Language Learning Games in the Tertiary Classroom

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Language games can provide a number of important benefits to foreign language learners, including improved speaking skills and fluency, high levels of student involvement and participation, and a positive motivation factor. And yet the usage of language games in tertiary contexts can be questioned in a number of areas. This paper consequently considers how we can determine whether games are being used to promote effective language learning, and describes some trials implemented in university classroom settings as part of a current research project. Results on the first set of teacher surveys were very positive, so evaluation criteria were developed to measure the effectiveness of the games in relation to language education goals. A subsequent survey then provided feedback on how the games could be developed in line with specific course objectives and the tertiary curriculum framework.

ゲームは、外国語学習者にとって非常に有益なものである。例えば、話す技能や流暢さを発達させたり、授業への参加を促進したり、また動機付けにもなる。しかし、多くの点で高等教育における言語学習でのゲーム使用は問題があると言われている。本論文の目的は、ゲームが効果的な言語学習を促進するために有効であるかどうかをどのように判断するか、また現在行っているアクションリサーチの一部である大学英語教育で行われている試みについて論じることである。最初の教師に対する調査では非常に肯定的な結果が得られた。そこで、言語教育目標に関連付けられたゲームの有効性を測るための評価項目が作成された。続く調査では、高等教育におけるカリキュラム及び特定のコース目標に即したゲームはどのように作成されるべきかということに関する貴重な情報を得ることができた。

Introduction

Teachers who have used games as classroom exercises have often found them to be particularly good at promoting communicative interactions. Students participate in games with a sense of fun and enjoyment, which adds to the classroom experience and increases the “interest of language-practice activities” (Ur, 1988, p. 23). Many students also enjoy the stimulation that an element of superficial competition brings to a learning activity: “Competition is often sharpened, and made less predictable by the addition of an element of chance” (Cook, 2000, p.

129). However, while games are commonly regarded as being acceptable activities for young learners, their usage in tertiary classrooms is questionable in a number of areas. This paper consequently considers the use of games in Japanese tertiary contexts and explains a system for evaluating the effectiveness of games as learning activities in a first-year university course.

Attitudes to using games in tertiary contexts

While games often feature as a regular part of children's education programs, their application in university settings is somewhat more controversial. There are important questions that can be raised about the educational value games provide to adult students and the types of learning outcomes they produce. One university professor, reporting on her recent experiences as a language learner, says that she was highly conscious of the money she invested in enrollment fees and felt justified in wanting maximum returns for her investment (Spencer, 2003). She argues that language games and other "communicative style activities often didn't represent good value for the time and money invested" (p. 11). Games can also be regarded as lacking a sufficient degree of seriousness to be used in university classrooms. Students tend to have fun and enjoy themselves, but do not learn anything important while playing games. Sometimes teachers use games without any distinct pedagogical purpose, in order to lighten the classroom atmosphere or to motivate students to enjoy their classes.

While there are elements of truth in these criticisms that could be relevant in some classroom situations, they fail to recognize that games can also function as serious learning activities designed to meet specific curriculum objectives. Many of the negative attitudes to games have consequently been described as "anti-educational and potentially demoralizing" (Ur, 1996, p. 289) because they tend to trivialize the learning benefits that games can provide. In addition, these generalizations tend to undervalue the importance of creative engagement in the learning process, as discussed by Cook: "the pedagogic potential of game elements in learning has often been stifled by negative attitudes to play" (2000, p. 185).

It is important to recognize the types of benefits that games can provide, since they are useful for promoting gains in relation to specific types of course objectives. They are particularly good for developing students' abilities in productive skills areas (e.g., speaking skills, language fluency, communicative ability), but there are other types of course objectives where games could be ineffective. In different types of courses, other types of learning activity might be more beneficial. Games could also be regarded as ineffective in language programs where it is necessary to demonstrate learning outcomes to course administrators or to justify to parents the fees expenditures they have incurred (Ur, 1996). However, although it is difficult to measure gains in productive skills areas, language development in these areas is often relevant to tertiary curriculum objectives. So the potential value that games can provide to tertiary students needs to be recognized, and teachers should aim to develop game materials to meet specific course objectives. It is also important for teachers to be aware of the learning contexts that are appropriate for using language games, as well as the potential for negative perceptions in some situations.

