Using Classroom Games Most Effectively with Young Learners

By David Paul, Language Teaching Professionals

Games play a central role in the lives of almost all children, and most children easily become completely immersed in their favorite games. Wouldn't it be great if these children were equally positive about learning English in our classes? This is definitely possible, and I think the easiest way to make this happen is quite simple: We need to make our lessons games-based. If learning itself feels like a game, and if children feel they are discovering a fascinating new world of English through games that they would also enjoy outside the classroom, it is much more likely that the children will be motivated to learn English both in the class and between lessons away from the class. And it is much more likely that they will use English in their daily lives.

Using Games in a Teacher-Centered Way

When classroom games are used in a more teacher-centered way, they tend to be used for practicing language rather than learning it. New words and patterns tend to be introduced before playing games, and the games are then used for practicing these new language targets. Some teachers even go further than this and assume that both learning and practicing take place most effectively outside games, and that games are little more than a kind of light relief or a reward for studying hard or for good behavior.

I think this is missing the point of having classroom games in the first place, and can often have more of a negative effect on learning than a positive one. Some children will come to see the serious parts of the lesson as what they have to get through in order to play games. These children will probably begin to separate learning from having fun, and over time, they may become restless during the serious parts of the lesson and may only become fully engaged when playing the games. As a result, the teacher may have to use games as bribes, saying things like "Keep quiet or no bingo!"

▲ *Playing the fishing game.*

A More Effective Approach

Effective child-centered games-based learning is where play and learning happen at the same time. Games are not simply for practicing language targets. They are where the most effective learning takes place. A child who encounters a new English word, expression, or pattern while immersed in a game is far more motivated to learn it, and much more likely to internalize it than a child who receives new knowledge from the teacher before the game.

Let's look at a fishing game. In this game, there are pictures or words on pieces of paper on the floor and each piece of paper has a metal paper clip attached to it. The children try to catch the pieces of paper with magnets. When they catch a picture or word, they perform a language task with it, such as identifying what it is or making a personalized sentence that includes the word.

How do the children learn new words in a game like this? The more teacher-centered way would be to pre-teach the new words before playing the game. This is, in effect, treating the children as blank slates. It is saying "Follow me. You learn because I teach. Now, practice the new language targets in the game." The game is just being used for practicing, not for learning.

In a more child-centered games-based approach, there is no real need for pre-teaching. There are new words in the game, which they discover while playing. This is treating the children as explorers rather than blank slates. The game motivates the children to try to understand and use the new words. If the words are phonically regular, the children can find out what the new words are by trying to read them. If the children need help, the teacher can hint and interact with them in a way that ensures they feel they are discovering the new words for themselves.

Keeping the Focus on Learning

It is essential that children do not see their English lessons as a time to play games for their own sake. The last thing we want is for the children to constantly look for stimulation from new exciting games rather than new exciting English. The best way to prevent this from happening is to find games the children like, and use them wisely. For example, it is best to stop a game before the children want to stop, so that the next time the game is introduced, the children feel "Oh, that's the game we wanted to play more last time, but we couldn't."

By using games wisely, we can keep children's interest in the same games but make the language content more difficult each time they play. They enjoy the game and don't feel they want to change it, so they get their stimulation from the challenge of the increasingly difficult English within the game, not from a change of games. For this to work well, we need games where the language content can easily be changed. When thinking of using a game in class or developing a game ourselves, key questions to ask are "What can we change?" and "How can the language evolve inside this game?" If we find the language content can easily evolve, the game can be used for learning.

I think it is helpful to think in terms of having a basket of games that we use with a class. The games in the basket steadily evolve over time. As the children's English develops, some games will become less appropriate, so we take them out of the basket and replace them with new games. This steady approach makes it less likely that the children will become dependent on the stimulation of new games to keep them motivated.

The Psychology Behind a Good Game
If we look at games from the constructivist perspective, which is behind the arguments I have made so far in this article, games are the almost perfect learning environment. They emphasize the central role of the child as an active learner, not as somebody who is receiving information from an adult. And the children learn through exploration – overcoming achievable challenges, making mistakes, and learning from these mistakes – and so construct their own meaningful interpretation of whatever they are learning.

