



Research Papers in Language Teaching and Learning

Vol. 11, No. 1, February 2021, 93-103

ISSN: 1792-1244

Available online at <http://rpltl.eap.gr>

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#LetMeepleTalk¹: Using board games for EFL preschoolers

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This paper probes into the merged area between language pedagogy, CLIL, preschoolers learners and educational technology, and centers on weaving multi-genres board games (both physical and digital ones) in early language teaching. Based on the communicative approach to foreign language pedagogy, we trace the development of modern board games that are language (in)dependent and link them to the teaching of early EFL within a constructivist learning framework. Up to now, previous computer gaming suggestions for educational purposes were game specified, and thus could not be generalized. Moreover, board game suggestions usually focused on non-language teaching proposals. In this proposal, we will present specific board game selection criteria for presenting or eliciting language and a template of integrating every gaming genre. We will present a model wherein any board game can be used in the current foreign language classroom by tying them to the teaching of specific language skills. We propose that every genre can be used to teach a specific language skill (e.g., speaking via board game streaming presentation or developing thematic vocabulary) in CLIL and early language contexts.

Key words: board gaming, language learning, language teaching, game-based teaching and learning theory, early language learning

1. Introduction

“The way a man plays a game shows some of his character.
The way he loses shows all of it. “
– Unknown

Game-based learning and teaching theory (GBLTT) is a theoretical approach and framework that has measured learning outcomes based on gaming and learning procedure. Generally speaking, GBLTT focuses on balancing information with gameplay as well as the ability of each learner to retain and

¹ Blend of the words “my” and “people”; a small person-shaped figure used as a player's token in a board game.

frame this subject in more realistic contexts. Moving from GBLTT to *Gamification*, one obtains a different kind of learning experience. The gamification process transfers dominant gaming features (such as experience points, achievements, user badges, challenges, leaderboards, progress status, etc.) to a non-game environment. Its major advantage is to turn boredom, routine, uninspired tasks into innovative, challenging and interesting experience.

According to the GBLTT plan, every game-based lesson should have specific learning objectives. The teacher could assign some roles to students so that everyone could be a gamer at some point. Furthermore, all necessary procedures and rules should be explained clearly and slowly from the very beginning. Since preparation is the key to success and to failure (play some game sections several times, provide supporting material and predict students' questions and reactions), this strategy could create a non-threatening, non-competitive, yet entertaining environment.

Additionally, we strongly underline that the teacher should not forget to apply the selection criteria carefully (Karasimos & Chrysovitsanos, 2020), even if there is a large number of them. More specifically, we should keep preschoolers' interests and attention intact while the concentration - which is involved while playing a video game- can be used to educate them and keep their minds active (Alexiou, 2020). The education community tries to 'force the videogaming industry to support their need for fun-based learning by developing educationally engaging games and devising GBLTT techniques and settings which would activate children' learning awareness during board games sessions.

An important step in the GBLTT plan is for the teacher to check the available websites before a game is chosen. The online board game database of BoardGameGeek² can be a real thesaurus³ with plenty of ideas and materials for teaching situations. Even if someone does not like (nor is used to playing games), he/she will find the board games to be valuable for fun, self-awareness, imagination and creativity. During the teaching process, a different kind of failure is quite possible. Gameducation may reveal some teaching weaknesses and frustrated situations when someone fails to fulfil the gaming objectives and hereafter, reach the language learning goals. If an educator creates a game-based teaching session, he/she should be able to deal with instances where students may not be able to solve the riddles or complete quests or even follow the storyline.

As opposed to video games, the teacher can manipulate the board gaming time, the rules and the stressful issues easier. Consequently, if his/her game-based decisions have been converted into positive learning outcomes, the educator should attempt and spread these techniques and theories to the teachers' community so that they can apply them in their classrooms. Even for an experienced board gamer and educator, the preparation time might be quite extensive and long, the effort could be intense and the lesson plan quite detailed in order to avoid any possible unpleasant surprises. Nevertheless, the actual impact from this implementation could be impressive and essential for young learners.

