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# LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE THROUGH PLAY

Abstract. Playing comes to children as naturally as breathing and is one of the most predominant forms of activity in a child's life from infancy to adolescence. In fact, the right to engage in developmentally-appropriate play and leisure activities is now recognised internationally as one of the basic human rights of children (UNCRC, Article 31, 1989). Children's playful disposition constitutes a powerful developmental drive whose educational potential cannot be ignored. In order to initiate and maintain meaningful interaction and create developmentallyappropriate learning opportunities, foreign language (FL) teachers of young learners' need to acknowledge play as a central element of early foreign language pedagogy. This paper takes up the issue of learning through play and argues that play-based activities should constitute the core of good classroom practice in young learners' FL instruction. It begins with a definition of play and a discussion of the centrality of play in early and later child development. It then considers the rationale for incorporating elements of play in the FL classroom and presents a range of its benefits and possible applications. Finally, a typology and examples of play-based tasks for very young and young learners are provided followed by some practical guidelines for implementing play in the classroom. The paper concludes with a list of resources for teachers who are willing to integrate play in their curricula.

Key words: young learners; foreign language learning; play; games; early start; incidental learning.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: DEFINING PLAY

Although children engage in play naturally and universally, not all their activity can be subsumed under the notion of play. Some distinction needs to be made between those children behaviours and routines which are truly playful in nature and those that constitute instances of rather mundane, every-day activities. Hiding behind a tree or jumping up and down are not necessarily examples of play, unless they are performed in a specific way indicative of the child's involvement, attitude and motivation.

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Research into child education and development has defined play in terms of a combination of features that describe both the child's actual actions and his/her mindset and motivation for undertaking them (Fromberg 1997, 1998, 2002). Isenberg (2002) provides a range of unique characteristics which underpin playful behaviour. In her paradigm, play includes all actions which are: 1) intrinsically motivated and self-initiated, 2) process rather than product oriented, 3) non-literal and pleasurable, 4) exploratory and active, 5) rule-governed, 6) meaningful, 7) episodic i.e. shift spontaneously and flexibly. In play, the child chooses to perform and sustain an activity on his/her own and focuses on performing rather that completing it. The activity creates opportunities for active exploration which stimulates positive emotions (joy, satisfaction, pleasure, interest, pride). Play typically shows evidence of structure and organisation, compelling the participants to follow some rules; however, its structure does not need to be tight and the play itself is not usually scripted (Christie and Roskos 2007). Playful activities also have some clearly determined purpose which is achieved by cooperation and, possibly (but not necessarily), competition. Finally, for a child to voluntarily participate in it, play needs to be personally relevant and meaningful by relating to familiar and concrete events, objects, situations and people that have been directly observed and/or experienced by the child himself/herself.

Early childhood play frequently contains an element of role-taking in an imaginative, make-believe set-up (Vygotsky 1978). Imaginative or pretend play involves a shift from reality-based reasoning to assuming an 'as if' perspective towards objects, actions and other people (Björklund 2012). Young children's preference for this kind of play can be explained in terms of their incomplete overall knowledge of the physical world which forces them to distort the reality to match their own ends (Piaget 1945/1962). As Vygotsky (1978, 102) puts it, imaginative play allows a child to think and act "as though he were a head taller than himself." Through fabricating and sustaining imaginary scenarios and endowing objects and people with imagined identities, the child learns how to mediate new situations by the use of symbols, which allows him/her to deal with intellectual and educational challenges more successfully. Make-believe play supports children's thinking and enhances the development of abstract thought and mental representations (Robson 2006, 28). Piaget (1970), similar to Vygotsky, considers play a key aspect of learning and cognitive development. He sees play as a form of active exploration in which children construct their own understanding of the reality by experiencing the environment themselves (Piaget 1970).

Similarly, for Bruner (1972) play provides a non-threatening, secure context in which children can test new ways of acting and thinking and experiment with new behaviours.

