Didactic games: their role in the teaching of English based on the common

European framework of reference

Los juegos didácticos, su papel en la enseñanza del inglés según el Marco Común

Europeo de Referencia

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Abstract

The development on the establishment of new policies has been carried out in Cuba, in order to upgrade the quality of the professional who graduates from universities. One of the elements that was taken into account was the students' mastery of the English language and the antecedents that have been observed show that our professionals in contexts where they must make use of this language for personal exchanges and in professional contexts is limited at the moment to talk to English-speaking colleagues. This work shows one of the ways in which didactic games are a motivational constructive influence in the teaching-learning process of English as a second language and its importance in the implementation of the new policy of English in Cuba, specifically in the University of Holguin. The use of didactic games to develop the speaking ability in English as a second language was analyzed. The study was carried out in a group of 27 third year mechanical engineering students at the Engineering Faculty in the University of Holguin. Several methods were used, such as document review, interview to teachers and students,

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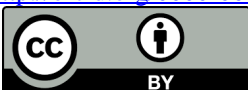
observation, analysis and synthesis. The lack of motivation and the insufficient development on the speaking ability were found. The most outstanding outcome was the good scoring obtained by the students in the placement tests of English in the 2018-2019 academic year. The authors recommended the use of the set of didactic games in the first years of the university majors.

Keywords: Second language, games, teaching- learning process

Resumen

En Cuba se ha venido desarrollando el establecimiento de nuevas políticas con el fin de incrementar la calidad del profesional que egresa de las universidades. Uno de los elementos que se tuvo en cuenta fue el dominio del idioma inglés por parte de los estudiantes y los antecedentes que se han observado muestran que nuestros profesionales en contextos donde deben hacer uso de este idioma para intercambios personales y en contextos profesionales, han sido limitados al momento de hablar con colegas de habla inglesa. Este trabajo trata sobre la forma en que los juegos didácticos son una influencia constructiva motivacional en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje del inglés como segunda lengua y su importancia en la implementación de la nueva política del inglés en Cuba, específicamente en la Universidad de Holguín. En este trabajo se analizó el uso de los juegos didácticos con el objetivo de desarrollar la habilidad oral del idioma inglés como segunda lengua. El estudio se llevó a cabo en un grupo de 27 estudiantes de tercer año de ingeniería mecánica de la Universidad de Holguín. Los métodos utilizados fueron: revisión de documentos, entrevista a profesores y alumnos, observación, análisis y síntesis. Se comprobó la falta de motivación de los estudiantes y el insuficiente desarrollo de la habilidad. Su resultado más importante fue las buenas calificaciones obtenidas por los estudiantes en los exámenes de certificación en el curso académico 2018-2019. Los autores recomiendan la utilización del sistema de juegos didácticos en los primeros años de las carreras universitarias.

Palabras clave: segunda lengua, juegos, proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje

Introduction

This century has an increasing scientific and technological development that has a great footprint in the socioeconomic life of the world. Such development implies a more systematic and effective exchange of data than in previous years so as to have access to the most updated tendencies of different sciences nowadays. Such context demands new positions for the formation of university students in our country. Taking this into account a new language policy addressed to the improvement of English learning to reach, in a relatively short and gradual period of time, a higher and more integral formation of university students was established by the Ministry of Higher Education of Cuba (MES, 2017).

Since the beginning of the implementation of this new policy there have been and at present are some irregularities in the implementation of the level that was originally intended to be established (B1 +). It was shown that not all the conditions needed in the institutions were created, especially the language level of the students when they entered in institutions, previous teachings, among others, necessary to achieve greater success in this purpose. At the University of Holguín, there is a language lab and a self-access center with all the conditions created, from a 40 "television, computers, speakers; however, these resources are not enough for the group of professors involved in this process, not being the case of other universities due to dissimilar irregularities, which resulted in establishing the A2 level as a requirement for their certification. So, the strategy of the use of didactic games was used within the syllabus established for the implementation of level A2. The objective of this work is to show how the application of a set of didactic games can positively affect students' English learning, more specifically in the development of oral expression.

Alina Elvia Rodríguez Ochoa, María Dolores Vázquez Gómez, Yasumí Mateo Ramos Villegas

Development

According to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) at Level A2 the student must understand frequently used sentences and expressions related to areas of immediate importance, for example: personal and family information, shopping, local geography, they should communicate in simple tasks from their routine and exchange to a basic level familiar information or routine matters. They should describe, in simple terms, aspects of their past in the environment around them and also in areas of immediate need. To achieve this objective, the teacher is responsible for awakening interest and desire to learn in the students.

This work took place during the 2018-2019 academic year in a 3rd year group of students from the Mechanical Engineering Major at University of Holguin. The syllabus used was basic English I which objectives for the development of oral expression skills are:

- Express your location and that other people's location in a limited way.

- Describe the position of objects and places.

- Express skills or lack of them in relation to basic activities.

- Describe people and express preferences in this regard.

- Express preferences about objects or activities.

- Describe wishes and needs, and request information through simple, everyday expressions.

- Describe the weather.

