

ISSN 2518-167X

WEB OF SCHOLAR

Multidisciplinary Scientific Journal



RS Global

INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY JOURNAL WEB of SCHOLAR

4(22), Vol.4, April 2018

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Publisher –
RS Global Sp. z O.O.,
Scientific Educational Center
Warsaw, Poland

Numer KRS: 0000672864
REGON: 367026200
NIP: 5213776394

Publisher Office's address:
Dolna 17,
Warsaw, Poland,
00-773

Website: <https://ws-conference.com/>
E-mail: rsglobal.poland@gmail.com
Tel: +4(857) 898 55 10

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THE ROLE OF GAMES IN IMPROVING YOUNG LEARNERS' SPEAKING SKILLS

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ARTICLE INFO

Received 18 March 2018
Accepted 02 April 2018
Published 12 April 2018

KEYWORDS

young learners,
short attention spans,
communicative techniques,
competitive games,
cooperative games,
linguistic games,
communicative games,
speaking skills

ABSTRACT

English has become an international language and its range of functions is increasing everywhere including Uzbekistan, because dynamic processes in all spheres and successive reforming need acquiring one or two foreign languages. In connection with this, huge tasks are set before teachers of the English language; teachers became one of the main subjects of educational reforms. Therefore, if a teacher is open to welcome new pedagogical innovations, he can provide goal-oriented introduction of innovative ideas into educational process. New approach is much more pupil-orientated, pupil's needs and interests are taken into consideration and it seeks to personalize and localize language and adapt it to interests of pupils. As young children are extremely imaginative and their fantasy is very much a part of their world, game activities are considered to be a very effective way of learning a foreign language, because games can play a big part in helping participants build relationships, and to feel equal, and, of course, games help activate pupils who may have been inactive before, due to lack of interest.

This article deals with the importance and benefits of using games in teaching foreign languages and improving speaking skills of young learners.

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Teaching English to young learners is a rapidly growing field around the world, and English education is increasingly found at the primary levels. According to the Resolution №1875 signed by the first President of the Republic of Uzbekistan on December,10, 2012, "About the measures on further development of foreign language teaching and learning system" it is indicated that:

1. Foreign languages should be taught to international standards to meet the commercial, industrial, scientific and academic needs of Uzbekistan.

2. Foreign languages, mainly English, are to be taught from the first year of schooling.

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned Decree the main goal of teaching young learners has become to encourage children to use the target language in their life. In order to develop young learners' communicative skills, competency and culture different effective innovative ways of teaching English to young learners are being used, such as playing English games, watching English cartoons or interesting TV programs. While communicative activities are in progress, the teacher no longer "teaches", she organizes, sets up activities and "monitors" her pupils using different interaction patterns. Thus, knowing the abilities and capabilities of the children of different ages is of vital importance to teach them effectively.

Young learners are those from about 5-10 years of age or from kindergarten to Grade 4. Teaching younger learners is different from teaching teenagers or adults. As young learners are social, active and creative, they have their own characteristics, that teachers and parents should know:

1. They have short attention span. So teachers should vary their techniques to break the boredom, they should give varied activities as handwriting, songs, games.

2. They are very active. Try to ask them to play games, role play dialogues and involve them in competitions.

3. They respond well to praising. Always encourage them and praise their work.

4. They differ in their experience of language. Treat them as a unit, don't favor those who know some English at the expense of those who do not know.

5. They are less shy than older learners. Ask them to repeat utterances, resort to mechanical drills.

6. They are imaginative. Use pictures to teach new vocabulary related to concrete meanings, but may have some difficulties distinguishing between imagination and real world.

7. They enjoy learning through playing. Young learners learn best when they learn through games. Let games be an essential part of your teaching.

8. They are less shy than older learners.
9. They enjoy imitating and skillful in listening accurately and mimicking what they have heard.
10. They respond well to rewards from the teacher.
11. They have limited writing and reading skills even in their first language.
12. Generally they are more concerned about themselves than others.
13. They have limited knowledge about the world.
14. They enjoy fantasy, imagination, and movement.

