PILOT STUDY ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE "RELAX 2" BOARD-GAME IN IMPROVING VOCABULARY AND SENTENCE FORMATION SILLS IN ROMANIAN

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Abstract. Board-games constitute a tool that simultaneously develops children in many ways and motivates them to learn. The aim of this experiment is to examine the effectiveness of using board-games in Romanian lessons and how the attitudes of Hungarian children change towards the Romanian language. To this end, the author created a board-game for Hungarian speaking children. The aim of the game is to bring the children closer to the Romanian language, to make it possible for them to playfully master the key words in the topics present in the elementary classes, to increase their existing vocabulary, and to develop their sentence-forming skills. 21 children participated in the research. The children learned 14 topics during the experiments, of which 7 topics were learned using traditional methods and also 7 topics were learned using the board-game. To measure the level of knowledge, the children wrote a test at the beginning and at the end of each lesson. The results show that children were able to learn more words using board-games than using traditional methods. It also became clear that when using board games, more than half of the children (56.46%) managed to form a correct sentence, while when using traditional methods, far less than half (35.37%) were able to form a correct sentence. By the end of the experiment, the children liked the Romanian lessons and their learning motivation increased significantly.

Keywords: traditional method, board-game, improving vocabulary, sentence forming skills, learning motivation

1. Introduction

Hungarian speaking children from Romania fail somehow to acquire Romanian language at an adequate level. These shortcomings are still very difficult or impossible to fill ulteriorly.

Almost half of the eighth grader students do not pass the final Romanian exam, and their only option remains technical schools. Students who are preparing for high school graduation are neither able to perform well at Romanian language and they are disadvantaged at admission because of that (Balázs, 2006).

When we observe the curriculum that apply to teaching the Romanian language in Hungarian language schools, we can notice that self-expression is neglected and the formal acquisition of knowledge is more dominant (Tódor, 2005).This situation generates asymmetric bilingualism. Bilingualism implies the application of a simplificative language strategy. This means that the speaker does not want to make mistakes and he rather gives up or modifies what he wants to say because he cannot express himself because of linguistic otherness. Thus, communication becomes formal, and he cannot live the joy of telling something (Tódor, 2005).

In 2013, a curriculum development was started with the aim of finding solutions for the problems that affect the Romanian language teaching for Hungarian children in Romania. The curriculum introduced an education based on speech comprehension and speech production. Most of the pedagogues consider that the attempt to make easier the teaching of the Romanian language is good, as there are less texts, and children encounter easier, more understandable words in the elementary classes (Pap, 2020). According to a research conducted in 2017, all the interviewed pedagogues agree that new teaching

methods should be introduced in the teaching-learning process and children should be motivated (Molnár, 2018).

According to the special literature, the use of board games in language teaching can be a good method, it is a well-established method in English teaching, for example. According to the author of the Smart Cards, playful learning increases performance levels and motivates children to learn. According to her, this game develops foreign language competencies excellently (Osváth, 2013).

In the course of my research, I examine how effective the application of the board game I made, named Relax 2 (Juhász, 2021), is in a Romanian lesson, to what extent it promotes the growth of Romanian vocabulary and how it develops sentence forming skills.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The linguistic competency

Every student in our country has the right and obligation to learn and use the Romanian language. In the primary school curriculum, the Romanian literature has a main role in contributing to the formation and development of the cultural competencies. Therefore, to form competencies means both forming capacities and acquiring knowledge and to update and correlate them in various contexts. These two activity categories are the methodological reflexes of the syllabus structure which connects the study of the language and the communication techniques with the language practice and the study of certain literary theory concepts with the practice of reading and interpreting (Pamfil, 2006).

The linguistic competency can be defined as the competency which allows the students or others to act using the linguistic means. The sub competencies are as follows: lexical, grammatical, phonological, semantical and orthographical (Platon et al, 2011).

Some students belong to some isolated linguistic communities. They need to benefit from a differentiated approach regarding the teaching and learning process. It is necessary to take into account the quality of the primary linguistic acquisitions of the learner (Rusu, 2017). For the students who don't have the Romanian language as their mother tongue, it is important that they enrich their vocabulary first.

The lexical competency is none other than the ability to use the vocabulary of a language, and use it in communication. We have to take into account the development of the students' vocabulary because they need a certain number of words in order to do well at the Romanian classes (Platon et al, 2011).

