

Using Competitive Games to Capture Student Interest and Increase Motivation in the Language Classroom

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Abstract

This paper aims to outline the benefits of using competitive games in the language classroom to engage student interest and increase their motivation to learn the language functions presented. As it has been established in the field educational psychology on the topic of motivation, working memory capacity is affected by motivation and in turn retention of information is affected by working memory capacity. It has been speculated that motivation is influenced by interest, and therefore, if students find the subject matter presented to them interesting, they will be motivated to learn, and their working memory will be activated while they are learning, leading to higher rates of retention of course materials. This paper aims to expand upon this theoretical base by outlining how presenting a topic that students find interesting is not the only way to engage their interest; the classroom activity used to present and practice new material can serve as a way of extrinsically motivating students. If instructors can engage students through their interest in classroom activities, then students will be motivated to complete these activities, activating more of their working memory while they perform the activities and increasing the chances that the information presented to them will be stored in their long-term memory. Drawing on my own classroom observations this paper outlines examples of games that can be adapted effectively to different contexts. While there is a wide range of classroom activities that can be used to capture student interest, the focus of this paper is to demonstrate how competitive games in particular can be used as an effective means of motivating students by capturing their interest.

Key words: motivation, extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation, working-memory, attention, noticing, interest, competitive games

Introduction

Playing games in class does more than create a fun classroom environment for learners; games are useful tools for practicing language functions. There are multiple factors that impact students' abilities to retain the information presented to them in the language classroom. The factors that this paper examines in closer detail are working memory, attention, noticing and interest.

Theoretical Background

This section of the paper aims to provide a description of the connections between motivation, working memory usage, attention, noticing, and interest, and relate these to how competitive games can be used to maximize student retention of class materials.

Working Memory

Students' ability to remember (retain) what they have learned is an important component of the language learning process because if students cannot remember and recall the language functions they have learned, then they cannot understand or produce that language. Research on the topic memory has established that a correlation exists between retention of information and working memory capacity. Brooks and Shell (2006) define working memory as the part of the memory system that deals with the temporary storage and manipulation of information during cognitive processes. As students perceive and respond to sensory information on the working memory it is then integrated into long-term memory. Working memory is linked to a students' ability to learn language. A study conducted by Baddeley (1992) on individuals' non-word repetition capacity demonstrates that a strong correlation exists between future success and a learner's short-term phonological memory. It's important for teachers to understand the restrictions of working memory in their students; students have a limit to how much information they can keep in mind at the same time, and this limit varies from student to student. A students' working memory ability limits how well they are able to undertake a leaning task, but content, context, and prior experience also play a role in working memory functioning. As students are exposed to more language, there are more connections in their neural network, and students can hold more information in their working memory because of these connections. Working memory capacity places a limit on how much new information students can work with; however, it is their motivation that limits how much of that ability students are willing to apply to the task of learning new language (Brooks & Shell, 2006).

The amount of attention students direct towards a stimulus is influenced by their level of motivation to learn or perform an activity. Motivation is defined as "the process by which goal-directed behavior is instigated and sustained" (Pintrich and Schunk, 1996) or as "the process by which we consciously or unconsciously allocate working memory resources" (Brooks and Shell, 2006, p. 24). Basically, the more motivated an individual is to learn, the more space in their working memory that is allocated to the subject at hand and the greater the amount of sensory information they receive that will be integrated into their long-term memory.

Attention/Noticing

"Those who notice most learn most, and it may be that those who notice most are those who pay attention most" (Mennim, 2007, p. 266). There are multiple learning models that attempt to explain the importance of attention in the classroom, and all of them include noticing in some form. Detection of stimuli "noticing" serves as a function of attention and a prerequisite for learning. It has been argued that unattended stimuli persist in immediate short-term memory for only a few

seconds at best, and attention is a necessary condition for long-term memory storage to occur (Schmidt, 2001). A motivated student pays closer attention to the information presented to them; they are in a better position to notice and process new information. As Wickens (2007) explains, information processing is served by a filter or selective attention, which identifies worthy data to be processed further, and by a fuel or resource attention that enables the carrying out of the processing. Attention to input is therefore essential for storage of new information. According to Gardner's socio-educational model of motivation attention is one of three key components of motivation (the other two being effort and persistence) (Tremblay & Gardner, 1995).

Interest

Attention is a necessary variable for control over cognitive functioning, as it controls access to consciousness (Schmidt, 2001). Interest also has a facilitative effect on cognitive functioning (Heidi, 2000 p. 152). There are different methods of stimulating student interest in the classroom: students can be interested in an activity they are performing or they can be interested in the subject itself. This variation in type of interest is similar to the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Lepper (1988) defines the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation in the following way: intrinsically motivated behavior is done for the sense of enjoyment, learning, or sense of accomplishment it provokes, while extrinsically motivated behavior is undertaken for a reward or to avoid a punishment external to the activity itself. There has been a lot of debate over the use of external (extrinsic) motivations to stimulate student interest in the classroom. Studies like the one performed by Greene and Lepper (1974) on the effects of extrinsic rewards on children's subsequent intrinsic interest demonstrate potential detrimental effects that an extrinsic motivational orientation towards learning may produce when extrinsic motivations are used to replace intrinsic ones. Intrinsic motivation is regarded as more sustainable since students are motivated to learn for learning's sake instead of in the interest of gaining external rewards. That being said, extrinsic motivations (like winning a competition) can be used effectively to stimulate student interest in activities when students have no intrinsic motivation (interest) in learning the subject they are studying (Lepper, 1988, p. 299; Zimmerman, 1985; Hidi, 2000, p. 167). Gardner and MacIntyre's research indicates that when it comes to activating the working memory "it is the amount of motivation that matters, not the type" (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993); therefore, any type of motivation (whether extrinsic or intrinsic) is useful in the classroom. This supports Hidi's suggestion that "creating environments that stimulate situational interest is one way for schools to motivate students and help them make cognitive gains in areas that initially hold little interest for them" (2000, p. 156). It is the instructor's task to create a classroom environment that stimulates student interest in order to motivate their students to learn. Studies indicate that the most liked activity in a language classroom is playing games or doing puzzles (Chambers, 1998); therefore, using these activities in the language classroom has the potential to increase student motivation by increasing their level of interest.

