

Using Games in TEFL - A Case Study of “Meša Selimović” Elementary School in Sarajevo

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Abstract:

The aim of this study was to examine the use of educational games in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) to young learners. The research was conducted in “Meša Selimović” elementary school in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The participants were three teachers of EFL and one third grade consisting of approximately 25 students ages 8-9. The research conducted proved the hypothesis that using games to teach EFL to young learners is a highly effective and enjoyable technique of language teaching/learning. The study was conducted in five stages using both quantitative and qualitative methods of research. The data was gathered by means of a class observation analysis, students’ poll, teachers’ interview and questionnaire, and a schoolbook analysis. The principal conclusion of the study is that educational games are an effective technique of teaching EFL to young learners and that it offers more positive learning outcomes than negative ones.

Keywords: teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), English as a foreign language (EFL), educational games, young learners.

1. Introduction

Children's games are hardly games. Children are never more serious than when they play.
Michel de Montaigne

This paper deals with the research conducted in “Meša Selimović” elementary school in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The participants were three teachers of EFL who teach young learners (ages 7-11) and one third grade consisting of approximately 25 students ages 8-9. The research conducted proved the hypothesis that using games to teach EFL to young learners is a highly effective and enjoyable technique of language teaching and learning. The study was conducted in five stages using both quantitative and qualitative methods of research, including:

- class observation – observing a third grade EFL class,
- game implementation - implementing an educational game instead of the planned activity,
- students’ poll - the students answered a short poll concerning educational games,
- teachers’ questionnaire and interview - the EFL teachers answered a few questions dealing with using games in EFL classrooms, in written form, and as a short interview,

- schoolbook analysis – the analysis of the schoolbooks and workbooks used in this elementary school.

Games used for TEFL must be educational and the pedagogical value of games always has to be their most important aspect (Carvalho and Schwertner, 2008). All the stages of the study confirmed the hypothesis that games that have educational goals and objectives are an excellent technique when it comes to TEFL to young learners, i.e. students between the ages of seven and eleven.

2. The class observation

Classroom observation was utilized in this study to explore the nature of classroom interaction and how it is affected by language games. This classroom observation was of a non-participant type; no part was taken in any activity by the observer. The observation form was the lesson plan which was analyzed during the observation to determine the frequency of using games and game elements in primary EFL. The data was collected through note taking during the whole period. The class observation conducted was in a third grade EFL classroom with the subject being eighteen students ages 8-9. The teaching unit was ‘Where is the ball?’, from the book *Family and Friends 1*. The aims and objectives of the class were to improve the students’ skills, listening, speaking, reading, and the main one, vocabulary. The students were to learn five new words (seesaw, slide, net, swing, tree).

The introductory part of the class was a game, to repeat the previous lesson “Peoples’ jobs”. The teacher showed the students flashcards with different occupations and asked them to repeat them with her. She introduced the game and explained the rules to the students. Three students were given a job-flashcard each, and the other students had to guess what the flashcard occupation was. After this, she asked three volunteers to come to the blackboard and handed them the flashcards after which the other students started guessing the hidden occupation. The students seemed to respond well to the activity, they were all engaged and interested. After this, approximately 7 minute-long game activity, the teacher continued the lesson as planned using activities that involved playing a record, using posters and the blackboard along with the exercises from the schoolbook.

The following remarks and conclusions were drawn from the class observation:

- Even though not all activities can be games, most of the lesson, activities and exercises had some aspects of games. The game activity portion of the lesson took up about 16% of the class period. However, game elements were not excluded from the other activities and exercises. Flashcards, song, rhyme, repetition and posters were present during the whole lesson. The schoolbook, *Friends and Family 1*, comes with a lot of these additional materials.
- Through different sensory inputs (pictures and sounds) students were acquiring new information indirectly while the needs of different learning styles were being met.

- With the dynamics of the game, their limited attention span presented no problem.
- The process of learning was being conducted ‘here and now’. The students were experiencing the language, that is, learning it within the context of the game while cooperating in a reduced stress environment.

