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Title: The Early Bird Gets The Word Games and Play : Creating a Context For Authentic Language Learning

Year: 2022

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Meriläinen, M., & Piispanen, M. (2022). The Early Bird Gets The Word Games and Play : Creating a Context For Authentic Language Learning. International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education, 14(4), 501-507. https://doi.org/10.26822/iejee.2022.259

iejee

International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education
March 2022, Volume 14, Issue 4, 501-507

The Early Bird Gets The Word Games and Play: Creating a Context For Authentic Language Learning

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Received : 18 November 2021
Revised : 14 February 2022
Accepted : 30 March 2022
DOI : 10.26822/iejee.2022.259

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"The person who knows only one language does not truly know that language."
-Goethe

Abstract

Early foreign language teaching has recently been made compulsory in Finland, making this an area open to development and innovation where policy - makers and teachers play a significant role in creating new kinds of learning environments, operating cultures, and pedagogy for foreign language learning. This article discusses the early foreign language learning landscape in the context of early foreign language learning theory, initial education pedagogy as well as functional foreign language learning. The cornerstone of this study is the Contextual Pedagogical approach to Learning, which creates a bridge between the theory and practice of early foreign language learning, creating an inspiring and stimulating basis for later language learning.

Language is a precondition for learning and thinking. Language is involved in all the activities presented in school and every teacher is a language teacher "(the Finnish National Board of Education 2014, 127). In this article we focus on this idea, presented in the core national curriculum. We attempt to explain the learning environments of language teaching, operational culture, and pedagogical solutions within the theoretical frame of reference of learning another language. The challenges of creating learning environments that support authentic learning experiences, have become still more demanding in today's rapidly changing world.

Keywords:
Early Foreign Language Learning, Functional Language Learning, Learning Environments, Contextual-Pedagogical Approach to Learning

Introduction

"Language is a precondition for learning and thinking. Language is involved in all the activities presented in school and every teacher is a language teacher "(the Finnish National Board of Education 2014, 127). In this article we focus on this idea, presented in the core national curriculum. We attempt to explain the learning environments of language teaching, operational culture, and pedagogic solutions within the theoretical frame of reference of learning another language. The challenges of creating learning

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ISSN: 1307-9298

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environments that support authentic learning experiences, have become still more demanding in today's rapidly changing world. In the setting of objectives concerning the learning, teaching and evaluation of the languages in the Common European Framework of Reference (See Common European framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment 2001), an aspiration can be seen for even more meaningful learning environments where the starting points for teaching are knowledge, contents, thoughts and feelings, whereas in a traditional language oriented learning environment the main focus has been, and still is, the transmission of linguistic information and in the area of linguistic competence. According to Merisuo-Storm (2002), the study of language learning has changed the concept of knowing a foreign language and as the functional conception of language has gained more ground, the aspects of language learning which are related to the use of language, have become more central to the learning process. Communicative language education has also been created based on this, emphasising the importance of meaningful use of language in language learning. So, learning a language takes place in natural social situations where adopting the language is also strengthened by the fact that studying a language challenges the brain to build new cognitive frames that are based on previous knowledge. This takes time, repetition, consistency, and motivation (Education First 2017). Thus, meaningful contexts that are familiar to the learners and help the brain to connect the language to become part of the authentic operation connected to the pupil's living world have to be utilised in language learning.

Language skills are manifold as a concept. Language skill is the ability to write the texts concerning oneself, to talk on the phone and to manage your affairs in offices. Language skill is to understand and to become understood. Language skill is understanding the structures of language but at the same time accepting the idea of lifelong learning. Language skill is a skill. So, the teaching of language must be based on something other than just internalisation of the language system. Language is interaction and a tool for thinking. (Dufva 2013, 66; Jurkka 2017, 32.)

In this article we examine the various factors in learning a language, and the significance of the functional environments which are specific to pupils learning languages. As we presented in an earlier article (see Piispanen & Meriläinen 2015), games and play are central to early childhood education. Play and games create an authentic environment for learning, interaction, and participation, as well as spontaneous and creative language-oriented activities. This is in line with the curriculum which places and emphasis on the significance of creativity and participation in the learning process (the Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, 27)

In learning languages there is a lot of room for joy, playfulness, and creativity, which can be brought to the learning through play. This adds to the participants' enthusiasm, commitment, and ownership of learning. Play allows pupils to participate in the planning and realisation of one's activity, which in turn serves as a central source of the fundamentally important motivation for learning. In fact, learning and the subjects can go unnoticed by the pupils when they become involved in the process of play. (Marandos & Randall 2012, 541).