It has also been suggested that play contributes to learning and overall physical, social, emotional and cognitive development (Christie 2001; Gestwicki 1999; Isenberg 2002). The kinaesthetic element, which is frequently present in games, increases children's body awareness and improves their balance, eye-hand coordination and gross motor skills. Play develops children's social skills by teaching them to regulate their own emotions and behaviour (Erikson 1963). In play, children are required to cooperate, share ideas, props and power, recognise and respect viewpoints and needs of others' and learn to control and adjust their own feelings and behaviour. Through play they socialise and become members of their peer community (ibid.). Play reduces stress and anxiety (Elkind 1981) and is essential for cognitive development. Isenberg (2002) reports that play enhances attention, concentration, memory, planning and problem-solving skills. Last but not least, play contributes to language development by providing children with opportunities to express themselves and interact with others in language in a meaningful and relevant context (Gardner 1993).

As the primary concern of this paper is the significance of play in early FL learning, we propose a definition of play and play-based learning which is applicable in an institutionalised, formal setting and describes play in terms of the following features:

- Play is purposeful, personally meaningful and relevant.
- Play involves learners cognitively.
- Even when teacher-initiated, play is voluntary and triggers (and sustains) positive emotions such as enjoyment, interest, satisfaction, pride, excitement.
- Play is intrinsically motivating.
- Play creates genuine learning opportunities in that it leads to the practice and acquisition of some elements of the target language (incidentally or explicitly) or, in younger learners, to the development of some non-language related knowledge or skills.
- Play is a collaborative activity in which learners work together to achieve a shared goal.
- Play is regulated by clearly defined rules.
- Play involves a balance between challenges and skills.

Seen in this light, play is a medium of learning which goes beyond literacy-based, traditional scholarly practices. It activates and engages the whole child and leads to a flow-like state stimulating creativity. Regular application of play creates a self-perpetuating cycle of motivation which enhances the whole language learning process.

We will now consider the reasons for using play in language learning and the benefits of learning a foreign language through play.

#### 2. BENEFITS OF PLAY

Play-based learning is now a firmly-established language pedagogy, which has secured its status in young learners' FL curricula across the globe. Enever (2011, 99) reports that "communicative playful practices" are currently as common as the traditional ones, with games being the first preferred type of classroom activity as declared by one quarter of young learners participating in the ELLIE project. Basing on teacher reports collected across 144 countries, Garton et al. (2011, 12) report that creative activities such as games are used during nearly every lesson by the majority (69,9%) of respondents. These findings suggest that playing and games are no longer an occasional innovation, but rather a customary practice in early language education. Play offers a wide range of benefits to language learners and teachers and it has now been recognised as a pedagogically valid and developmentally appropriate medium for teaching young learners.

A whole array of arguments in favour of play-based language learning have been identified across research studies. For example, Pound (2006, 2009) argues that play provides a concrete context for the taught subject (or skill) and an opportunity for pressure-free practice. The context is authentic and, as pointed out by Maley (1999, 3), "for the duration of the game, it replaces external reality." The provision of safe and non-threatening circumstances encourages children to experiment, test imaginary solutions and rehearse scenarios (Rumley 1999, 125). By doing so, it vents young learners' natural inclination to engage in pretend play and stimulates their creativity, at the same time basing on their every-day, real life experiences thus making the game personally meaningful and motivating. As pretend play is the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE) project investigated early FL instruction across seven European countries: Croatia, England, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden.

dominant occupation of pre-school and lower primary children in and outside home (according to Haight and Miller (1993) it accounts for 10–30% of waking time), make-believe games and playing provide intrinsic motivation for language learning which may be stronger than parental influence and attitudes (Khan 1991).

Another considerable advantage of implementing play in a FL classroom is that it typically involves some degree of physical activity, which allows the child to explore the environment. Movement is "the basis of all learning" and a primary need of young learners (Pound 2006, 85). The element of movement distinguishes play from traditional, static classroom tasks and enables the child to focus attention for a longer period of time (Szpotowicz and Szulc-Kurpaska 2009). Playing (also in a foreign language) increases the player's involvement and enhances understanding of the world and the reality. The foreign language becomes yet another tool for exploring the child's environment.

