Application of Games in College English Teaching in China

Qiaoyan Yang, Professor,
Zhijiang College, Zhejiang University of Technology, China
Virginia L. Dixon, Ed.D.
California State University, Sacramento

Abstract

Games are an activity with rules, goals, and create fun (Hadfield, 2007). Games can stimulate learning and motivation, and students get very absorbed in games, some of which are suitable for college students in studying English as their second language. Appropriate use of games in college English teaching could help students eliminate the psychological pressure of learning a language and create a relaxed atmosphere for learning. The researchers will share their experience of applying games in teaching college English in China. Various games help students in their study of vocabulary, speaking, and texts. However, games should be used in an appropriate way. Instructors have to be clear in their role in game activities in the classroom, be aware of the frequency and time of games used in classroom, and devote themselves to designing games that not only can be carried out easily but also benefit student learning in a long term way.

Key words: Games; Language Teaching and Learning; Social Identity; Methods

The first author, Yang, has been integrating games as a technique to employ when teaching English to Chinese college students at a university in southern China. Dixon has consulted with Yang and co-taught for two months. Stimulating students' performance through the use of games can prompt engagement in learning, in this case learning English. This type of group learning, creates interest in the usefulness of English language learning. Cummins and O'Boyle note that the often sub-conscious aspect of social identity theory has shifted from intergroup relations to a broader view including group processes such as social influence and leadership (Cummins & O' Boyle, 2014).

Currently, Non-English majors in Chinese universities must take College English as a mandatory course in the first two years of University. The purpose of learning English is to go through a two-year study period designed to help students pass the national College English Tests (CET 4 or CET 6), after which they expect to have better opportunities to find desirable employment after graduation. Therefore, in Chinese college English classes, the main purpose is the knowledge accumulation of English without consideration of formal rules (Gao & Li, 2006). In order to pursue their institutions' target CET pass rate, most university foreign language instructors carry out "duck-stuffing" teaching methods, so that students do not experience the joy of learning the language.

Most students find the use of games motivating and find that a more interactive approach helps them reach the skill--listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation--required for

language acquisition. In 2007, the Ministry of Education in China developed a trial set of College English Curriculum Requirements emphasizing that college English teaching model should reflect the practical, informative, and interesting characteristics of English teaching (www.moe.edu.cn, 2007). Interest is not only an indispensable add-on and potential catalyst to improve the informative and practical features of college English teaching, but also one of the effective ways to improve the its overall quality. In order to make the class more interesting, many colleges and universities have attempted various types activities. Based on their own classroom experiences of using games to increase interest, the authors share their ideas about how to design and use games smartly to improve students' English learning in China.

Games and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

Games are an activity with rules, goals and create fun (Hadfield, 2007). In other words, fun is a necessary element of games. Additionally, games also have teaching value, especially in second language learning and teaching. As everyone knows, language learning is hard and can be tedious. Effort is required at every moment and must be maintained over a long period of time. However, in the process of learning language, games help and encourage many learners to sustain their interest and work. "Games help the teacher to create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful. The learners want to take part and in order to do so must understand what others are saying or have written, and they must speak or write in order to express their own point of view or give information" (Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 2006, p. 1). This makes games useful strategies to promote students' language proficiency when learning a foreign language. Through games, "students are encouraged to communicate and interact, and games are a good way of creating a meaningful context for language use" (Kim, 1995, p. 35). Games can also be a wonderful and welcoming break from the usual routine of the language class, and they provide motivating and challenging language practice in various skills such as speaking, writing, listening, and reading.

Appropriate use of games in college English teaching can help eliminate the psychological pressure on students and create a relaxing learning atmosphere. Most Chinese college students have become, since middle school, used to a learning mode in which teachers lecture while students listen. Students are afraid of losing face when making mistakes in speaking, so they miss out on a lot of opportunities for language practice. As a foreign language teacher, one needs to make an effort to stimulate the motivation of the students and cultivate their positive attitude toward learning. Therefore, teachers can promote student engagement by selecting games suitable for students by age and interest areas. This will activate the classroom atmosphere, making learning more enjoyable. In this way, students tend to overcome their anxiety of language learning in a more lively atmosphere. Games can create a relaxed and harmonious atmosphere in the classroom, so that students can learn the target language unconsciously, which helps teachers achieve their purposes more easily.