- Describe an object or person using simple vocabulary.

- Express occupations.

The quality of education mostly depends on the teaching-learning process, as well as, the relevance of the study plans, the availability of teaching materials and the conditions of the

teaching environment. Therefore, it emphasizes the provision of educational services that respond to the needs of the student and are relevant to their future professional life. Aspects such as the student's personality (the psychological), intellectual, self-learning, existential competence (knowing how to be) and intercultural awareness, the environment in which it is found (the geographical situation, the classroom) and others, are studied objectively to determine to what degree they determine the student's motivation to study English.

Regarding the characteristics of the teacher, Chastain (1975) argues that, above all, the student must appear as a source of stability and control, understood in terms of the ability to provide a sense of direction to the learning task. On the contrary, as Stevick (1976) also argues, the student's basic need for security would be unsatisfied. In addition, the teacher is also responsible for encouraging initiatives and individual development, experimentation and the discovery of the most productive way of learning for each of the students, according to their personality, cognitive style, aspirations and interests. (Motivation in the Foreign Language Classroom (Barrios, 1989).

Why the decision to use games?

Didactic games can be defined as a way of playing that is governed by certain rules or conventions, they are designed to be enjoyed wherever they are played, however, in school language these are not just fun or a break from the routine, but must also contribute to the use of language by allowing students to use it in the development of the activity, because games can be used to improve the student's mastery of any element or elements of language, for example: sounds, vocabulary, spelling, grammatical aspects or functions. These are adopted to provide repetition of a particular element or element within a pleasant context. They are effective because the students are so involved in the game that they do not realize they are practicing elements of the language.

Of all the affective variables, motivation stands out as the most important for our profession; However, it should not be considered as a monolithic construct, but rather made up of several closely interrelated components. This complex nature is referred to by Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) when they define motivation as a set of factors that includes the desire to achieve a goal, the effort directed toward that goal, and the reinforcement associated with the act of learning. In the field of language teaching, likewise, the idea that success is closely linked to the degree of motivation of the student is commonplace. The selection and application of a set of didactic games was carried out to achieve the motivation of the students and thus manage to communicate effectively.

The communicative approach

Some of the referents we take into consideration in the design of the didactic games, can be find following, the authors consider them of paramount importance, above all due to the results obtained after the implementation. The activities described are consequently framed for these referents and the didactic games as well. According to Muñoz (2010), the main characteristics of the communicative approach are:

- The goal to achieve is communicative competence.

- Language is created through a trial-and-error process.

- Emphasis is placed on learning to use the language rather than learning about the language.

- Motivation for learning is intrinsic.

- Lessons include a lot of group and pair work.

- The curriculum is planned around the communicative functions of the language. (Invitations, apologies, permission).

- Language is more than a system of rules; it is an active medium for creating meanings.

- Emphasis is on meaning rather than form.

- Students actively participate. The teacher is a facilitator. The class is centered on the student.

- Real life situations are introduced.

- Lessons include a lot of interaction.

- Greater emphasis is placed on fluency than in precision.

- Students are responsible for their own learning. The teacher provides them with the tools (learning strategies).

The authors of this work also rely on the theory of Zone of Proximal Development, introduced by Vigotsky (1987), where he states that it is the distance between the level of real development of the student (what they are capable of doing on their own) and the level potential development (what you would be able to do with the help of a more capable adult or partner). To enhance this area through interaction between students, it is necessary to carefully plan these interactions. Group work (cooperative learning), as done during a game, allows for a positive relationship between students.

Ledin & Målgren (2011) state that one of the ways teachers have to help their students to acquire a new language is through play as a learning method and this can consist of acting, playing and singing. Hence, the game facilitates learning. Students acquire the knowledge of the second language by trusting their knowledge in the mind many times without describing the structure or grammar. This is a method that helps all students because it is fun and less formal. It is essential that English teachers include different games in their classes from preschool to university that, according to the age of their students and the topics studied in class, facilitate their learning.

After putting the didactic games into practice, there was a greater motivation towards learning English, which was evidenced in the placement test carried out in 2018-2019 academic year. Ten games were used, which can be adapted in correspondence with the content to be taught.

1. Interviews: structured or open-ended

a) A structured type of interview is more appropriate for lower-level students or to reinforce some new vocabulary and / or grammatical structures at higher levels. For example, exchanging real information such as name, age, job, family, interests, etc.

b) Open-ended interview

Interviewers in the activity would prepare their own questions.

-Interviewed students should be ready to answer a wide variety of questions.

Performance Tasks

a) Dramas (dialogues skits)

-Structured performances (self-written to use certain structures, functions, or vocabulary)

b) Story Telling-Presentations-narrations

-Timed picture descriptions

-Circle conversation (sentence building + discussion)

-Chain stories (story building)

-The years in a person's life (narration game about self or another person)

-Picture sequencing

2. Spontaneous talks / speeches

Use a box: In pairs, students take turns about an assigned topic; at a signal from a teacher both must reach into the box and take one of many pieces of paper where students and / or the

teachers have written phrases, questions, and sentences. Each one has to incorporate these into the conversation right away. (one-minute speeches)

3. Prepared talks. Students should be ready to talk about an important personality, description of a city, comparison of two cities, description of a house.

