



# SAFARA

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UFR Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Université Gaston Berger,  
BP 234 Saint Louis, Sénégal  
Tel +221 961 23 56 Fax +221 961 1884  
E-mail : safara@ugb.sn

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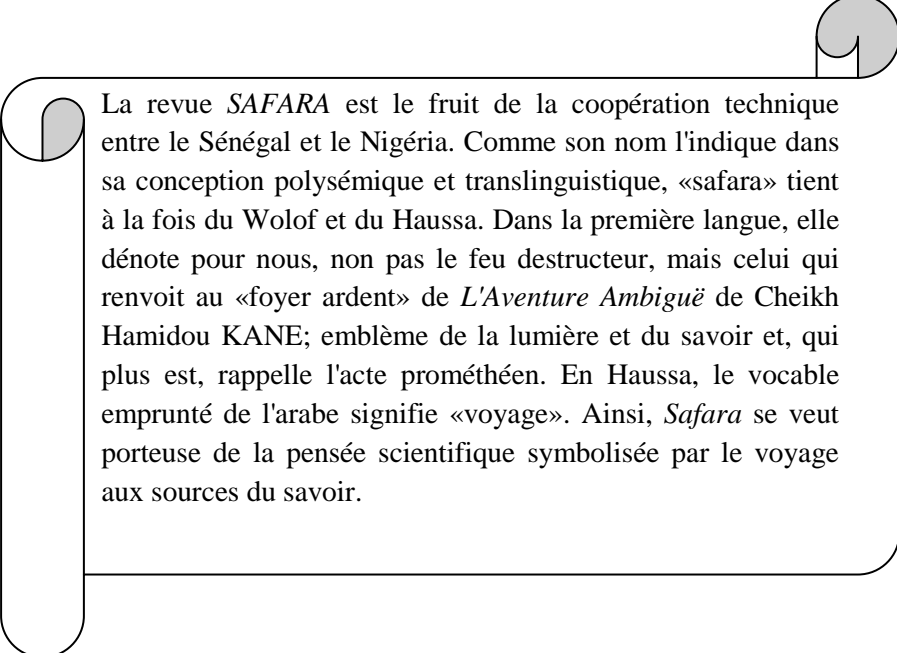
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La revue *SAFARA* est le fruit de la coopération technique entre le Sénégal et le Nigéria. Comme son nom l'indique dans sa conception polysémique et translinguistique, «safara» tient à la fois du Wolof et du Haussa. Dans la première langue, elle dénote pour nous, non pas le feu destructeur, mais celui qui renvoie au «foyer ardent» de *L'Aventure Ambiguë* de Cheikh Hamidou KANE; emblème de la lumière et du savoir et, qui plus est, rappelle l'acte prométhéen. En Haussa, le vocable emprunté de l'arabe signifie «voyage». Ainsi, *Safara* se veut porteuse de la pensée scientifique symbolisée par le voyage aux sources du savoir.

## Sommaire

Beyond Point Zero: Reclaiming Agency in Nawal Al Saadawi's <i>Woman at Point Zero</i> .....	5
<b>Oumar Cherif DIOP</b>	
Misandry In Amma Darko's <i>The Housemaid</i> .....	15
<b>Célestin GBAGUIDI</b>	
Functions and Contexts of Reference Deviation in <i>Anthills of the Savannah</i> .....	31
<b>Léonard A. KOUSSOUHAN and Yémal C. AMOUSSOU</b>	
Murambi : un tombeau à ciel ouvert .....	53
<b>Pierre GOMEZ</b>	
L'écriture pleureuse dans <i>Lucy</i> de Jamaica Kincaid .....	71
<b>Badara SALL</b>	
Actorialisation et spatialisation comme motifs de l'écart et de la norme dans <i>Le paradis des chiots</i> et <i>Al Capone le Malien</i> de Sami Tchak .....	87
<b>Pierre Ndemby MAMFOUMBY</b>	
La Main sèche : Quête identitaire ou quête esthétique ? .....	97
<b>Didier AMELA</b>	
L'influence de l'autoritarisme religieux sur l'évolution psychologique des personnages à travers <i>La Religieuse</i> de Denis Diderot.....	109
<b>Mahboubeh FAHIMKALAM and Mohammad Reza MOHSENI</b>	
L'accès de la femme aux sphères de décision en Islam.....	123
<b>Cheikhou DIOUF</b>	
Using Games to Foster oral Communication in EFL Classrooms in the Republic of Benin	139
<b>Estelle BANKOLE-MINAFLINOU</b>	
Liberal Democracy and Governance in Africa: A Brief Critique .....	163
<b>Aboubacar Abdullah SENGHORE</b>	

## **Using Games to Foster oral Communication in EFL Classrooms in the Republic of Benin**

Estelle BANKOLE-MINAFLINOU\*

### **Résumé**

*L'enseignement de l'Anglais comme langue étrangère dans le Secondaire en Afrique Sub-saharienne et en particulier au Benin, suscite de nos jours un nouvel engouement, vu le rôle prépondérant que cette langue joue sur le plan international dans toutes les sphères de la société.*

