

# CHAPTER 10

## Using Language Practice Games to Teach English in Chilean Primary Classrooms

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Games are among the most frequently recommended and used activities in young learners' classrooms around the world (e.g., Garton, Copland, & Burns, 2011). However, little is known about their use in Chilean classrooms. As an experienced Chilean K–12 teacher of English, I like using games with my students but had never reflected much on this area of my practice. Therefore, I decided to put on my researcher hat to explore the extent to which games are used in Chilean classrooms. In this chapter, I explore how two teachers implemented games for teaching English to young learners (TEYL) in two primary schools in Chile. With the aid of these two teachers' voices, I discuss how games are implemented for teaching English, the frequency of their use, and the constraints faced by these practitioners.

### Games in the Language Classroom

In a classroom setting, we understand games to be purposeful and familiar activities for children, governed by rules and which provide a meaningful and comfortable environment for target language use (Khan, 1991; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2009). Language learning games (LLGs) have been defined by the following six features:

1. **Rules and goals:** clear rules that need to be followed to achieve the expected goal, acknowledgment and feedback on the outcome (Garris, Ahlers, & Driskell, 2002; Sørensen & Meyer, 2007; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2009).
2. **Fantasy/authenticity:** a safe environment of fictional situations that are authentic in their language use (Garris et al., 2002; Guevara & Ordoñez, 2012).
3. **Challenge:** interesting content matter with an appropriate level of difficulty (Garris et al., 2002; Rixon, 1991; Sørensen & Meyer, 2007; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2009).

4. **Curiosity:** opportunities to apply intuition and to explore and discover effective ways to achieve the goals (Garris et al., 2002; Sørensen & Meyer, 2007; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2009).
5. **Sensory stimuli:** visual, auditory, and kinesthetic stimuli (Garris et al., 2002; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2009)
6. **Learner control:** opportunities to contribute with ideas, select approaches, and make decisions to achieve the aim (Garris et al., 2002; Guevara & Ordoñez, 2012).

Within LLGs, Khan (1991) makes the distinction between language practice games (LPGs) and communicative language teaching games. LPGs are defined as those “which involve repeated use for particular language items, where language form is given and controlled and where accuracy of reproduction is required in order for the player to succeed” (p. 149). Communicative language teaching games are “games where the need to communicate is powerful and urgent but no fixed language formulae are available or adequate for doing so” (p. 150).

Research on the use of LLGs for TEYL remains scarce, particularly in public school contexts (e.g., Butler, 2015; Griva, Semoglou, & Geladari, 2010; Guevara & Ordoñez, 2012). Similarly, researchers have recently begun discussing the purpose of these games and their role within the English as a foreign language (EFL) lesson in different teaching contexts. In this chapter, I describe the use and adaptation of LPGs in two primary schools in Chile.

## Context

In Chile, EFL is compulsory from fifth grade (age 10). However, in 2013, the Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Educación; MOE) launched a suggested curriculum from first grade (age 6). According to the objectives of the new curriculum,

Children learn the foreign language in a contextualized and meaningful way through the use of communicative and authentic tasks that encourage natural and spontaneous use of English, and which should contribute to developing the four language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) of young learners (YLS) as well as fluency and pronunciation. (MOE, 2012a, p. 3)

The document also states that, “the established aims follow the Communicative Approach, together with other approaches with a focus on communication” (MOE, 2012a, p. 3). This new curriculum also expects that with 1.5 hours of English teaching a week, at the end of 4th grade (age 9), children will achieve level A1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

To implement the curriculum, the MOE guidelines consider games as one of the relevant activities in achieving the aforementioned objectives. In this document, games are defined as “activities that allow contextualized and meaningful use of the language, and which respond to different learning styles” (MOE, 2012b, p. 8). In the same text, it is stated that “in order for a game to be a learning activity, the learner should be able to identify what is learnt from it” (p. 14). Interestingly, this guideline establishes that the aims of games within the English lesson should be to review (1) grammar structures or (2) vocabulary items through motivating activities (p. 14).

In sum, and according to the aims and guidelines presented by the MOE, TEYL should be based on authentic and communicative tasks, and LPGs are a meaningful opportunity to use the language in context.

