THE USE OF LANGUAGE GAMES IN ESL CLASSROOMS

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MARCH, 2004
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Dedicated to my dearest dad, Ling Kuok Leong and mum, Teo Sui Ing
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Language games had made its marks in English teaching and learning since decades ago. Besides from motivating students to learn and improving students’ retention on the subject matter taught, language games also provide good ground for students to practise teamwork. Therefore, language games should be widely practised in English teaching and learning. Hence, this study was conducted to find out about the current implementation of language games in ESL classes by examining the procedures and the problems faced in implementing language games. For this purpose, a total of 45 English teachers teaching in Taman Universiti, Johor Bharu, were chosen as subjects. The instruments used in this study included a set of questionnaire and a set of semi-structured interview. The findings show that although most of the respondents had implemented language games in their ESL classes, they seldom implemented them. While implementing language games, not all of them followed the procedures suggested by Maidment and Bronstein (1973). The respondents ranked problems such as exam-oriented system or lack of time and low proficiency students as the main problems in implementing language games. Based on the findings, this study recommended solutions to overcome every problem faced by the respondents such as the need for language games courses and the need to integrate language games into teaching and learning process. Hopefully, this study would be able to provide some useful insights for effective implementation of language games.
ABSTRAK


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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Since the Educational Reform in 1956, English had been given less attention than Bahasa Melayu. According to Razak Report 1956, “the aim of Malaysia Educational Policy was to unite all its people by using Bahasa Kebangsaan (Esah Sulaiman, 2002).” Since then, Bahasa Melayu was widely used throughout the nation. On the other hand, English was only taught as a second language in Malaysia and it was seen as less important than Bahasa Melayu. “MCE was last held in Malaysia’s secondary schools in 1979 and after 1980, all the language of instructions in all the primary schools and secondary schools had been changed to Bahasa Melayu (Ahmad Kamil Mohamed, 1980).” This meant that English was treated not more than an ordinary subject and its usage among Malaysian students had also been limited.

As the result of lack of emphasis on English, Malaysians’ command of the English was beyond satisfaction. According to Ahmad Kamil Mohammad (2000), “MUET (Malaysian University English Test) result in June 2000 showed that 50% of the examinees’ performance in English was in critical condition.” “In reporting about MUET results for June 2000, Minister of Education, Tan Sri Musa Mohamad, stated, most of the examinees were not able to express themselves well in writing and speaking because of the lack of vocabulary to be used and poor command of grammar among the examinees (Ahmad Kamil Mohammad, 2000).”
In 1998, Malaysia’s Education Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak had set up a committee to upgrade the teaching of English in secondary schools which covered several aspects of English teaching. “One of them is to adopt a more progressive teaching-learning method (The Star, 1998).” From the traditional teacher-centred approach, English teachers had been urged to adopt more active kind of learning or student-centred approach.

Teacher-centred approach which was being practised before this put teachers at the centre of the teaching and learning process. Teachers were seen as the main source of information and students were expected to learn what was taught to them. As a result, students could not participate actively in the learning process. The use of traditional lecture method might have made English a dull subject and Malaysians were not motivated to learn English. Besides that, research shows that passive involvement generally leads to a limited retention of knowledge by students. “The only way to get 100% retention of information is by hearing, seeing, doing, smelling, feeling, tasting, inhaling (Silberman, 1996).” One of the best methods is through the implementation of active learning.

Silberman (1996) believed active learning is the most effective method in learning because when learning is active, students do most of the work. They use their brains to study ideas, solve problems, and apply what they learn. In other words, active learners energetically strive to take a greater responsibility for their own learning. They take a more dynamic role in deciding how and what they need to know, what they should be able to do, and how they are going to do it. Examples of active learning method include collaborative learning, problem based learning, course projects, simulations, technology uses, and language games.

“According to Ghazali Bunari, language games do not only promote English as a fun subject, it is also a good ground for students to learn about team work and cooperation (The Star, 1998).” Through language games students are not only motivated to learn but at the same time they can also acquire other knowledge that is
useful in their daily life. Besides that, games are incorporated into the learning process to provide an exciting environment to motivate students to use English as much as possible. Wright, et. al (1991) added that, “games can give practice in all the skills, in all the stages of the teaching or learning sequence and for many types of communication.” Since language games bring a lot of benefits to both students and teachers, they should not be treated as marginal activities. Instead, they should be treated as one of the important activities to motivate students in learning English.

