



Original

Developing the Speaking Skill in Cuban Primary Schools through Language Games

Aprendiendo a hablar en Inglés a través del juego

St. Yanelis de la Paz Figueredo. University of Granma. Bayamo. Cuba ⁽¹⁾

M. Sc. Eduardo Escalona Pardo. University of Granma. Bayamo. Cuba ⁽²⁾

M. Sc. Yusimí Frías Reyes. University of Granma. Bayamo. Cuba ⁽³⁾

Authors references

⁽¹⁾ Foreign Languages 5th Year Student. Faculty of Middle Higher Education. University of Granma. Bayamo. Cuba.

ydelapaz@estudiantes.udg.co.cu

⁽²⁾ Assistant Professor. Master in Sciences of Education. Department of Foreign Languages. University of Granma. Bayamo.

Cuba. epardo@udg.co.cu - <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2832-8828>

⁽³⁾ Assistant Professor. Master in Sciences of Education. Department of Foreign Languages. University of Granma. Bayamo.

Cuba. yfriasr@udg.co.cu - <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3585-6779>

Recibido: 12 de diciembre de 2020 | **Aceptado:** 10 de marzo de 2021

Abstract

The following article is part of a term paper aimed at developing the speaking skill through the application of language games due to the necessity of developing this skill in primary school students. It addresses its attention to a system of language games that contributes to the development of the above-mentioned skill by practicing the linguistic content after the system of knowledge of each unit of the syllabus has been introduced in the English lessons.

The research work is important because it helps to develop the teaching learning process of oral communication in English among these students. The system of language games, linguistic and communicative, is a great contribution to the primary school bibliographical system. It facilitates developing the speaking skill in a practical and dynamic way, favouring the process of

oral communication in the foreign language. A very important value is that students are assessed using the levels of the Common European Framework of References to the Languages.

Keywords: language games; speaking skill; primary school; dynamic; descriptors

Resumen

El siguiente artículo forma parte de un trabajo final destinado a desarrollar las habilidades orales a través de la aplicación de juegos de lenguaje debido a la necesidad de desarrollar esta habilidad en los estudiantes de primaria. El presente trabajo dirige su atención a un sistema de juegos del lenguaje que contribuye al desarrollo de la habilidad antes mencionada mediante la práctica del contenido lingüístico una vez que el sistema de conocimientos de cada unidad del programa de estudios se haya introducido en las lecciones de Inglés. El trabajo de investigación es importante porque ayuda a desarrollar el proceso de enseñanza aprendizaje de la comunicación oral en inglés entre estos estudiantes. El sistema de juegos (lingüísticos y comunicativos), es un gran aporte al sistema bibliográfico de la escuela primaria. Facilitan, de forma práctica y dinámica, el desarrollo de las habilidades orales, favoreciendo el proceso de comunicación oral en la lengua extranjera. Un valor muy importante es que los estudiantes son evaluados utilizando los niveles del Marco Común Europeo de Referencias para las Lenguas.

Palabras clave: juegos de lenguaje; habilidad para hablar; escuela primaria; dinámica; descriptores

Introduction

English is an international language that facilitates good relationships among the different countries of the world. Cuba keeps international cooperation throughout the world in different fields such as culture, science, medicine, sports, social movements, education and some others. Therefore, learning English is not a luxury, but a great necessity. The Cuban government has

increased the opportunities for people to learn foreign languages, and to English has been given special attention.

That is why, the National System of Education in Cuba has included the teaching of English language in the basic curricula of all levels of teaching. It begins from third grade in Primary school. At this level the teaching of English contributes to the formation of a solid scientific conception of the world and to the development of the logical thinking. In this way, the Cuban Educational System achieves its principal goal: the comprehensive formation of students' personality.

At present, the teaching of English in Cuba is grounded on the methodological conceptions of the well-known communicative approach which integrates the basic principles of the conscious practical method. It gives special attention to the primacy of oral language. Teachers make a great effort to prepare lessons where students can feel free to interact with each other and with that the development of the speaking skills is achieved, which is the main objective in primary school, but from the empirical investigation, the authors of this article can say it is not good enough. Some *limitations* are still present for example:

- Students feel no motivation towards the subject.
- The vocabulary to express themselves orally is limited.
- Students are afraid of making mistakes at the time to speak.
- The time devoted for developing communicative skills is not enough.
- There is a lack of activities that permit language interaction dynamically and consciously.