Games can improve students' interest in learning as well as their efficiency. Curiosity is an innate human talent, and interest is the best teacher. In *The Analects,* Confucius said, "People

who know it are no better than those who love it; those who love it are no better than the ones who love to know it" (Zhu, 2001, p. 62). Thus, promoting learning through games offers more interaction with English language. In class, teachers should focus their skills in teaching on enticing the students' love to learn. The most realistic and most active factor in motivation is to recognize and cultivate interest, arousing curiosity. American linguist Noam Chomsky has pointed out that it is extremely important to stimulate learners' interest in learning. In his words, "99 percent of the teaching is to make the students interested in learning material" (Chomsky, 1988, p. 181). In current college English teaching, the most serious problem is that students learn the language passively just to pass examinations. Indeed, students' interest in learning English is mainly a product of the combined influence of environment and teaching. Games in teaching, with their unique appeal and attractiveness, will mobilize students' emotions, stimulate their interest, and promote their mental activity to goad them into participating in class activity enthusiastically, so as to help them grasp knowledge more firmly. In this case, a variety of games can give full play to the imagination of students. At the same time, many games require students to be dedicated and attentive. Innovative games in the classroom produce a sense of anticipation and freshness in students so that they will not feel tired.

By stimulating and developing students' interests, the instructor can spur students' internal motivation and enable them to build self-confidence. Students who play games in class are more positive about learning English, so they take the initiative to practice. As games create a real scene of communication, when students do have difficulties in communication, they will be more likely to come up with strategies to solve the problem. If the problem can be resolved smoothly, students will have a sense of achievement that can be applied to tackle problems they will meet in the future. In this learning process, students regard learning as a kind of reward, and for such rewards, they will plunge themselves into the learning process effectively and consistently without encouragement and supervision from others. In this learning process, students' communicative ability and English proficiency are improved. Finally, students are more willing to learn English due to their internal motivation. The application of games in the teaching process enhances students' motivation to learn and stimulates their interest in learning English, so that they can be actively engaged in learning by themselves. "You want me to learn English" changes into "I want to learn English." They will be engaged in improving their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Thus, games provide motivation for language learners, relieve their pressure in the learning process and provide them with a real opportunity to exchange ideas. In other words, games prompt motivation so that students affectively learn the language (Amato, 1996).

Methods of Game Application in College English Teaching in China

As indicated above, appropriate use of games in college English teaching will help students learn English as a foreign language in a easy and relaxing way. Here is an approach to setting up an effective array of games in English teaching practice. With the guidance of College

English Curriculum Requirements, the instructor uses several games of vocabulary, text, and speaking in a college English Learning class in China.

According to the College English Curriculum Requirements, students need to master the usage of between 4700 and 7500 key English words. To teach students English vocabulary, the instructor asks them to do a word-guessing game. For some words characterized as "emotion" or "action," the instructor will ask the students to act the word out. When teaching words like "anxious," "cheerful," "depressed," "suspicious," etc, the instructor will ask a group of students to act the word out and ask another group of students to guess what their classmates are acting by their expressions or gestures, then give the correct answer of the word they are learning. For verbs like "vanish," "expel." "calculate," or "split", students are encouraged to act the action in front of the whole class. Some are asked to guess what word is his/her classmate acting. This form of activity allows students to relax, be active, enhance their self-confidence, and reduce their anxiety to learn a foreign language. The classroom takes on a pleasant atmosphere. Ideographic action games flexibly applied in teaching, whether as an introduction or further development activity, will yield positive learning. Teachers can easily make use of the contents of a study unit from a textbook to design these kinds of games.

For some words with distinguishing features in combination, the instructor may ask students to explain in English. For instance, "vis" will be written as the key word, and "visible, invisible, visit, television, supervise, revise, visual and visage" will be added on the blackboard. Two students (A and B) will be asked to stand before the podium, facing other students. Then the teacher writes the words one by one on the blackboard (these words should not be too abstract). At this time, Student A can see the blackboard and Student B can't. Every time the teacher writes a word, Student A will explain in various ways in English without using any body gestures, but they can't directly say that word. Student B should guess the word the teacher wrote based on a series of information Student A has provided, after some questions and answers. After students' explanation of these words, teachers might summarize the laws or rules of the combination of these words and give students a better understanding of the words. This approach can be used to enhance the students' memory of the vocabulary as a way of review, too. Even sometimes purely for relaxation and adjustment of classroom atmosphere, flexible word-guessing games will help students learn words with distinguishing features in the long run (Yang, 2015).

