier to achieve when learning a new language (Hubenthal, 2004, p.104-126). Gao (2008) also states the importance of motivating the students` interest that he believes it is the most frequently used to make language learners overcome difficulties or complex task during their learning (p.599-614).

Second, ELL games help to relieve pressure and to relax students physically and mentally. Third, using games in English teaching process give more opportunities for students to speak and practice English. Game activities not only can increase students` interest and make them to be able to use language, but also put them in a real language circumstance (Hatch, 1998; S. K. Lee,1995; Deesri, 2002). ELL Game activities create real circumstances and a lively atmosphere, fosters the whole class` participation and interaction, and helps students learn and use language spontaneously.

Fourth, games encourage the teachers to grow professionally by adjusting their

teaching styles and activities for different ages and learning levels. While creating games is a break for both the teachers and the students from regular lectures and response, it also provides an increased opportunity for practice. Fifth, whereas the traditional method of teaching is very teacher-centered and observation student-centered, this newer game method allows the teacher to be more of a guide to the students as they participate in more activities. Sixth, using challenging games is a strong tool to help keep students` attention and to improve their critical and independent thinking skills.

These researchers of language education support the idea of using games in English teaching, especially in elementary schools, where students are still very young. It is easier for students who are at a young age to learn a new language, and it is easier to convince them that something is fun. Learning English is a long-term process in which continued interest is necessary. Games help to stimulate students` interest, inspire their motivation, and keep their interest during the long process. In addition, games force the students to interact with others, which then offer an essential opportunity for students to improve their communication skills.

Games are carried out as an important tool to motivate interest in teaching ELL in an elementary classroom. The games should consist of activities that promote group success and individual creativity, as well as encourage students to effectively use a variety of skills. Playing games in English teaching can reduce the learners` psychological pressure, arouse their interest, and explore their capabilities in many ways. Games can improve teaching efficiency, produce long-lasting impressions on

students` minds, inspire the students` learning enthusiasm, and widen their knowledge range. It can also help to make the students develop good habits of creative thinking and reinforce their independent will to solve problems.

Examples of ELL Games in Chinese Elementary English Classes

Game 1: Spelling Words with the First Letter Given

In this ELL game activity, the teacher usually divides the students into several groups. Then the teacher will give each group a single letter with the instructions to make up as many words starting with that letter as possible in a limited time. Each word is one score, and no points are awarded if the students spell the word incorrectly. The group which remembers the most words and spells them correctly will be the winner. Here is an example:

If the teacher gives the group the letter “A”, here are some correct answers:

1. Apple, any, angry, ask, are, art.....

Starting with the letter “D”:

2. Dog, duck, do, dad, desk, down.....

And with the letter “S”:

3. Sad, see, say, seven, sale, Sunday.....

The teacher can also ask each group to write down as many words as possible from a specific vocabulary category. For example, the group may be asked to write down all the words they can think of for the category “animals.” Possible examples include:

1. Animal: cat, dog, rabbit, fish, chicken, horse.....

Words about “fruit” they can think of:

2. Fruit: apple, banana, pear, watermelon, strawberry.....

Or the words for “sports”:

3. Sport: basketball, football, baseball, hiking, skating.....

This game is designed to make students remember newer words and to strengthen retention of ones already learned. Students must classify the words they have learned before in this ELL game activity. They could master and learn a lot of vocabulary words at the same time.

Game 2: Guessing game

This game is designed to help students improve their ability in oral English. As we know, children are curious and love to have the chance to guess words that they do not specifically know. This game activity encourages the students to guess about words. This game tests students` vocabulary as well as their quick response and presentation skills. The steps for the implementation of this game are as follows:

- 1) The class can be divided into several groups, just like the first game.
- 2) Each group chooses one student to explain and one student to guess. The student who will guess the mystery word is required to come to the blackboard and place their back to the blackboard.
- 3) Then the teacher will write either a noun or a verb on the blackboard.
- 4) The student tasked with explaining the word is forbidden from saying the word directly. Instead he/she must use clues such as body language and description.

- 5) Then the student whose back is to the blackboard will try to guess what the word is.

For example, when guessing the word “monkey,” the student who explains could say, “It is an animal has a long tail. It is brown and likes to eat bananas.” The group that guesses the correct word will be awarded a point. The group who has guessed the most words will be the winner.

Game 3: Role play games

Role play games are activities in which students in the class act out specific roles through dialogue or physical performance in different scenarios. Teachers use role play games because it tasks students with imitating real social scenes, so that students acquire oral communication abilities required in a real social environment and can freely use oral communication in English. Students could express courage through role play games, thus overcoming psychological barriers and dare to speak. By creating opportunities for students to perform on stage, the teachers will increase the students' self-confidence and oral communication abilities. This game can be implemented like this:

- First, the teacher could allow students to divide into several teams freely. The number of people in each group depends on the specific circumstances.
- The second step is to arrange for students to perform on stage.
- Finally, the teacher will give a brief evaluation for every group about the strengths and weaknesses of their performance.