It is noteworthy that play and games as part of learning are not restricted to children learning languages. Language experts (Education First 2017) emphasise that authentic situations are also bringing play to adults' language studies: for example, the foreign language cooking courses, dance courses and other hobbies as well as tourism connect language to the playful side of the adults' world. Huizinga (1938), a classic in the pedagogical study on play, stated more than 80 years ago that play was present everywhere and all the time because it is a basic quality of a human being, not only for the children's amusement.

Language In Broadening The World

One of the best-known quotations from the philosopher Wittgenstein is "The limits of my world are the limits of my language." (1984). In his Tractatus, Wittgenstein attempts to deal with the relation of language and reality by stating that the human being can express rationally only what he is able to perceive and can condense to a succinct and unambiguous wording. Here language serves as an intermediary of words and broadens the thinking. According to Wittgenstein, the language fails in describing ambiguous and speculative phenomena satisfactorily despite its aims, for which reason he marks off areas experienced by him as difficult, such as feelings, gestures, values, visions, images, and connotations (the secondary meaning which is created from the association) outside a meaningful human communication. According to the logic of Wittgenstein, the only method of human beings to extend the limits of their world, is to extend their vocabulary and their ability to express themselves. By extending their language skills a human being can describe phenomena that was not perceived earlier -to transmit their thoughts, to communicate and to also find culturally bound significances to the words. (Wittgenstein 1984.)

In the learning context ambiguous and speculative phenomena, such as feelings, gestures, values, visions, images, and connotations, however, help the individual in the building of schemas and in the construction of knowledge. This makes thinking about the context of language learning particularly significant: how to build pedagogically meaningful learning contexts in which the linguistic skills of the learner develop as a

natural part of the development of knowledge and skills? According to Lehtonen and Vaarala (2015), as changes occur in our approaches to learning, there has been a shift in second language learning theories, a move towards more holistic theories: language learning is seen as a process rather than considered to be the final learning outcome. In teaching it is essential to offer opportunities for language use and practise in authentic situations and environments by creating language situations which make communication and interaction possible.

The studies have shown that the integration of language to the teaching of content in different subjects is a more efficient way to learn language compared to the traditional language teaching method in which the language is learned as a separate subject. (Meriläinen 2008; Genesee 1994) According to studies, adopting a foreign language takes place most efficiently when the language is used as a tool for communication in meaningful contexts. In this kind of teaching the pupils participate in real situations of language use and thus learn to use a new language when studying, which also increases the pupils' motivation because only a few young people get excited about language studying when it is abstract and regarded as separate from one's own life.

So, the learning of a language is something more than just adopting the rules of a language. Language is a changing tool with which we interact and take care of business. Language also always expresses the culture, to which it is related. According to Krashen (1985) a learner is most able to take advantage of a language learning situation when the structures of the language presented are only slightly above the learner's skill level. Krashen describes this situation with the diagram i + 1 in which i represents the level of the language skill the learner commands. The ideal input is not only suitably understandable but also interesting and essential for the learner. In addition to the input, it is also important that the learner must experience the language learning situation as positive. The affective filter may prevent or may promote the adopting of linguistic material. In addition, Bergström (1995) noticed in her study that in the learning situation of the foreign language, a safe learning atmosphere is a significant factor. According to her it must be possible for every pupil to use language safely and diversely as a tool for learning so that a new language gradually begins to feel like one's own.

Examination of Language Learning In The Light of Sociolinguistic Theories

The sociolinguistic theories emphasise the significance of the environment in learning a language. In sociolinguistic theories there is a greater significance on the learner's social environment than on the internal action of the individual. The interaction and the use of language in different situations which require communication facilitate the learning of the language, adopting, understanding, and becoming understood. There is high significance here on creating a safe atmosphere and on meeting the pupil. (Lightbown & Spada 2006, 46- 47.)