Students learn English with textbooks designed to help them accumulate language knowledge and broaden their view of different cultures, according to the College English Curriculum Requirements. In the process of teaching a text, instructors may use brainstorming to start. The instructor designates a topic, and students are asked to list as many words and concepts related to the topic as possible in a limited time. Students may list many words related to "college life," for example, which is the topic of Unit 1, Book 1 in the College English Text book. Of course, there are thousands of different possible answers, such as dormitory, roommate, facilities, library, challenge, friendship, majors, etc. The instructor asks students to use as many sentence patterns as they can to express their likes and dislikes, too. As they participate in this first class of English in their colleges, students will be encouraged to say

anything that comes to mind. This fast-paced thinking training can help them expand their vocabulary and build their confidence in learning.

To help them learn the text's content, some skits can be designed for students to practice the vocabulary and sentence patterns that they have learned. Performative alternatives might include scenario dialogues, recitations, debates, or speeches. For instance, the content of Unit 6 in Book 2 is "Being Creative." In this unit, the author mentions eight contradictory extremes in the personalities of creative people. Students will be divided into several groups for role play. In the role play scenario, the chapter's author stars in a TV interview. One of the students will play the role of the author and prepare a brief introduction to the research and its findings, using the information given in the text and his or her own imagination. The other student will play the role of the TV host. Under guidance from the instructor, each team of students develops questions for the other team. The high number of correct responses wins the game. The instructor will decide who wins the game and rewards the winning group based on their performance. In doing this analysis and acting, students come to understand authors' idea better, develop their own views, cooperate with their classmates on team work, and build their confidence in learning. Such group activities, in particular, will mobilize the enthusiasm of students and develop their ability to cooperate with a group to a large extent.

After finishing a unit, instructors often encourage students to explore opinions of their own. For instance, after studying the topic of "success," students are encouraged to debate whether happiness leads to success or success leads to happiness. Under guidance from the instructor, students will prepare before class to argue their views and opinions. Involved in the process of debate, students may improve their speaking and thinking abilities by thinking positively and striving to express their ideas effectively.

According to the College English Curriculum Requirements, students need to speak in English as fluently and accurately as they can. In terms of improving students' speaking skills, especially for those whose English is poor, instructors can use a "Gossip Relay" or "telephone" game. First, the instructor tells a phrase, sentence or sentence pattern to a student in each group. The students should pass what was said around the group one by one by whispering the message to the next participant. Those who can finish the task the most accurately and quickly win the game. This game not only alters boring classroom atmosphere, but also adapts to the large-capacity characteristics of the college English class by involving all of the students in the class efficiently into simultaneous activities.

In another effort to enable students to open their mouths to speak English, the course instructors designed "Make Up Stories" games. First of all, the instructor starts telling the story, like this: "On a dark night I was walking in a forest. I walked and walked. Suddenly....." Then, the instructor might throw a ball into the hands of any student to name him or her the speaker who must continue the story. The student might say something like "Suddenly, a big tiger walked towards me, and then ...." With the ball passed to the hands of many students in succession, the story goes on, full of students' imagination. This game reduces students' sense

of oppression about speaking and stimulates their enthusiasm for speaking and acting in the classroom atmosphere, as implemented by the first author, Yang.

To improve students' pronunciation and intonation, instructors often ask students to read aloud. One approach is to use "tongue twisters" to correct student pronunciation, which is not only fun, but is also a way to intensify practice. For example, the sentence "She sells sea shells by the seashore, and the shells she sells are sea shells I am sure" requires students to practice the pronunciations of [s] and [ʃ]. For some engaging passages in the text, or some English poetry and classical texts loved by students, the instructor asks students to read aloud together, or read in different roles. Alternately, the instructor might divide the students into groups to recite some material or hold reading contests, in which those who read closest to the original win the game. In the last class of a semester, a role play competition could be held. Every student would have to stand up on stage and give a performance of a selection from an English drama, play, movie, song, speech, etc, to imitate the pronunciation and intonation of the original native speaker as accurately as they were able. Their performance would receive feedback and scoring as part of their final class evaluation.