The class observation showed that students enjoy learning a foreign language through games, even though not playing during the entire lesson, some aspects of play occur during every activity. This is enough to prove that games should be, and are, implemented in schools when teaching EFL.

3. The game implementation

The second class observation was of a participant type; the observer regularly takes part in the activities. This is done either by assisting the teacher or by leading the whole activity. During the second class observation, with the same class, in agreement with the teacher, the final part of the lesson was replaced with an educational game. The unit was the same as the class previously observed, and the lesson was “Presentation and describing position using *in, on, under*”. The introduction and the main part were once again intermittent with elements of playing and games. The game in the final part was a way of repeating and confirming the new information that the students have acquired during that class.

The game was memory cards. This game activity took about 11% of the entire period. The students were introduced to the rules of the game after which they were divided into small groups (approximately three students per group). Then each group was given a set of twelve cards, six cards had pictures of objects in, on or under certain things, and the other six cards had phrases describing the pictures. Each student could turn over two cards in one turn, and this goes on until they find a matching pair of pictures and phrases. During the game itself, the teacher observes the students by going from group to group to see how they are doing and assists them if any help is needed. When all cards have been paired, the students read the phrases and show the pictures that the phrases represent. The objective of the game is to pair up all the cards. In doing so, the students practice the newly acquired material; in this case, how to describe positions using in, on and under.

The following are the conclusions drawn from the game implementation:

- The students enjoyed the activity, they understood the rules with no problems and worked well in groups.
- They were motivated to do the activity and the learning process since the game was an enjoyable way of practicing the new material.
- All the benefits of using games that were noted during the game activity of the first class observation reappeared during this activity without any major challenges appearing.
- Some students did not understand the rules at the very beginning of the activity. This problem was dealt with by the teacher explaining the rules again individual, group by group or even by the students helping one another.

- The noise factor did not present a problem, and since this was an activity conducted in the final part of the lesson there was no need to calm the students down and get them to continue with the lesson.
- The game had visual and auditory elements, with the kinesthetic elements somewhat lacking. However, the students were standing around their tables and this made for a dynamic atmosphere.

All in all, different learning styles' needs were met and the game proved to be a great way in which to repeat the new material.

4. The students' poll

The poll for the students was comprised of eight questions, with twenty-five third grade student respondents; the same students with whom the first two stages of the study were conducted with. A three-point scale (yes, sometimes, no) was presented in the research to survey the respondents' opinions on the subject of educational games in primary EFL. The aim of the poll was to find out what type of games are mostly used in schools, and what type of games the students prefer. Responses to each item on the questionnaire survey were converted into percentages and presented in Table 1 for the purpose of analyzing and interpreting the results. In the first seven questions, the students were supposed to answer by circling *yes*, *sometimes* or *no*. In addition, with the intention to find out the students' favorite and most common game activities, one more question without choices was set. The poll was administered after the second observation class. The results reveal the students' attitudes towards games and using them in an educational EFL context. The poll questions were designed on the basis of the learners' characteristics; with the goal of determining the presence of games that suit different learners' needs.

Table 1: The students' poll results

	YES	SOMETIMES	NO
1. I like to play games.	88%	12%	-
2. We play games in EFL classes.	24%	52%	24%
3. We play games with pictures and posters.	32%	40%	28%
4. We play games with song and rhyme.	40%	20%	40%
5. We play games with movement.	20%	24%	56%
6. We play games in groups and/or pairs.	44%	40%	16%
7. I like to play games in school.	84%	12%	4%
8. My favorite game is...	TPR 28% Visual games 24% Video games 24% All games 16% Auditory games 4% Cooperative games 4%		

The following conclusions were drawn from the analysis of the students' polls:

- In the first question, do they like playing games, 88% of the students answered with the expected yes, and only 12% with sometimes. This high percentage is reasonable if we take into consideration the benefits of games, from the general enjoyment and excitement that they create, to their motivating aspect. It comes as no surprise that young learners like games.
- When asked if they played games often in EFL classes 24% answered with yes, 24% with no, and 52% with sometimes. This percentage might come from the fact that conventional games with rules and objectives are not implemented during lessons.
- The following four questions explore which types of games are used most often; when taking into consideration students' differences. As far as playing games in which pictures and posters occurred, 32% answered with yes (yes signifying that they play such games often), 40% with sometimes, and 28% with no. Games with song and rhyme occurred similarly, with the answers being 40% yes, 20% sometimes and 40% no. Games that involve some movement occurred the least, with 20% answering yes, 24% sometimes, and 56% no. Most, 44%, said that they do play games in groups and pairs, 40% said sometimes, and only 16% said no. The results show that different types of games are implemented.
- Finally, a majority of students, 84%, said that they enjoy playing EFL games in school, only 12% said that they sometimes enjoyed them, and just 4% did not enjoy playing games in school.
- In the last question, the students were supposed to write their favorite games. TPR games, games with pictures and computer games were the highest ranking with each being almost equally popular among the students. 28% of students preferred TPR games (e.g. hide and go seek), 24% preferred games with pictures, and 24% preferred computer games (these would also be Play Station, Nintendo, and similar games). 16% of students have no games that they prefer in particular, and only 4% prefer games with songs. 4% of students wrote that they like any game that involves cooperation (i.e. group, pair work).

The results of this poll show that a majority of students find learning through games to be a fun and enjoyable process.

5. The teachers' questionnaire and interview

The instrument used in this part of the study was a survey questionnaire about participants' perspectives on the use of educational games in EFL lessons. As far as the teachers' questionnaire and interview are concerned, the results were similar to those of the students, all parties in question seem to appreciate the value of games in education. The three teachers of EFL were given a questionnaire comprised of eight questions and a short interview to elaborate some of their answers. They were asked to reflect upon their own experience when using games in an EFL classroom. The focus in this part of the study was to find out what benefits and challenges the teachers might come across when they use educational games, what type of games they prefer and their most common sources of games.

The aim was to find out what do teachers in primary schools, who have experience in using EFL games with young learners, have to say about that subject.

The questionnaire shed some light on the teachers' attitudes towards EFL educational games and their application in primary schools. The eight questions, that is, teachers' answers are analyzed in the following part of the paper. The analysis shows the following:

1. When asked to explain educational games and how they perceive them, the teachers in the primary school in question all considered educational games to be an enjoyable way of learning EFL, and also a very useful tool for building and developing different language skills.
2. When it comes to them using games and how often they use them, the teachers stated that they implement games in their class schedule as often as they can, depending on the curriculum and the time that they have at their disposal, especially with young learners (older student are said to be a bit more disruptive when it comes to playing games in the classroom).
3. As far as the benefits of using games are concerned, the ones that were stated by the teachers were some of the benefits previously mentioned in the paper, and they are that any work can be made interesting, and also that games stir the students' curiosity, natural for young learners, when it comes to learning a foreign language.
4. Concerning the possible problems, they believe that any potential problems can be avoided if the game is well planned, although sometimes it is hard to focus the students away from the game and back to 'regular' schoolwork.
5. When dealing with learner differences, one teacher stated 'It is beyond doubt that educational games bring students together', and since students generally like learning together and through games, it makes the teachers' job somewhat easier.
6. Teachers usually use modified games (they either modify them themselves or get them from other teachers), they only sometimes use existing games (i.e. from schoolbooks) or make up their own games.
7. When asked which games they and their student prefer the teachers answered with the traditional games; games with commands, like Simon says, and vocabulary games, like Hangman.
8. When they use games in their classroom they receive positive reactions from their students. Basically, the teachers all agreed that educational games, when used wisely, are an excellent technique for teaching a foreign language.

The major conclusions drawn from the questionnaire analysis, on the whole, provided encouraging evidence to indicate that:

- The teachers generally appreciate the benefits and value of using games as foreign language learning activities.
- The teachers agree that games motivate students to become effective communicators in the foreign language, in this case, English, and help them use the language in a more spontaneous and natural manner.
- Moreover, they believe that games are particularly suitable for most students at the primary level who have a shorter attention span since the nature of games which provides joy, excitement and amusement can hold the students' attention and create an enjoyable learning experience. This is important since learners should feel comfortable with each other, confident in themselves and

focused on the language lesson rather than on other distractions (Wright, Betteridge, and Buckby, 2005).

