THE DESIGN OF BOARD GAMES AS AN ESP TEACHING EXPERIMENT

Vera Lúcia de Lucena MOURA *(UFPe)*

Abstract

This paper aims at reporting a rewarding teaching experience with the design of games for the teaching of English. The games were devised by English for Special Purposes (ESP) Graphic Design students from the Federal University of Pernambuco. The paper's goal is also to motivate colleagues to devise other ways to teach ESP. In order to accomplish this, reasons will be given for the choice of this teaching experience as well as the methodology used. A critical self-evaluation of the experiment will also be done in order to have a more accurate appraisal of the results obtained so as to be able to evaluate its success.

Key Words: *teaching; games; learner; design; creation; invention.*

Resumo

Este trabalho objetiva relatar uma experiência pedagógica gratificante concretizada pela criação de jogos educativos para o ensino do inglês. Tais jogos foram elaborados por alunos de Inglês Instrumental do Curso de Programação Visual da Universidade Federal de Pernambuco. O mencionado trabalho visa também incentivar os colegas a construirem novos caminhos para o ensino de Inglês com Fins Profissionais. Para isso, serão abordadas as razões que motivaram esta experiência assim como a metodologia utilizada. Far-se-á também uma auto-avaliação crítica sobre

o experimento, com o intuito de melhor apreciar os resultados obtidos e avaliar seu sucesso.

Palavras-chave: *ensino; jogos; alunos; design; criação; invenção.*

1.   Introduction

A question might be raised whether the design of games has anything to do with the methodology used in the teaching of English for Special Purposes.

Conceivably, the approach used in this classroom experiment may be considered odd if we limit the kinds of activities experienced by students to the practice of reading strategies and grammar instead of keeping in mind the aim of an ESP course, which is to fulfill the learners' expectations and needs according to their specific linguistic purposes. In order to achieve this goal, teachers should encourage "learners not only to make an appropriate linguistic input but also to draw on their experience, knowledge, ideas and imagination." (Byrne, 1988:10). As will be seen, the learning experiment described in this paper shared Byrne's point of view as the basis for the learners' language projects. The design of the games was the product of their ingenuity and freedom to create new useful things. For a better understanding of the learning process followed in the experiment, the article is divided into four parts.

The first part gives the experiment rationale covering the students' profile and the project steps, including the explanation of how the games were designed. The second part describes the kinds of games which the students devised. The third explains the guidelines used for the project evaluation

and grading. Finally, the last part mentions the project results with a critical analysis of the experiment as a whole, adding suggestions for future improvements.

2. The experiment rationale

2.1 The students' profile

This group of students was made up of twenty-five young adults with a beginning English proficiency level. They wanted to develop their four language skills and had diverse interests. Some of them enjoyed dealing with advertising and typography, whereas others liked to work with graphic computer design, fashion and jewellery design, album cover design, three-dimensional books and video tape design. They were very creative and most of them had lively personalities with such active minds that it was difficult for me to keep their attention for extended periods of time. Then I realized I had to face a big challenge; either adapt the course and activities to the group's needs or affect the whole learning process by using an approach which would not be interesting enough for them. Taking these considerations into account, I tried to make my classes as dynamic as possible by engaging learners in activities which would foster their creativity with the use of graphic skills while learning English. For instance, I asked the students to summarize texts by illustrating their main ideas. The outcome was story boards that have been used as teaching materials with this and other groups of students. The activities done in class also aimed at integrating and developing the four language skills. However, the emphasis was put on reading because this would certainly be the learners' most required skill as the majority of their academic books are in English.

2.2   Steps of the project

My Graphic Design students had already been trained in the use of reading strategies on General, Main Points and Intensive Comprehension levels by doing several reading comprehension exercises. This had been the content of their first evaluation, a formal test. At that moment, though, I wanted to give them the chance to do something more creative such as a project. As Byrne (1988) mentions, the advantage of it would be that projects provide opportunities for combining the following approaches to the classroom:

∗ "Exploit the Classroom as a Social Setting in its own Right.
∗ Bring the Outside World into the Classroom.
∗ Simulate the Outside World in the Classroom.
∗ Escape the Classroom on an Imaginative Level.
∗ Get out of the Classroom into the Outside World" (:10-12).

To do the project, the learners were asked to carry out research in English on a topic of their interest which would provide the necessary information for them to design products using the foreign language such as: games, video tapes, comics, newspapers and others. This research stage of the project helped the students integrate reading and writing. This happened when they applied the knowledge of the subject taken from the texts and the specific vocabulary just acquired while writing the game rubrics: rules, role cards, instructions, etc.
The idea of carrying out a language project was based on the following guidelines:

* Encouraging students to read in English according to their interests and needs.
* Helping learners use their imagination and creativity.
* Giving students a chance to use their graphic skills in the design of English teaching materials.
* Trying a more dynamic and fairer kind of evaluation.
* Helping learners understand the main aim of an ESP course: using English as a tool, a means of instruction.

2.3   The design of the games

The design of the games was a cooperative effort in which the teacher worked as a partner and a supervisor. All the decisions were shared by the group. Even the idea of doing a project for their second evaluation was consensually agreed upon. After accepting the suggestion of the project, the class got into seven groups and chose a topic to work with from the alternatives suggested. Four out of the seven groups decided to design language teaching games and followed this procedure.

* Choosing a theme: vocabulary, phonology, grammar, general knowledge, etc.
* Selecting a topic related to the theme chosen.
  Example: *Topic* (Phrasal Verbs)
  Theme (Vocabulary and Grammar)
* Reaching a consensus on the game to be designed.
* Asking the teacher for assistance in order to decide whether the topic was suitable for the kind of game to be designed. Example: Dominoes for Phrasal Verbs.
* Carrying out research in English on the topic chosen.

