

# Language Games: Effective Tool for Language Learning

Pratibha Gupta

Dept. of English, L. N. Mithila University, Darbhanga, Bihar

Email: P10gupta@gmail.com



## ABSTRACT

*Second language (English) learning/teaching is a difficult task, particularly when there is little exposure to, and less opportunity for, the use of the target language. The task becomes more challenging especially when the two languages (L1 & L2) differ extensively. Learning a second language is much more than just learning its words. One has to make efforts to understand, and to manipulate the newly understood linguistic items and use the whole range into spoken or written expression. Efforts are required at every step and should be maintained for a longer period for proper development. It is equally challenging to the teacher and to the learner for achieving the desired outcomes. The learning environment demands high motivation to make the teaching-learning process an enjoyable experience for both. Language games prove to be very effective towards this end. Language can be learnt easily through language games, which are primarily aimed at teaching-learning along with helping learners to overcome the confusions in language use. It draws attention to the way language works to prompt a desired response. This paper tries to highlight this aspect of language teaching in a non-native context, by providing learners native-like learning environment.*

## Second Language Learning Context

Learning a second or foreign language (e.g., English) is a hard task. One has to make efforts to understand, to manipulate newly understood linguistic items and use the whole range into spoken or written expressions. English language, like any other language, poses problems for foreign learners. It is easy to explain some of its points, like framing interrogative sentences, difference between *since* and *for*, etc., but some aspects are trickier, causing difficulty even to the advanced learners and teachers. In a non-native context, one of the practical problems for the teacher is to provide

learners the natural linguistic context for language use in a meaningful way.

In most of the universities, generally English language classes are so designed that they promote imparting pieces of factual information about the language to the learners and the expected outcome demands their recollection. Likewise, learners are supposed to write critical appreciation, long answers, short answers and some of the grammar exercises bereft of their contexts. As a result, it has been observed, that the output of many of the learners is not up to the mark. They cannot handle the language in an efficient manner, creating

dissatisfaction and frustration, which results in poor performance. In reality, learners consider learning English as a profitable business and willing to participate in the learning process. Yet, when full participation is required, due to various reasons, they fall back. It points out the need to make lessons more interesting, meaningful and challenging for enhancing proper language production.

### **What is a Language Game?**

Recent years have witnessed an increased interest in formal pragmatics and especially in the establishment of game theory as an area in new methodology for the teaching/learning of language use particularly in second language. Game theory and decision theory (GDT) are the natural components that form the theoretical foundation for linguistic pragmatics on which language games work. Over the last decade, a firm research community has emerged with a strong interdisciplinary character, where economists, philosophers, and social scientists meet with linguists. Within this field of research, three major currents can be distinguished: one is closely related to the Grecian paradigm and aims at a precise foundation of pragmatic reasoning; the second originates in the economic literature and is concerned with the role of game theory in the context of language use; and the third aims at language evolution seen either from a biological or from a cultural perspective.

Very often it is presumed that "language game" means "word game" (in the sense of people playing word tricks on each other).

But Wittgenstein (1965) helps in understanding the meaning of the term "language game". Language game is a key term in his work and forms the foundation for much of his later work, which challenges classical as well as many modern notions about language and psychology. Wittgenstein says that people are trained to "react in this way" to the words of others. While working with language games, learners use language to prompt people to do some specific things. In any language, words and phrases have multiple purposes and, accordingly, listeners must interpret the context to know what to do. But in Wittgenstein's view, in simple situations, there is just the word and a single, correct response. These correct responses are not being thought of as inherited reflexes; rather they are simply the responses which the listener has decoded into communicative messages. Language games support this aspect of second language teaching/learning. They can be effectively used in the foreign language class.

Language games are supported by various language learning theories as per the requirement of the learner group. Cognitive theory of language learning forms the basic underlying constituent that uses the techniques of information gap and putting challenges while working with the task. Many of these games are based on cooperation and focus on accepting the learning task as a challenge and searching for solutions. Challenges put before them are used as reinforcing elements and motivate learners. They compel them to think critically over the problem.

Discussions, on the basis of clues given, direct them to find out the solution and help them finally to arrive at a decision. Most importantly, learners are exposed to a native-like learning experience/environment, which helps them to understand the communication as a native speaker in a natural environment.