- The findings also suggested that when facing students with different learning styles, needs, and expectations, teachers should take the learners' individual variations into account and be more flexible in their use of educational games in order to maximize the educational effects.

6. The schoolbook analysis

The schoolbook analyzed in this study is the 2011 edition of the Oxford University Press' *Family and Friends 1* by Naomi Simmons. This 120-page schoolbook is comprised of fifteen units, plus an additional starter unit. After every three units there is a review part, in total there are five of these. There is also a section on the Bosnian and Herzegovinian culture, a word list, and a grammar reference. Each of the fifteen units has six lessons, and they are words, grammar, song, phonics and skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing). The textbook itself offers no games. However, it comes with additional material that is made up of posters, cards, and similar helpful props, so that there are some elements of games. All the units in the schoolbook are designed in the same way, with each having six lessons with similar tasks and exercises. The unit analyzed in this study is Unit 5 "Where's the ball?", since this was the unit from the lessons of both of the observed classes.

- The first lesson in each unit is words. Students are presented with new words in the form of pictures with the words themselves being written underneath. After that, they have a colorful comic where the new words are contextually used. With apparently no games, a teacher can easily make this part into a game by having groups of students act parts of the comic trying to guess which group represents which picture.
- The second lesson is grammar, in this case, prepositions in, on, under. Once again, the teacher can create a short game to practice the new material by having the students place certain objects (i.e. pens) in, on and under something and have the students guess what the object in question is.
- Lesson three is a song. Students can be asked to sing the song and try to act it out. This is a fun and playful activity.
- Lesson four is phonics. This lesson has a game-like activity where the students listen to the sounds and join the letters to guess, in this case, what the queen has.
- Lesson five and six are skills, which can easily be combined with a number of different games.

All of the activities suggested are easily organized, do not take too much time and are enjoyable for both the student and the teacher. The colorfully designed units, with many props, make it easy for a teacher to implement a game activity at any moment of the lesson. Even though there are no games (with rules and goals), game elements are present throughout. Since teachers believe in the beneficiary outcomes of using games as a technique of teaching EFL to young learners they regularly use the additional materials in game-like activities. Each unit is designed so that it focuses on a certain skill in each lesson. This means that the

teachers can simply follow the textbook, thus making sure all the skills are taught, and by adding the materials already provided they implement games as well.

7. Conclusion

The study conducted for the purposes of this paper proved that games are, and should be, used when teaching EFL to young learners. The class observations showed that teachers often use games with young learners, and besides that, most of the lesson segments have some aspects of games. The young learners responded well to EFL educational games used in the classroom. The students' poll results proved that, from the perspective of the students', educational games are more than welcome; they prefer games that are active and require some movement. Teachers share this enthusiasm with their students. However, besides the benefits, they recognized some of the possible downsides as well. Every technique has both praise and criticism. This is especially true for engaging activities and techniques such as educational games since many unexpected situations can arise when working with young learners. However, a well-prepared teacher should be able to keep the activity under control. The schoolbook mentioned has no games in specific, it did, however, contain many game and play elements. When all the segments of the research are taken into consideration, dynamic activities that serve an educational purpose do seem to be a favorite among both the students and the teachers.

Educational games used in EFL with young learners create an environment in which the participants are active and engaging, a learner-centered teaching approach. On the other hand, games are centered on communication. Young learners emerge themselves in the world of playing and games; their thinking is stimulated, they are motivated to learn and they do so by cooperating with other learners and the teacher as well. All of the advantages that educational games offer make them ideal for teaching EFL to young learners in primary schools. When all of this is taken into consideration, from the theoretical to the practical application of games, one does conclude that they truly do deserve to play a major role in any primary classroom.

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