My Situation

I'm currently teaching English as a foreign language at the Soran University in Kurdistan Region,

Iraq. The University is in the process of gradually transitioning their main language of instruction from Kurdish to English. At the moment, when students enter the University in their first year, their English proficiency is elementary level, yet they are expected to be proficient enough to receive instruction for certain classes solely in English by their third and fourth years of study. In my Faculty, all first year students are placed into general English classes where there are upwards of 20 students and they meet for only 60 minutes once a week. Currently students are taught using a grammar-based syllabus that goes well with the test-based curriculum in place at the university (where 60% of the students' grades come from their final exams in each class). Students at the University are not necessarily given a choice of which program they would like to study (since entrance is based on exam scores), and their program is very structured with their courses chosen for them. This means that many students are not interested in their area of study and do not want to be in class, whether this is English class, core classes, or subject specific classes.

The students' lack of interest in their area of study means many students are lacking motivation. This is a problem because current research done at a University in the UK indicates that the most common reason for dropping out of university is lack of commitment to one's chosen field of study (Breen and Lindsay, 2002, p. 694). The lack of motivation exhibited by students in the Education Faculty at Soran University (both to learn English and to study in general) has led me to investigate various methods of motivating unmotivated learners. I've focused a lot on the issue of interest and how interest affects motivation.

Competitive Games

Working with unmotivated learners can be extremely challenging, as second language achievement is related to both aptitude and motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1959). One aspect of student motivation is their interest in the subject or activity presented in class. Fortunately, it is possible to trigger student interest by using stimulating activities (Mitchell, 1993). When student interest is activated by an activity, their attention is directed towards the activity in question. As mentioned earlier in this paper, attention is an important component of language learning as it is a necessary condition for allocating working memory space to the material being taught. Competitive games are a successful way of extrinsically motivating students to participate in classroom activities, and attention is a necessary component of successful participation. Competitive games are classified as an extrinsic motivator because of the reward of winning. Students want to win so they try their best when competing with others in order to do so (Deesri, 2002). Competitive games also provide students with a sense of satisfaction upon completion (Dornyei, 1998). When students are participating in a competitive game in the language classroom their attention is focused on the English language functions required in order to win the game; they are noticing the language and engaging their working memory.

Competition can be a solo activity or a group effort. There are infinite numbers of both individual and competitive games that can be used effectively in the language classroom, but my goal with this paper is to provide a few easily adaptable options not an exhaustive list. Examples of competitive games that can be used on an individual level include: Bingo (using numbers, letters, vocabulary

words, or target pronunciation sounds), Hangman (students raise their hands to pick letters to figure out key vocabulary words or phrases), Memory (a set of cards are spread out face down and the student that matches the most pairs wins, this can be done by matching verb tenses, definitions and vocabulary words, vocabulary words and pictures, etc.).

Sometimes weaker students struggle when asked to compete individually, but when placed in a group they have the support of other students. When students are placed in groups that compete against one another they feel a sense of responsibility to their teammates and this serves as a measure of accountability (Papasideris, 2013). Group competitions that have functioned effectively in my classes include: Jeopardy (two teams compete to answer trivia questions from the material covered in class), Team Spelling Bees (one student from each team is given the chance to spell a word and the first person to correctly spell the word wins a point for their team), Charades (students act out or draw vocabulary and points are awarded when team mates guess correctly), Races (teams compete to create the longest list of vocabulary words in a set amount of time), Matching Exercises (vocabulary words are placed on the boards and the first team to correctly identify the definition wins a point, or one vocabulary word is written on the board behind two students, one from each team, and the first student to guess the words scores a point for their team).

Conclusion

Based on research conducted by Chambers (1998) investigating how students remember information, the conclusion can be made that not only are games fun but they are also a great way of motivating students to participate in the language classroom. Although it has been demonstrated that games in general (and competitive games in particular) can successfully be used to motivate language learners, more research is needed on the efficacy of specific games in as this could help language teachers make wiser choices about which activities to include in their classrooms. When students are participating, they are paying attention. Students that are paying attention are activating more of their working memory capacity, increasing the amount of input from class that is available to be processed into students' long-term memories. Therefore, games are an effective method of practicing language functions in a stimulating way. Language teachers should be aware of current theories concerning the topic of learner motivation because to a degree their success as language teachers depends upon successfully motivating their students.

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