Leo Vygotsky is one representative of the sociolinguistic theory who specifies the language as an internalised speech which develops through interaction: language is first learned in the interaction with others, and second as an internalised speech of the individual. Vygotsky emphasises the idea of the zone of proximal development which refers to the individual's actual level of development, which stays between their present knowledge and skill level and their possible potential level of development. For the knowledge and skills to still develop, the individual needs guidance and teaching that develops their own level of knowledge and skills. Dufva (2013, 60) condenses the matter so that the skill, which is learned in practice, will be first practised together with the person who already commands the skill and eventually, the learner is able to use the skill independently. Lightbown and Spada (2006, 22) concretize the zone of proximal development by using the development of baby talk as an example: the child will not develop in their language development if they are not guided "to the following level" but instead talked to childishly. (cf. Krashen: input + 1:) A response is not expected from a baby, but the parents should talk to the child as if they could understand and could answer. The expressions and gestures support the dialogue. Interaction is the most important and the baby needs to be encouraged to take part in it? (Jurkka 2017, 25). Jurkka (2017, 25) makes one think where the line is between speech and baby talk. Correspondingly, as good a result is not achieved by merely listening to the TV or radio compared with genuine interaction. Language can develop through repetition, questions, and verification of answers. A mere repeating of the language does not talk about skills and understanding.

Identification and definition of the level of language skills to be aimed at, and planning and implementing the methods of language teaching so that the language skills increase and develop systematically is indeed one central dimension of functional language teaching. The awareness of what type and which level (cf. Common European framework of Reference for Languages) of language skills are aimed at in the teaching, essentially directs the planning of the teaching and the choice of the teaching methods which make the development of versatile language skills possible.

Larsen-Freeman (1997; 2007) creates the bridge between the scientific chaos theory of Isaac Newton and the development of language. According to

her, language should be seen as a wholeness of the complex and non-linear systems, where the evaluation of its separate parts cannot provide a real picture of the whole. It is as if the continuously changing language is in chaos for the learner of the language all the time: the parts of the language change their form, sometimes strengthening and sometimes weakening, and to learn the language is sometimes slow and sometimes fast. Learning a language is not linear but proceeds at its own pace and own ways for every learner. (1997, 141-142; 2007, 780-783.) Language is a dynamic tool which constantly changes and through which thoughts are expressed in writing or orally - it is a communication system, where the code changes all the time.

Language is a communal skill, which is why, when we create language learning contexts, they should be authentic interaction contexts, in other words, real or imitating reality. In these contexts, language has a real significance and becoming understood, and understanding are real starting points for the development of functional and communicative language. (Järvinen 2014, 83-85; Dufva 2013, 63.) Discussion at a reception, asking the way, ordering food, and attempting to play together are examples of real-life social situations. In sociolinguistic theory, the importance of imitating the group is emphasised. Such collaborative learning where every learner brings their own knowledge and skills to the situation and the shared knowledge of the group develops together, changes the knowledge of an individual into something owned (Jurkka 2017, 25).

Play as Part of Learning In Supporting Language Learning

A well-planned game, whether it is based on free or scripted interaction, provides positive and efficient opportunities for learning a language (Godwin-Jones 2013.) Studies have shown that using the language to be learned increases (Peterson 2010) because to proceed in a game or in play tasks the learner must use the language: one must understand and possibly engage in the oral or written interaction with the elements of the game or with the other players. When one is interacting with others, the socially (pragmatically) correct use of the language is more important than grammatical correctness. This supports the development of the communicative competence of the learner. (Rama et al. 2012.)

Play is one of the most natural, most important, and most meaningful functions and learning environments in the child's life. Play is the child's communication tool. In play children can also express themselves without words. (Stagnitti 2010, 372.) When the words become part of the play, the effect of play and words which support each other strengthens the language, creates, and tests values and rules as well as develops operation in the social situations (cf. Huizinga, 1938). Huizinga (1938) even states that play is one of the most important sources of pleasure and creativity experiences (cf. flow –state:) the one who gets absorbed in play easily forgets the time and the environment and experiences being part of the events of play. However, a pedagogically well-planned play is extremely important in learning and a starting point to be generalised as the foundation of learning at every age. (Piispanen & Meriläinen 2015)

As in all the educational solutions, the starting point for the use of games is objectives: what is sought to be achieved through the play and games, which skills are practised, what are the learner's needs and wishes for the activity and for learning itself. The success in using games depends on how well the game answers the objectives set, and how the game is used as part of the teaching or to support it (Godwin-Jones 2013.) It is not a coincidence that games, playing and game-like solutions are also of interest and are topical as an area in language learning and as an area of research because games reflect a pedagogical change in language learning more generally (Cornille et al. 2012.)