Surveys on games at Japanese universities

Two recent surveys have considered the usage of language games as part of Japanese students' attitudes on a broad

range of tertiary education issues. O'Donnell (2003) asked 134 university freshmen in their first week of classes to what extent they agreed with the statement: "You can improve your ability in English by playing games." Their responses were measured on a six point Likert scale (1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=slightly agree, 4=slightly disagree, 5=disagree, 6=strongly disagree). The mean value reported in the study is 2.98 points (slightly agree), the median is 3.00 (slightly agree), the mode is 3.00 (slightly agree), and the standard deviation is 1.20 (p. 51). The survey results indicate that the students were generally positive on the educational value of games at the commencement of their tertiary education. The degree to which they recognized the potential benefits of games was marginal, since their mean response was just 0.5 points beside the neutral response value of 3.5 points. However, these results may have been significantly impacted by the students' lack of exposure to games during their secondary schooling, particularly since a very small part of the secondary English curriculum is concerned with communicative language learning. It is consequently possible that the marginal strength of the responses could be a result of the students' lack of familiarity with effective game materials.

In a previous study, Matsuura, Chiba, and Hilderbrandt (2001) surveyed 301 university students and 82 teachers (N=383) concerning their attitudes on communicative language learning in Japan. One survey item asked the two university populations whether they thought: "Game-oriented activities are childish for university level students." The responses were measured on the same six point Likert scale used in O'Donnell's survey. Matsuura et al tabulated the frequency of responses in their research report (p. 80). When their results are averaged across the two populations, they yield mean scores of 4.57 (disagree--slightly disagree) for the student group and 4.26 (disagree--slightly disagree) for the teacher group. These results are somewhat stronger than the responses to O'Donnell's survey item, with both students and teachers being less inclined to consider that games are childish than to uphold the educational value of games. It is also interesting that the students were less likely to regard games as childish than the teacher group, and that the teachers tended to have somewhat more negative perceptions about games than the students.

Introducing games to a tertiary English course

Language games can be utilized in a broad range of learning situations and a number of resource books featuring different types of game activities have been published (e.g., Hadfield, 1999; Hancock, 1996; Ur, 1988; Woodward, 1997; Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 1984). However, teachers wishing to introduce games to tertiary courses also need to address the issues discussed in this paper, including the range of attitudes associated with the use of language games and the limited recognition of potential benefits apparent in the university surveys. It is consequently important for teachers to consider these areas in relation to the effectiveness of the game materials they plan to use. A fundamental question for the development of successful game activities has now been determined: "How can teachers ensure that language games function as effective learning materials in a tertiary curriculum?"

In order to address this question, a current research project that investigates the effectiveness of language games in the English course at Ehime University shall be described, and a number of suggestions for the effective use of games provided.

Language games were recently incorporated in the new curriculum as part of the communicative language teaching reforms being developed by the English Education Center at Ehime University, a national university located in Matsuyama. The games appeared as major class activities in many lessons in the compulsory textbook for the first-year English course, which was produced internally by the English Education Center and used by all freshmen classes (1,679 students in the 2001 academic year). The games practise a variety of language activities, including information questions, answer strategies, verb tenses, explanation strategies, and specific topic areas (high school experiences, occupations, culture). A materials evaluation was undertaken on the first edition of the textbook, and revisions were subsequently implemented to produce the second edition of the textbook. The second edition was then also evaluated, and based on the feedback received from teachers was continued for a second year. In summary, the majority of games in the English course at Ehime University have now been used for three consecutive years with the complete first-year student body each year, and the feedback on the game lessons has been consistently positive during this period. Many teachers praised the effectiveness of the games and commented that the students really enjoyed these activities.