*Les méthodes traditionnelles d'apprentissage ont prouvé leur limite, car elles n'ont pas pu à elles seules former un apprenant performant, capable de manier cette langue pour relever les défis socio-économiques actuels. Il s'avère alors nécessaire d'utiliser des techniques qu'on croyait à tort ou à raison 'hors programme' comme les jeux pour pallier aux faiblesses des anciennes méthodes afin de les renforcer et de rendre l'enseignement de cette langue plus efficace au Benin.*

### **Abstract**

*Today, teaching English as a foreign language in secondary school in Sub-Saharan Africa and particularly in Benin resulted in a new thrust because of the predominant role this international language plays in all areas of life.*

*The traditional methods to teach/learn the language have shown their limits, for they have not been able to train learners who can perform well in using the target language as a tool to overcome the current socio-economic challenges. Therefore, using "extra curriculum" teaching techniques such as games proves necessary to overcome the deficiencies of the old methods and reinforce them in order to make the teaching/learning of English language in Benin far more effective.*

**Keywords:** *Oral communication; competency-based approach; information and communication technology; anxiety and stress-free atmosphere.*

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\* Maitre-Assistant de Didactique de la Langue Anglaise. Département d'Anglais, Flash/ Université d'Abomey-Calavi

## **INTRODUCTION**

Language is the most important binding element in society. It is the tool for communication which allows people to interact daily in various social situations. In our era of fast communication and technology, the value of English language cannot be overemphasized. In Benin, though it is a foreign language it plays an important role in the socio- economic, religious, cultural and political fields, its teaching and learning meet with daunting problems. For instance, students are unable to speak the language properly after seven or even ten years of learning. Therefore, making the language play the role of development vanguard by teaching it communicatively in our secondary schools is a must. In fact, this is a real challenge to overcome at any cost.

In Benin, though some efforts have been made to make the teaching of this language relevant to the needs of the country so as to meet up with the current challenges, many things remain to be done at the classroom level. The traditional methods used so far by English language teachers seem unable to promote the students' use of the language for real communication.

Why not introduce apparently 'uncommon' methods such as the use of games to stimulate students' interest and foster their learning of the language in an enjoyable and relaxed atmosphere conducive to effective learning? In fact, though games have always been used in language classes, they have been considered as marginal activities, filling in odd moments, and not as part and parcel of the process of learning a language.

The present article aims at shedding light on the use of games as a means of reinforcing language elements and skills, to make daily classroom practice more enjoyable, more rewarding and less threatening for the use of language for communication.

An investigation was carried out to deal with the topic. Questionnaires, interviews and class observations are used as research instruments to collect reliable data for top tips to classroom teachers.

## **Using Games to Foster oral Communication (Estelle BANKOLE-MINAFLINOU)**

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### **1 Overview of the English Language teaching /learning situation in Benin**

The English language has since long been introduced in Benin teaching curriculum starting from secondary school to university. The educational authorities through the National Curriculum, by making English compulsory in the secondary education, expect that the school leavers should be able to speak write and understand the language in real life situations. Whereas English learners in Benin are expected to communicate with any English user, whether Anglophone or native speakers, the dire reality is that after seven or even ten years of English learning, very few graduates can speak the language fluently, let alone hold a few minutes' conversation. The major cause of this situation is that the English language is not taught in secondary schools communicatively, but rather as a subject for which students consciously need only to apply mechanical grammar rules or formula.

Many EFL teachers (most of them untrained until recently) ignore that teaching a language is teaching a tool for use in real life and only focus on language basics. The reality is that when a language is stripped down to its bare essentials, in other words, when the teaching is based on isolated pieces of knowledge in grammar and vocabulary, it makes it nearly impossible for any creativity to take place and the capacity of learners to interact genuinely is drastically reduced. Though some efforts are being made with the implementation of the competency-based approach, many teachers still lack the necessary teaching skills background and are still bound to the grammar/vocabulary oriented methods. In other words, for many years now, teacher-centered methods have been commonly used to teach this foreign language, reducing English classes to a one-man show platform and leaving no place for adaptability and flexibility. As a result, the learning atmosphere is far from being conducive to enhanced effective learning of the language.

Besides, lack of adequate materials such as teacher's books, textbooks, audio-tapes, video- tapes and libraries is compounded by lack of qualified teachers able to exercise creativity and critical judgment of innovations in language teaching. The only available learning material for students is the textbook and very few students can afford it.

The socio-linguistic environment of Beninese learners where French is the official language constitutes another stumbling block to the communication in this foreign language. To cope with such a situation, it is imperative to find ways and methods

of teaching which can help English learners develop their speaking skills through the use of communicative activities in class. In this era of globalization is it not possible to learn a language and have fun at the same time? Do students really need to learn in a tensed and threatening atmosphere? Why not engage them in a pleasurable relaxed learning experience devoid of inhibitions? Why not deviate more often than occasionally from the humdrum routine and do something refreshing and different in class, something that can be more rewarding and capable of generating enthusiasm?