Taking these limitations as a point of departure, the authors of this article decided to develop a research work to give a solution to these insufficiencies present in the teaching learning process of oral communication that limits the development of the speaking skill in 6th graders at Horacio

Rodríguez Primary School in Manzanillo.

In order to give a solution to these limitations, a varied bibliography is studied. The following authors were consulted: Wright (2002), Uberman (1998), Thiagarajan (1999), Lee (1995), Ersoz (2000), Canale and Swain (1980), Antich de León (1986), Giovannini (1996), Byrne (1989), Vigotsky (1968), among others.

When applying some investigation methods like the interview, survey and observation these limitations are corroborated, thus the objective of this article is to highlight the importance of applying language games to develop the speaking skill in primary school students.

Population and sample

For the development of the investigation it is taken a *population* of 60 students from sixth grade and three English teachers at Horacio Rodríguez Primary School in Manzanillo. The *sample* is chosen intentionally; it constitutes 25 students from group # 3, it represents the 41,7 % of the population.

These students have not been developed the necessary skills to communicate properly in the foreign language. They cannot ask and answer questions and respond to simple statements, they are not able to use some simple structures correctly and still systematically make basic mistakes, and cannot establish social contact: greetings and farewells; introductions or giving thanks.

Analysis of the results

The Marxist postulates on the Theory of Knowledge which allow to understand that practice is the criterion of truth in its broadest sense is assumed in the article, this emphasizes the fact that all learning is a reflection of reality on the part of the student and, as such, occurs in the activity that each person develops in his contact with the object world and with other human beings.

Activity, social relations and the communication that can be achieved through language

games become inseparable categories. In the process of teaching and learning the English language, communication is a complex process, as well as the human activity in which it is expressed. That is, the student is able to communicate during the practical activity to find himself the steps to follow in the process of satisfying his needs and objectives.

The authors have also considered the postulates of the historical cultural conception which expresses that language is a highly personal, and at the same time, profoundly social human process....through the use of signs (words) man establishes relationships with his environment, thus faces new forms of human activity and develops different skills. (Vigotsky, 1968)

Skills are not independent, isolated elements, but are linked to a structure; this implies that the development of a particular skill is not disconnected from the parallel processes through which the development of other skills occurs, although some experiences are propitiated with the intentionality of contributing to the development of a particular skill. This also implies that for the achievement of a particular ability, more than a specific skill, a skill structure is involved. (Elliot, 1999)

The formation of skills constitutes, therefore, the mastery of a whole system of operations aimed at the elaboration of the information contained in the knowledge and information obtained from the object and the operations tending to reveal this information and its confrontation and correlation with the activities.

Language games are fun activities that promote interaction, thinking, learning, and problem-solving strategies. Often, games have an aspect that permits players to produce information in a short time period. Some games require players to engage in a physical activity and/or complete a mental challenge.

Thiagarajan (1999) and Wright (2002) consider games add interest to what students might

not find very interesting. Sustaining interest can mean sustaining effort. After all; learning a language involves long-term effort.

Games provide a context for meaningful communication. Even if the game involves discrete language items, such as a spelling game, meaningful communication takes place as students seek to understand how to play the game and as they communicate about the game: before, during, and after the game (Wright, 2002). Motivation arouses when playing games and they add variety to the sometimes dry, serious process of language instruction. (Lee, 1995)

In this research, the language games are introduced in the teaching learning process of the English language in Sixth Grade by the authors of the article. An initial pedagogical test is applied to confirm the current state about the development of the speaking skills in the sample. The final pedagogical test was also applied after putting into practice of the language games to corroborate their effectiveness by making a comparison between the two tests.

The following indicators are used taking into account the descriptors of the Common European Framework of References to the Language:

- Fluency.
- Accuracy.
- Interaction.

To evaluate each indicator the following descriptors are taken into account, considering they are primary school students:

Appropriate fluency: when students can make themselves understood in very short utterances, even though pauses, false starts and reformulation are very evident.

Appropriate accuracy: when they use some simple structures correctly, but still systematically make basic mistakes.

Appropriate interaction: when they can ask and answer questions and respond to simple statements and can keep a short conversation expressing likes, dislikes and talking about their family.