Language games may be broadly classified in terms of their function, or on the basis of language structures, or types of communication involved. The characteristic features and the spirit of the game make it more extensive and appropriate for different levels of learners with varying levels of language achievement. Yet, its effectiveness and enjoyment depends much on the appropriateness of the game and roles of the players participating in that particular game. Its range could be made wider from controlled practice either through guided or free practice. As guided language activities demand a teacher-supported environment, it is least in interaction games, and especially aimed at listening or repeating type of activities. While guided practice is partly supported either by teacher or content, or partly provided by the learner himself, free activities depend on independent and full language support from the learners themselves.

### **Why Language Games?**

Language games provide meaningful and contextual language practice that is enjoyable and applicable at all levels and for all age groups. Wittgenstein finds language games primarily to dispel language confusions and make learning easy and

muddle-free. They refer to multiplicity of language practices that happen in the first language as well. They also refer to games that children play and enable them to learn language.

In the context of second language learning, the word 'game' has a specific connotation that highlights certain dimensions of language, which very often pass unnoticed. It draws one's attention to the fact that learning a language is much more than just learning its words. It directs the attention of the learner to the way language works to prompt a desired response from the listener/reader. It helps teachers to focus attention on the way in which learners can learn from these language games. By supplementing the concepts used in the game, before learners have mastered the language, individual learners could be provided necessary help to cope with the system.

It is a common perception that learning should be serious and solemn in nature and that there is no place for fun; if there is any, then it is not really learning. This is a misconception. It is possible to learn a language as well as have enjoyment at the same time. In reality, language games are a welcome break from the usual routine of the language class. In the easy, relaxed atmosphere created by the games, students learn faster and better (Wierus and Wierus, 1994; cited in Uberman, 1998). Silvers (1982) has observed that many teachers use games as "a teaching device," yet very often they perceive games merely as time-fillers or frivolous activities. He claims that many teachers often overlook the importance of the relaxed atmosphere provided by the

games that promote a real learning environment (cited in Uberman, 1998). Zdybiewska (1994; cited in Uberman, 1998) believes games are a good way for practising language, as they provide a model to learners to use in real life, in future.

Furthermore, to quote Richard-Amato, language games "add diversion to the regular classroom activities," and break the ice, "[but also] they are used to introduce new ideas" (1988; cited in Uberman, 1998). Games are highly motivating because they are amusing and interesting. They may be used to practise all language skills and various types of communication. Language games help teachers to create contexts in which language is learnt in a useful and meaningful way. Learners have to participate in the process where they need to understand what others are saying or have written. In response, they should speak or write in order to express their own viewpoint or give information. They must respond to the content in a definite way. In that process, if they are amused, intrigued, surprised or angered, it suggests that the content is clearly meaningful to them. The language which they listen to, speak, write or read will be vividly experienced and help them to remember the learnt item properly.

Learners can learn the lessons on their own or with little help from the teacher. It will be effective even for poor learners without feeling humiliated. The real aim of a language game is to make learning an enjoyable experience supported with real life experience. Games have the key features of drills added with a sense of achievement while getting opportunity for

real life communication, which is central to the language learning process. When language is vividly experienced, it will be properly assimilated in to the linguistic system of the learner. The games help learners in the learning process and encourage sustaining their interest. Active participation in the task compels learners to understand and use the language in a meaningful way. Many of the games provide more meaningful practice than conventional drill exercises. They provide the key features of drill with the opportunity to look at the working of the language in real life contexts. Games can thus provide practice in all the skills, at all levels and in all aspects of language learning.

#### **When to Use Language Games**

Games are often used as short warm-up activities or when there is time left at the end of a lesson. But Lee (1979:3) opined that a language game "should not be regarded as a marginal activity just filling in odd moments when the teacher and class have nothing better to do." Games ought to be at the heart of teaching foreign languages. Rixon (2001) suggests that games can be used at all stages of the lesson, provided they are suitable and carefully chosen. Games may also be used for revision exercises helping learners recall items in a pleasant and entertaining way. When students are paying attention to and using meaningful language in the classroom, it motivates learners, promotes their communicative competence and generates fluency.

## How to Choose Games

Tyson (2000) suggests that while choosing language games the following factors must be kept in mind. The game should:

- Be more than just fun.
- Inculcate "friendly" competition among learners.
- Keep all of the learners involved and interested.
- Encourage learners to focus on the use of language rather than on the language itself.
- Provide learners a chance to learn, practise, or review a specific learning item.