Games as effective learning activities

For games to be effective learning activities, they should provide content relevant to the language course (Ur, 1988). The games in the Ehime University curriculum that received more positive feedback practiced target language forms or specific language content areas. By contrast, the less effective games tended to result in students either not producing sufficient conversation, or producing a broad range of conversations that were not related to the lesson focus. It is consequently suggested that teachers should develop game materials with a distinct pedagogical purpose in order to provide intensive practice of target language forms or language content relevant to the course objectives. The language content practiced during the game should also relate to the perceived needs of the students: "Adult players are more apt to connect the new language content to their own real-life needs since they direct their attention more to meaningful objectives" (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986, p. 82). Furthermore, games should provide a beneficial way of practicing the target forms: "Many games cause as much density of practice as more conventional drill exercises; some do not. What matters, however, is the *quality* of practice" (Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 1984, p. 1).

Although the students enjoyed playing games in the Ehime University course, limitations were also observed as to how much time they could spend playing games effectively in any one class. The students tended to lose interest in one textbook lesson that featured three consecutive game activities, and appeared to prefer doing a variety of activity types during each lesson. The games were generally more effective when they appeared as the final stage of a lesson. This observation relates to the importance of applying games in appropriate stages of the learning cycle. Language games should generally be employed during the focus on fluency stage, which follows other stages designed to promote and support initial language development. In a typical learning cycle, teachers first provide focus on form instruction (Carter & Nunan, 2001, p. 222), when the correct target forms (and any context requirements) are explained and common types of errors demonstrated, and then provide controlled practice activities to reinforce learning of the target language (Brown, 2001, pp. 133-136). Games

can be used at the controlled practice stage, or during further learning stages, which involve free practice (i.e., less strictly controlled) activities and subsequent revision exercises to reinforce learning processes. These types of activities are used to extend students' familiarity with the target forms in a variety of language contexts as a vital part of the learning process. As with other communicative activities, teachers should maintain a focus on error correction through the various production stages to ensure that students are using the target forms appropriately (Brown, 2001, pp. 367-368), while also permitting some degree of error tolerance, as generally occurs in fluency learning stages (Harmer, 2001, pp. 99-113).

Evaluation process for language learning games

Although the feedback collected on the game units during the textbook evaluation was very positive, this evaluation system did not specifically address the effectiveness of the language games in the course. Consequently, it was determined for the purpose of this research project that an alternative evaluation system should be developed which more specifically considered the performance of the games as tertiary learning materials. In order to develop the new evaluation system, it was necessary to first determine a set of relevant evaluation criteria that could be used to rate the effectiveness of the game materials.

The evaluation criteria developed for this stage of the evaluation process were designed to reflect the curriculum objectives of the first-year English course, which aims to promote speaking fluency and improve learners' communicative competence. The criteria were consequently derived from principles of communicative learning theory (Brown, 2001, pp. 42-53; Harmer, 2001, pp. 84-6), from Ur's guidelines for effective classroom activities (1988, pp. 17-25), and from Comeau's qualities of interactive oral grammar exercises (1987, pp. 57-58). The purpose of the evaluation criteria is to relate the effectiveness of the language games to the curriculum objectives. The eleven criteria developed to evaluate the games in the first-year course at Ehime University for this research project are as follows:

1. clear learning objective
2. learning purpose is useful / beneficial
3. involves meaningful communication
4. provides practise / repetition of target language forms
5. level of learner activation / active participation
6. motivation factor / interesting, enjoyable
7. personalization experiences, opinions, ideas, feelings
8. learning challenge / tension
9. volume of language production
10. appropriate difficulty level
11. appropriate pace / rate of progression

Sample analysis of survey results

A sample analysis shall now be provided for one of the games used in the first-year course to demonstrate an evaluation process that could be modified to suit the context of other learning situations. The game chosen for this purpose involves groups of four students trying to guess vocabulary items from specific lexical sets (e.g., restaurant, hotel, house, clothes). The student who has the answer gives hints about the item to the other students using explanation strategies practised during previous lessons, but cannot say the actual word. When another student guesses the correct answer, the student checks the answer with the teacher, collects the next word, and takes it

back to the group. The other members of the group then try to guess the new word from the hints the student provides. There are ten vocabulary items in the lexical set, and each group races to finish all the terms before the other groups. The game takes about fifteen minutes to complete and was enjoyed by students in most classes. The target language involves the practise of specific explanation strategies, which were used to give hints for each vocabulary item.

