

## Using Games to Develop English Speaking Skills in Children

Ruchi Kaushik\*

### Abstract

*Children, at the primary stage, have an innate ability to acquire and learn a new language. Therefore, it is important for teachers to provide them with a stress free environment so that learning may become fun, and the young learners may feel inclined to learn the language (i.e., the second language or L2, apart from their mother tongue or native language) in a natural way without feeling intimidated or burdened. In the Indian context, this second language is mostly English. Research studies indicate that fun activities and games make English classes enjoyable. This article reviews some research studies that describe how games and fun activities are beneficial in teaching English to students at the primary stage. It also points out that many teachers use games as warm-up activities or fillers, which may be incorporated meaningfully in prescribed lessons for developing students' communicative skills, particularly, spoken English.*

### INTRODUCTION

The *National Curriculum Framework* (NCF) 2005 describes the status of English in India as that of a “global language in a multilingual country” and offers justification for its introduction at the elementary level in schools “as a matter of political response to people’s aspirations”. It, however, recommends

that children, at the primary stage, should be taught in the native language and that English should serve as one of the languages through which they may be able to explore the world. Moreover, the NCF–2005 defines the objectives of the second language curriculum to be “attainment of basic proficiency... and development of language for knowledge acquisition”.

---

\* Associate Professor, Shri Ram College of Commerce, University of Delhi, New Delhi.

Several States and Union Territories (UTs) have responded to public demand and introduced English in primary classes, as early as from Class I. However, most school teachers face immense difficulty in teaching English to students, particularly, in government, government aided and regional medium schools located in rural and semi-urban areas of the country, as many children are first generation learners and have had little exposure to the English language outside classroom. Moreover, it is often observed that in many cases, teachers lose the enthusiasm to creatively engage with students when they see a majority of them struggle with the basics of the second language. In such a situation, most teachers are left with no other option but to teach English in the vernacular or bilingual mode with only one objective in mind, i.e., to complete the prescribed syllabus within a stipulated timeframe.

This is corroborated by the findings of a national level study conducted by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the Educational Consultants India Limited (EdCIL) in the year 2012. The study investigates the status of teaching of English at the primary level in government schools in eight States across the country. It was found that “teachers made little or no effort to develop the skills of listening and speaking” (in students), as they fell into “the textbook trap” and failed to “move beyond the textbook” (Dutta and Bala, 2012).

As conventional methods of teaching the second language have not yielded the desired results in the Indian context, it is time to examine the teaching methodologies being used in classrooms and come up with learner centric innovative strategies so as to develop and hone the language skills of the young learners. Incorporating games in the teaching of English is one such strategy.

According to Rooyackers (2002), “Language is immensely powerful, but it can also be loads of fun. In fact, a sense of fun can make language more powerful...Language and play complement and enrich each other” (as cited in Klimova, 2015). Since playing is a natural phenomenon for children, it can be an effective method for igniting in them a desire to use L2 for communication, especially, in oral interactions. Thus, activities that require children to move around, complete a task and talk with their peers naturally in the second language may help them acquire it as well.

## **GAMES — DEFINITIONS AND TYPE**

Language researchers and practitioners have offered different definitions of the concept of ‘game’. Hadfield (1984) defines game as “an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun”. She also distinguishes between ‘linguistic’ and ‘communicative’ games, arguing that the former emphasises the production of a grammatical structure, while the latter focuses on the successful completion of a real-life task by making use of a language. Hadfield lists a

variety of games that teachers may employ in classroom for inculcating language (or communicative) skills in students, such as sorting games, information gap games, search games, puzzle solving games and role-play or drama games.

According to Lewis and Bedson (1999), games are language activities that are primarily rule driven and goal oriented, and also could be 'competitive' or 'cooperative' in nature. They distinguish between 'rousing' (to wake up a class) and 'settling' (to calm down a class) games, and argue that a teacher may decide which of these games to use, depending on factors, such as the profile of the children, the time of the day the English class is scheduled to begin, etc.

Similarly, Wright, Betteridge and Buckby (2005) consider a game "to mean an activity, which is entertaining and engaging, often challenging...in which the learners play, and usually, interact with others". According to them, games provide opportunities to children to feel and experience language in meaningful contexts. They classify games using verbs (like 'do', 'describe', 'create', etc.), which, according to them, primarily, focus on the manner in which the learners would be engaged while playing the game. The games designed by them also incorporate a wide variety of learning styles, ranging from visual and kinesthetic to dramatic.