To sum up, besides being innately fun, board games affect teacher-talking time by shifting the focus to young learners' interactions and their discussion. The gaming goals or quests encourage students to work through challenges and encourage healthy competition between classmates, which helps

² <https://boardgamegeek.com/>

³ BGG is an online board gaming resource and community. The site is updated on a real-time basis by its large and still growing user base, making the 'Geek the largest and most up-to-date place to get gaming information! There is no charge for becoming a registered member of BGG, although you are certainly encouraged to help improve the site by adding your own reviews and thoughts on games to the existing database. There are reviews, ratings, images, play-aids, translations, and session reports from board game geeks across the world, as well as live discussion forums (https://boardgamegeek.com/wiki/page/Welcome_to_BoardGameGeek).

build solid relationships (specially with board games in cooperative mode) and provides evolving speaking opportunities as students work together to solve a mystery or a riddle. With the teacher's interference, vocabulary and spelling skills through structured activities can be honed. Finally yet importantly, board games provide a break from the traditional lesson structure, encourage creative and strategic thinking and "force" students to have fun and enjoy their lessons.

2. Games in the early foreign language context

"We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing."
– George Bernard Shaw

McDonough (1981, p. 32) suggests that "children are the best examples of language learners because of their spontaneous nature of language acquisition". They may not be able to rationalize a grammatical rule. However, they are able to learn short phrases (not just individual words), which they can use to communicate with some reasonable degree of grammaticality. During an L2 learning process, teachers' priority and focus is given to oral skills during the early stages, as "children have not yet developed literacy skills in their first language" (Alexiou, 2015, p. 192). A significant issue with preschoolers learning or acquiring a second language is their limited attention span and their lack of discipline and persistence. Consequently, playful, alternative and unconventional teaching techniques are encouraged at this early stage (ibid). This is the reason they get excited with any form of implicit, playful, alternative and unconventional teaching. Moreover, visual stimuli aid their memory development, recall, and this is why popular cartoon series, for instance, can also serve as educational tools (see Alexiou, 2015; Alexiou & Kokla, 2018; Kokla in this volume). Recent research has indicated that various playful websites for example, can serve as rich input for effective and memorable vocabulary learning (Alexiou & Vitoulis, 2014; Alexiou & Chondrogianni, 2017).

The teaching procedure during these early stages usually includes informal vocabulary and a variety of songs and rhymes, short stories, colouring and drawing that create a cheerful and playful learning environment. Children always enjoy funny and easy-to-remember rhymes, riddles, jokes and hands-on activities (Oesterreich, 1995). Based on Halliwell (1992), physical response activities, handcrafts and arts, theatrical plays and drama, games and projects are all appropriate since they make children use language authentically and for meaningful purposes. Miller (2014) underscored the facilitation of memory and thinking procedures through comic series as well as the function of both brain parts in order to process the data received either visually or orally. Consequently, animated stories offer a combination of visual representations, sound and text (Alexiou & Yfouli, 2018). Language learners' contact with video games (Karasimos & Zorbas, 2020) and board games (Karasimos & Chrysovitsanos, 2020), which contain entertaining, interactive but also meaningful and adaptable content, is conducive to language improvement, effective lexical development and constitutes a well-established context for both adult and young learners.

It is widely accepted that education should be based on holistic development and ought to be child-centered while its content should mirror real-life experiences. Culture free play is crucial for their social, emotional and cognitive development while it promotes collaboration and eliminates fears and insecurities (Alexiou & Chondrogianni, 2017). In Alexiou and Chondrogianni's (2017) small-scale study, playing Twister and Wii-Fit appears to enhance the learning process, accelerate the learning rate, increase their attention span, boost motivation and positively impact cognitive development. Most importantly, however, they accomplished all these in "a stress-free environment and they learnt while playing and enjoying themselves" (Alexiou & Chondrogianni, 2017, p. 430). The process of setting an alternative task to the level of the learner is essential for useful outcomes to emerge. According to Alexiou, Roghani and Milton (2019, p. 208) "even where learners possess considerable

vocabulary knowledge, they may be unable to show this if the format is unfamiliar or too challenging”.