Such games and activities create a relaxing atmosphere beneficial for students to learn English effectively, as it helps prevent fatigue and boredom. They are more engaged and enthusiastic during foreign language learning.

This use of games creates team-building among the students. As students continue their quest to learn English, the presence of a team atmosphere helps them shed some of their tensions about face-saving. Team building also makes it more likely that students will utter words or phrases to help each other, as well as helping their teams overall.

Questionnaire for Students

In order to quantify the teaching effect of games in College English Teaching, I asked my students to help by filling out questionnaires about their satisfaction with English classes before and after the application of games. In addition, students were asked to share comments or suggestions about their English classes.

Students who answered the questionnaires are all from the Economic and Trade Department; 46 of them majored in Marketing, 45 in Accounting, and 44 in Financial Management. Their scores on the National College Entrance Examination, recorded in June of 2014, are all over 110 out of 150. All together, 115 samples were collected as data to show the degree of students' satisfaction with their English classes before and after the application of games. Questionnaires show that 6 students classified themselves as "least" or not at all satisfied, 15 of them were less satisfied with the original curriculum, 61 of them were satisfied, 24 were more satisfied, and 9 of them were the most satisfied possible with their English class before the application of games.

After the application of games in English class, the numbers of students who classified as "least" satisfied dropped to 3, less satisfied to 12 , and satisfied to 49. These data demonstrated an increase in satisfaction from the use of games. Meanwhile, students are getting more satisfied
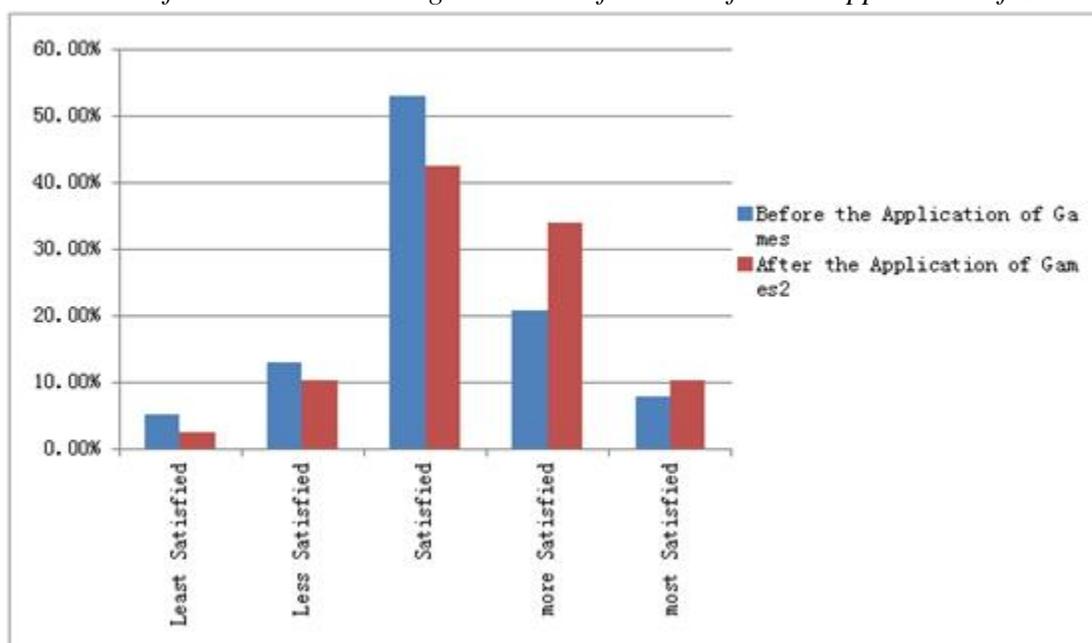
with English class with the application of games. Thirty-nine students rated themselves "more satisfied with English class" compared to the original 24, and 12 students showed the most satisfaction with English classes after the application of games in teaching, rather than 9 before the games. In other words, the percentage of students "more" or "most" satisfied with English classes jumped from 29 to 44 once games were introduced in the classroom; the percentage of students "less" or "least" satisfied dropped from 18 to 13.