## 3. LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE THROUGH PLAY

Play offers an unlimited number of language practice opportunities. In a game, foreign language is contextualised and the context itself creates an immediate and urgent need for language use - "it brings the target language to life (Lewis and Bedson 1999, 5)." Completing the game requires interaction and interaction can only be sustained via a foreign language, which forces all the players to contribute and ensures participation and fluency practice. In order to achieve the goal of the game, the participants need to practise the target language by listening and responding, asking and answering questions, discussing, asking for clarification, arguing and talking about the rules. All of these provide opportunities for practising the whole range of language areas and skills such as grammar patterns, topic-related vocabulary, word families, pronunciation and language chunks. This kind of practice could otherwise be difficult to organise and perceived by children as uninteresting and tedious (Rumley 1999, 125). Brewster et al. (1992, 173) label this kind of language use "hidden practice" stating it is unconscious, unintentional, unplanned as it results from other activities. In first and second language acquisition this process is referred to as incidental learning (Ortega 2009). As games are frequently repeated as part of classroom routines, they create numerous opportunities for the incidental learning of

fixed language elements of a game such as prefabricated patterns or chunks (Rixon 1991, 35). Finally, during play-based activities the role of the teacher shifts from teacher-centered initiation to teacher observation and facilitation. This shift has its reflection in classroom interaction—during playing it is typically the learners who take control of classroom discourse and their talking time becomes maximised.

Playing and games change the pace of the lesson and break the classroom routine adding novelty and variety. In fact, children often perceive playing as the opposite of traditional school activities and see language games as a kind of a light relief, which increases their motivation. Finally, during play children need to take control of and responsibility for classroom events and become autonomous players (and language users) appropriating the foreign language for their personal use and needs. In short, play gives children a purpose for learning but also a purpose for using (and learning) a foreign language.

Depending on the nature of language practice generated during play, games can be broadly divided into code-control games (Rixon 1981) and communicative games (Brewster et al. 1992; 2002). The former, also called hidden drills or accuracy-focused games, involve an accurate reproduction of a pre-selected language pattern which is based on fully or semi-controlled practice. Examples include: Simon Says in which children follow the leader's instructions ('Simon says raise your left hand!') until they make a mistake; Spelling Bee in which two teams compete in the spelling of vocabulary items and the teams' members drop out if they misspell a word; I Spy in which children guess the vocabulary items selected by the leader ('I spy with my little eye something beginning with an a.'); Grandmother goes to Market in which learners' repeat their peers' sentences having to reproduce the whole set thus far ('Grandmother went to market and bought a(n) item.') (Khan 1991, 153-156). Code-control games provide extensive pronunciation practice as well as consolidate vocabulary and grammar practice (Brewster et al. 2002). In communication (fluency focused) games, learners need to cooperate in groups or pairs to complete a task by filling an information gap. The language they use can be pre-taught and modelled; however, the task involves spontaneous speech production rather than mechanical repetition. Communication games include activities such as: Describe and Draw, Find the Differences, Describe and Arrange.