The use of games, formerly considered as 'extra curriculum activity' suitable for five minutes on a Friday afternoon class just to entertain learners, seems to offer among other techniques, the solution to the challenge of using English in Benin as a communicative tool for development that can make our students real practitioners of the language. Let us first shed light on what communication is, because it shares many characteristics which are relevant to the teaching and learning of languages and particularly foreign languages.

## **2 What is real communication?**

Communication between human beings is an extremely complex and an ever-changing phenomenon. To communicate is to make news, information, opinions, feelings, etc. known, to share or exchange them with another person in such a way that he/she understands the message being passed across to him/her. There are two major forms of communication: oral (verbal) and non- oral (non- verbal). The great majority of communicative events share some characteristics which are relevant for the learning and teaching of languages. In fact, when two persons are engaged in talking to each other they are doing so for a reason. Harmer, J. (1983) made the following generalizations about the issue. He declares that when a person speaks it is because:

- 1 He/she wants to speak. It means that he/she has made a definite decision to address someone or he/she intends to speak; otherwise he/she would keep silent.
- 2 He/she has some communication purpose. Speakers say things because they want something to happen as a result of what they say. A speaker may want to charm his/her listener; he/she may want to give some information or to express



## Using Games to Foster oral Communication (Estelle BANKOLE-MINAFLINOU)

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pleasure. He/she may decide to be rude or to flatter, to agree or complain. In each of these cases he/she is interested in achieving this communicative purpose. In other words, being successful at conveying a message is the objective.

- 3 He/she selects from his language store. In order to achieve his communicative purpose, he/she will select from the store of the language he/she possesses, the language he/she thinks is appropriate for this purpose. (pp. 41-42)

It is important to realize that these generalizations do not only apply to the spoken word, they characterize written communication as well. So when communication takes place there is a speaker or/and a writer and a listener and/or a reader. A speaker normally has a communicative purpose or a reason for speaking and the listener is interested in discovering what that purpose is. However, even if our listener has some idea about the purpose, he/she must listen in order to be sure, and the conversation helps to close that gap so that now both speakers have the same information. [Harmer, J. (1983)] p.42

In the classroom, we teachers have to create the same kind of information gap if we are to encourage real communication. Whatever activity the students are involved in, if it is to be genuinely communicative and if it is really to promote language use in real life, the students should have a desire to communicate. They should be using language in some way to achieve an objective, and this objective should be the most important part of the communication. If students do have a purpose of this kind then their attention should be centered on the content of what is being said or written and not the language form that is being used. The students however will have to deal with a variety of language rather than one grammatical construction, for example. While the students are engaged in communicative activity the teacher should not “intervene”. By “intervene” we mean telling students they are making mistakes, insisting on accuracy, asking for repetition etc. This would certainly undermine the communicative purpose of the activity. The teacher may of course be involved in the activity as a participant and should also be watching and listening very carefully in order to be able to conduct feedback.

After establishing the main features of real oral communication, it is important to know how games can be used to foster real communication and what roles they play.

### **3 The roles of games**

#### **3.1 Games as a factor of children development**

For many psychologists, games have a positive impact on human psychology especially on children's. Alain Boudet (1977) has established games as a means to direct children's behavior. He goes beyond this by showing that through games, children can build their own personality in many respects: physically, affectively, mentally and socially. For the author, from birth to the age of three, children try to differentiate themselves from others through some games. At this stage, they discover gradually their body and their movements. Their muscles start developing and consequently, the development of their brain starts. They compare themselves with their environment and are aware of the influence they have on the nature and its laws and on the people around them. By doing so, they develop and build their intelligence. Boudet goes further to demonstrate that from three to six years old, children express their real feelings aggressively, through fear, enthusiasm and conflicts. At this stage, they build their personality through a good development of an expressive creativity.

Jo Ann Brewer (1991) argues that most of the abilities required to succeed in school settings are acquired through play experiences for, they helps children in social, emotional and mainly physical development. She further states that play offers young children opportunities to master many fundamental, physical, social and intellectual skills and concepts. The author has distinguished through intellectual abilities two kinds of play, namely exploratory ones in which the child has no objective other than exploration; and rule-governed ones in which the child's objectives are to find solutions to a problem or to determine cause and effect, thereby contributing to cognitive growth. The latter can be defined as an increase in the child's basic store of knowledge. Brewer finally declares that many studies support the positive relationship of play experiences and the development of the child's cognitive ability. According to her, cognitive abilities include identifying, classifying, sequencing, observing, discriminating, making predictions, drawing conclusions, comparing and determining cause and effect relationships, and she also confirms that these intellectual abilities underlie children's success in all academic areas. The author declares that through plays children develop their problem-solving abilities. While playing, children must think about organizing

## **Using Games to Foster oral Communication (Estelle BANKOLE-MINAFLINOU)**

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materials in order to meet their play goals. So, they must decide how to move and arrange materials so that they can play. This requires very fine discriminations such as sorting by size, shape, or color. Older children playing the roles of characters in books they have read, take into account the roles being assumed by other players when creating their own roles. According to the same author, games develop children's intelligence in problem-solving behavior and creative thinking by putting together information from previous experience, from real life and from other play participants. This opinion is shared by Franck, P. (2002) who contends that a play "is a way of learning by trial and error to cope with the actual world" (p. 436).

