



CAN LEARNERS BE MOTIVATED TO SPEAK A FOREIGN LANGUAGE THROUGH THE USE OF GAMES?

Eliana Bettiol

Resumo:

Este trabalho objetiva responder se o uso de jogos aumenta a motivação de alunos no aprendizado de uma língua estrangeira e em particular relatar uma gratificante experiência pedagógica na qual o jogo "Habits and Hobbies" foi aplicado durante uma aula com um grupo de alunos a fim de examinar o efeito deste jogo no desempenho dos alunos na comunicação.

Abstract:

Can learners be motivated to speak a foreign language through the use of games? The major purpose of the present study is to address this question and in particular, this study aims at reporting a rewarding teaching experience in which the "Habits and Hobbies" game by Hadfield, 1990 (apud Biancamano & Perna, 1993) was applied during a class to a group of students in order to examine the effect of this game on the learners' speaking performance.

Palavras-chave:

Motivação, jogo "Habits and Hobbies", estudantes de língua estrangeira.

1 INTRODUCTION

Although ethereal, elusive, and difficult to be clearly measured, the effects of motivation are felt and observed every day in classrooms around the world. According to Cunningsworth (1992), a student who is not well taught but is motivated will have better results in learning a foreign language than a student who is well taught but is not motivated. Cunningsworth (1992, p. 59) also states that "motivation determines the student's level of attention during class, and the assiduity which he does his homework and revises what he has been taught during the day".

It is commonly thought that if motivation is present, students become active as well as involved in the learning process; if absent, the learner will be passive, disinterested, and not involved in the learning process and therefore will not learn. Thus, foreign language teachers have to be aware of the necessity of looking for techniques and interactive activities such as games in order to enhance their classes and also to motivate their students to learn a foreign language. Researchers such as Wright (1989) and Moura (1986) have stated that games have a positive effect on unmotivated learners of a foreign language. However, only a few studies in applied linguistics in the Brazilian EFL context have investigated the importance of games in motivating learners to speak a foreign language. Thus, the present study is an attempt to help improve the area of applied linguistics, showing that learners will probably be more willing to speak a foreign language through the use of games. The present study also aims at reporting a rewarding teaching experience in which a game was applied to a group of students to examine the effect of this game on the learners' speaking performance.

First of all, I will identify some psychological views on motivation, then I will explore the questions: a) What is motivation in EFL learning? and b) Who and What motivates foreign language students? After that, I will talk about the advantages of the use of games in EFL classes, games in EFL classroom and the Habits and Hobbies game. Then, I will present the method, which includes: subjects, procedures and the measuring instrument. Finally, I will present results and discussion and the concluding remarks. This is a qualitative study and the term "foreign" is used here to refer to English taught in Brazil.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND ON MOTIVATION

Psychological Views on Motivation

According to Wlodkowski (1985), there are over twenty internationally recognized theories of motivation, all of them with their own terminology and definitions, experimental approaches and opposing viewpoints. Williams & Burden (1997), explain that "a behaviorist would tend to consider motivation largely in terms of external forces, i.e. what specific conditions give rise to what kind of behavior and how the consequences of that behaviour affect whether it is more or less likely to happen again" (p. 112).

An extension of the behaviourist view centered on the identification of a whole variety of basic human needs. (Murray, 1938, apud Williams & Burden, 1997) pointed out some human needs such as people's need to join with other people, people's need to dominate others and also people's need to understand or make sense of their worlds, as well as basic biological needs. Murray envisaged these needs as causing inner tensions which had to be liberated. Motivation was defined in terms of the 'press', that is the desire to liberate the tension and satisfy the needs.

Another study on motivation relates to the notion of the need to achieve, or achievement motivation. Ames (1992) identified three different kinds of goals in the area of achievement motivation. The first goal, the mastery or the learning goals, focuses on obtaining competence or mastering a new set of knowledge or skills to achieve success; the second kind of goals are called performance goals or ego-involvement goals, which are related to doing better than others or doing well without a lot of effort in order to avoid failure, and the last ones are called social goals which focus on relationships among people.

An important aspect of the achievement motivation theory is that learners can be motivated to either avoid failure (more often associated with performance goals) or achieve success (more often associated with mastery goals) (Ames, 1992). In other words, it means that

when learners want to avoid failure they try to select either easy tasks in order to achieve success or difficult tasks in order to have a good excuse for why failure occurred. However, when learners want to achieve success they try to select moderately difficult tasks, which will provide an interesting challenge for them to keep the high expectations for success.