For the evaluation process, fourteen teachers provided numerical ratings for the game against the eleven evaluation criteria using a five-point Likert scale (5=very good, 4=good, 3=satisfactory, 2=poor, 1=very poor). The ratings were collected and mean values calculated for each criterion. The results were then represented graphically (see Figure 1). Four criteria are rated between 4.2 points and 4.0 points, a mean score that equates to a 'good' (= 4 points) rating on the Likert scale. Another five criteria are rated between 3.7 points and 3.4 points, which equate to a mid-position between 'good' (= 4 points) and 'satisfactory' (= 3 points) on the scale. One criterion is rated at 3.2 points (= 'satisfactory'), and another criterion is rated substantially below the others at 2.5 points ('satisfactory — poor'). Since the majority of the criteria are rated at 'good' or 'good — satisfactory', this game is performing well according to the evaluation framework used in this study. However, improvements could also be made in a number of areas identified by several of the evaluation criteria.

The results of each evaluation criteria should also be considered. This game is particularly good in terms of having a clear learning objective (criterion #1), being interesting and enjoyable (criterion #6), having a useful learning purpose (criterion #2), and involving active participation (criterion #5).

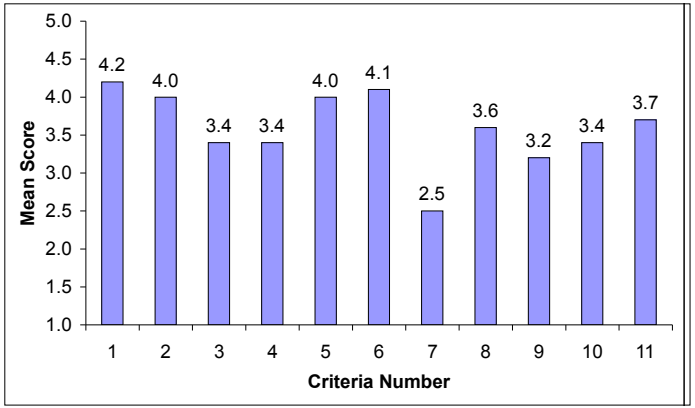

Figure 1. Game survey results

The game appears to also be acceptable in terms of providing an appropriate learning challenge (criterion #8), and rate of progression (criterion #11). It could be improved in areas of criterion #3 (more meaningful communication), criterion #4 (increased repetition of target language forms), and criterion #10 (more appropriate difficulty level). This game should also be developed to produce more volume of language (criterion #9), and this was confirmed by teachers who observed that students did not always use the intended explanation strategies to give hints but sometimes resorted to alternative techniques (e.g., non-verbal strategies: demonstrating physically, miming, pointing). Finally, this game should be modified to allow students to express their personal experiences or opinions (criterion #7), since this area was rated substantially lower than the other evaluation criteria.

Games development for future courses

It is recommended to teachers considering employing games in tertiary classes that they should develop similar evaluation systems, since this is the most appropriate way to ensure the effectiveness of the game materials. While the current versions of the games in the Ehime University course appear to be performing well, a number of directions for developing the games have emerged from the evaluation process. Each game can be subsequently revised according to the evaluation results, with modifications made to those areas rated as less effective in achieving the course objectives. After being modified, the games should subsequently be re-evaluated in order to determine the effectiveness of the revisions.

There have also been other benefits that have emerged from the evaluation process. Feedback has been collected on the effectiveness of the games in the first-year English curriculum at Ehime University, and a number of reports have been produced which establish the beneficial results being achieved by the games in areas of communicative learning outcomes. If the value of the games was to be questioned in future curriculum discussions, the survey findings could provide useful support.

It is hoped in the future that further research can be undertaken into developing the games in the Ehime University curriculum beyond the results of the present study. A more comprehensive investigation could extend to include detailed consideration of the program goals and objectives, and the process of deriving the evaluation criteria used to rate the games. Other directions for developing the games include the introduction of third party observations during games sessions and small-scale student surveys (Ellis, 1998, pp. 227-235) to gather feedback directly from students. It is suggested also that an emphasis should be maintained on evaluating the game materials to ensure their effectiveness in specific learning situations.

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