How Do Competitive or Interactive Games Effect Language Acquisition in an ESL Classroom?

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Background

I made this question the focus of my research study, because I was very interested in what stimulates and motivates my students. What got them excited enough to focus on the language and content? Though it would seem that the crucial need to learn English would be motivation enough, teenagers being teenagers, this was often not the case.

Teaching techniques that have lower amounts of student interaction such as lectures, presentations, classroom exercises, videos and group/pair work are all important to learning, but do not allow a wider range of student participation. Through my discussions with other ESL teachers, we share how competitive and interactive games are harder to "tune out" for most students. Because of this, I wanted to take a closer look at the effect of these games on both student motivation/participation and the classroom atmosphere.

I focused my research on an ESL class comprised of low-level language learners. These students were not in this class due to intelligence or effort necessarily, but rather on their educational backgrounds and current English language abilities. The class had 15 students: six Somalis, two Salvadorans, an Albanian, a Peruvian, a Sudanese, a Kurdish and an Afghani student. All of these students struggled with English and had been put in this group because the other ESL classes were too advanced for them. Most lacked basic study skills and have trouble with following directions, reading comprehension, taking notes, spelling, and written work on their own.

Research Questions and Implementation

My research question evolved as I thought about the general atmosphere in my classroom. In a given class with 20 students, the motivation and participation level was greatly varied. Though some people would clearly be trying hard, the degree of language acquisition wouldn't nearly be as high as it could be for all students. For example, in one class, the same 10 students would be diligently working away at an assignment, 4 would be talking and joking about an unrelated matter, one would be sleeping, and the remaining 5 would be putting in a half-hearted effort - working very slowly or trying to get a majority of the answers from their peers. Of the 10 students working diligently, a portion would be racing ahead trying to complete as much of the work as possible, without absorbing or trying to understand the content.

While much of this varying degree of motivation/participation could be attributed to personality, maturity and effort, it was also quite possible to assume

that there was simply not enough stimulation for some students. Written or class work assignments, if followed properly, could definitely reinforce material, yet were often too passive for some students. There was also little peer recognition to participate and unlike in games, where there's pressure to perform well for your team, in these types of situations the pressure can often be negative – the pressure to let people copy or copy from others. One student could end up doing the work for many.

Games could be used to teach language, grammar and content – which was very helpful in an ESL setting. Some of the games we played included: Bingo (using a board to write vocabulary words on and paper chips), and Jeopardy (asking trivia questions from the material covered and there are two teams). When playing Jeopardy, each team sent a member to the front of the class with hands behind their back - the first to push the buzzer with the correct answer wins a point - the team with the most points wins. Sometimes key words were put on the board, or I asked true/false questions. Other games were also employed: Team Spelling Bees (where the first person to correctly write the word won), Hangman, (students raised their hands to pick letters to figure out geography or key words), and Charades (students act edout or draw vocabulary).

For all games, I gave a small prize, usually candy, which excited students very much. One student, a 14-year old Somali boy, when told I had only one lollipop left, stared intently at it and said in a very serious voice, "It will be mine..." Certainly, all the students don't get this involved in the games but I have found that the majority, even those who usually seem unmotivated in class, perk up and participate more when a game is involved. It's interesting to see the same students who sit glazed-eyed in class when doing a review, intently studying their vocabulary words before it's their turn to participate in a game.

Since I began teaching almost two years ago, I've noticed that students really seem to get into classroom games. Students often ask me "Are we going to play a game today?" "Can we play a game?" "Do you have candy?" "Team game today?"

How do students act during these games? Generally, there was a very spirited atmosphere with almost all students involved to some extent. Some students got very competitive, rushing to the board, pleading with me to go next, hitting the buzzer so hard that it hits the wall, getting loud or animated or even angry when losing. Three of the people in the class need to be coaxed to participate – but even these three students participate more than they would in a regular class, asking to be scorekeeper or at least actively studying in the fear of being called upon next. Though most of the students who were hesitant about participating, were just new and intimidated to use English, a few genuinely had writing disabilities, could not write Roman letters, or had speech or hearing problems.

Analysis and Reflections

I asked these students if they liked team games to prepare for quizzes or if they preferred to study on their own. Some of the responses that I received (paraphrasing because of the language proficiency): they wanted games as

preparation for testing, they attributed poor performances to not playing an interactive/competitive game prior, they studied more for the game, the games helped them remember the material, they thought they needed the games and they liked playing games.

Even with those students who complain or don't want to play, most quickly get involved and get concerned about winning - especially if their team was *not* winning. In fact, often times the games got so intense that opposing team members argued and exchanged harsh words or people started shouting or complaining to me that the game was unfair.   Though this could be very rowdy and drive me crazy at times, it often opened up a constructive discussion about "how to act" and "good sportsmanship."

The nature of my research could not equate test scores using games vs. test scores with no games because other factors could not be accounted for. These factors include the language progress of individual students from the beginning of the year until present, the passing of the silent period or acclimation time for some, students becoming used to the classroom management and testing methods of the teacher and whether a student studied on their own that particular day or not. There were simply too many other variables to make a sweeping judgment about whether competitive/interactive games account for higher language acquisition.

Aside from the educational benefits, it seemed to me that the students became better acquainted with their peers in the class, created a closer classroom environment. Students from different cultural backgrounds had to cooperate and support one another and which lessened some of the inhibitions between groups.

What I could conclude is that use of these games created a more energetic, interesting climate in the classroom. The group dynamics of students tended to be very positive and intense vs. a passive learning environment. Though every day could not be geared towards games, incorporating competition and fun sparked most students out of lethargy and into increased language acquisition and awareness.