## 3.1 PLAY-BASED ACTIVITIES FOR VERY YOUNG LEARNERS

It needs to be noted that potential language gains resulting from playbased foreign language instruction are age-determined and vary across age groups. When it comes to selecting appropriate play-based tasks, very young learners (up to the age of 6) "require a special handling" (Maley 2003, 2). Much of the learning in this age group takes place through play, as preschool learners lack literacy skills (even in their mother tongue) and learn the language mostly in an incidental fashion. Essentially, this involves processing the meaning of language in order to understand it along with complete disregard for language form (Pinter 2006, 2). Additionally, young children's knowledge of the world and their awareness of the learning process is limited and their need to move quite great (ibid.). Therefore, the activities used with very young learners do not have a definite language focus, but rather need to assist them in general development. Game instructions are short, sequenced and, when playing for the first time, delivered in the learners' mother tongue. The focus is on cooperation rather than competition. Very young learners' games maximise opportunities for movement. According to Reilly and Ward (2003, 8–9), play-based learning with very young learners should build on the following skills and activities: singing, chanting, repetition and rhymes, stories, total physical response, drawing, colouring, cutting, sticking, puzzles, dressing up, acting, and pretending. Szpotowicz and Szulc-Kurpaska (2009, 210) list the following types of games as appropriate for this age-group: games played with toys, where a puppet is a game participant; group games played in a circle e.g. catching a ball and naming colours, movement games e.g. What's the Time Mr Wolf?, Simon Says; games with background music e.g. How Do You Do?, Fruit Salad; games involving singing and skipping e.g. Hopscotch.

#### 3.2 PLAY-BASED ACTIVITIES FOR YOUNG LEARNERS

With age, children begin to approach language more analytically and, having started school, develop literacy skills and some degree of awareness of language structure and form (Pinter 2006). They begin to organise their learning. They become less egocentric and more willing to cooperate and/or compete. Therefore, games used with lower and higher primary school children can (and should) become more language-dependent (Khan 1991, 144), that is, they have a clearly defined language focus such as practising

vocabulary, grammar structures, language functions and pronunciation. First, card games such as Vocabulary Snap or Memory can be introduced in the first grades of lower primary; however, caution should be exercised as regards games relying on the learners' ability to spell. Word-level reading and writing games can be done with 8 and 9 year-olds (e.g. bingo, crosswords, word maps as well as board games such as Snakes and Ladders) (Szpotowicz and Szulc-Kurpaska 2009, 2011). By the time, children get to the age of 11–12, the range of games they are developmentally ready to engage in becomes fairly wide.

## 4. IMPLEMENTING GAMES IN A FL CLASSROOM

There is a number of significant issues that every teacher needs to address before playing with learners. Games and other play-based activities should be selected with clear learning goals in mind and for a specific group of learners. If the pedagogic goals are purely linguistic, teachers need to specify which language structures and/or skills will be practised and how. Relevant language resources should be provided and necessary patterns drilled in speech or writing. Rixon (1991, p. 35) refers to possible language gains resulting from taking part in a game as "language pay-off." This means that every play-based activity brings tangible linguistic benefits. An important question that arises in relation to the concept of language pay-off is that of the social, emotional and temporal costs of the activity. If a game requires a considerable preparation load on the part of the teacher and learners and is time-consuming, but generates little language use or interest/enjoyment, it is perhaps better to reconsider its usefulness. In other words, there needs to be a balance between the costs and the pay-off.

Classroom management is also of key importance. To assure smooth performance and successful completion of a game, its mechanics should be explained, modelled and demonstrated to ensure that the learners have the necessary linguistic means and procedural knowledge to complete it. Play-based activities need to be carefully structured i.e. broken into stages and introduced one at a time. Verbal scaffolding should be provided including brief, logically sequenced and maximally clear teacher instructions.

Naturally, the choice of an activity should take into account learners' age and universal developmental characteristics as well as more individual preferences such as attitude to competition, the need for time limits and prefer-