From a learning environment point of view play as part of learning means varied learning in the play and games environments. Play has many forms: it can be play or a game which contains rules, or a free activity which contains a state of imagination and creativity, and in which the player practises a social and cognitive spontaneity in the shared activity, in the jointly agreed environment.

Emotions play an important role in learning. Games and play give room to feelings because they allow the taking of roles. New and even difficult matters for the child can be approached through play – playing creates a safe environment because the character of the jointly agreed play includes the understanding of the play specifically as play, and the understanding of the role, inside the play, specifically as a role (Piispanen & Meriläinen 2015). The tension related to the activity diminishes through the play and on the other hand a strong sense of commitment is connected to play. Informal knowledge is processed through play and play can be a bridge between formal, non-formal and informal learning.

Creative and communal learning takes place through play. Play as part of learning connects cognitive, emotional, and bodily operations. Play as part of learning is at its best the joy of achievement and success. (Kangas 2014, 74-78; 83; 85-86.) According to the studies (among others, Järvinen 2014, 72) feelings of anxiety are often linked to learning a language, which for its part makes learning more difficult. Play as part of learning has instead been often noted to reduce anxiety towards participation and thus facilitates practice in the use of the language (Hakkarainen

2004, 384 etc.). Safety at the emotional level gives the players an opportunity to experience disappointment and vulnerability and allows room for mistakes to be made.

When playing, a child learns because of their own operation, which is a significant factor regarding learning new things and constructing knowledge. According to Hakkarainen (2004, 160) the player becomes absorbed comprehensively in the play and does not analyse why they play, which for its part reduces anxiety that the pupil may experience when facing learning new things. Playing together is pleasing for the child and play provides positive feelings which promote and maintain motivation.

In the frame of reference of language learning, a good play or game - learning environment with play and games as part of learning -is based on the foundation of the socio-constructivist learning theory. Learning takes place through active participation and interaction as we form our increasing understanding with the help of shared knowledge and skills. In social play, a child verbalizes their operation which is central from the learning point of view: a child verbalizes their operation and reflects on what they learn together with the other children (see Vygotsky 1982). According to Lerkkanen (2006, 43) and Dewey (1957, 76; 143) the pupils commit themselves in the tasks which they regard as meaningful to themselves. Play and games that pay attention to the learner's stage in life and to their subjects of interest are important factors here. The pupil gets excited in the task and believes that they can manage the activity through intrinsic motivation. When encouraged by external motivation, the pupil becomes interested in completing the task only because of a goal to be reached. At school, both motivations are needed but only with intrinsic motivation can significant, long time learning results and commitment be reached. (Jurkka 2017, 19.)

According to Koskinen, Kangas and Krokfors (2014, 28-30) the guiding role of the teacher is significant in the play as part of learning -learning process: the teacher plans and organises, guides to a game-like process, supervises during the game and collates what had been learned after the game. According to Jurkka (2017, 20), it is pedagogically significant that the teacher defines the contents of the game, in other words, what is learned through the game. In a small group game, the pupils can practise social skills and collective thinking. Piispanen and Meriläinen (2015, 230) state in their study on playing as part of learning, that the teachers' role is important particularly as pedagogical planners of learning projects in which case the objectives and contents of the curriculum create those tasks and contexts in which the play is performed: *As regards learning, both context and pedagogy are seen as being linked to interaction between an individual and his environment. Thus, learning is a personal experience that happens in interaction with the environment. It is not restricted to learning a single fact but aims at logical thinking through a diverse dialogue with the environment, and with the help of reflection, reasoning, and research. (Meriläinen & Piispanen 2012, 2019.)*

The starting point is not to learn the content of any subject, even with regards to the curriculum, but to help the pupil to understand that in fact the content becomes meaningful when they are connected to a context. Functional language studying springs from the frame of reference of authentic learning, where the language, instead of being seen as the target of learning, is seen as a tool for learning - the language skills enable genuine interaction and ways to express oneself instead of learning the language separated from its natural contexts.