From a cognitive view of motivation, people can choose the way in which they behave, so that they have control over their actions (Williams & Burden, 1997). When making a choice, however, people have to be aware of the possible results of what they decide to do, allowing them to set goals for themselves, and then they can decide to act in certain ways in order to achieve these goals (Williams & Burden, 1997). Thus, from a cognitive perspective, "motivation is concerned with such issues as why people decide to act in certain ways and what factors influence the choices they make" (Williams & Burden, 1997 p. 119).

A cognitive view of motivation, then, centers around individuals making decisions about their own actions as opposed to the behaviourist view which considers motivation in terms of external forces over which they have no control.

Taking into account the views quoted above it is also important to mention Gardner's approach to motivation. Gardner & Lambert (1959, apud Crookes & Schmidt, 1991) made the distinction between integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation was identified by the fact that students are attracted by the culture of the community speaking that L2 and they want to integrate themselves into such a culture or become a part of that society. It is associated with components such as "interest in foreign languages", "desire to learn the target language", "attitudes toward learning the target language", "attitudes toward the learning situation", "desire to interact with the target language", and "attitudes toward the target language community" (Gardner, 1982, apud Dörnyei, 1990 p. 46).

Instrumental motivation, on the other hand, is marked by the fact that the learner studies the L2 with a utilitarian purpose in mind, such as a better job or a higher salary. Thus, no matter what type of motivation students have, foreign language teachers have to keep in mind that the strength of motivation depends on the state of a student's needs and goals.

What is motivation in EFL learning?

Motivation may be defined as "a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, which leads to a conscious decision to act, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal or goals" (Williams & Burden, 1997 p. 120). In other words, a person gets interested in some way and this interest may be started by different causes, maybe internal ones, coming from inside the learner such as an interest in the activity or a wish to be successful. Other causes may be external, for example the influence of another person or even an event. However, whatever the cause, the person's interest is activated, leading this person to make a conscious decision to act in certain ways in order to achieve a goal or goals related to the activity undertaken. Once the activity has started the person has to persist in achieving the goals and all this is influenced by the context and situation, and will be personal to the individual.

Specifically in EFL learning, motivation is "a complex phenomenon which can be defined in terms of two factors: learners' communicative needs, and their attitudes towards the second language community" (Lightbown & Spada, 1993 p. 40). It means that if students need to speak the foreign language in a variety of social situations or maybe to get a better job they will notice the importance of the foreign language and consequently will be motivated to learn it. Likewise, if students have positive attitudes towards the speakers of the language, they will probably want to have more contact with them.

Ur (1996), who is concerned with English language teaching, also sees motivation as a very important phenomenon. As she considers motivation difficult to give a definition, she prefers to think about motivation in terms of 'motivated' learners, that is, learners who are willing to involve themselves in learning activities to progress. Ur (1996) states that teaching and learning can become much easier and more pleasant when there is learners motivation. But what are some of the characteristics of motivated learners? Ur (1996), points out the following characteristics:

Positive task orientation. The learner is willing to tackle tasks and challenges, and has confidence in his or her success.

Ego-involvement. The learner finds it important to succeed in learning in order to maintain and promote his or her own (positive) self-image.

Need for achievement. The learner has a need to achieve; to overcome difficulties and succeed in what he or she sets out to do.

High aspirations. The learner is very aware of the goals of learning, or of specific learning activities, and directs his or her efforts towards achievement them.

Perseverance. The learner consistently invests a high level of effort in learning, and is not discouraged by setbacks or apparent lack of progress.

Tolerance of ambiguity. The learner is not disturbed or frustrated by situations involving a temporary lack of understanding or confusion; he or her can live with these patiently, in the confidence that understanding will come later (p. 275).

A very outstanding characteristic among the ones quoted above is the need for achievement in which learners are motivated to reach a goal that they have set, being willing to overcome difficulties in order to achieve their goal.

Thus, keeping in mind some of the characteristics of motivated learners, foreign language teachers should be conscious of the fact that learners bring to the classroom not only their intelligence and aptitude but also a lot of attitudes and interests which are consequence of a variety of psychological and sociological factors. Foreign language teachers should also be aware that it is part of their responsibility to channel these affective elements.

Who And What Motivates Foreign Language Students?

It is important to say that students' motivation in foreign language learning is the result not only of their internal environment but also of many other factors involved in the external milieu in which they are studying that language, and the teacher is one of the most important of such factors. The characteristics foreign language teachers should possess could be summed up as follows: they should be competent, observant, tactful and communicative; in addition, however, they should stimulate interest, have a capacity for self-evaluation and be willing to develop their skills. Above all they must feel a genuine interest for their students, be extremely sensitive to the students in order to motivate them. (Calvin, 1991).