Brian Sutton-Smith (1973), in showing the role games play in children's emotion, talks about games as expressive forms. The author observes that right from a tender age, the child imagines plays in a way that allows us to see some of his dominant concerns and anxieties. His dreams, stories, folktales, nursery rhymes and games life seem to be expressive forms of his future life. The motivation for playing games according to the author seems to be the presence in the player of anxieties and conflicts that may have been induced by previous child training processes. The game is fun because it symbolizes these conflicts and also because the player gains some competence and confidence in the life situations he is anxious about. He furthermore observes that games are a means of children socialization. He notices that from seven years old, children develop their socialization by having contact with others. Within a group activity, they build their own moral rules taking into account the views of their peers so as to have a good organization within the group. Brewer, agreeing with Piaget (1972), argues that during children socialization, games push a child out of egocentric thought patterns. Children also learn to cooperate, to achieve some goals during play. They have opportunities to delay their own gratification for a few minutes for instance while someone else finishes playing. As children grow older, the importance of the peer group steadily increases and they practice and perfect the roles they will play in later years.

To conclude, it can be noticed along with Sutton-Smith (1973) that games are suggested to be models of ways of succeeding over others, through magical power (as in games of chance), through force (as in physical skill games), or through cleverness (as in games of strategy). He speculates that in games, children learn all those necessary arts of trickery, deception, harassment, divination, and foul play that teachers will not be able to teach them, but that are most important in

successful interrelationship in marriage, business, studies and war. Brewer adds by mentioning that although most teachers are not trained to be play therapists, they can be aware of how children explore different emotions (anger, sadness, and so on) in different social roles in their play.

### **3. 2 The Importance of Games in Education**

Shelly Vernon (2006) has demonstrated the important role that games can play in education, especially in EFL classes. In fact, for her, students involved in an interesting and attentive class where English language games are used, follow one hundred percent (100%) of the lesson and retain up to eighty percent (80%) of it, whereas a bored class will take in less than half of what a teacher says and retains none of it. Class game activities help the learners to memorize easily what they are learning with pleasure and joy without difficulty. They are also one of the most exciting and enjoyable ways teachers can use in a foreign language class.

Vernon has shown that vocabulary can be learnt through games. She contends that students learn new vocabulary more quickly and retain it better when the learning process takes place in a relaxed and comfortable environment such as while playing games. She deduced that if a child can rapidly learn and retain significant amounts of new vocabulary using games, then teachers are advised to use English language games more and more in their classrooms because of their great advantages and effectiveness in various ways. First, they bring in relaxation and fun for students, thus help them learn and retain new words more easily. Second, games usually involve friendly competition, and they keep learners interested. Then these create the motivation for them to get involved and participate in the learning activities. Vocabulary games bring real world context into the classroom and enhance students' use of English in a flexible and communicative way. She however warns that games should not be regarded as a marginal activity filling in odd moments when the teacher and class have nothing better to do. They should, on the contrary, be at the heart of teaching foreign languages.

Many experienced textbooks and methodology manuals writers have argued that games are not time-filling activities but have a great educational value. W. R. Lee (1979:2) holds that most language games make learners use the language instead of

## Using Games to Foster oral Communication (Estelle BANKOLE-MINAFLINOU)

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thinking about the correct forms. He added that games should be treated as central not peripheral to the foreign language teaching programs. A similar opinion is expressed by Carmichael, J. (1986) who considers games to be fun but warns against overlooking their pedagogical value, particularly in foreign language teaching. There are many advantages in using games. Thus, the author highlights that games can lower anxiety, thus making the acquisition of input more likely to be used later. They are highly motivating and entertaining, and they can give shy students more opportunity to express their opinions and feelings. They help learners to acquire new experiences within a foreign language, which is not always possible during a usual lesson. He declares that games add diversion to the regular classroom, by “icebreaking” activities, by also introducing new ideas. Yin Yong Mei and Jang Yu-Jing (2000) contend that when games are used in a relaxed atmosphere, students remember things faster and better. They add that with games activities, not only real learning takes place, because students use the language they have been exposed to and have practiced earlier, but they provide a model of language they will use in real future life. The writers finally suggest that games should be used at all stages of the lesson, provided they are suitable and carefully chosen. They should lend themselves well to revision exercises, helping learners recall materials in a pleasant, entertaining way and promoting communicative competence while generating fluency.