# The Participants

The teachers were working with me as participants in a larger project (Inostroza A., 2015). With their fourth graders, they took part in an intervention project from March to July 2013 that involved classroom observations, interviews, and teacher training sessions aimed to develop the listening and speaking skills of young learners, such as storytelling, listen-and-do activities, songs, and games.

Francisca and Verónica (pseudonyms) are two Chilean teachers of English who work in state-funded schools in Santiago. Verónica holds a degree in primary education and has a diploma in teaching English to late primary learners (from ages 10–13). She is proficient in English (Association of Language Testers in Europe 4/CEFR Level C1). She feels able to communicate but finds some limitations in her speaking skills because she has had few opportunities to communicate with people in English. Verónica's first language is Russian, and she moved to Chile when she was a girl. She thinks that learning Spanish was easy for her because she was exposed to the language on a daily basis. She has 10 years of experience teaching EFL. She has taught English to very young learners (ages 5–7) for a couple of years; however, at the time of our conversation she was working with learners from preprimary (age 5) to seventh grade (age 12).

Francisca holds a degree in teaching French as a foreign language and has a diploma in teaching English in primary schools. She describes her level of English as low-intermediate, particularly in relation to her speaking skills. She has been teaching English for 7 years to early primary learners. At the time of our conversation, she was teaching first to eighth grade (ages 6–13). Our conversations were in Spanish and all English translations are mine.

## Using Hands-on Games in the Chilean Primary Classroom

Verónica's and Francisca's classrooms were crowded with children seated in rows facing the board. Their fourth grade classes had one English lesson a week lasting 90 minutes, which in fact were 75 minutes at the most because of lunch time interruption. Apart from covering the syllabus for each grade, these teachers were expected to assess one content unit every month (mainly focused on vocabulary or grammatical structures). This assessment tended to be through a pen-and-paper test.

In our conversations about the use of activities such as games, both teachers demonstrated awareness of the impact of games on children's motivation. Francisca said that at the motivation stage (the beginning of the lesson), games helped to engage children with the lesson topic. She mentioned that children particularly enjoy contest games.

“Children really enjoy competition games, for example contests among the rows getting the largest number of vocabulary items written, etc. . . . Also, as a personal strategy, I haven't read this anywhere, I have the feeling that [by doing games] at the beginning they release energy, so after these activities they are calmer for the core of the lesson, and I can explain the lesson content, etc. You find your own teaching strategies with time.” (Francisca)

Based on Francisca's description, she used LLGs not only to motivate and engage her learners, but also as a classroom management strategy to control discipline.

Verónica's views on games were similar; however, she made the point that she used LLGs more often with younger learners. She said that when children take part in games they get involved and incorporate the content provided in the lesson. According to Verónica, while being engaged and

focused on the process and outcome of the game (i.e., winning), the children tried really hard to get the correct answer, something that she viewed as positive for learning.

The lessons I observed showed that Francisca's and Verónica's views on LLGs were reflected in their practice. For example, Verónica implemented a memory game in which students had to find matching pairs of cards. First, children were supposed to work in groups, creating the card game with words about places in the city. She wrote on the board the list of vocabulary items and assigned a set of words to each group member to create paired cards. Then learners had to decide whether they were going to write the word in Spanish or draw the picture of the vocabulary item. The organization allowed each group to have a set of cards and ultimately to be able to play the game.

About the implementation of this activity in particular, Verónica said,

“ I feel like it worked, but maybe it could have worked in a different way if they have had the experience of working in groups more often. . . . I also felt like in groups the task took longer than if they were in pairs . . . I feel that, yes, of course, they are really useful for children to . . . own the contents, right? Because when they are playing, they want to win, and try to move everything they've got stored in their brain to answer correctly . . . Everything that has to do with competition it's true that works, right? I think that every time they try to participate, it provides added value to their knowledge. ” (Verónica)

Among the games that Francisca used there was a charades activity aimed at reviewing the vocabulary of occupations. This was a whole class activity, which started with her acting out some of the vocabulary items and children calling out the correct occupation. Then, volunteer learners were invited to act out the occupations in front of the class so that their classmates could guess the correct item. Francisca used this activity as an opportunity to correct pronunciation and assess understanding. She commented on the implementation of these activities:

“ I think they like it, they get engaged. They like that I show them things with the computer projector, that I act out and sing with them . . . they love it, and they achieved the objective, so I think it's fine. . . . While they are motivated, the class is better managed, it seems fun and shorter. Today it was lunch time, and none of them asked how much time was left before lunch break during the whole lesson, as happened in previous sessions. So that shows me that they are motivated and engaged. ” (Francisca)

These teachers mainly used LPGs to work on new vocabulary and to activate learners' previous knowledge on the unit theme. The use of LPGs was consistent with the didactic guidelines provided by the MOE, which defined games as motivating activities to review grammatical structures and vocabulary. During these lessons, children were engaged and participated in these LPGs, developing their listening skills and learning to produce some of the target vocabulary.

These teachers also needed to fulfill the syllabus for each class and assess their learners. To do this and to support their students in studying the lesson contents, they frequently used more traditional teaching strategies, such as drilling and copying translated vocabulary from the board. By complementing conventional or traditional activities with LPGs, Francisca and Verónica found ways to provide children with engaging learning experiences; at the same time, they responded to their academic and administrative demands, one of the major constraints they faced.

At the end of the semester, in our conversation about the use of games, both teachers mentioned that it was difficult to use games as often as they would have liked to because of time constraints. Verónica said that even though she usually used games in her lessons, time was always a limitation.

“ I think that once again you realize the relevance of playful activities for children’s learning. And I would like to have more hours a week with every class to be able to implement them more frequently so children can learn more, but unfortunately we’re limited to just 2 hours a week, which is not enough time, it’s very little really. And you have to try to do your best, to organize as best as possible, but sometimes things go beyond your control, and time flies. You don’t realize when suddenly it is the end of the lesson. ” (Verónica)

Francisca described particular benefits of these playful activities—children seemed more motivated and for them lessons felt shorter. However, she reported that she felt she did not have enough time to prepare herself for teaching.

“ I enjoy doing this as long as I’m prepared to do it, right? I feel that there are so many (administrative) things to do here, some of them completely unnecessary, that it’s really frustrating not having enough time to prepare more and better material, or to prepare myself to teach my lessons better. That’s what really annoys me, because even when you have provided me with all the tools and strategies, many times I haven’t had the time to implement them. ” (Francisca)

Francisca clearly expressed that she felt pressured to use her time fulfilling administrative requirements and that these activities were detrimental to her lesson planning and material preparation time. However, it did not discourage either teacher from using LGPs as a complement to more traditional and content-focused activities, highlighting the teachers’ expertise in adapting and using these as strategies that respond to their learners’ needs and to administrative demands.

The teachers’ narratives also illustrate the features of the language classrooms and specific contextual factors, for instance, the time available for teachers to prepare materials and to prepare themselves to carry out these activities for TEYL.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown the relevance of contextualizing learning activities suggested in the literature for TEYL. The reflections in this chapter could be particularly relevant for teacher trainers and novice teachers as they are the responses of two teachers dealing with curriculum demands.

Hands-on LGPs have been noted as age appropriate activities for TEYL. According to the literature, they are meaningful activities that give children the opportunity to use the target language purposefully in a comfortable environment. Like many primary teachers, Francisca and Verónica saw the potential of using games in their classrooms as a motivational strategy and an activity that facilitates language learning; however, they reported some constraints using hands-on LGPs.

Their narratives make the relevance of teachers’ adaptive skills apparent. Given the numerous contexts in which there is a demand for academic outcomes and good results on standardized tests, teachers are sometimes forced to use more traditional language teaching approaches with young learners. However, practitioners understand children’s learning processes and see the advantages that playful activities have on learning in primary classrooms. This knowledge encouraged Francisca and Verónica to incorporate games into their teaching practice. Like these two teachers, teachers of young learners have specialized knowledge about their students. To capitalize on this knowledge, they need to be aware of what is recommended generally for TEYL and work to adapt it to their own teaching context. In this way, they can add their voices to the chorus of teachers who are working diligently to discover the most effective ways of TEYL.

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