Early childhood educators are called to make informed choices that can inspire and empower children’s learning potential and maximize language opportunities (Alexiou & Vitoulis, 2014). Teaching with new technologies, interactive material and alternative games today is a challenge and there is a rhetoric question: Can we really afford being game-phobic, game-ignorant, game-addicted or game-friendly?

3. Board games: Re-visiting the area of gameducation

“You have to learn the rules of the game.
And then you have to play better than anyone else.”
– Albert Einstein

3.1. The variety of the board gaming genres

Board games are a dominant entertaining hobby with several categories and subcategories. Their representation of real-life situations can range from having no inherent theme, like checkers, to having a specific theme and storytelling, like *Mysterium*. The rulebooks include some very simple rules, like *Taboo*, to those presenting a fully detailed game universe, like *Dungeons & Dragons*[®] – although most of the latter are role-playing games where the board is secondary to the game, serving to help visualize the game scenario. Usually the relation between time required to learn and the mastering curve is strongly correlated with a board game type and its features. Nevertheless, it is not necessarily associated with the complexity of rules or the number of its components.

The board games classification systems are several and depend on the researchers’ or game designers’ approach. To our knowledge, there is not actually a globally-recognized classification system for board games. Rather, a handful of researchers or experts have tried to make sense of the sheer diversity of game designs and premises with different levels of success. Moving from an extensive, quite chaotic and complex classification to a plethora of genres and considerable overlapping categories (Edwards, 2016), we follow a more concrete and straightforward board games classification suggested by expert board gamers⁴, designers and reviewers as more accurate.

On the other hand, Notebaert and Cornilly (2001) tried to fulfill the most important aim of the Flemish Games Archives which was to create an easy-to-classify system of the huge amount of different modern and new age board games, so that players, designers, educators, students and researchers can use those games and group them based on their similarities. They modified the *Deutsch Spiele-Archiv* classification, which describes a very strong, quite clear and straightforward insight into the different systems of board games. However, they include six major categories for board games (lay down games, role-playing games, thinking games, dice and be-lucky games, dexterity and action games and the rest) and three categories for card games (abstract card games, role playing card games and communication card games) with several subcategories for each one (from four to nine sub-classifications). For an extensive discussion about board game classification, see Sousa and Bernardo (2019).

Nevertheless, the typical question from researchers and educators is usually the following: *“I played that particular game and I would like to know what other games are similar. Can you give me a list of equivalent games or can you suggest me a board game genre that is proper for my classroom?”*

⁴ By TheKnight: <https://tableknight.com/board-game-genres/> and by Brian Truong: <https://gamecows.com/types-of-board-games/>

(adapted from Notebaert & Cornilly, 2001, p. 3). We suggest a classification system that is more compact and straightforward for an easier use by the non-expert board gamers and educators/researchers.

The key role in success or failure in using games in an EFL classroom is the selection of an appropriate board game, the relation to the real needs of the students and the active participation of the students. The selection of the appropriate game is based on three constituents, on some core criteria modified for board games for preschoolers.

The *age recommendation and appropriateness* are one of the three minimum required icons (with duration and number of players) on every board game box case. Therefore, following the same restrictions as with PEGI ratings for video games (Karasimos & Zorbas, Computer games and language teaching and learning: A multi-skills theoretical proposal, 2020), we should select board games that fulfill the minimum age suggestions by the designers and publishers. This criterion is based on the difficulty of the board game and depends on specific skills, such as speed, memory, attention, flexibility, comprehensibility, problem solving and language level.

Moreover, the *time factor* is essential and crucial for a preschool classroom; the duration range comes with a huge variety (from 10-15 minutes games to 360 minutes). Our ideal spot for preschoolers is around forty minutes plus or minus 10 minutes.