So, young learners tend to have short attention spans and a lot of physical energy. In addition, they are very much linked to their surroundings and are more interested in the physical and the tangible. As Scott and Ytrebeg describe, "Their own understanding comes through hands and eyes and ears. The physical world is dominant at all times." Young children are extremely imaginative and fantasy is very much a part of their world, therefore game activities are considered to be a very effective way of learning a foreign language, because games can play a big part in helping participants build relationships, and to feel equal, and, of course, they help activate pupils who may have been inactive before, due to lack of interest. Very often games teach a language which is used in real situations, for example when travelling, shopping, therefore they prepare pupils to the real life. It is easier to open up and forget the shyness when playing a game because the atmosphere is not as serious and more emphasis is put on fluency rather than grammatical correctness. Games are not just time-filling activities but have a great educational value and it can be used in the classroom to make learners use the language instead of just thinking about learning the correct forms.

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

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

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

Games have *memorizing* and *communicating* stages:

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

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

Let's analyse some games for young learners.

1. Card game: ALPHA-FLIP

"Alpha-Flip" is a fun card game designed to teach young learners the sounds and written forms of the English Alphabet, and to directly associate the letters with the initial sounds in vocabulary items. Each alpha-flip set consists of 26 alphabet cards and 26 picture cards.

This is basically a memory game where all of the cards are placed face down on the floor or table. Learners take turns, and they are allowed to turn over two of the cards. If they turn over a letter and a picture that employs that letter as its initial sound, they can "keep" the cards and score points. If the cards do not match up, they must turn them over again and it becomes the next learner's turn. Obviously the way to win the game and obtain the most cards is to watch the cards others turn over and try to remember:

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

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

2. Find the word.

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

For example: The theme of the lesson is “At the Market”. The teacher shows the following table with pictures and pupils will predict the theme according to the 1st letter of the word.



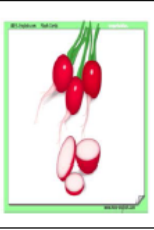
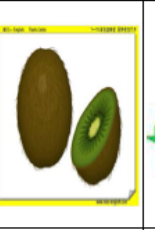
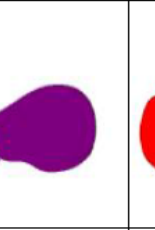
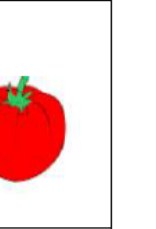
					
M	A	R	K	E	T

Fig. 1.

3. Matching game.

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







1. 	2. 	a) I can ride a bike b) I can sweep the floor c) I can cook d) I can play tennis e) I can play football f) I can walk KEYS: 1-e, 2-f, 3-d, 4-a, 5-c, 6-b
3. 	4. 	
5. 	6. 	

Fig. 2.

4. Miming.

This game can be used as a guessing game. The wordless activity leads the learners to talk quite naturally. Someone mimes an action and the others try to guess what it is. This game can provide further practice of a wider variety of lexical and grammatical units. One pupil choose a card and mimes a typical activity that it involves. The others try to guess it by asking questions.

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

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

These games help pupils not only to have fun and guess the word, but also to reinforce previous grammar rules and vocabulary.

There are a lot of advantages of using games in the classroom. Games can lower anxiety, this making the acquisition of input more likely. They are highly motivating and entertaining, and they can give shy pupils more opportunity to express their opinions and feelings. They also enable learners to

acquire new experiences within a foreign language which are not always possible during a typical lesson. Games encourage, entertain, teach, and promote fluency.

Teachers might consider the following questions as they choose a game:

Which language does the game target?

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

What type of game is it?

What's the purpose for using it?

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

How much interaction and participation is there?

Pupils may wish to play games purely for fun. Teachers, however, need more convincing reasons. "Teachers need to consider which games to use, when to use them, how to link them up with the syllabus, textbook or program and how, more specifically, different games will benefit pupils in different ways". Therefore English teachers of young learners should be very careful about choosing games if they want to make them profitable for the learning process. If games are to bring desired results, they must correspond to either the pupil's level, or age, or to the material that is to be introduced or practised. Not all games are appropriate for all pupils irrespective of their age. Different age groups require various topics, materials, and modes of games.

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

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

A game should be planned into the day's lesson right along with exercises, dialogues and reading practice. It should not be an afterthought. Many games require modification in use when the pupils' need is taken into consideration and, of course, teachers must be very attentive while giving instructions if they want to encourage their pupils to learn more. When giving instructions to younger learners, a few words in the mother tongue would be the quickest way to make everything clear. For younger learners games are best set up by demonstration rather than by lengthy explanation and it is very important not to play a game for too long, because they will begin to lose their interest. It is best to stop a game at its peak.

The key to a successful language game is that the rules are clear, the ultimate goal is well defined and the game must be fun.

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