But I think it is also helpful to look at games from the perspective of self-determination theory. In order to do this, I will draw on some of the ideas in the book *Glued to Games: How Video Games Draw Us In and Hold Us Spellbound* by Rigby and Ryan (2011), which looks at the psychology of why videogames are so engaging. My focus in this article will be on applying some of these ideas to classroom games for learning English. According to self-determination theory, we are motivated to develop and change if three universal psychological needs are met: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Rigby and Ryan suggest that games are most successful, engaging, and fun when they satisfy these three intrinsic needs.

Competence
Competence refers to our innate desire to develop our abilities and gain mastery of new situations and challenges. We have a deep intrinsic desire to get better at things and overcome challenges. As Rigby and Ryan say, "From the moment we're born, we naturally seek to gain mastery over ourselves and our environment, learning how things work by observing, exploring, and manipulating them – first through play and later through work, hobbies, sports, and a variety of activities. We see this intrinsic need energizing us from the very earliest ages, motivating children to stretch their abilities as they learn to crawl, stand, and walk. The truth is there is a sheer joy that comes from mastering new challenges that are an inherent part of who we are, from birth straight into adulthood."

What does this mean for classroom games? I think it means that in order for games to be engaging, they need to be challenging. They need to provide opportunities for children to puzzle things out and overcome problems. It is not enough just to play games where the same content is repeated many times. It is also not enough just to teach new words and patterns before playing a game and then get the children to practice them while playing. So self-determination theory provides additional support for introducing challenging new words and patterns inside games, not before games.
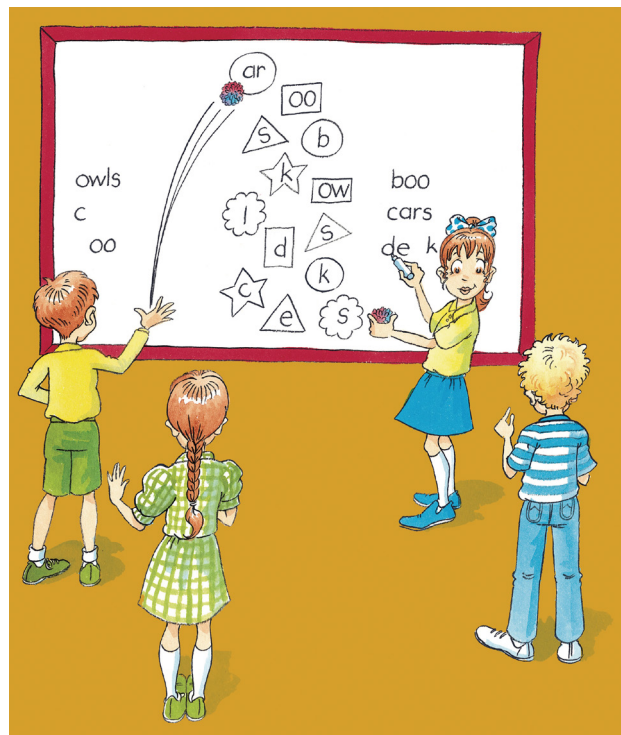
▲ *Challenging children to learn.*

When games provide children with challenges, they give them an opportunity to stretch to new levels of mastery, which, once achieved, satisfy their intrinsic need for competence. This means, of course, that the challenges in the games need to be achievable. We need to be continually scaffolding the children's ability through the games. In effect, from a Vygotskian perspective, games are an indirect and engaging way for children to reach their potential by interacting with a more knowledgeable person, in this case, the teacher. It is the teacher who can ensure that the children encounter achievable and appropriate new words and patterns while immersed in games.

Having achievable challenges also ensures that the children take them on positively. The games themselves provide a fun, non-threatening environment where children are more likely to take on challenges, but we also need to scaffold the level of the challenges. With a new class, we can start with gentle challenges, make sure the children handle them successfully, with our hints if necessary, and then gradually increase the difficulty of the challenges. So, over time, we build up the children's belief that they can and will succeed.

Relatedness
Relatedness refers to our need to have meaningful connections with others. It is natural to seek out quality relationships simply for the intrinsic reward that comes from having a mutually supportive connection with others. As Rigby and Ryan say, "Humans inherently seek to be connected with others and feel that they are interacting in meaningful ways. This need for relatedness naturally occurs in all of us, requiring no external incentive. We are simply evolved to connect and to feel like we belong."