## **BENEFITS OF INCORPORATING GAMES IN THE TEACHING–LEARNING PROCESS**

Many studies point out the beneficial effects of incorporating games in the teaching–learning of a foreign or second language. Uberman (1998) reported a successful small-scale experiment of using games to introduce and revise vocabulary with Class III students. Ara (2009) analysed the dismal learning atmosphere of compulsory English classrooms at the primary level in Bangladesh and concluded that songs, rhymes and games may be incorporated as effective tools in the teaching of English.

Chirandon, Laohawiriyanon and Rakthong (2010) reported significant improvement in the communication skills of sixth grade Thai students, who were taught English using games in a small experimental group study.

Wang, Shang and Briody (2011) investigated the impact of using games on sixth grade EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in China, and found remarkable improvement in their learning motivation and vocabulary acquisition, apart from reduced levels of anxiety.

Masri and Najjar (2014) explored the impact of using word games on first grade students in Jordan and found that there was significant improvement in the vocabulary of experimental group students, who were taught using word games than those taught via traditional methods.

These are only a few research studies that have been conducted

to explore the beneficial results of teaching L2 using games. It has been proven that by playing such games, children get involved in learning L2 and feel motivated to use it creatively, as well as, spontaneously in a stress free environment. This, in turn, boosts their confidence. However, using games in the classroom must be purposeful. Before introducing any language game in the classroom, a teacher must have clarity about the following.

- Learning outcomes (what the students will accomplish by playing a particular game)
- Designing and the implementation of the game (content, material, rules, instructions, etc.)
- Appropriateness of the game (factors like students' age and proficiency level, learning style, class size, etc.)
- Suitable time to introduce the game (before, while or after a topic or lesson)

### **INCORPORATING GAMES TO DEVELOP SPOKEN ENGLISH SKILLS IN CHILDREN**

It has often been observed that teachers use games in language classrooms as “warm-ups at the beginning of class, fill-ins when there is extra time near the end of class, or as an occasional bit of spice stirred into the curriculum to add variety” (Jacobs, as cited in Klimova, 2015). However, games may be used in a more meaningful manner by incorporating them as a fundamental part of the teaching-

learning process. For example, NCERT's *Marigold* series of English textbooks for Classes I to V carry an interesting set of contents, covering different genres, along with relevant CDs. The textbooks focus on developing the language skills of the students. Unit 8 of *Marigold* — Textbook in English for Class V carries a poem titled 'Nobody's Friend' and a short story, 'The Little Bully', based on the themes of friendship, growing up, and a person's rights and responsibilities, to name a few. The exercises given at the end of the Unit, particularly, focus on developing and polishing the listening and speaking skills of the students. These are designed in such a manner that encourage the students to share their thoughts and feelings, narrate personal accounts or experiences, and think creatively. For instance, the speaking section after the poem, 'Nobody's Friend', is titled 'Let's Talk' and comprises the following questions.

- Do you like to share your favourite food or toy with others? Why?
- Who is your best friend? Can you describe him or her?
- Suppose you and your friends are very thirsty and there is only one glass of water, what would you do?
- If you had a bat, could you play cricket by yourself?

These questions are structured in such a manner that require a teacher to encourage the students to reflect and respond, and thus, initiate a

discussion. There is a probability that the learners, who are shy, hesitant or underconfident may speak little or not speak at all. In such a case, the teacher could convert this exercise into an interesting game like the one as follows.

### **Name of the game — Find a friendly or unfriendly connect**

This game has been adapted from the activity titled ‘Two Pictures’ by Wright, Betteridge and Buckby (2006). It can either be played at the beginning of a lesson to introduce the students to the theme of ‘friendship’. It may also be played as an after lesson activity to reinforce their concepts, and enrich their vocabulary and speaking skills.

#### **Objectives**

To enable the students to imagine and creatively draw connections between words, objects and situations related to the theme of friendship

#### **Group size**

Five to six students in each group

#### **Duration**

One hour

#### **Material**

A bell; a tape recorder; a stopwatch; three sets of chits — one set comprising 15–20 chits with words describing good and bad qualities (one quality written on each chit), second set comprising 15–20 chits with names of objects (one name written on each chit) and the third with 15–20 chits describing situations [one situation in the form a phrase written on each chit]

#### **Step-by-step procedure**

Step 1 — Divide the class into groups, comprising five to six students each. Allot a number or letter to each group.

Step 2 — Explain the objective(s) and rules of the game clearly.