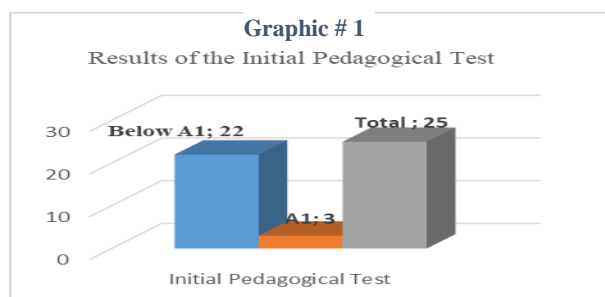
Taking into consideration these indicators, students are placed into *two levels*:

Below A1: Students who cannot make themselves understood in very short utterances. They cannot use some simple structures correctly. They can ask and answer only questions about their names and how they are, but cannot keep a short conversation expressing likes, dislikes and talking about their family.

A1: Students who can make themselves understood in very short utterances, even though pauses, false starts and reformulation are very evident. They use some simple structures correctly, but still systematically make basic mistakes. They can ask and answer questions and respond to simple statements and can keep a short conversation expressing likes, dislikes and talking about their family.

Results of the initial pedagogical test

In the three questions students had to talk about personal information. Although they were answered by all of them (100 %), it was very difficult for the majority to make themselves understood. Only three students, that represents 12 %, could use the simple present of verb be correctly and could ask and answer questions and respond to simple statements to keep a short conversation expressing likes, dislikes still systematically making basic mistakes. There were seven students who do not wanted to express anything because they were afraid of speaking. Considering the descriptors stated before, the 88 % (22 students) were placed in the below A1 level and three students, the 36 %, in the A1 level as it is show in graphic #1.



Results of the observation

By means of the 5 lessons observed, as it is illustrated in the table #1, it is likely to control that the methods teachers used were not enough to improve students ‘speaking skill. There was a lack of natural communication, students were afraid of speaking. There is not independence in the part of students. Fluency, interaction and accuracy were very limited. Oppositely, it was confirmed that when the teacher developed language games, students’ participation increased without paying attention to what the rest may think or say about them.

Table # 1

No	Indicators	Quantity of lessons	%
1	Spontaneous oral interaction	0	0
2	Appropriate pronunciation	1	20
3	Inhibition when participating	3	100
4	Wide use of vocabulary	0	100
5	Independence when speaking	1	20
6	Asking and answering questions keeping a dialogue	2	40
7	Use of language games	1	20

Results of the survey

It is applied to know students’ opinions about the development of the speaking skill in the

English lessons. Eleven students (44%) stated they do not understand the oral and written language, not even what teachers said. They all said it was very demanding for them to speak. Seven students (28 %) were afraid of speaking in front of the class because they were worried about what the teacher might say about them.

On the other hand, the 100% would like to learn the English language playing games in the lessons. Seventeen students (68 %) preferred games to develop speaking, meanwhile eight students (32%) preferred games to develop listening. The 100 % wanted the class be divided into teams.

Results of the Interview

The three teachers interviewed have more than 10 years working in primary school, hence they have enough experience teaching English at this level. They were all aware that speaking is the ability they had to work with, but they sometimes, unconsciously, planned written exercises to be developed in class. They knew language games were very useful when applied in a lesson, but refused to use them because they worked with long classes and students were very difficult to control in this kind of activity. Something very important they said is that the bibliography they had at schools does not suggest too many types of games to be developed in class, not even the methodology to develop them.

Presentation of the proposal

The language games elaborated are supported by the theory of knowledge, in which activity, social relations and the oral interaction that can be achieved through language games are connected categories. In the teaching and learning process of the English language, oral interaction is very complex in the communication process.

For the development of the games the authors utilized methods from the different levels of assimilation, all of them were organised taking into consideration settings that contributed to the

development of the logical thinking, thus students' speaking skill was favoured too. The games were suggested for drilling lessons, although teachers could apply them in other contexts.

The main structure of the games can be the following:

- Title.
- Objective.
- System of knowledge
- System of skills.
- System of methods
- Procedures
- Class organization
- Time

Methodological orientations for its application

Users of language games might consider the following aspects:

- To diagnose students' speaking level.
- To select the system of content to work with per unit.
- To apply the games taking into account the communicative approach.
- To develop an educative work whenever the game permits it.