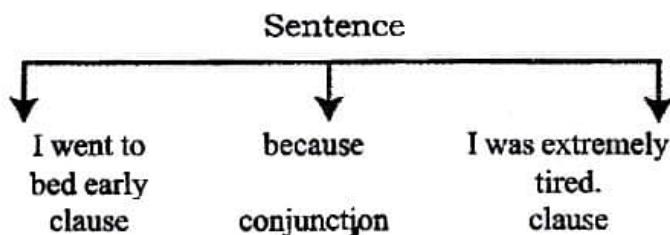
## Let us play

Grammar games can be used effectively for teaching the use of conjunctions learners have a lot of problems with. One such game is 'It's my sentences - That's your paragraph'. It requires 20-30 minutes and is meant for intermediate level learners. It is based on linking words, i.e. conjunctions. It will be helpful to provide learners the meaning of the term 'linking words'. A conjunction is a word which merely joins together words and sentences, as in the following sentences:

*The man is poor, but he is honest.*

*The man is poor, but honest.*

Conjunctions are words that join clauses (group of words) into sentences. They not only join clauses together; they also show how the meanings of the two clauses are related.



*We brought the food and they supplied the drink. (Addition)*

*She was poor but she was honest. (Contrast)*

*We can go swimming or we could stay here. (Alternative)*

*People dislike here because she was rude. (Cause)*

*I'll ring you when I arrive. (Time)*

## Examples of conjunctions:

1. Coordinating conjunctions: and, but, or.
2. Subordinating conjunctions: because, when, that, which.
3. Some conjunctions made up of two or more words:  
*I stayed an extra night so that I could attend the marriage.*  
*Let me know the moment that you arrive.*
4. Relative pronouns also join clauses like conjunctions: who, which, that.  
*There is the girl who works with my sister.*  
*I've got a friend who works in a canteen.*

## It's my sentence - That's your paragraph

This grammar game provides opportunity to write a paragraph on any topic. It is a mind-boggling exercise, which leads to effective writing. Below are given a few general sentences around a theme:

*I love travelling in the countryside.*

*Looking around, I realized, I was the only passenger left on the bus.*

*This is as far as we go.*

*I sat in front of the bus to get a good view of the countryside.*

*I'm going to Church Gate, I said to the conductor as I got on the bus.*

*I don't like losing my way.*

*The bus stops after some time.*

Now these sentences should be arranged in any order the learners want, linking them together into a paragraph of two or more sentences. The learners are then asked to read the paragraph they have written and compare it with other learners' paragraphs in groups. This will give them insight into how differences in word order and linking words cause differences in meaning.

### **Conclusion**

Grammar games are effective tools to learn a foreign language in an efficient manner. They challenge the learners and promote language learning in a fun-filled way. Learners reach the target level without facing any inferiority complex or shyness. The games also facilitate self-learning with great ease.

### **References**

- [http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Language\\_game.html](http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Language_game.html)  
Accessed on 2.9.2014
- <http://www.uasilanguage.com/> Accessed on 14.9.2014
- Lee, R. (1979). *The evolution of reciprocity in sizable groups*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Richard-Amato, P. A. (1988). *Making it happen: Interaction in the second language classroom - From theory to practice*. New York: Longman.
- Rixon, S. (2001). *Game practising English word cards*. Amazon.co.uk.
- Silvers, S. M. (1982). Games for the classroom and the English-speaking club, *English Teaching Forum*, 20 (2), pp. 29-33.
- Tyson, C. (2000). *Using games in EFL classes for children*. Daejin University ELT Research Paper, Fall 2000.
- Uberman, A. (1998). The use of games for vocabulary presentation and revision, *Forum*, 36 (1).
- Wittgenstein, L. (1965). *Philosophical investigations*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Zdybiewska, M. (1994). *One hundred language games*. Warszawa: WSiP.

Members may now access the current as well as some of the past issues of our bi-monthly *Journal of English Language Teaching* on the Web by clicking on the relevant link given on the Home page of our website [www.eltai.in](http://www.eltai.in).

They may also get to know their membership details by clicking on 'Member log in' found on the right hand side of the Home page and entering their membership ID. If necessary, they may contact <[eltai\\_india@yahoo.co.in](mailto:eltai_india@yahoo.co.in)> for their Membership ID.