The third significant information for a board game is the *number of players* who can participate. Although it is a restrict factor for a normal play, for a teaching/learning play it can be easily modified. For a cooperative board game, the teacher can actually duplicate the number of players, and for a competitive one, the teacher can assign the role of each player to a small group (2 to 4 players). Therefore, the number of players can be expanded without issues or problems.

Furthermore, since our subjects are preschoolers, all the appropriate games are by default very easy. Otherwise, a difficult game is going to dramatically increase the complexity of the lesson as well as the danger of preschoolers feeling unconfident, afraid and overwhelmed. Additionally, the *language factors* are the most relevant for our (board) game-based learning and teaching theory (for more info check in Karasimos & Zorbas, 2020).

Moreover, less amount of information, less amount of language, limited number of rules, and the amount of time can be a real treat for a board game session in a pre-school and/or kindergarten. According to Arcario (1993) and Stempleski and Tomalin (1990), the *amount* is inversely proportional to *comprehension*.

3.2 The language independence factor

Board games can be broadly divided into two categories: language dependent games with text reading during the play and language independent games with no texts in their cards. Although several language dependent games do not require a high level of English, usually they are by definition more difficult to use in a classroom. We can build a specific rule or threshold for the language dependence factor in the case of preschoolers' scenarios. Nevertheless, the majority of these games contain a many-pages rulebook, bundles of cards with texts or include campaign modes with storybooks written in Advanced English (it is a kind of interactive and evolving literature-like gaming experience). Therefore, we strongly recommend avoiding language dependent board games for preschoolers.

On the other hand, all language independent games have the four characteristics that one looks for in board games for all-level of the CEFR English learners or generally for mixed languages learners.

The first one is that the games contain mostly *pictures*. For example, a common trait of the Eurogames category is that the same game can be used in any language by only translating the manual. In order to achieve that, game components rely on images, symbols and numbers rather than text to communicate what they do.

The second characteristic is the *simple rules* with interesting gameplay. Therefore, the golden rule of board gaming can be modified into “*if the game is complicated to learn and understand, it can be hard to teach it to a person who speaks a different language. It also makes answering questions about gameplay tricky*”. Based on the BGG database, the best language-independent games⁵ have simple rules you can teach by showing, not telling, which is a great task for teaching writing or speaking. Besides, compact and straightforward rules do not imply that it is a boring, simple game.

A third and skill-related feature of language independent games is that during the play, the *learners do not have to talk much*. If the students in your classroom speak different languages or are shy or they avoid the use of the spoken form of English, a game with lots of talking is not such a great idea for low-level language speakers. Trading, complicated bluffing games, and cooperative games all require a lot of talking. This is why they do not always work so well. Therefore, these subcategories without text are strongly recommended for advanced learners, since it requires a lot of talk and they are great types for speaking tasks and activities.

Finally, the fourth characteristic is the *absence of cultural references*. Games like *Pete The Cat’s Cupcake Party*, *Colorama*, *Hoot Owl Hoot*, *Dr. Seuss “I Can Do That!” card game*, *Charades for Kids*, *Sequence for Kids* or all-time classic games such as chess (see also Zapounidis in this volume) and backgammon are awesome picture-based games. Hopefully, they are not difficult for the learners to give good, yet obscure enough clues to do well in the game. This is quite important, since cultural associations differ from one country to the other (see compared discussion about it, Arcario, 1993). What is considered obvious in one country might not be obvious in another one. Most of them are target skill building, dexterity, challenges, cooperative, simple strategy, imagination, connection, spatial awareness, matching, etc.

3.3. Cooperative vs. Competitive board games

Cooperative (coop) board games are a general top-category in the board games hierarchy where players play as a group in order to achieve a goal together. Therefore, they are going to win or lose as a team. These types of board games emphasize collaboration over competition. A cooperative game attracts players who usually enjoy the social aspect of games and it can be characterized as the ideal genre to get new board game players interested in the area (Wilkes, 2018).