4. Brainstorming. This is usually done in pairs or small groups. (This game can be used to come up with topics for a writing or reading assignment.

5. Observation activities. Playing a video, the teacher can turn off the sound and make them watch carefully for non-verbal signals. Using their imagination, they can create a dialogue according to what they infer from the video.

Table 1

Activity 1

Name/type of activity: Timed Picture Description		
Purpose:	Practice in description and naming, Interaction and cooperation	
Brief Description:	In a small group, students try to make as many sentences as they can about 2 different pictures, during a limited time period.	Groupings: - Small groups
Materials required	Two unrelated pictures: one set for each small group	Time required: 5-15 minutes
Procedures	One student in each team is the monitor. The other students have two minutes to make as many sentences as they can about the first picture. The monitor will count the number of sentences the students produce. Change turns. The winner will be the team that produces more sentences.	
Grammar Focus:	There is/there are. Present sentences	

Source: elaborated by the authors.

Table 2

Activity 2

Name/Type of activity: Find Someone Who		
Purpose:	Interactive speaking, class rapport	

Brief Description:	Each student gets a list of actions titled "Find someone who" followed by a list of actions to ask questions about. (e.g. "find someone who lives in a house/apartment) For each	Groupings:
		   - Small groups
		   - Whole class

	question they must have a classmate who answers "yes".	
Materials required:	Piece of paper, a pencil	Time required: 10-15 minutes
Procedure:	-Students must stand up and mingle in order to find someone who can say "yes" when asked. They must have to write the name of the "yes" person. The students can only ask one question at a time.	
Grammar Focus:	Questions and answers. Sentences	

Source: elaborated by the authors.

Table 3

Activity 3

Name of activity: Information Gap Picture Description and Comparison		
Purpose:	Describing, naming, problem solving, comparing	
Brief Description:	Each student has a picture that is closely related to that of a partner. Through discussion, without looking at each other's card, they discover the differences between the two cards.	Groupings: - Pair
Materials required:	Closely-related pictures	Time required: 5-10 minutes
Procedures	The students must describe their picture to their partners in order to find the differences between the two pictures. (could be two cities, two houses, two people) They must not show the cards to their partners.	

Source: elaborated by the authors.

Table 4

Activity 4

Game: Snakes and Ladders		
Objective:	Practice in any of the grammatical structures, communicative functions or any other structure.	
Description:	It can be played in groups of 2, 3, 4 or even 6 students; the teacher decides what to practice according to the content taught at the moment of playing.	Groupings: Independent Pair Small group Whole class
Materials:	A chart (four charts better, to provide team work) a dice, some groups of cards with commands, small pictures, to be described etc.	Time required: 10-20 min.
Procedures:	One student begins rolling the dice, he/she will pace the number that is on the top of the dice, if it is a box in which there is any of the symbols, he/she should take a card and do what it reads. The winner is going to be the first that arrives to the last box.	
Grammar focus:	Simple and compound tenses.	
Alternatives:	The cards should be different depending on the kind of student.	

Source: elaborated by the authors.

Table 5

Activity 5

Game: Stepping stones		
Objective:	Practicing sentences building.	
Description:	The teacher will draw a river with two edges, to cross the river there should be some stones (as much as you can), in which the student will write (in each stone) a word until he completes a whole sentence.	Groupings: Independent Pair Small group
Materials:	The blackboard, some colored pieces of chalks	Time required: 10-20 min.
Procedures:	The group should be divided into two teams, the teacher will be the controller, and he/she will draw the river on the board and should ask: e.g. Write a sentence describing this picture. It should have someone doing a certain activity The teacher can make direct commands, or use cards, as he/she desires.	
Grammar focus:	Any of the tenses studied in the classes, depending on the content taught.	
Alternatives:	The cards should be different depending on the kind of student.	

Source: elaborated by the authors.

Accordingly, the above activities can be redesigned or adjusted in correspondence with the students' characteristics and class profiles, the diagnosis the teacher has, the learners' needs and their zone of proximal development. They are not a recipe to any extension.

Conclusions

All the games were applied to 27 students of 3rd year mechanical engineering. The results in the placement exams were higher than those of the previous year, it was also possible to increase the motivation towards the subject on the part of the students, it also increased the level of linguistic competence, encouraged collective work, cooperation between them, self-evaluation and co-evaluation.

The result of this work shows the need to increase the tasks that promote motivation in students and thereby develop communication skills, especially oral expression, which despite having better results requires even greater attention. Furthermore, educational games were shown to have a high impact on college students. Games have been developed especially for children for many years, but it has been shown that the strategy of applying games achieves an environment where the student not only assimilates, practices and fixes knowledge, but also recreates, and provides fun. The use of didactic games also enriches the teaching-learning process. The CEFR

offers the possibility in Cuba of being involved in the processes that are carried out nowadays in the rest of the countries for the development of English as a second language, and the use of didactic games constitute a tool that will favor the fulfillment of the mentioned goals set for this commitment.

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