From the point of view of language learning, the amount of repetition in games and play has an important significance in learning a new language. Repetition of the sounds and words strengthens the discrimination of sounds and gives opportunities to practise the intonation. The children preserve the words and phrases they learn in their memory and use language when they are ready to do so. Therefore, all the opportunities for the safe repetition and use of sounds, syllables and words are good. (Keaveney & Lundberg 2016, 57; 59-60.) Play is an excellent tool in adopting and remembering concepts. It serves as a safe factor with a significant role in handling new and complex situations and in developing motivation. (Hakkarainen 2004, 160-161; Helenius & Korhonen 2011, 71.) In play, "the repeated part" can be for example a song, joining movement to the words, connecting a theme to the language, or rhyming - the recurrence, interaction, and the use of different sensory channels in supporting learning are essential. When learning a new language, innumerable possibilities to listen and to practise pronunciation and intonation are needed. (Keaveney & Lundberg 2016, 57; 59-60.) When examined from these many points of view, the use of play as part of learning and as a tool for language learning supports the sociolinguistic concept of language learning: the interaction and the opportunity for authentic use of language promote the idea that language serves as a tool of one's own expression instead of being just a separate thing to learn. (Järvinen 2014, 79; 83-85; Dufva 2013, 63; Lightbown 2006, 46-47.) Language awareness is not the primary aim in learning a language, something which one should know how to analyse and command. In learning a language, it is rather a question of learning a skill - of becoming understood and having communication skills - of experiencing the possibility. (Education First 2017.)

Development 0f Language Skills In The Frame of Reference of The Core Curriculum

The objective of planning in language teaching is to direct the teacher to think about the learning processes as entities which develop the language skills in a variety of ways. This approach to planning helps to develop teaching which builds language skills systematically with the help of the chosen teaching methods, teaching materials and learning environments. With detailed planning the teacher's task is to define the central aim of each individual learning situation with regards to the development of language skills. In authentic and integrated language teaching this comprises the central objectives and content areas, vocabulary, studying the language structures, the chosen teaching methods, materials, and the study strategies which support learning, as well as evaluation. Planning must encompass the teaching of content, the numerous linguistic aspects which will form the focus of the lesson and will be needed to meet the learning objectives, and any cross-curricular skill development.

In planning an individual lesson, attention is paid to the central vocabulary which is linked to meaningful activities, these in turn create natural and authentic situations to use the language by utilising different sensory channels in a variety of ways. One important aim of teaching is indeed to plan the teaching so that the pupils' language skills will expand over the subject barriers to a cross-curricular level (cf. content compatible language learning) (Meriläinen 2008, Meriläinen & al. 2019). According to Meriläinen (2008), the teacher must take care to ensure at the planning stage that the activities planned provide plenty of opportunity for language use to ensure that the language learning outcomes, as well as content learning outcomes, are met. In addition to that, it is important that the chosen teaching methods direct pupils to study matters diversely in authentic social situations utilising the possibilities of the digital age. Versatile learning environments offer a natural context for the development of language skills.

In the Finnish National Core Curriculum (2014) the following areas of language learning, which direct the planning and implementation of teaching, have been raised as the focus of language teaching: Education into cultural diversity and language awareness, Language study skills, developing language competence: skills in interaction, developing language competence: skills in interpreting texts, and Developing language competence: skills in producing texts. These five areas form the central objectives for language teaching and learning, with the emphasis on teaching. As, a tool, which directs the development of language skills, the teacher uses the chart of developing language skills (formulated from CEFR) as well as the Common European framework of Reference for Languages. With the help of these, the systematic and cross-curricular development of language skills takes place, and it is possible to attain the learning outcomes set out in the curriculum.

The central starting points in this article were play and games as part of learning in the planning of an authentic and functional language learning landscape. A teacher, when planning and implementing early language learning must make sure that language learning environments inspire pupils and make learning possible. Teachers must also be aware of the purpose of the games and play selected for teaching, and how they can be used to achieve learning outcomes.

Planning the teaching using the Curriculum 2014 – as a frame of reference creates the foundation for aim-oriented language studying. The authenticity of teaching, contextuality and versatile opportunities arising from the student's world of experiences for using language, as well as cross-curricular teaching, enable the broad development of language skills. With globalisation, communicative skills of foreign languages have become still more important both in study and in working life. In addition, shifting populations have resulted in an increasingly multicultural society which increases the need for language skills and creates new challenges for language teaching. Games and play as part of learning are part of the child's natural way of operation and offer approaches to the language studies which develop different areas of language diversely. The genuine social situations created through play make language use meaningful and create possibilities for the pupils to practise their language skills in authentic situation, like those which pupils are likely to meet outside the classroom.

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