Step 3 — Say ‘start’. All students are supposed to start tapping on the desk or stand and turn around as music is played (ensure some kind of movement that is neither too noisy nor too chaotic).

Step 4 — Stop the music after some time. Ring the bell and speak aloud an adjective or a noun that describes either a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ trait in a friend, for example, ‘trustworthy’.

Step 5 — If the word spoken aloud is a negative, undesirable or bad trait, then the students are supposed to act as statues till they are told to ‘relax’. If a student moves, the group gets a negative point.

Step 6 — If the spoken word is a positive, desirable or good trait (like ‘trustworthy’), then the group that identifies with it, asks one of its members to shout out something like this — “True friendship lives forever” (it could be any short quote or affirmation or tongue twister). The group gets the opportunity to send one of its members to select three chits — one each from Set A, B and C (which could be arranged set wise on the teacher’s desk).

Step 7 — If a group identifies or does not identify with the spoken word but forgets to speak the decided quote

or affirmation or tongue twister, or in case, there is a tie, then the teacher needs to 'start' the game again.

Step 8 — Once a student has collected three chits, one needs to run and hand it over to the group that is next in order of number or letter. For instance, if the student belonging to Group 2 or B comes forward to collect the chits, then one needs to hand them over to Group 3 or C.

Step 9 — The group that receives the three chits has to quickly and loudly inform the class (any group member may speak) about their contents. After this, the group gets two minutes to connect the three words and weave a story, describing a friendly or an unfriendly act in 10–12 sentences. For example, if a group receives chits consisting of the following.

**Set A:** The word is 'Selfish'.

**Set B:** The word is 'bottle' or 'bottles'.

**Set C:** The phrase is 'at the bus stop' or 'in the school bus'.

The story could probably be woven somewhat like the following.

It was a hot and humid morning. Aditi was standing at the bus stop waiting for her school bus. Suddenly, she felt thirsty and reached out for her water bottle. To her dismay, she realised that she had forgotten it at home. It was too late for her to go back home and fetch it. She would not face much problem at school as she could drink water from the water

cooler installed there. But how would she quench her thirst now? Her friend, Vaishali, was standing close to her. She shared her problem with Vaishali and requested if she could sip some water from her bottle. Vaishali was a selfish girl and refused, saying that she had a sore throat, and so, could not share water from her bottle as Aditi, too, could catch the infection. Aditi realised that Vaishali was not her true friend.

Step 10 — In case the group is unable to connect the three words and develop a story within two minutes (use a stopwatch to take note of the time), the opportunity would automatically get transferred to the next group in line. If this group is successful in weaving a story using the set of words and phrases, it will get 2 bonus points.

Step 11 — The teacher would give 5 points for a complete story narrated by a group, 2.5 points for a partially developed story and 1 point for an innovative idea, even if the story has not been developed (the teacher may also develop one's own set of points to be awarded).

Step 12 — The teacher should carry on with the game till all students in the class get the opportunity to participate in it.

Step 13 — Then, at the end of the game, one needs to calculate the score of all groups and announce the winner.

Step 14 — The next day, the teacher may invite the students to share their experiences, and the story they liked the most and why.

### Possible variations

The students may be encouraged to be creative. So, the story could be in the form of dialogues or it could just be a simple narration of a personal account or experience. The students may also be encouraged to enact the story in the form of a role-play with props. Further, the teacher may even tweak the game and simplify it, or make it slightly difficult. The students may also be encouraged to include at least one idiom on friendship in their story (for instance, ‘a shoulder to cry on’, ‘through thick and thin’, etc.). But for this, the teacher will have to familiarise them with some idioms related to ‘friendship’ before they actually begin play to the game.

### Challenges and opportunities

Some of the challenges and opportunities that the teacher may come across while incorporating this game in the classroom are as follows.

- Students, at the primary stage of education, tend to get excited at the mere mention of getting to play a game. So, noise and chaos are bound to happen. However, one may try to minimise such instances by laying down few rules, such as each student will have to wait for one’s turn and raise one’s hand, if one wishes to say something. Also, the teacher needs to encourage the

students to clarify their doubts before they actually start playing the game. This will reduce instances of confusion or chaos. Besides, the teacher needs to give clear-cut instructions to the young learners and explain with the help of examples, wherever necessary. Once the students realise that they will miss the opportunity to play the game in case of chaos, they will cooperate with each other and follow the rules.