There are many advantages in using games in the classroom as Lee Su Kim (1995) observes:

- ✓ Games are a welcome break from the usual routine of the language class;
- ✓ They are motivating and challenging;
- ✓ Learning a language requires a great deal of effort. Games help students to make and sustain the effort of learning;
- ✓ Games provide language practice in the various skills: speaking, writing, listening and reading.
- ✓ They encourage students to interact and communicate;
- ✓ They create meaningful contexts for language use.

Moreover, games must be part and parcel of TEFL because they create a spirit of competition. In fact, competition is one way of enhancing interest and motivation in class as long as no one is forced to participate. Creating the right type of language games can foster this healthy beneficial competition in the classroom. Gretchen Weed (1975) has shown that games can be used as a physical activity to

release physical and nervous tensions and to promote alertness by breaking the routine drills and making the students look forward to their English class. In a language class, cultural-content games can also be used as a way of revealing general patterns of culture that should add to the students' grasp of the ways of English speaking peoples.

Finally, using games in language-learning context aims at serving as an adjunct to the techniques of teaching grammar and sound systems of the new language. Games can be the experience that gives meaning to form and sound. The use of games to teach sound systems helps teachers promote and maintain interest in the recognition from a unit up to complete sentences and beyond. And for this realization, Gretchen Weed found that some criteria should be observed.

### **3.2.1 Criteria for a good selection of games as a teaching material**

Gretchen Weed (1975) lists the following criteria.

Topicality: This means that the material should meet the learners' needs. One should not bring into the classroom a material which does not suit the interests or everyday life activities. Otherwise, the whole game activities will be boring and thus useless.

Authenticity: It basically refers to the originality of the material. The subject should be genuine.

Realism: The subject which is dealt with should be realistic.

Clarity: Both the sound and the script should be clear and sharp so that the learners can hear the sound distinctly and see the script with the greatest precision.

Technical quality: This refers to the quality of the machines used. They should not alter the quality of the material.

The variety in the presentation: The material should be presented in various ways. The teacher should use diverse methodologies to present the material for the students to comprehend the material thoroughly.

## Using Games to Foster oral Communication (Estelle BANKOLE-MINAFLINOU)

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Adaptation to the level of the class: The material should not be selected at random. It should deal with a topic with which students are familiar and which is part and parcel of their daily life.

Monovalence: This term refers to the singularity of the subject within the material. It should deal with only one topic in order to make students concentrate on this particular problem. (p.303)

According to the same author, in using a game as part of a lesson plan, teachers need to think carefully about its selection ahead of time if they want to be really effective and successful. For this reason, he makes a list of twelve principles which teachers should take into account when selecting a game.

1. Decide on the purpose of the game first;
2. Consider the space you have in which to play the game;
3. The number of students will limit your choice of games;
4. Decide whether a game is to be individual or team competition
5. The age group into which your students fall is another factor to consider;
6. Think about the activity level you want;
7. Pick the general type of game you want;
8. Decide ahead of time on your time limit;
9. Plan the use of properties;
10. Decide whether you want to give rewards;
11. Buy and refer to some game books;
12. Adapt the game you select to suit your teaching situation. (p. 304)

Once these principles are taken into account, there is a particular lesson plan that teachers should consider. When they have decided to make use of a game, first, they should start by planning their regular English lesson. Next, they should select the game they think will be most useful and suitable, and finally they should take particular pains to adapt it to the point of the lesson. As the criteria of a good selection of teaching game is made clear, it may also be useful to discuss some of the type of games from which teachers should make some selections.

### 3.2.2 Types of Games

Today, with the development of technology, there are several kinds of games which consist of challenges, puzzle and provide learners the opportunity to practice

mathematics, language skills, and letter recognition, to develop pronunciation, vocabulary and words recognition skills. According to Richard, J. C. (1985), such games and also the mazes which help children develop visual perception and hand-eyes coordination and even some outdoor games can help EFL teachers to make their classes lively and more interesting while teaching the different skills of English language, vocabulary, function, grammar, pronunciation etc.

➤ Language skills games

These kinds of games are the ones which help EFL teachers to reinforce the four skills. An example is: “Simon says” (the teacher gives a series of instructions such as “stand up, sit down, touch your nose, point to the door”, etc. Only those preceded by the words ‘Simon says’ should be obeyed. Those who make a mistake are ‘out’). Other examples are “Counting Critters”, “Friends forever”, “Let’s Picnic” etc.

➤ Vocabulary, functions games

They are the ones which help the learners recognize words and their meaning. Such games are followed by pictures to help students memorize the meaning of the words they are exposed to. Examples are “Mixed-up Bs”, “Dandy directions”, “Schools Tools”, etc.

➤ Grammar games

Such games help teachers reinforce and make their grammar lessons enjoyable. Examples are “Oops”, “Monsters”, “On the Farm” etc.

➤ Pronunciation games.

They are games that enable teachers to easily teach students words pronunciation and rhyming words. Examples are “Time to Rhyme”, “Search and Circle”, “Splicing and Splashing” etc.