There is a typological difference between the Romanian and the Hungarian language: the Hungarian language is agglutinant and the Romanian language is inflected (Pál, 2017).

The principles according to which we can select the lexicon for the primary school students are the following: the frequency, the necessity, the ability to combine, the derivational power, the semantic value, and last but not least the cultural factor.

As for the optimal number of words that can be taught within a Romanian language class, they vary from one specialist to another. For example, Willis says that a child can learn between 2-8 words a day. David Beglar thinks that the optimal number is between 5-7 words. Ruth Gaims and Stuart Redman say that a child can learn between 8-10 words within an hour (Platon et al, 2011). No matter how we take care of the moments and rules of teaching, we have to remember that play should be an important part of the lesson.

2.2. Traditional and alternative methods

In traditional schools, the emphasis is rather on teaching than learning, yet nowadays more and more reform pedagogical methods are being used in these schools as well. Perhaps it would also be a mistake to claim that there are two independent forms of education: traditional schools and alternative schools, because these two systems interact with each other. The quality of the lessons largely depends on the teachers anyway. There are teachers who teach from the heart, with devotion and attention to the needs of children in traditional schools too (Zahu, n.d.). However, it is a fact that there is a multiplication of the number of the students who matriculate to the classes that use alternative

methods. According to the interviewed teachers, the simple fact that traditional schools introduce alternative methods to the education justifies the alternative education (Asztalos, Hadnagy, & Szilágyi, 2021). Nor can we ignore the fact that students who have attended alternative schools and have already entered the labor market are much more independent, more creative, and are better at collaboration (Dobos, 2019).

2.3. Board-game

According to Rogers, we almost do not need to teach anything to the more clever students, they only need us to provide them resources that not only arouse but also maintain their interest (Rogers, quoted by Klein, 2013). One such tool could be a board-game, because the ability to learn effectively and independently develops while using it. If the student wants to perform or just wants to win, he has to learn constantly (Lencse, 2016). In addition, the use of these games develops competencies that are necessary for life, even though we do not teach the children directly, but involve them in the game and allow them to develop without intervention (Péter, 2017). This is also a useful tool in the hands of the teacher, because when we ask what could a teacher use as a new teaching method in order to develop the independent learning of the students, the answer should be none other than that of the game. In the game, the pairing of theory and practice leads to a purposeful behavior, so it also accustoms teachers to strategy, encouraging them to look for alternative paths and to think flexibly (Karasimos, 2020). It is not worthwhile for the teacher to participate in the game as a teacher but as a player, and it is not recommended to make educational remarks neither. Of course, as a player, the teacher has the opportunity to shape each situation, and he should take advantage of this opportunity, as he can set an example for students with his play and decisions (Lencse, 2016). Comprehension can also be improved with these games, as children have to read and interpret on their own the rules of the game as well as the text on the cards (Péter, 2017). These games are especially useful for children who do not excel in reading comprehension because they have poor reading motivation. The child knows that he can only count on himself, as he cannot ask his opponent what it is about, so the game motivates him unawarely to struggle with comprehension alone (Lencse, 2016). The use of board-games can also be useful in foreign language communication, for example if the goal is to learn words or simple phrases, games such as Guess Who or Dobble are recommended (Lencse, 2016).

3. Methods

This research took place between 19th October 2020 and 10th March 2021 in a 4th grade class.

3.1. The aim of the research

The aim of the research is to assess the effectiveness of using the author's board-game to improve vocabulary and sentence formation skills in Romanian lessons.

3.2. Participants

4th grade students from Tasnad General School, a total of 21 children (9 girls and 12 boys) took part in the study.

3.3. Research questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

- What is the difference between a Romanian class taken with traditional methods and one taken with a board-game?
- Which method is more effective in improving vocabulary and sentence formation skills?

3.4. Data collection

The research covered a total of 14 topics: 7 topics with the use of traditional teaching methods and 7 topics with the use of the Relax 2 board game. I used tests to assess the level of knowledge at the beginning and end of each lesson. The test included 12 Hungarian words which the children had to translate in Romanian and then form a sentence with one of the words they knew. The children wrote the test before and after every intervention. Thus, it is clear how many words the children knew before

the intervention and how many words they were able to learn through the intervention, as well as how much their sentence forming skills developed during the intervention. The research was based on the division of the Romanian vocabulary into levels, edited by Elena Platon et al. (2014). Thus, I also compiled the word-cards needed for the board-game appropriately to these levels, and I used them in a differentiated manner, according to the composition of the class.