- In a multilingual classroom set-up, it is quite natural for students to speak in their mother tongue while interacting and playing the game. It is important to use multilingualism as a resource and not impose the ‘speak only in English’ rule. Thus, one may encourage the learners to discuss things within the group in multiple languages, but at the same time, ensure that they focus more on the use of English as they write or narrate a story. One may also make the game more multilingual by encouraging the students to include at least two to three words from other languages in the story, for which they may be awarded extra points.
- The young learners may make some mistakes while using the target language, in this case — English. Instead of disrupting the game by pointing out

their mistakes repeatedly, the teacher may make a note of few common mistakes being made by the students and carry out a practice session on grammar and vocabulary with the entire class, after the game is over. Since it is a communicative game, the emphasis is on developing students' fluency in speaking rather than checking the accuracy of facts, grammar and vocabulary at all times.

- As children exude immense excitement and energy while playing a game, it is sometimes easy for a teacher to digress or lose track of the objectives. So, the teacher must make a checklist that would help one to understand if the aims have been accomplished.
- The students may be encouraged to share their feedback on the game. This, in turn, will help the teacher to modify the game, if necessary, and make it more appropriate to meet the learners' requirements.

## CONCLUSION

There is sufficient pedagogic evidence that suggests that foreign or second language teaching-learning may be made more interesting, interactive and meaningful by employing games in language classes. Games help develop children's communicative skills, reduce their anxiety levels and motivate them to explore L2 in a relaxed and fun-filled environment. However, teachers need to optimally and purposefully use games so as to achieve the desired learning outcomes, i.e., making the students fluent in spoken English. Rather than treating games as marginal activities that may be undertaken once in a while, they must be incorporated in the language classes frequently. This will help to reinforce the concepts and develop the communication skills, especially spoken skills, of the students. Therefore, making language learning a joyous experience for children depends a lot on language teachers.

## REFERENCES

- ARA, S. 2009. 'Use of songs, rhymes and games in teaching English to young learners in Bangladesh'. *The Dhaka University Journal of Linguistics*. Vol. 2. No. 3, pp. 161-172. Retrieved from <https://www.banglajol.info/index.php/DUJL/article/view/4150>
- CHIRANDON, A., C. LAOHAWIRIYANON AND A. RAKTHONG. 2010. 'The effects of teaching English through games'. The 2nd International Conference on Humanities and Social Sciences. Faculty of Liberal Arts, Prince of Songkla University, Thailand. Retrieved from <http://fs.libarts.psu.ac.th/research/conference/proceedings-2/4pdf/006.pdf>



- DUTTA, U. AND N. BALA. 2012. 'Teaching of English at primary level in government schools — A synthesis report'. NCERT and EdCIL (India) Ltd. New Delhi, India.
- HADFIELD, J. 1984. *Elementary Education Games*. Longman. Essex, UK, p.4.
- KLIMOVA, B. F. 2015. 'Games in the teaching of English'. *Procedia — Social and Behavioral Sciences*. Vol. 191, pp. 1157–1160.  
Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042815025720>
- LEWIS, G. AND G. BEDSON. 1999. *Games for children*. Oxford University Press. Oxford, UK, pp. 5–6.
- MASRI, A. AND M. NAJAR. 2014. 'The effect of using word games on primary stage students' achievement in English language vocabulary in Jordan'. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*. Vol. 4. No. 9, pp. 144–152.  
Retrieved from [http://www.aijcrnet.com/journals/Vol\\_4\\_No\\_9-September\\_2014/17.pdf](http://www.aijcrnet.com/journals/Vol_4_No_9-September_2014/17.pdf)
- NATIONAL COUNCIL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND TRAINING. 2008. *Marigold — Textbook in English for Class V*. NCERT. New Delhi, India.
- . 2005. *National Curriculum Framework*. NCERT. New Delhi, India.
- UBERMAN, A. 1998. 'The use of games for vocabulary presentation and revision'. *English Teaching Forum*. Vol. 36. No. 1, pp. 20–27.  
Retrieved from <http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/vols/vol36/no1/p20.htm>
- WANG, Y. J., H. F. SHANG AND P. BRIODY. 2011. 'Investigating the impact of using games in teaching children English'. *International Journal of Learning and Development*. Vol. 1. No. 1, pp. 127–141.  
Retrieved from <https://www.macrothink.org/journal/index.php/ijld/article/view/1118/0>
- WRIGHT, A., D. BETTERIDGE AND M. BUCKBY. 2006. *Games for Language Learning* (III Ed.). Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, UK.