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Greek teachers' beliefs on the use of games in the EFL classroom

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The present paper aims at exploring English language teachers' beliefs about using traditional and digital games with young learners and how these beliefs determine their attitudes. More specifically, 164 EFL teachers working in primary education completed a questionnaire and provided data regarding their views on using games, both traditional and digital ones, to teach English to young learners as well as the factors they consider restrictive in using games in the classroom. The findings revealed that restricted time is one of the main obstacles for playing games in the classroom while availability of technological equipment and familiarity with the use of technology can have direct consequences on teachers' methods, expectations and reservations in terms of playful activities used.



Η παρούσα εργασία έχει στόχο να ερευνήσει τις πεποιθήσεις των εκπαιδευτικών αγγλικής γλώσσας σχετικά με τη χρήση παραδοσιακών και ψηφιακών παιχνιδιών στη διδασκαλία μικρών μαθητών καθώς και τον τρόπο με τον οποίο οι πεποιθήσεις αυτές καθορίζουν τις στάσεις τους. Πιο συγκεκριμένα, 164 εκπαιδευτικοί αγγλικής γλώσσας, οι οποίοι εργάζονται στην πρωτοβάθμια εκπαίδευση, συμπλήρωσαν το ερωτηματολόγιο και έδωσαν στοιχεία αναφορικά με τις απόψεις τους για τη χρήση παιχνιδιών, τόσο παραδοσιακών όσο και ψηφιακών, στη διδασκαλία των αγγλικών σε μικρούς μαθητές, όπως επίσης και με τους παράγοντες που θεωρούν περιοριστικούς στην χρήση παιχνιδιών στην τάξη. Τα ευρήματα κατέδειξαν ότι ο περιορισμένος χρόνος είναι ένα από τα βασικά εμπόδια που τους αποτρέπουν από την χρήση παιχνιδιών στην τάξη ενώ η ύπαρξη τεχνολογικού εξοπλισμού και η εξοικείωση με τη χρήση της τεχνολογίας μπορεί να έχει άμεσες συνέπειες στις διδακτικές μεθόδους, τις προσδοκίες και τις επιφυλάξεις των εκπαιδευτικών ως προς τη χρήση δραστηριοτήτων με παιγνιώδη χαρακτήρα.

Key words: traditional games, digital games, teachers' attitudes, obstacles

1. Introduction

Playful activities have been extensively preferred in early education as a smooth transition from the relaxed home atmosphere to the demanding school environment since they can impart psychological, social and intellectual benefits for the learners (Calvo-Ferrer, 2017). Some aspects of games are closely related to Dewey's 'learning-by-doing' approach (Reese, 2011), which could facilitate the learning process by imitating the way we grasp the world outside the strict educational classroom in alignment with the social constructivism perspective (Vasalou, Khaled, Holmes & Gooch, 2017). At the same time, the current interests of young people, who are usually technologically competent before they start school, cannot be overlooked (Levy, 2009). In other words, language acquisition has to be redefined by incorporating the positive effects multimedia and technological advances can have (Al-Seghayer, 2001; Reinders, 2017), bearing in mind the need to enhance learners' 21st century skills (Csapó et al., 2012). Nowadays teachers differ not only in their purpose of using games in the classroom, but also in the mode of delivering them, that is traditional games- most often paper-based - or digital ones. This study investigates EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers' views regarding the use of games in the classroom and examines the parameters that influence teachers' choices.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. About games

The term "game" has been used for various activities, so the need to define it appropriately deems important. 'A game is an amusing and challenging activity which abides by certain rules, leads to the achievement of some objective(s) and entails decision-making. In due course, students may interact and/or compete against each other until the game finally comes to an end (Koufopoulou, 2015).