3.5. Intervention

Traditional method

We always started the class with a song that matched the topic. Then the children wrote the test, which I used to assess how many words they know in that topic. After that I collected the tests and I wrote on the blackboard the Romanian equivalents of the Hungarian words (cluster chart). I asked the children the Hungarian equivalent of the Romanian words, then I pronounced the Hungarian equivalent of the words, and the students had to show on the board which are the Romanian equivalents of the words I said. After that we started to form sentences with all the 12 words. Someone said a sentence that we corrected together in case it was not right and wrote it on the board. One student wrote it on the board, the others copied it in their notebooks. As a revision, we said again the Hungarian equivalents of the Romanian words after which the children wrote the test from the end of the class. The children had the Hungarian equivalent of the words they had learned written, and they had to write next to them their Romanian equivalent, and then they had to form a sentence with a word that they had learned during the class. In the case of difficult topics, everyone got words from level A1, in the case of easier topics the talented students got words from level A2 and B1.

Topics of the classes taken with traditional methods: Clothes, Family, Free time, My body, My friend, Festive season, Seasons.

Using the board-game

The overall purpose of the class was to increase vocabulary. We started the class with a song or a riddle, and then I handed out a test to the children, where they had to write the Romanian equivalent of 12 Hungarian words, and then they had to form a sentence with one of the words they liked. I found out from this test approximately how many words the children know about the topic. Then we read together a text where they got to know the words I wanted them to learn. When practicing the learned words, we did not follow what is usually done in the lessons taken with traditional methods (writing words on the board, in the notebook, forming sentences, answering questions etc.), but we used the board-game. I handed out to the kids the board game with word-cards appropriate to the topic. Most of the children received the basic words from level A1, from the levels set up by Elena Platon et al. (2014). Occasionally, groups of more talented children received words from level A2 or B1 on both the test and the picture-cards. The children walked with the puppet according to the rules of the board-game, they were singing, drawing, pointing, counting, learning proverbs, turning a wheel of fortune, forming a sentence, etc., all according to the topic. They could only proceed if the tasks at each point were solved. For example, if they did not know the Romanian equivalent of the Hungarian word from the word-card, they could learn from the checklist until it was their turn again. This means that they missed a round in order to learn that word. There was always a winner in the game, to whom the other kids could give a task at will at the end of the game. At the end of the class, the children received the same test as at the beginning of the class. This way I was able to assess how many words the kids managed to learn. For example, if at the beginning of the class the student knew 2 words from the words on the test, but by the end of the lesson he could still describe the Romanian equivalent of another 8 Hungarian words, that is a total of 10 words. This means that with the help of the board-game, he learned 8 words on that topic that day.

Topics of the classes taken with the help of the board-game: Fruits and vegetables, At the school, Let's set the table!, In the holiday, The town, Occupations, Let's travel correctly!

4. Results

4.1. The average number of the words learned using traditional methods

During the seven activities where traditional methods were used, the children learned a little more than 5 (5.17) Romanian words on average. The table below (Table 1) shows the average number of words that the students managed to learn at every topic.

Table 1. The average number of words learned using traditional methods

Topic	Average frequency
Clothes (Îmbrăcăminte)	4. 42
Family (Familia)	6.14
Free time (În timpul liber)	4.61
My body (Corpul meu)	4.85
My friend (Prietenul meu)	5.95
Festive season (Sărbătorile)	5.85
Seasons (Anotimpurile)	4.42
The average during the seven topics	5.17

4.2. The development of sentence formation skills using traditional methods

By the end of the 7 activities, 35.37% of the students had succeeded in forming a correct sentence, 37.41% had between 1 and 3 mistakes, 4.08% had more than 3 mistakes, and 23.12% had failed to form a sentence at all. These data are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The average of the development of sentence formation skills

Correctness of the sentence	Frequency	Percentage
Correct sentence	7.42	35.37
Mistakes between 1 and 3	7.85	37.41
More than 3 mistakes	0.85	4.08
No sentence	4.85	23.12

4.3. The average number of the words learned using the board-game

During the seven activities where the board-game was used, the children learned a little less than 7 (6.87) Romanian words on average. Table 3 shows the average number of words children managed to learn in Romanian during each topic.