Stages to follow

Motivation: it can be done by means of pictures, real objects or any other means that helps to motivate students.

Development: games are carrying out. The teacher must use contexts related to students' objective reality, he provides the possibility to work in pairs or team work to achieve independence and dynamism during the development of the games.

Control: the following expressions can be used: *Very good, That's excellent, That's OK* or giving a grade to the students after answering the exercises involved in the games. Encourage all students to avoid the fear of speaking in front of the class.

Types of language games elaborated

During the process of elaborating the games the authors had taken into consideration the following classification:

Hadfield (1999) explains two ways of classifying language games. First, she divides language games into two types: linguistic games and communicative games. Linguistic games focus on accuracy, such as supplying the correct antonym. On the other hand, communicative games focus on successful exchange of information and ideas, such as two people identifying the differences between their two pictures which are similar to one another but not exactly alike. Correct language usage, though still important, is secondary to achieving the communicative goal.

The second taxonomy that Hadfield uses to classify language games has many more categories. As with the classification of games as linguistic games or communicative games, some games will contain elements of more than one type.

Exchanging games: In these games, students barter cards, other objects, or ideas. Similar are exchanging and collecting games. Many card games fall into this category, such as the children's card game Go Fish.

Board games: Scrabble is one of the most popular board games that specifically highlight language.

Role play games: The terms *role play, drama, and simulation* are sometimes used interchangeably but can be differentiated. Role play can involve students playing roles that they do not play in real life, such as dentist, while simulations can involve students performing roles

that they already play in real life or might be likely to play, such as customer at a restaurant. Dramas are normally scripted performances, whereas in role plays and simulations, students come up with their own words, although preparation is often useful. Another distinction among games is that between competitive games and cooperative ones. (Jacobs, 1996)

In this article, resulting from a term paper, linguistic and communicative games have been organized. The researchers are applying them in the student pedagogical practice in this moment and the results are relevant for example:

- Students' motivation and participation in class has increased.
- Inhibition is decreasing.
- Students ask and answer questions each other and most of them can keep a short conversation going.
- Simple grammatical structures like the use of verb "to be" in present to talk about personal information and family is being using correctly.
- Teachers have gotten used to apply games in class.

Conclusions

The teaching of the English Language in Cuba has evolved during years and has become a necessity nowadays because Cuba is open to the world and its policy regarding English Language Teaching has changed.

During learning, oral communication is a priority and developing the speaking skill is the main objective in primary school. Thus teachers must be updated in the field of investigation to search for new methods and techniques to develop their lessons.

Language games are useful not only to develop fluency, but accuracy and oral interaction too. Inhibition can be avoided when they are used in class and students learn the language in a

dynamic and practical way.

Bibliographical references

Antich de León, R. (1986). *Metodología de la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras*. La Habana: Pueblo y Educación.

Byrne, D. (1989). *Teaching Oral English*. La Habana: Revolucionaria.

Canale, M. and Swain, M. (1980). *Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing*. Applied linguistics, Vol.1 (1), Spring.

Elliot, J. (1999). *El cambio educativo desde la investigación-acción*. Madrid: Ediciones Morata.

Ersoz, A. (2000). *Six games for EFL/ESL classroom*. Available in <http://iteslj.org/Lessons/Ersoz-Games.html>.

Giovannini, A. (1996). *Profesor en Acción*. Madrid: Edelsa Grupo Didascalía. S.A.

Hadfield, J. (1999). *Intermediate vocabulary games*. Harlow, Essex: Longman.

Jacobs, G. M., & Kline Liu, K. (1996). *Integrating language functions and collaborative skills in the second language classroom*. TESL Reporter, 29, 21-33.

Lee, S. K. (1995). *Creative games for the language class*. Available in <http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/vols/vol33/no1/P35.htm>.

Thiagarajan, S. (1999). *Teamwork and teamplay: Games and activities for building and training teams*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Uberman, A. (1998). *The use of games for vocabulary presentation and revision*. Available in <http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/vols/vol36/no1/p20.htm>.

Vigotsky, L. S. (1968). *Pensamiento y lenguaje*. La Habana: Edición Revolucionaria.

Wright, A. and Buckby, M. (2002). *Games for Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.