Table 1 shows the comparison of students' satisfaction with their English class before and after the application of games.

While asked to comment on or suggest anything to improve the English class before the games were introduced, many students mentioned that they had difficulty listening and speaking English in class. They do not traditionally have much of a chance to speak in English, and they dared not speak in class in front their classmates for fear of losing face. Some students mentioned that they wished to learn more techniques or skills to be able to pass CET 4 or 6. However, after the application of games in English teaching, students' comments and suggestions for the class changed. Some mentioned they found their English classes more interesting; some mentioned that they were now able to speak English a little, and some even suggested more games and having games outside of the classroom. However, there were some students who felt that games distracted their attention in class, and they grew impatient with some of games applied.

Table 1
Student Satisfaction with their English class before and after the Application of Games

Statistics above show that the degree of students' satisfaction with English Class increased overall with application of games. Fewer students were dissatisfied with English class

and more were pleased. One can see that students' interest was stimulated with games implemented in English class. Their confidence in learning English was greatly increased accordingly. Students as a whole are more willing to participate in class activities with games in English teaching, especially in vocabulary, text learning, and speaking. However, the researchers also found that certain games were not well accepted by some students.

Conclusions and Limitations

Gallimore and Goldenberg (2001) defined cultural models as involving a shared environment with interpretations of that environment to be aligned in a pervasive way. Thus, even interpretations of what is valued and what is ideal are part of the landscape. Along with these are interpretations about what should be avoided and what should be acted upon. Even rules of interactions and purposes of interactions are attended to. One can claim that the utility of games in helping students acquire a language creates an explicit "shared environment" wherein students experience the activity of the game and current use of the language.

Just as there are multiple approaches to teaching English as a class to Chinese students at universities in China, the style of participatory learning, using various games, prompts student engagement which will be beneficial to their acquisition of English, particularly in conversation.

Therefore, for college students learning English in China, instructional use of games promotes their oral language output while making the process of learning more interactive (Yang, 2015.) Students seek to comprehend, explain, and make sense out of these frames of reference, all of which support their involvement in learning English.

Sensemaking as a process is "both cognitive and social.... experiences are made sensible when people place stimuli into some type of cognitive framework..., view an experience as one within a category...encountered previously...or create a new frame of reference for interpreting the experience" (Bess and Dee, 2012, p. 154).

Although it is commonly known that English learning becomes more effective by using games, sometimes games do lead to problems. Therefore, there are certain principles that should guide the use of games.

First, the role of the teacher in an English class game should be clearly set. Students should be the main actors in the class game, while the teacher acts as an organizer, a director, and a referee. When the game is over, teachers can point out the errors students have made in the game in pronunciation, intonation, or grammar. However, they should avoid interrupting students during the game, which will limit the students' enthusiasm, affecting the smooth conduct of the game and its integrity. Teachers should allow students to struggle in the "language ocean" in order to inspire them to use their brains, hands, and tongues and improve their classroom participation, giving full play to the role of practice in foreign language teaching. In addition, teachers should accumulate different games based on students' age, hobbies, and other interests, and should continue to design new games.

Second, games should be designed according to their features and students' language level. Teachers should select games carefully to ensure that they are interesting, applicable, and

communicative. It is documented that positive games, which can reduce the information gap among game participants, can stimulate students' learning of a foreign language. Teachers should focus on setting a real context for language communication in games design. While selecting a game, the first consideration is whether the game meets students' language level. Games teachers choose according to teaching materials and purpose should not be much beyond students' language level, otherwise they will not fully understand the rules of the game and feel stress in playing the game. Therefore, teachers should take into account students' learning needs, the objects of the in-game communication, and the real interpersonal communication environment. Moreover, students' personalities, motivation, learning methods, qualifications, age, and sometimes gender should also be taken into consideration when designing a classroom game. Teachers must also ensure that they have fully mastered the essentials of the game before explaining it to students. In addition, rules of games applied in class should not be too complex, to ensure that the game can proceed smoothly. Teachers can demonstrate the rules of games by running a scenario with several students in advance.