Either the players win the game by reaching a pre-determined objective, or all players lose the game, often by not reaching the objective before a certain event. For example, *Hoot Owl Hoot’s* goal (according to its manual instructions) is for the group to cooperate to get the owls back in the nest before the sun rises. During their turn, players must play a sun, if they have one (then proceed to the sunrise). Otherwise, they play one of their colour cards. The colour lets you move an owl closer to the next. You can play with a different number of owls (up to 6) to make it easier or harder. The game has enough strategy to be fun, and kids get to learn how to work together too.

⁵ It based on user’s rating, reviews and hotness factor of the BGG subscribers.

On the other hand, competitive games are the opposite of the aforementioned genre. They are like the classic never-ending games of Monopoly – instead, a new wave of games uses interesting themes, challenging tasks and innovative ideas to provide a guaranteed fun factor among the players (Nicholson, 2008). The main core rule of this category remains the player vs. player and the competition rises from every player's move, which creates antagonistic, stressful and heated moments. Nevertheless, to assure that learners are always entertaining themselves and learn outside of an adversarial environment, the educators should carefully choose the proper board games for their class.

To make a long story short, the ideal mode is definitely the cooperative one, since it offers a smooth and easy-going playing and learning environment. For those who avoid board games because of competitiveness around the table, the cooperative board games offer unique challenges that can only be solved together, so communication becomes the difference between winning and losing. These games emphasize teamwork rather than a mad scramble to victory. Playing board games with preschoolers is expected not only to strengthen the relationship connection between educator-pupil and pupil-pupil, but this playful learning has cognitive and metacognitive benefits for children.

During the board game sessions, children and youngsters acquire social skills such as oral communication and sharing, especially in coop mode. The board games sessions motivate players and pupils to increase their focus and to cultivate patience during their turn-waiting mode. Preschoolers enjoy the scenario to work on mastering letter recognition, word meaning, hand-eye coordination, and imagination. Along with these benefits, playing games together gives children a comforting space to learn how to play within the rules and boundaries of the game and then it will be easier to follow a grammar rule.

For preschoolers (even at the age of 3), much of understanding is quite difficult to predict, to anticipate, to control and to support. Therefore, we strongly believe that board games provide an unusual and uncommon sense of empowerment as preschoolers conquer this understanding through game sessions. Additionally, board games are an interesting medium to teach a preschooler about cooperation, teamwork and group effort. It resembles a Montessori-like case where older preschoolers play a few of these board games with the younger ones, so they can learn to work with people of different ages while also learning how to be fair. For more discussion regarding the benefits of collaborative games, see Zagal, Rick and His (2006).

3.4. CLIL-ing board games

Preschoolers remember information learned while having fun much longer than information learned through rote memorization. When kids have fun, they retain so much more information and which stays with them in the long-term memory; it stays much longer than it otherwise would. Especially if children already enjoy a certain subject, board games can help them make connections, and build on their existing knowledge.

Playing board games together strengthens social relationships. Playing games together is also a fantastic way to connect with the learners. Therefore, if an educator is going to use board games, why not choose board games that teach the educator how to have fun with them along with the process of teaching? This way, educators can expand their cooperation for combined themes during a board game play. Science board games can be an excellent supplement to formal science instruction or serve as a core part of a DIY science curriculum. Hopefully, language learning and language teaching are and can be part of any gaming session. For any CLIL scenario, there is always at least one board game that offers plenty of options for a more interactive, engaging and fun-learning experience.

Instead of using a formal science curriculum, the teachers should regularly check out science books from the library and the web to find answers to frequent and random science questions. Science board games are yet another way for us to reinforce the knowledge we already have and learn simple science facts at the same time! Science-themed board games are an increasingly popular way to learn about everything from eco-friendly behavior to simple chemical and space scenarios. The topics and the themes are almost limitless and since the board game invasion is worldwide, every country or civilization has influenced one way or another the game designers.