As far as the second part of my question is concerned (What motivates foreign language students?) I can say that the way a teacher presents the content must be dynamic and interesting in order to get the students' attention. Besides, foreign language teachers have to look for activities that promote interaction among students in the classroom and activities that provide meaningful dialogue in the target language.

Concluding these questions asked above I would stress that motivation can be seen as both a cause and an effect of successful learning. Thus, it is important that teachers keep in mind that they are dealing with a self-perpetuating or self-destroying phenomenon. In the same way as motivation breeds motivation, a de-motivating factor can weaken the foundations of all motivation. We are confronted with a chain reaction, in which we value especially the human factor; that is, the teacher-student relationship.

3 THE ADVANTAGES OF THE USE OF GAMES IN EFL CLASSES

How many times have we, foreign language teachers, found our classes "boring" and have become upset with our own acting in classes? Most of the time foreign language teachers dedicate hours and hours preparing their classes and the result they have is students totally absorbed in other thoughts. Wouldn't it be better to change the environment of the classroom? Asking constantly for silence would ruin our nerves and our images before the students.

"Games can play an important part in the language process" say Hadfield & Hadfield (1995, p. 6). When students are asked to play games in the classroom, they generally get motivated, because games are fun. If students are having fun, they will probably find learning English interesting; consequently, if they find what they are studying interesting they will tend to absorb and retain the content being aimed at much more than if they are only studying because they have to.

Games In EFL Classrooms

As previously pointed out, foreign language teachers have to be creative, dynamic and they always have to look for different activities and techniques in order to motivate their students to learn a foreign language. Games are activities that may help increase motivation and knowledge of the language. "Game playing, having apparently originated as a form of instruction, now appears again to be coming into its own as an instructional activity" (Rodgers, 1978 p. 251).

According to Richard-Amato (1996), Games are often associated with fun. While it is true that games are usually fun, one must not lose sight of their pedagogical value, particularly in second language teaching. Games can lower anxiety, thus making the acquisition of input more likely. In addition, they are often highly motivating, relevant, interesting and comprehensible. Games are sometimes used in classrooms to develop and reinforce concepts (e.g., colors, shapes, numbers, word definitions), to add diversion to the regular classroom activities, and even to break the ice, particularly in the case of rank beginners. Their most important function, however, is to give practice in communication skills. Although some are quiet, contemplative games, others are noisy and require much verbal or physical involvement. Some are meant for small groups, others for large groups (p. 193).

Foreign language teachers must select games which can be adapted to the objectives being developed, using them to reinforce or even introduce new objectives. The objective of a game must not be a simple passtime, but it must seek education, through entertainment. To achieve it, the teacher must apply it in a correct and planned way, seeking apprenticeship. Games promote student involvement and participation. Students learn the content aimed at by the activity while they have fun.

Wright (1989) was able to verify that by use of games foreign language learners are given the opportunity to learn and speak a foreign language in a creative and enjoyable way. Games generate the basic ingredients to energize a group of students: fun, action, competition and challenge. Games can also help students know each other and make students feel more relaxed in the classroom environment.

By the use of games, teachers can make their students practice important grammatical structures, develop oral and listening skills and improve vocabulary, general comprehension and fluency in a relaxed and funny way that may help students to learn without noticing they are studying.

According to Stevick (1982), games are a rich source to achieve positive results in learning a foreign language. Games are fun and students get motivated when they are asked to play games in the classroom. At the same time, students may learn the content aimed at by the activity.

The Habits and Hobbies Game

The Habits and Hobbies game by Hadfield, 1990 (apud Biancamano & Perna, 1993) is a very interesting game in which students have a chance to communicate among themselves in a dynamic way and it also practices the function of talking about hobbies. In order to play this game students have to master some structures such as: "Do you ...?", "What do you usually do...", "How often do you ...?", "When do you ...?", "I ... once/ twice a day / a week/ on weekends/ month/ year", "... in the afternoons/ mornings/ evenings", "...on days of the week".

The Habits and Hobbies game can be applied with any number of students from eight upwards. The teacher must copy enough cards and questionnaires for everyone in class. The objective of the game is to fill in the questionnaire. To fill in the questionnaires students have to move round the class, asking questions such as: "Do you play the violin?", "How often do you have English classes?", "When do you have swimming lessons?" and so on. Students have to get the signature of a person in each category. The Habits and Hobbies game allows the students to speak and practice the language in an enjoyable way and at the same time their communicative competence can be increased. I have applied the Habits and Hobbies game as an experiment to examine the effect of this game on the students' speaking performance.