ences for working with specific learners. Other important factors include the timing of the game and the effect it can have on learners. Teachers need to schedule the game appropriately basing on their knowledge of the learners' timetables and their knowledge of their own lesson's proceedings. Some games are vigorous, energetic and fairly engaging and are better suited as a warm-up activity at the beginning of the lesson or as a brief interlude between two cognitively demanding tasks. Stirring activities, such as Pin On Back or Miming, engage learners cognitively, physically and emotionally and might lead to overexcitement (Brewster et al. 2002). Settling games (Dominoes, Memory) reduce learners' energy levels and channel their attention and energy into a calmer, less vigorous task. Settling games might reduce anxiety and relieve the pressure (ibid.). Practical aspects of playing should also be taken into account. These include: providing the necessary space for playing, providing materials and tools needed, calculating the time needed for preparation, distribution and displaying materials and grouping the learners. Once the game has started, monitoring of learners' performance and progress is necessary and addressing queries and difficulties. The game cycle may be repeated and incorporated into lessons on a regular basis.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Play is an integral part of every child's life and a precondition of healthy and optimal maturation. It enhances holistic development and facilitates learning. School occupies a central role in every child's life. With an increasing number of FL lessons added to the curricula and the progressive lowering of the starting age of FL education (Cameron 2003), the need has arisen for delivering age-appropriate, pleasurable and effective FL instruction. If education is to create genuine, learning opportunities, children's natural instinct for play needs to be recognised and cultivated by stakeholders an policy makers. Play constitutes a natural and motivating context for language practice and creates numerous learning opportunities.

A number of useful resource books can be recommended for teachers looking for photocopiable materials and guidelines for using play-based learning. Reilly and Ward (1997/2003) is a collection of didactic materials intended specifically for preschool learners. Games constitute the majority of activities in this book, but there are also other age-appropriate tasks intended for pre-schoolers such as songs and stories. Lewis and Bedson (1999)

offer a game collection for a variety of age groups which provides very useful game descriptions featuring the age of learner. This book features a sizeable collection of activities for four- and five-year-olds as well as older learners. Toth (1995) is another resource book with games for young learners with extensive introductory sections and useful tips. Copland et al. (2012) is a recent collection of age-specific tasks and games which are well-tested tasks, provided by language teachers from all over the world. Ideas for games can also be found in books focusing on the methodology of early FL instruction. For example, Szpotowicz and Szulc-Kurpaska (2009) devote a whole section to the role of play in early FL teaching and provide an extensive overview of games that can be arranged and conducted without many additional resources. Similarly, Roth (1998) provides a bank of resources for teachers which is one of the appendices added to the core of the book.

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# ROLA ZABAWY W UCZENIU SIĘ JĘZYKA OBCEGO

#### Streszczenie

Zabawa jest jedną z głównych form aktywności dziecka od niemowlęctwa do okresu dojrzewania, a prawo do uczestnictwa w zabawie jest uznawane za jedno z podstawowych praw dziecka. Naturalna skłonność dziecka do zabawy stwarza okazje do poznawania świata, nawiązywania więzi społecznych i stanowi główny motor jego rozwoju psychicznego i fizycznego. Artykuł porusza tematykę roli zabawy w procesie uczenia się i nauczania języka obcego na etapie przedszkolnym i wczesnoszkolnym. Celem artykułu jest wykazanie, że nauczanie poprzez zabawę stwarza rozwojowo uzasadniony kontekst do kształtowania kompetencji językowej dziecka w sposób spontaniczny, autonomiczny, zrozumiały i przyjemny. Zabawa zapewnia warunki, w których nauczyciel może jednocześnie zaspokajać potrzeby ruchowe, poznawcze, emocjonalne i społeczne małego dziecka i umożliwić mu oswojenie się ze środowiskiem klasy językowej. Gry i zabawy aktywizują wszystkie dzieci bez względu na różnice indywidualne i motywują je do uczestnictwa w lekcjach języka obcego. Artykuł rozpoczyna się wprowadzeniem definicji zabawy oraz omówieniem roli jaką odgrywa ona w rozwoju dziecka. Przedstawione są formy i zasady zastosowania gier i zabaw podczas lekcji języka obcego i korzyści językowe, poznawcze i społeczne płynące z nauczania poprzez zabawę. Autorka omawia również klasyfikację gier dla dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym i wczesnoszkolnym. W końcowej części artykułu zaprezentowane są praktyczne wskazówki dla nauczycieli języka obcego.

Streściła Ewa Guz

**Słowa kluczowe:** zabawa; gra; dziecko; nauczanie języka obcego; rozwój dziecka; przedszkole; szkoła podstawowa.