Third, game time and rhythm control in the process of the games is very crucial. In each game, overall time and rhythm should be strictly controlled. Teachers should neither interrupt students frequently nor stand by the side completely. Instead, they should pay close attention to the process of the game. When students need help, their teacher can pause the game to explain, but only if there are common problems which will seriously affect the smooth conduct of the game. If not, teachers can serve as reminders and assistants to make the game go smoothly. In the process of applying games in English class, if teachers find students' activities have achieved the goal of the game, they can stop the game; otherwise continuing would be a waste of valuable class time.

Regarding the limitations of this research. The data the authors used was from a single study. The options for this study as described above are ideas and practical experiences based on primary author's years of experience in the teaching of college English; in addition to the co-teaching experience of the primary and second author. The study is limited in regard to questionnaire responses by students: students' answers may differ by their English level and their learning objectives. For example, students who are outgoing and have less English mastery welcome games more, whereas students who want to pass the CET exams might feel more impatient with some of games applied in English class. On the other hand, more variables should be considered in studying the application of games in College English Teaching and learning. For instance, type of learning environment, socio-economic status of students, and access to English environments outside of the class. In addition, for future study there is a need to study the methodology of games in the classroom as a causative factor in the improvement of English language.

References

Amato, R. (2012). *Making it happen*. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Group.

Bess, J., & Dee, J. (2012). *Understanding College and University Organization: Theories for Effective Policy and Practice*(2nd ed.). Sterling, VA.

Chomsky, N. (1988). *Language and Problems of Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Cummins, P., & O' Boyle, I. (2014). Leading through Others: Social Identity Theory in the Organizational Setting. *Organization Development Journal*, 27-39.

Gallimore, R., & Goldenberg, C. (2006). Analyzing Cultural Models and Settings to Connect Minority Achievement and School Improvement. Educational Psychologist. 36(1).

Gao, Q., & Li, Y. (2006). Review of the Latest Language Teaching Research. *Foreign Language Teaching*. 27(5), 53-57.

Hadfield, J. (2007). *Elementary Communication Games*. Longman.

Haslam, S., Reicher, S., & Platow, M. (2010). *The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power* (1st ed.). New York: Psychology Press.

http://www.moe.edu.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/s3857/201011/xxgk_110825.html

Kim, L. (1995). Creative Games for the Language Class. *Forum*, 33(1), 35-37.

Wright, A., Betteridge, D., & Buckby, M. (2006). *Games for Language Learning* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Yang, QY. Interview with Dixon. V, Sacremento, March, 2-3-4, 2015.

Zhu, X. (2001). *The analects of Confucius variorum*. Beijing Library Press.

About the Authors

Qiaoyan Yang is now a visiting scholar at California State University, Sacramento. She has been teaching College English in Zhijiang College of Zhejiang University of Technology, PR, China.

Virginia L. Dixon is a Professor in Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, California State University, Sacramento.

APPENDIX A

Questionnaires on the Use of Games in English Class

Questionnaire before the application of games in English class:

1 How satisfied are you with your current English class?
   Very satisfied   5   4   3   2   1   very dissatisfied

2. How satisfied are you with your vocabulary learning in English class?
   Very satisfied   5   4   3   2   1   very dissatisfied

3 .How satisfied are you with your text learning in English class?
   Very satisfied   5   4   3   2   1   very dissatisfied

4. How satisfied are you with your speaking and listening in English class?
    Very satisfied   5   4   3   2   1   very dissatisfied

5. What suggestions and comments do you have for future English class?

Questionnaire after the application of games in English class:

1. How satisfied are you with your current English class?
    Very satisfied   5   4   3   2   1   very dissatisfied

2. How satisfied are you with your vocabulary learning in English class?
    Very satisfied   5   4   3   2   1   very dissatisfied

3 .How satisfied are you with your text learning in English class?
    Very satisfied   5   4   3   2   1   very dissatisfied

4. How satisfied are you with your speaking and listening in English class?
    Very satisfied   5   4   3   2   1   very dissatisfied

5. Would you like the forms of games applied in English class?

Yes, I definitely   5   4   3   2   1   No, I definitely do not like
like the application   the application of games in
of games in my   my English class
English class

6. What suggestions and comments do you have for future English class?