4 METHOD

Subjects

The subjects participating in the present study were ten beginner-level students in two classes at Centro de Cultura Anglo-Americana Language Institute in Tubarão, Santa Catarina State, Brazil. Their average age was twelve. Beginner-level students were chosen because (1) they seem to be interested in learning a foreign language in a different and enjoyable way, and (2) because many times through my experience at a Language Institute I have seen students who become unmotivated and give up studying English. This is the main reason for the kind of research I am carrying out.

Procedures

First, students were observed by me and filmed by another teacher during a 60- minute class in which a grammatical structure (The Simple Present Tense) was reviewed through oral questions. Second, students were observed and filmed by another teacher again during another 60-minute class in which the "Habits and Hobbies" game was applied to review the same grammatical structure. During both classes cards and questionnaires were distributed to the students and they were asked to fill in the questionnaires. The two classes were observed and filmed in order to compare students' speaking performance through oral questions and through the game, and also to check if they got more motivated to speak a foreign language through the use of the Habits and Hobbies game or not. I also took pictures of the students during both classes to compare their facial expressions during the classes. In addition, a questionnaire written in Portuguese (to avoid students' misunderstanding) was also applied after the control and the experimental classes in order to have a clearer conclusion through students' answers which class students got more motivated to speak English.

The Measuring Instrument

As motivation is difficult to be clearly measured, I considered the students' oral participation and their facial expressions to measure in which class students were more motivated. Besides, I also considered the analysis of the answers of the questionnaires to evaluate students' opinions on the two different classes, the pictures and the videotape to conclude whether the use of the "Habits and Hobbies" game had positive results on motivating students to speak English as a foreign language.

Before being applied to the students the questionnaire was analyzed and discussed by colleagues, other EFL teachers in order to avoid students' misunderstanding. The questionnaire was also analyzed by a pedagogical authority to check if it was clear and well designed to apply to the students.

Students did not have to sign the questionnaire and they were asked to answer the questions with calmness and sincerity. The first question, "How did you feel in today's class?", was asked to verify students' enthusiasm during both classes. Through their answers it was possible to analyze in which class they felt more motivated. The second question, "What was your participation in today's class?", was designed to check students' participation during both classes. Students were also asked to justify their answers. Thus, through their answers I could measure in a clearer way students' participation during the control and the experimental classes. The third question, "Did something call your attention in today's class?" was chosen especially to check if the Habits and Hobbies game played during one of the classes called more students' attention than the oral questions asked during the other class. The fourth question was chosen in order to know if games are the activities students most like in English classes. And the last question was designed to hear students' voice, that is, to have a clear conclusion about how students felt during both classes and also to know the suggestions they wrote about English classes.

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results indicate that overall class motivation was enhanced when the "Habits and Hobbies" game was applied. From the analysis of the videotape I could notice that students looked more interested in speaking a foreign language through the use of the game than through oral questions. Students walked around the classroom as they tried to fill in their questionnaires and they got involved also with this interest practicing the language. During the control class (through oral questions only) students were not enthusiastic; they just answered the questions

as they were asked without moving or showing explicit signs of enthusiasm as I could observe in other classes I taught. However, during the class in which the "Habits and Hobbies" was applied I could realize that students were much more willing to speak English; they participated more and they were highly motivated. It was interesting to notice that the game quoted above helped students to know each other better as they asked the questions about their habits and hobbies. Besides, during the game students felt much more relaxed in the classroom environment.

The pictures that were taken during both classes just confirmed through the students' facial expressions that students were motivated in the class in which the game was applied. Students looked happy, active and full of energy as they walked around the classroom trying to fill in their questionnaires. However, the pictures taken during the control class, in which students were just asked oral questions, showed that students looked bored and disinterested in learning a foreign language.

The analysis of the questionnaires applied to the students after the oral questions to check their opinions about the class showed that eight out of ten students felt a little motivated during this class, and the other two felt motivated during the class. In relation to the second question ("What was your participation in today's class?"), all students answered that they participated a little. One student wrote that it was a normal class. Regarding the third question ("Did anything call your attention in today's class?"), the ten students commented that nothing had called their attention. In the fourth question students were asked to rank from 1 to 5 what they like most in English classes, number 1 for what they like most and number 5 for what they like least.