➤ Some mazes

Mazes are games that help learners solve problems they are exposed to while learning the language patterns’ lessons. They motivate learners to use their brain to



## **Using Games to Foster oral Communication (Estelle BANKOLE-MINAFLINOU)**

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find solution to a given problem. Examples are “Snack Time”, “Home Run”, “Wanting a Web”, “Hungry Bird” etc.

### ➤ Some outdoor games

Outdoor games are games played outside the classroom which help children for their development and socialization. When students play such games, they develop physically and emotionally while keeping their intelligence and reflexes awake. Many of those games are played in African societies and that is why many nurseries and primary schools have adopted them. In Africa, games are considered as the most interesting and important leisure for children. It is fair to say that games are used all over the world and children organize them according to their culture, their civilization and according to the materials that are available to them. Examples of such games are: “Lines”, “Bowling”, “Blindman’s Buff”, “Step on your Tail” etc. [Richard, J. C. (1985)] p.86

After having highlighted the roles of games as factors of children development and their importance in education and listed some types of games, let us probe more into the topic by presenting the results of an investigation carried out with teachers in classroom situation in Benin.

## **4 The investigation**

### **4.1 Research methodology**

The target population includes both teachers and students from whom a sample was drawn. A purposive sampling was preferred so as to question only trained teachers, for they stand more chance to use this teaching strategy in their classes. In order to get reliable information, fifty qualified classroom teachers were given questionnaire to answer. Forty teachers returned them. Thirty students were interviewed. Three teachers were also observed in their classrooms.

#### **4.1.1 Questionnaires**

A ten-item questionnaire was devised, the results of which are summarized in Table 1 below. Apart from the teachers’ background characteristics, they were

asked to mention the language skills they often teach; the adequacy of the current English curriculum to foster oral communication; the interactive group activities they use, including games and the frequency of these activities. Teachers were to appreciate games as a teaching strategy to foster oral communication. Finally, space was provided for teachers to mention their challenges and offer any comments and suggestions as far as the issue is concerned.

#### **4.1.2 Interviews**

Students being teachers' best judges, I designed a five-question interview schedule for students from the first form up to the seventh. They were asked if they enjoy learning English and why; the teaching techniques used by their teachers; whether games are used or not, how often, and their appreciation of the strategy. The opportunity was then given to the thirty (30) randomly sampled students to voice out their challenges and make suggestions.

#### **4.1.3 Class observations**

I observed three teachers in their classrooms. I had a pre- observation session with each of them, and I made it clear to them what I was going to focus on; that is, their use of games as a teaching strategy to foster oral communication. I paid particular attention to: 1) the clarity of the instructions given; 2) the type of games chosen by the teacher; and 3) how far the strategy has developed effective language fluency and classroom interaction.

The results of the teachers' questionnaire are summarized in the table below.

**Using Games to Foster oral Communication (Estelle BANKOLE-MINAFLINOU)**

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Table 1 Teachers' responses N= 40

Language skills often taught	Reading 25/ 62.5%	Writing 11/ 27.5%	Speaking 03/ 7.5%	Listening 01/ 2.5%	Total / % 40/ 100%
CBA for oral communication	Very appropriate 15/37.5%	Quite appropriate 10/25%	Improvement needed 13/ 32.5%	Non-appropriate 02/05%	40/ 100%
Importance of interactive activities (games)	Very useful 35/ 87.5%	Quite useful 00/ 00%	Improvement needed 05/ 12.5%	Not useful 0/ 0%	40/ 100%
Frequency of use of games	Regularly 0/0%	Once in a while 05/ 12.5%	Rarely 18/ 45%	Never 17/ 42.5%	40/ 100%
Games appreciation	Very useful 25/ 62.5%	Quite useful 10/ 25%	Time-consuming 03/ 07.5%	Boring & noisy 02/ 05%	40/ 100%

Table 2 Students' interview responses

Love for English	Yes 30/ 100%	No 00/00%		
Interactive group activities used	Games 10/33.33%	Music 15/50.66%	Riddles 05/16.66%	
Frequency of these	Very often 00/00%	Once in a while 05/ 16.66%	Never 25/83.33%	

techniques				
Games appreciation	Very useful 22/73.33%	Quite useful 03/10%	Time-consuming 03/ 10%	Boring 02/06.66%
Challenges	Lack/of materials 30	Teachers' insensitiveness Lack of support 30	Boring lessons 20/66.66%	Workload 25/83.33%

#### 4.2 The Results

Twenty five teachers out of forty mentioned that the language skill they often teach is reading and eleven said it is writing. Most teachers 62.5 percent agreed that the current curriculum, if effectively implemented, is appropriate to foster oral communication whereas 13 percent admitted that improvement is needed. Though the majority of the sampled teachers (87.5 percent) confessed that interactive group activities such as music, games and riddles are important to promote oral communication, only very few of them, (12.5 percent) use them once in a while; 45 percent rarely use them and 42.5 percent never bother to use any of these techniques. 87.5 percent confessed that it is appropriate and helpful to use games in classes; 07.5 percent claimed that it is time- consuming, and 05 percent declared it is boring and favors a noisy class. The challenges they mentioned are: lack of adequate materials including book of games, lack of professional training and development, class management (discipline problems), workload, lack of school support and exams pressure.