What does this mean for classroom games? I think it means that whether a game is engaging or not does not just depend on how interesting a particular game is or whether the game contains challenges. It also depends on the children having meaningful connections with the other children or teachers they are playing with. Even a very simple game can become highly motivating if there are positive relationships with others who are playing. Playing in teams or playing as a whole class can foster meaningful connections between the children. Cooperative games are likely to lead to supportive connections

between children, but competitive games can also provide a positive experience in terms of connections between children.

As Rigby and Ryan say, "Through competition, we contribute to the competence satisfaction of the other and them to us, which creates the kind of meaningful and supportive connections that are a hallmark of relatedness. But when we feel our opponents are trying to tear us down as people, through taunts, cheating, and mean-spirited play, our relatedness needs are thwarted."

Autonomy

Autonomy refers to our innate desire to do things because we want to do them, not because we are controlled by circumstances or by other people. According to Rigby and Ryan, "Autonomy means that one's actions are aligned with one's inner self and values; that you feel you are making the decisions and are able to stand behind what you do."

One way to strengthen children's feeling of autonomy is to do activities where they have more choices. This is easier to achieve in games than in most other activities. Children even make a lot of choices in many very simple games, such as when they choose a card in a concentration game, throw a sticky ball at a word of their choice on the board, or choose who to throw a ball to.

We can also let children choose which game to play. For a few years, I taught different groups of children one after the other in a community center. I used to arrive with a rucksack full of games, put them on a table, and let the children choose which game they wanted to play. The classes were small, so they all played the games together.

Of course, when I planned the lesson, I worked out how to achieve the language targets of the lesson with each of the games, so it didn't really matter which game they played, but giving the children the choice of which games to play was wonderful for their motivation.

Giving children choices, however, is not the only way to strengthen children's feeling of autonomy. As Rigby and Ryan say, "It is often when an individual has a sense of mission and purpose that they feel most autonomous, even though they may not perceive a lot of options or specific choices," and "We feel autonomous even when choice doesn't exist, as long as we personally endorse the path we're on."

Games provide an ideal platform for giving children a sense of purpose. Race games have finishing lines, treasure hunts have

▲ *Games have goals.*

treasure to find, hopscotch has squares to hop through. And whether or not the children feel they are doing what they want to do, and so "endorse" the game, depends very much on how we introduce the game in the first place.

If we just tell children what to do in a clear, autocratic way, the children are unlikely to have a strong feeling of autonomy, But, if we draw the children into the game with mystery, or introduce it tentatively as if we are discovering the game together with the children, they are much more likely to endorse the game, have a greater feeling of autonomy, and so be more motivated to play.

> **Effective child-centered games-based learning is where play and learning happen at the same time.**

An Essential Element

Getting back to constructivism and, in particular, the ideas of my favorite constructivist, George Kelly, I think there is another element that is fundamental in learning and engagement that plays a key role in determining whether a video game is engaging. And it is an element we need to also maximize in classroom games, so as to maximize the children's feeling of autonomy and engagement in our lessons.

Can you guess what the element is?... It's a long word beginning with A.... The first three letters are an insect…. Can you guess?... I am introducing it in this way so as to build it up... I expect you have guessed. The element is "anticipation." In a successful video game, a child is constantly anticipating what is going to happen next. This draws them deeply into the game, and so, according to George Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory, their actions in the game become more aligned with their inner self and personal direction. At every opportunity, we need to maximize anticipation in the classroom, and games provide the ideal platform for doing this.

When a teacher pre-teaches new words or patterns before a game, explains them clearly, drills them clearly or models them clearly, the teacher is reducing anticipation. If instead, the children go straight into a game and encounter new words as surprises while playing, and if they need help, the teacher provides this help through hints and puzzles rather than clear explanation, there will be much more anticipation. And the children will be much more likely to be engaged.

So to use games effectively, we need to look at children as explorers who are anticipating and constructing their understanding of English while playing, and who are challenged to overcome problems while immersed in the games. They also need to have a feeling of autonomy while playing and feel meaningfully connected with other children and the teacher. The secret to using classroom games most effectively is to aim for all of these goals.

References

Rigby, S., & Ryan, R. M. (2011). *Glued to games: How video games draw us in and hold us spellbound*. Praeger; ABC-CLIO.
Kelly, G. A. (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs*. Norton.