Seven out of ten students ranked games number 1, two students ranked number 1 in the Internet and one student ranked number 1 in songs. In the last question students had to write something about that day's class or provide some suggestions for English classes. Eight students wrote that English classes should have more games, songs and drama as we can see in the following examples: "A aula de Inglês podia ter mais jogos e teatros" (English classes could have more games and drama), "As aulas de Inglês poderiam ter mais jogos porque com os jogos nós aprendemos de uma forma mais divertida" (English classes could have more games because with games we learn in a more enjoyable way), "Eu acho que a aula de Inglês devia ter mais jogos, músicas e teatros" (I think an English class should have more games, songs and dramas). Three of these eight students pointed out that English classes should have fewer drills and the other five of these eight students wrote that English classes should have more games and not only videos about the lessons and texts. "As aulas de Inglês deviam ter menos drills" (English classes should have fewer drills), "As perguntas não foram difíceis. As aulas devem ter mais jogos e não apenas os vídeos e textos do livro" (The questions were not difficult. Classes should have more games and not only videos and texts from the book). One student did not want to express his/her opinion and the other one made a comment on the teacher's performance "Lições novas não são problemas quando Super Eliana está por perto" (New lessons are not problems when Super Eliana is around).

The analysis of the questionnaires given to the students after the second class, that is the class in which the "Habits and Hobbies" game was applied, was impressive. All the students answered in the first question that they felt motivated during that class. Concerning the second question the ten students answered that they participated a lot during the class. They made comments such as: "Porque hoje eu aprendi coisas novas" (Because today I learned new things), "Falei bastante com meus colegas" (I talked a lot to my classmates), "Andamos pela sala e perguntamos e participamos" (We walked around the classroom, we asked and we participated), "Todos participaram da aula" (Everybody participated in the class), "Uma atividade legal foi desenvolvida" (A nice activity was developed). In the third question eight of the ten students wrote that something called their attention during the class. One of the students explained that they played a game and it was nice. Another student commented that the game was different and everybody participated. Two other students wrote that it was a different and enjoyable class and three others commented that they got interested and motivated playing a game. Three out of ten students did not make any comments.

In the fourth question nine out of ten students ranked 1 in games to express what they like most in English classes, and one student ranked 1 in the Internet. Concerning the last question students suggested different activities that should be included in the English classes. All of them pointed out that English classes should have more games, songs, and the Internet: "Eu acho que nós devemos ter mais jogos, músicas, teatros e termos também internet" (I think we should have more games, songs, dramas and we should also have the Internet), "Podia botar Internet e muito mais jogos e teatros" (It could have the Internet, many more games and dramas), "Mais jogos e músicas. Com isso nós aprendemos mais" (More games and songs. With games and songs we learn more). One student wrote that English classes should have fewer readings and listening comprehension practice: "Podia ter menos leituras e Lcps" (It could have fewer readings and listening comprehension practice). Five out of ten students commented that it was a very enjoyable and different class because they had learned new things. Another student wrote that the class was nice because they had to talk to everybody to fill in their questionnaires and then they learned in a better way. Two other students commented that English classes should continue like the one in which they played the game.

After having analyzed both classes through the students' questionnaire answers, the videotape and the pictures, I can say that games are effective tools foreign language teachers have to motivate learners to speak a foreign language. The results of this experiment indicate that students were highly motivated and they were more willing to speak English during the class in which the game was applied. The results also indicate that students are tired of a lot of drills, readings and listening comprehension practice. Although classes are not the same every day, I suggest that foreign language teachers make use of games in their classes in order to provide a better social interaction among students and also to give students a chance to use language in a creative way.

6 CONCLUSION

Motivation is an important factor that contributes for the acquisition of a foreign language. But how can teachers motivate their students to learn a foreign language? It was the aim of this project to show that games are activities that help enhance motivation. It is known that motivation is difficult to be measured, but teachers can notice when their students are motivated by their facial expressions, attitudes and also by their participation in class. During this experiment in which a game was applied, I could realize that my students were glad in participating in class and they were actively involved in the learning process without noticing they were studying. Besides, games can help students to know each other and can also make students feel more relaxed in the classroom environment.

Thus, the present study was a very successful and rewarding experiment especially because there was enough involvement on the part of the learners, who displayed a feeling of accomplishment for having been able to use the language in a more creative and dynamic way. They got motivated and had fun while they were learning.

To conclude, I want to emphasize that foreign language teachers have to be imaginative, look for different and interesting activities that promote social interaction among students, activities that provide motivating dialogue in the target language and, also activities that serve as a way to bring individuals and groups closer. Thus, after this rewarding experience I can say that games are a good source to start students into the habit of using English for communication in a more enjoyable way.

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