All the thirty randomly sampled students declared their love for English and would have enjoyed its learning if it had not been so difficult. Quite a good number of students (10/33.33%; 05/16.66%;05/16.66%) confessed that since the advent of the competency-based approach their teachers have been striving to use interactive group activities such as games, music and riddles to teach the target language. Five of them (16.66 percent) declared that games are used once in a while in their classes. Twenty-five students out of thirty (83.33%) claimed that games are rarely used in their classes even though they would have loved their use more often. This is confirmed by what 45% of the respondent- teachers confessed. 22/73.33% of the

## **Using Games to Foster oral Communication (Estelle BANKOLE-MINAFLINOU)**

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students found this strategy very useful to promote effective communication, and only 16.66% of them declared the use of games time-consuming and boring. The challenges they face are namely: lack of appropriate materials including textbooks, teachers' insensitiveness to their needs and interests, boring lessons, workload and unfavorable linguistic environment.

The observation of the classes has revealed the following:

The first teacher chose a matching game, the second one an oral guessing game, and the third one used a jumbled words game. All the three activities were more or less successfully conducted. All the instructions were clear with one out of the three teachers issuing them in French. The matching and the guessing games after the first five minutes' hesitations started stimulating interaction among the students, thereby creating a non-threatening stress-free environment. As they got more comfortable with each other and with the game their fear of making mistakes faded gradually. The excitement was very high and so was the noise level, but one could notice that the inhibition to speak English had faded away gradually. A competitive dimension was included in the first matching game class as a grade is given to each good answer from each group. The jumbled words game was less successful to promote group interaction.

### **4.3 Discussions and interpretation of the results**

From the results revealed by the investigation, it is obvious that one can possibly learn a language while enjoying oneself. It is unfortunate that the prescribed handbook series "*Document d'Accompagnement*" includes very few games in its teaching/learning activities. It seems that games are considered as extra curriculum activities. No wonder that very few teachers ventured to make use of them as a useful strategy for language reinforcement that can promote oral communication.

The majority of teachers (87.5 percent) recognized the positive and significant effect of games upon learners and the use of them stands more chance to increase students' interests, aspirations and ambition. This echoes Edward Wilkins' (1979) views for he states that "to make any progress in a skill, the learner must be positively motivated; that is, have some ambitions and aspirations connected with it" (.205). For this to be possible, purely traditional methods of 'chalk and talk' teaching cannot provide alone for the students' needs. Furthermore, experienced

teachers know that the views of students, born into this world of information and communication technology are not congruent with traditional course content and methods. It is only an anxiety and stress-free environment conducive to effective learning and self-learning that can help communicate naturally and freely. Fortunately, entertaining activities such as games, including electronic ones offer such opportunities. Therefore, finding ways to minimize inhibition that prevents students in Benin from communicating freely should be one of the main objectives of every EFL teacher. Developing group activities and offering learners many opportunities to interact, to express themselves freely will make them discover new points and new structures to reinforce in a meaningful context. This can also build up self-discovered vocabulary, revise already known vocabulary and practice all of the language skills in an enjoyable atmosphere that can trigger off learning English for real communication.

The interviewed students (100 percent), just like those I observed in classroom situation, showed they do like English and enjoy games in their language class. In fact, as games develop their communication skills, it also develops their socialization by putting them in contact with others. Within a group activity, they build their own moral rules taking into account the opinions of their peers so as to have a good organization within the group. They learn to cooperate, to achieve some goals during the game and by providing personal, social, and cross-cultural issues to define. The excitement in the classes I observed was partly due to the competitive side of the game which enhances the motivation of the students, placing their attention on the message and not on the language and thereby reducing stress. While eighty seven point five percent (87.5 %) and seventy three point thirty three percent (73.33%) of respectively teachers and students believe games can stimulate effective language acquisition, twelve point five percent (12.5%) of the sampled teachers and sixteen point sixty six percent (16.66 %) of students consider the use of games boring and time-consuming. Until recently, more than seventy five percent of the teaching force in Benin was untrained and are still being trained now. In such a case, teachers lack confidence and ability in venturing in any activities other than those which involve familiar and 'safe' teaching routines. When adequately trained and mainly for self-development, a teacher should be able to take risk to deviate more often than occasionally from the humdrum routine to be creative and innovative so as to create a warming atmosphere conducive to learning with varying and not always traditional methods.

## **Using Games to Foster oral Communication (Estelle BANKOLE-MINAFLINOU)**

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Using this strategy should be seen as an approach of reinforcing and supplementing the common teaching materials used by teachers in classroom. As for those students who said they resent games, it is probably due to the fact they were not put in the appropriate relaxed atmosphere and given the right motivation to practice the language, to be able to enjoy classroom games.