4. Examples and board game suggestions

Choosing a board game to play during teaching sessions with your toddlers and preschoolers is a tricky proposition. The children are developing rapidly, so it is not uncommon for them to throw a tantrum over, or be indifferent toward, something they loved moments earlier. This can happen with preschoolers' board games, too, but board games tend to bring people (and their moods) together in a way that other toys do not.

There are a few things, which teachers can look for when choosing a toddler game. The aforementioned criteria could be: the board game should be colorful, a little silly, and very simple and easy. If a game is too complex and not completely intuitive for your preschoolers, there might be some crying, screaming and definitely no learning at all. Although the basic baseline for most of the new board game is above 8- and 9-year old players, there are several board games for preschoolers.

We suggest *Katamino Duo*, *Animal Upon Animal*, *Bee Alert*, *Karuba Junior*, *Mystery Garden*, *Blokus*, *Cobra Paw*, *Click Clack Lumberjack*, *Dancing Eggs*, *Monza*, *Rhino Hero*, *Avocado Smash!*, *Bamboleo*, *Bandido*, *Bugs on Rugs*, *Catan: Junior*, *Chop! Chop!*, *Cockroach Salad*, *Coconuts*, *Echidna Shuffle*, *Enchanted Forest*, *Get Packing*, *Halli Galli*, *Happy Salmon*, *ICECOOL*, *Leo*, *Nope!*, *Peach Snaps*, *Penguin Party*, *PitchCar*, *Problem Picnic: Attack of the Ants*, *Qwirkle*, *Rat-a-Tat Cat*, *Rory's Story Cubes*, *SET*, *Speed Cups*, *The Magic Labyrinth*, *The Mysterious Forest*, *Walk the Plank!*, *Zitternix* among others.

For example, *Zeus on the Loose* is a great game for building quick addition skills – perfect for children (and grown-ups) ages 8+. It is also just downright fun, and the rounds go quickly, making it perfect for squeezing in a card game for math and language. Moreover, *Sum Swamp*, a popular mathematics board game for children just learning simple math calculations (such as addition and subtraction) is another pick from the learning pile of board games. In *Sum Swamp*, they will make their way over the crocodile shortcut and through the swamp to the finish by using the numbers on number dice in combination with a math symbol die to make additions and subtractions. They try to make it across the swamp, hopping across the boulders, which is a great combination of math, ecology and language.

Furthermore, *Sumoku* is great for mental mathematics, since in this crossword-like numbers game players seek combinations of numbers that add up to multiples of the “key number” (which you find from an included die). *Operation*, it is still fun as an adult, even more for children. It is simple for little ones but still challenging for preschoolers since they are learning language and biology.

One last example is *Mystery garden*, where one player takes a card on which a picture is displayed which is also on the game board. The next player may ask one question which can only be answered with a yes or no. In clockwise order, the next player may ask a question and so on. Whether the

answer to the question is yes or no, the playing-figure moves up one space in the direction of the castle. There are 15 spaces between the gate in front of the garden and the castle, so a maximum of only 15 questions can be asked. It is not allowed to ask a question about the location of the picture on the game board. Instead of asking a question, a player may also say what picture is on the card when he thinks he knows it.

5. Conclusions

It is fascinating to see the learning process at work with youngsters. There is an air of excitement about what happens in the classroom. Preschoolers produce spontaneous responses and build confidence, because they do not spend too much time thinking about what to say. An answer just comes to them. Sometimes it is right, sometimes it is not.

At any rate, games allow preschoolers to show a portion of their personalities, strengthen interpersonal connections with others, practice and improve several skills. Moreover, they allow the educator to observe who has mastered the information and who is (or is not) afraid of sharing it. This way, what children need more instruction on or what concepts can or cannot be performed adequately becomes even more apparent. The more teachers use games in their classroom, the more effective their teaching becomes. Furthermore, as one progresses, it becomes second nature to them to form groups, to share and follow rules and procedures, to be consistent, to deal with competition and collaboration as well as to evaluate the benefits of educational games.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Dimitris Grammenos for his detailed and insightful list with board games for pre-school and primary school learners.

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