However, not all the teachers are willing to practise language games in their ESL classes as what had happened to ‘Class Reader’ and the use of literature in secondary schools. Ahmad Kamil Mohammad (2000) commented that, ‘the strategies which had been implemented by Ministry of Education such as ‘Class Reader’ and the use of literature materials in secondary schools did not achieve their objectives because of lack of cooperation or help from some English teachers.” This might be because they treated the strategies as a burden for them and some of the strategies might also not be practical for them.

Therefore, this study intended to find out about the current implementation of language games in ESL classes by looking at the procedures that teachers adopted in implementing language games and the problems and constraints they faced in implementing language games.

1.1 Background of Study

Educational Games existed long before World War 2. According to Boocock and Schild (1968), “gaming was discovered by social scientists in 1962 and 1963 as a technique for the classroom.” Since then, many educational games were designed and implemented.
Previous research proved that language games bring a lot of benefits to language learning. According to David and Hollowen (1977), “games promote active, student-centred learning.” This is because games can stimulate students’ involvement in solving problems, mastering new skills, or practising old skills. They learn either through their own discovery or from the interaction with their friends. In other words, games are part of a general movement away from the teacher-dominated classroom. Shepherd (1993) argued that, “language is behaviour, vital, creative, and powerful.” Therefore, language learning should not only focus on drills and practices or merely knowing the rules of the language. Instead, students should also be involved in more active learning activities like group discussion, collaborative learning and language games. McAliease (1978) added that, “language exercises should ideally demand maximum involvement on the part of the learner and minimum interference by the teacher.”

Through active learning, students will be able to master the language. According to Pine and Boy (1977), “learning is facilitated in an atmosphere which encourages students to be active.” The learning process thrives when there is less domination by the teacher. Students are not passive receptacles into which teachers can pour in everything. Students are active and creative beings. They learn when they feel they are a part of what is going on and when they are personally involved in the learning process.

Besides that, Pine and Boy argued that (1977), “the most effective teacher creates condition by which he loses the teaching function.” By being facilitators in the learning process, teachers enable students to emerge more strongly as vital human resources and active learners. Instead of providing students with information and input all the time, teachers should give more opportunity for students to explore and experience the language actively. Therefore, through language games, students are involved actively in the learning process since they have to depend on themselves to get the information. In other words, games provide opportunity for students to experience and practise using the language.
Greenall (1984) added that, “language games provide an opportunity for learners to try out their newly acquired competence in a context where they feel psychologically secure.” This is because students are less likely to be troubled by fear of making mistakes since the consequences of inaccuracies and misunderstandings are fictitious and have no real significance in the game. Pine and Boy (1977) believed that, the learning process involves meeting the challenge of new and different experiences, and therefore, necessarily involves making mistakes. If students are to learn, they need to explore the unknown without being penalized or punished for mistakes. If they are always corrected whenever they make mistakes, they will be discouraged from trying to use the language.

Although language games are a great benefit to ESL students and teachers, there are some problems in the implementation of language games. Games are normally associated with noise and class control. Students are either too noisy or passive. Based on the research did by Yeoh (1999) and Sor (1999) on using language games in teaching English at the schools in Kuala Lumpur and Perak, some of the problems faced by English teachers in implementing language games include noise, class control, timing, and inactive students. These problems may have discouraged language teachers from using them in ESL classes.

Therefore, through the data collected from questionnaires and semi-structured interview, this study proposed a conducive setting or environment and practical ways for implementing language games in ESL classrooms. Hopefully, this study would help English teachers to gain some insights on the implementation of language games.
1.2 Statement of the Problem

Language games are a great benefit to both English teachers and students. Besides from motivating students to learn English, language games also help students to learn and practise their language in a meaningful way. According to Shepherd (1993), “language games are generally experiential, inviting students to take part in, or to witness, language behaviour.” Language games also promote active learning or student-centred learning. Instead of receiving input from teachers all the time, language games give opportunities for students to explore the language themselves.

It cannot be denied that language games are beneficial for teaching and learning process, but are they being widely practised in ESL classes? If language games have been implemented, why is there no significant result from their use? Is there anything wrong with the procedures or materials used in implementing language games? On the other hand, if language games have not been implemented, what are the constraints or problems that discourage teachers from using them? What are the strategies that can be used to overcome these problems?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This study is guided by three objectives. The objectives are as follow:
1. To get the general information on the use of language games by English teachers in their ESL classes.
2. To identify the procedures that English teachers use in implementing language games in their ESL classes.
3. To identify the major problems faced by English teachers in implementing language games in their ESL classes.
1.4 Research Questions

This study aims to seek answers to the following questions.

1. How frequent are language games being implemented in ESL classes?
2. What are the procedures used by English teachers in implementing language games?
3. What are the major problems and constraints faced by English teachers in implementing language games?