Table 3. The average number of the words learned using the board-game

Topic	Average frequency
Fruits and vegetables (Fructe și legume)	7.14
At the school (La școală)	6.71
Let's set the table! (Să aranjăm masa!)	6.38
In the holiday (În vacanță)	6.52
The town (Orașul)	7.19
Occupations (Meserii)	6.42
Let's travel correctly! (Să circulăm corect!)	7.76
The average during the 7 topics	6.87

4.4. Development of sentence-making skills with the use of the board-game

By the end of the 7 activities, 56.46% of the students had succeeded in forming a correct sentence, 19. 72% had between 1 and 3 mistakes, 2.04% had more mistakes than 3, and 21. 76% had failed to form a sentence at all. These data are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. The average of the development of sentence formation skills

Correctness of the sentence	Frequency	Percentage
Correct sentence	11.85	56.46
Mistakes between 1 and 3	4.14	19.72
More than 3 mistakes	0.42	2.04
No sentence	4.57	21.76

4.5. A comparison of the classes taken with traditional methods and those taken with the use of the board-game as regarding learning new words

During the seven activities held with traditional methods, the children learned a total of more than 5 (5.17) words on average per activity. During the seven activities held using the board-game, the children learned with almost 2 (1.7) words more per activity than with the traditional activities. The difference between the two methods is 6.87-5.17 = 1.7

For comparing the average number of words learned by each pupil in case of the traditional method and the board-game the paired t-test was used. The results shows that the average in case of using the board-game is significantly higher than in case of traditional methods (p=0.00<0.05 – Table 5).

Table 5. The comparison of the average number of the words learned with paired t-test

Teaching method	Average	Variance	t	p
Traditional	5.17	1.62	-7.19	0.00
Board-game	6.87	1.32		

4.6. A comparison of the two learning methods in terms of the development of sentence formation skills

If we examine the difference between the two methods, we can notice that more students (56.46%) formed correct sentences in the post-test when using the board game than when using the traditional methods (35.37%). The post-tests also showed that the number of children who could not form a sentence decreased more (21.76%) when using the board-game than when using the traditional method (23.12%).

Table 7. A comparison of the development of sentence formation skills

Correctness of the sentence	Using of the board-game		Traditional method	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Correct sentence	11.85	56.46%	7.42	35.37%
Mistakes between 1 and 3	4.14	19.72%	7.85	37.41%
More than 3 mistakes	0.42	2.04%	0.85	4.08%
No sentence	4.57	21.76%	4.85	23.12%

If we examine the post-tests of both methods, we can see that when using the traditional method, the average number of the incorrect sentences was 8.70 sentences, while when using the board-game, this number decreased to 4.56 sentences (see Table 7 – adding the rows "Mistakes between 1 and 3" and "More than three mistakes").

In the following the number of mistakes made by each pupil during sentence formation is counted for each lesson. Two averages for each pupil are calculated: an average for the lessons taught with traditional methods and an average for the lessons taught with the board-game. For comparing the average number of pupils' mistakes during sentences formulation in case of the traditional method and

the board-game the paired t-test was used. The results shows that the average in case of using the board-game is significantly lower than in case of traditional methods (p=0.01<0.05 – Table 8).

Table 8. The comparison of the average number of incorrect sentences formulated by pupils with paired t-test

Teaching method	Average	Variance	t	p
Traditional	1.04	0.71	2.76	0.01
Board-game	0.47	0.11		

In the following the number of spelling and grammatical mistakes are analyzed. The average number of sentences with spelling mistakes is 5 when using the traditional method and 3.85 when using the board-game. The average number of grammatically incorrect sentences is 3.71 when using traditional methods and 0.71 when using board-games.

Conclusion

The difference between the results obtained in classes taught with traditional methods and those taught with the use of the board-game is significant. In the lessons where the Relax 2 board-game was used children learned significantly more words than during traditional teaching. The use of the board-game also developed sentence formation skills, in these lessons children had significantly less mistakes in their sentences. Both spelling and grammatical mistakes are less frequent when using the board-game.

Beside the significantly higher achievement, kids were much more motivated during the activities where they could learn through the board-game. They forgot their prejudices about the Romanian language and played liberated as their Romanian language vocabulary increased.

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