### **5 Using Games to foster oral communication in EFL classes in Benin**

Today most of the job of an effective teacher in Benin is to encourage his/her learners to use English language in real life contexts by providing situations in which they choose to fulfill different language functions. In other words, using oral communicative activities in classroom proves to be the missing link. The competency-based approach being implemented in the country encourages pair and group work as one of the sine qua non conditions for communicative promotion of the teaching/learning of the target language. Interactive activities including games offer the advantages of minimizing inhibition, revealing secret talents, and more than anything else they create an enjoyable, anxiety and stress-free atmosphere conducive to effective learning and stand for a tool for socialization that enhances problem-solving skills. However, for the use of games to be as a successful teaching strategy, some prerequisites are to be dealt with.

#### **5.1 Language Game Selection**

Not all games are suitable for the foreign language class in a developing country such as Benin, where in some rural even urban areas textbooks are rare commodities. So, appropriate language games should be carefully selected. Emilio G. Cortez (1975) suggests a checklist worthy of attention:

- ❖ The game should reinforce a particular point of language that students lack and/or offer practice for items previously taught. It should be fast-moving and involve many members of the class and not just a few.
- ❖ The game should contain an element of surprise or competition simple enough so that very little time is required for explanation or scoring and provide sufficient motion to heighten and sustain interest. So, classroom should have enough space to conduct the game properly.

- ❖ The game should be suitable to the maturity and age level of the students and the material safe for everybody. (pp.307-309)

## **5. 2 Teacher Preparation**

The success of any classroom game depends on a thorough preparation by the teacher. So, some pieces of advice are necessary.

- The teacher should have a thorough knowledge of the organization, skills, techniques and rules of the game. He should make sure that the activity is suitable to the ability and experience of the players and have the equipment ready for use.
- The teacher's attitude is also an important factor. He/she should develop a very good interest towards classrooms games as children are extremely sensitive to adults' moods and perform accordingly.
- The game should be simple, supplement regular class lessons, have a definite learning objective and fast-moving so that students will not be bored. Therefore, teachers need to consider which kinds of games to use according to the level of the learners, when to use them, how to link them up with the syllabus or textbook and how different games can benefit students in different ways [(Byrne, D. (1985) p. 25]

### **5.3 Some Top Tips for the Use of Games in EFL Classrooms in Benin**

Julia Dobson (1970) has some excellent suggestions for the setting of proper classroom atmosphere. She advises:

Keep the game well under control. Even though you want your students to have good time you cannot allow class discipline to disintegrate. Establish a pleasant but firm tone, in order that the game can both amuse and teach students (P.10)

The concept of fair play being very important in the success of games, Dobson makes the following recommendations:

- Be sure to follow the rules of the game exactly. If you do not stick to the rules, but permit even one student to break a rule, you will establish an unfortunate precedent that can lead to hostility among students. It is best always, therefore to prevent all problems of this kind by playing the game according to the rules. (p. 10)



## **Using Games to Foster oral Communication (Estelle BANKOLE-MINAFLINOU)**

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- Teachers should insist upon sportsmanship and adherence to the rules of the game and should also impress upon the learners the importance of being an honest winner and a graceful loser.
- Finally, teachers should be sure that through their instructions, the students understand perfectly and clearly how to play the game before the real competition begins.

Keeping score is a necessity for many competitive games, as it nurtures motivation in classrooms. Learners can look intently at the scoreboard after a response to see their team's progress. Teachers can use letters for keeping score and be flexible and sensitive to the moods of their students. If it doesn't seem to be going well, they should not force a learner to play a game if he/she is not ready to play. Furthermore, the teacher should avoid elimination games, vary games and not overuse any specific game. Providing for teaching materials such as game books wherever available is then a must, for when there is a will there is a way.

Students of equal proficiency should be equally dispersed among the different groups or teams. Two or three practice runs should be engaged in before scoring begins. The game should ideally end when the students are asking for some more.

Many of the free games we have in our mobile phones, such as Scrabble, crossword puzzles and others involve a focus on language. Although some of them may not be suitable for a large size class in Benin, they can at least encourage students to engage with the target language in a context of entertainment.

## **CONCLUSION**

For many years English language has been taught in Benin and most teachers have tried their best to teach it but have unfortunately failed to reach the main objective which is to make it a tool for communication that opens windows to the world and to development. The investigation carried out in this study through some instruments such as questionnaires, interviews and class observations showed that very few teachers make use of games as part of their classroom teaching practice. It has also been noticed that when students learn in a stress-free, non-threatening and enjoyable atmosphere, there stands more chance for them to use the language in an uninhibited way. These observations make me strongly suggest the use of games as

a motivational factor that can trigger off the learning of English language for communication and development.

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## Using Games to Foster oral Communication (Estelle BANKOLE-MINAFLINOU)

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