∗ Designing the games including the writing of the necessary rubrics and materials: rules, questions, role cards.
∗ Securing the teacher's corrections of the written material as well as her pedagogical suggestions on how to improve the game designed.
∗ Reviewing and printing the material.
∗ Finishing the design of the games and handing them in to the teacher.
∗ Piloting the game in the classroom.
∗ Students and teacher share evaluating the games as a language teaching device and giving suggestions for future improvements.

3.   Kinds of games

There were four games, of which three were board games and one dominoes.

Definicture: A coinage, resulting from blending the words *Definition* and *Picture*. It is a vocabulary game designed to be used with students of the three English proficiency levels: beginning, intermediate and advanced. It was adapted from a well-known game: **"Imagem e Ação".** The main differences from the latter are:

∗ There are three sets of cards with the suitable vocabulary for each language level (as opposed to only one level)
∗ There are three sets of *Surprise Cards* (actually small boards), having illustrations or language cues to be used with the corresponding *Word Card* levels, when the players need some help to define the words. The *Surprise Cards* have prizes such as *play again*, or penalties, such as

go backwards, so that things are more suspenseful. **"Imagem e Ação"** features no Surprise Cards.

∗ There is a board which has a track for the players to follow. Depending on the correct or incorrect definitions given, the players can either go forward and win the game or go backward until they lose it (In other board games, players usually only go forward).

∗ Instead of drawing the meaning of the word - as in **"Imagem e Ação"** - the player has to define it to other team members who have one minute to guess the word. When the player is unable to define the word, he/she can choose to look at the *Surprise Card* that matches the number on the word card.

Around the world: As the name suggests, it is a trip around the world. While answering general knowledge questions about twelve countries, the players may have the chance to "visit" these countries by actually going around the globe printed on the game board. This game has one hundred and thirty-two colorful cards including the ones with questions and the *Surprise Cards*. Each *Surprise Card* illustrates one of the twelve countries about which the players will have to answer questions. There are prizes and penalties depending on the right or wrong answers given and the winner is the player who manages to get to the end of the journey first.

Reign of Magic - It is based on the guidelines for the design of Role Playing Games. The Reign of Magic has a game board in the shape of a medieval castle map with a view of the rooms where a fantastic story of knights and ladies takes place. There are four characters in this story, and

consequently, four role cards. There are also cards to provide the characters' profiles which have to be filled in by the players after choosing the character they wish to be. This game is over when one of the players manages to rescue princess Dhalia from the Tower of Shadows.

Phrasal Verb Domino - The twenty-eight domino pieces are divided into two parts. The first half has a drawing and the other one a phrasal verb. The players must match the right picture with the corresponding phrasal verb. The decision of asking students to illustrate the meanings of the phrasal verbs came from the belief that "when someone has drawn a picture..... he knows the meanings of the English words that the teacher will use while talking about it. The meanings are in his mind before he is given the English word." (Allen, 1983:28)

4.   Guidelines used for project evaluation and grading

As previously clarified, this project was carried out cooperatively. By cooperative I mean the students not only worked with the support of the teacher and group members, but also with the help of other classmates having a better command of the English language. This cooperative learning was one of the guidelines chosen by the class and teacher to be used for the project evaluation. Other guidelines were:

∗ Reading texts in English about the topic chosen for their research.
∗ Writing all the game rubrics in English.
∗ Using their creativity to design the games as much as possible.

∗ Designing games for adults.
∗ Handing in the games to the teacher before or on the deadline.
∗ Making useful games with a good layout.
∗ Considering the learning process as the most important feature of the project.

The last guideline on the list, the learning process, was certainly included by the teacher who wanted to give the students a fairer evaluation and grading. To do it, the learners' language improvements were observed in class while designing the games and when piloting them by showing a good grasp of the vocabulary used in their own games. Since most of the students had a beginning English proficiency level and the written tasks were too demanding for them, their mistakes were not taken into account as part of the evaluation criteria. As Revell (1994:8) says, "(...) Making mistakes is now considered to be a necessary part of a foreign learner's progress towards mastery of the language, or his (...) 'interlanguage'."

5.   Project results

A careful analysis of the project as a pedagogical resource shows it called for more time to be done satisfactorily. This would have probably eliminated ineffective features of the games such as: typing mistakes and technical imperfections. Despite those obstacles, the project proved to be a very successful and rewarding experiment especially because of it having been tailored to the very interests of the students. There was enough involvement on the part of the learners, who displayed a feeling of accomplishment for

having been able to design their own learning activities based on something really interesting and useful for them.

References

ALLEN, V. F. (1983) *Techniques in Teaching Vocabulary*. Oxford: OUP.

BYRNE, D. (1988) *Focus on the Classroom*. Oxford: OUP.

CARTER, R. (1987) *Vocabulary*. London: George Allen & Unwin.

HUBBARD, P. et al. (1984) *A Training Course for TEFL*. Oxford: OUP.

KISHIMOTO, T. M. (1994) *O Jogo e a Educação Infantil*. São Paulo: Pioneira.

MCDONOUGH, S. H. (1986) *Psychology in Foreign Language Teaching*. London: George Allen & Unwin.

REVELL, J. (1984) *Teaching Techniques for Communicative English*. London: Macmillan.

Vera Lúcia de Lucena Moura is interested in Linguistics Applied to the Teaching of Languages, especially in the area of methodology of English or Portuguese as foreign languages. She is currently involved in the project "Aprender Brincando", which aims at designing games to the teaching of Portuguese for foreigners from an intercultural perspective.