There is also a new form of the activity in which teachers also could write some

important sentences or phrases intended to teach on the blackboard. Then, the students should use the sentences or phrases to come up with their own dialogue to act out. In addition, the teacher could pick out one person from each group composed of judges who will score the performances, provide written response, and then choose a winner.

In summary, as an important part of teaching, role play games are the most exciting moment for the students in the classroom and will also help transform knowledge into ability. Children actually like to express themselves and role play games meet this demand of the students, and also make the classroom a lively atmosphere. Role play is also a chance to communicate through applying the English language. The teacher could prepare some tools in advance in order to make the performance more interesting and the atmosphere more relaxed.

Game 4: The Word Solitaire (last letter)

The Word Solitaire is an attractive game activity to encourage students to learn new words and consolidate the old words they have learned. The basic rule is to write down as many words as possible in a limited time with the last letter of former word. The same word cannot be used twice. One way is to divide the whole class into several groups first and then each group will try their best to write as many words as possible. For example, students could write ant-table-egg-glad-dog-good-desk-kite and so on. The group that writes more words in the same time will be the winner. Another way to play Word Solitaire is like this:

Student A says a word at random, and then the other students follow one by one, the first letter of each word should be the same as the last letter of the previous word.

For example: Student A says “apple,” Student B could say “eye,” Student C could not say “eye” also, but could say “egg.” Then the next student should say a word starting with the letter “g.”

This game could make students focus on what others say and keep thinking whether their words are repeating others. Through this word game activity, students can not only consolidate the old words and enlarge their vocabulary, but the game also helps the class atmosphere become exciting and promote class participation at the same time.

Game 5: Listening and drawing

Listening is one of the most important skills for English language learners. This “listening and drawing” game is appropriate to higher grade students who aim to improve their listening skills. This game also requires students to provide a quick response and focus their attention to listen carefully. In this listening exercise game, the teacher will ask two or more students to draw what he or she will hear on the blackboard. The other student explains the picture which the teacher shows.

For example, the teacher could show a picture of a figure which consists of squares, triangles, wavy lines and circles. The student who explains could say, “This is a picture of a person’s face. Draw a big square first which could be regarded as a face. Draw two circles in the place of eyes with a dot in the circles. Then draw a triangle as a nose. Finally draw a wavy line as the mouth.” Compare the drawings and judge which one is most similar to the given picture.

In conclusion, teachers should try to design various game activities in classroom

for different teaching purposes. Games should be designed according to the different age and different English language proficiency (Blachowicz, et al., 2006, p.524-539). In addition, teachers also should observe the students` behavior during the game activities. It is essential for teachers to observe what is happening during the process of games to make the most of games in English language learning (Jacob, et al., 1996, p.253-280).

Designing some interesting games can motivate students` interest to learn English and enhance their enthusiasm for learning. Creating a more relaxed and happy atmosphere to learn English effectively will increase students` interest in the process of English language learning.

Summary

In summary, interest is the motivation to learn. Considering the age of the students` characteristics and psychological characteristics, the most important goal in elementary school English teaching is to stimulate students' interest in learning English. How to make the students generate and maintain interest in learning English is a critical issue for English teachers.

The purpose of using ELL game activities in English teaching is also to make students actively involved in English language learning and to master the language skills well through game activities. Games are activities which children like best. Games are easy to effectively stimulate student interest, and mobilize students to actively participate in the classroom teaching activities.

Thus, teachers should take advantage of the pedagogy of the game activities and

insert proper games in the teaching process. Designing some ELL games helps enhance students` enthusiasm to learn effectively in the relaxed atmosphere. Games are not only helpful for English language learners to acquire new knowledge and consolidate knowledge they have learned, but are also conducive to the intellectual development of the students and establish a sense of cooperation.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

Interest is the key for elementary students to learn English well, and motivation of students is extremely important. Students with strong motivation always have better performance than those with less motivation in English learning. In order to make students actively participate in classes, the teacher should make the class atmosphere vivid and interesting through some methods (Fien, Baker, Smolkowski, Smith, Kame'enui, & Beck, 2008, p.391-408). ELL game activities are one of the most important methods to motivate their interest, and they make students eager to learn English well.

As we know, game activities involve almost all the basic language skills, such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, and communicating and so on. Therefore, games provide an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. Foundational to growth and development of early childhood learners is the sharing of the joys of creativity. In addition, games also increase the English language learners' general achievement.

In conclusion, games have proved to be a useful tool in English language teaching and learning. Playing games is a way for children to experience rich language in a pleasant way. Not only does it create a motivating, relaxing class, but it is also regarded as an important practice for all language skills. During the game activities, important skills, such as listening, speaking, reading and writing are developed. ELL game activities generate learners' interest, encourage creativity, promote student interaction, improve their acquisition, increase their achievement and set a stage for a positive learning environment. These advantages of games create a

lively atmosphere in the classroom and can help the teachers` teaching and the students` learning.

Consequently, it is necessary to take games into elementary school English classes. Teachers should implement various games and use the suitable ones they can modify to encourage elementary children in English teaching and learning. It helps to motivate students` interest and arouse their enthusiasm in the classroom. Teachers should look out for new games and activities, encouraging and stimulating students to participate in various class activities, and students will have a happy elementary classroom where learning English is easy and fun.

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