Games are supposed to create a positive atmosphere in the classroom for a variety of reasons. First of all, a game-like situation can entertain the participants and it is bound to motivate them. In this way, students can have fun while learning new structures, revising or accomplishing many more tasks. This relaxed atmosphere could have an impact on their eagerness to learn and could possibly enhance their memory (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Juul, 2001; Ramantani, 2012; Serderidou, 2013; Tsairi, 2007). Playful tasks can also be utilized to expose students to unfamiliar material and facilitate incidental learning, especially vocabulary items that appear in new and challenging contexts (McGonigal, 2011; Mohsen, 2016). Last, games can be exploited for evaluation and assessment purposes as the end of a game is associated with a score which does not appear as threatening to players/learners as in the case of other forms of assessment, such as tests, in a traditional classroom setting (Brown & Harris, 2014; Csapó, et al., 2012). In this sense, learner's autonomy and formation of a realistic self-perception can be facilitated so that children can reach self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943).

2.2 Teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards games

The integration of games in the curriculum might be partly a responsibility of curriculum designers but teachers are those who actualize the details and guidelines of any curriculum. Their key role refers both to implementing changes so as to use games and to overcoming any obstacles encountered during the process. As for the curricula relating to English language teaching in Greece, the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001) along with the new English curriculum for Greek

Schools (Dendrinou, 2013; Dendrinou & Karava, 2013) support the educational aspects of games. More specifically, it is asserted that

“[T]he use of language for playful purposes often plays an important part in language learning and development, but is not confined to the educational domain. Examples of lucid activities include: Social language games: [...] board and card games (Scrabble, Lexicon, Diplomacy, etc.)” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 56)

Research on teachers’ beliefs around the globe has pinpointed a restricted scope in the use of games. Teachers frequently employ playful activities as an entertaining break in a busy session (Rixon, 1981; Silvers, 1982), as a time-filler and/or as a way to praise good behavior and consequently motivate students to participate (Afentouli, 2009; Langran & Purcell, 1994; Michail, 2010; Ramantani, 2012; Wright et al., 2006). It is noteworthy that work taking place in a relaxed atmosphere can lower anxiety and foster learning since students’ attention and interest can be heightened (Silvers, 1982).

Another aspect that cannot be overlooked is the way digital games are treated in the classroom and the underlying teachers’ views. Personal experience, that is, the degree to which teachers play digital games themselves can be decisive. Obviously, a teacher who is an advocate and a keen player of this kind of games is expected to encourage playing digital games as a way to develop new literacies (Awan, 2011; Ertner et al., 2013; Sandford et al., 2006, Shin & Son, 2007; Wastiau et al., 2009). The idea of offering equal opportunities to all students regardless of their learning styles and individual abilities seems to be effectuated due to the flexibility a game-based context allows. In view of the needs of a mixed ability classroom, teachers believe that students with low performance in terms of their skills can be equally competent with their peers while being engaged in games (JGCC, 2012; Takeuchi & Vaale, 2014; Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003).

On the other end of the spectrum, there are also contradictory feelings towards the potential of games as “a teaching device” (Silvers, 1982, p. 29). *Figure 1* summarizes research conducted in different countries and reflects teachers’ skepticism towards games regardless of the advantages usually associated with them (for information about the Greek context see Section 4). As the integration of games in the curriculum is pre-empted if teachers acknowledge more obstacles than benefits to that, it would be worth presenting some reasons why teachers’ views should be taken into serious account.

First, language acquisition is supposed to take place during serious activities including learning grammar rules and extensive skills-based lessons, both of which are aspects missing in gaming. For fear of syllabus and time constraints, teachers seem to restrict their teaching to efficient rather than innovative methods (Casé, 2014; JGCC, 2012; Milatonic, 2012; Takeuchi & Vaala, 2014; Wastiau et al. 2009). Another parameter militating against games is classroom management (Watson et al., 2013). Students who play games can be full of energy, quite noisy and lacking strict discipline. Under these circumstances, teacher may feel afraid to lose control of the situation (Beavis et al., 2014). These parameters are opposed to a teacher-centered classroom as they leave the floor to students to be creative and become responsible for their own learning and requires new methods of assessment according to games specifications (Csapó et al., 2012).

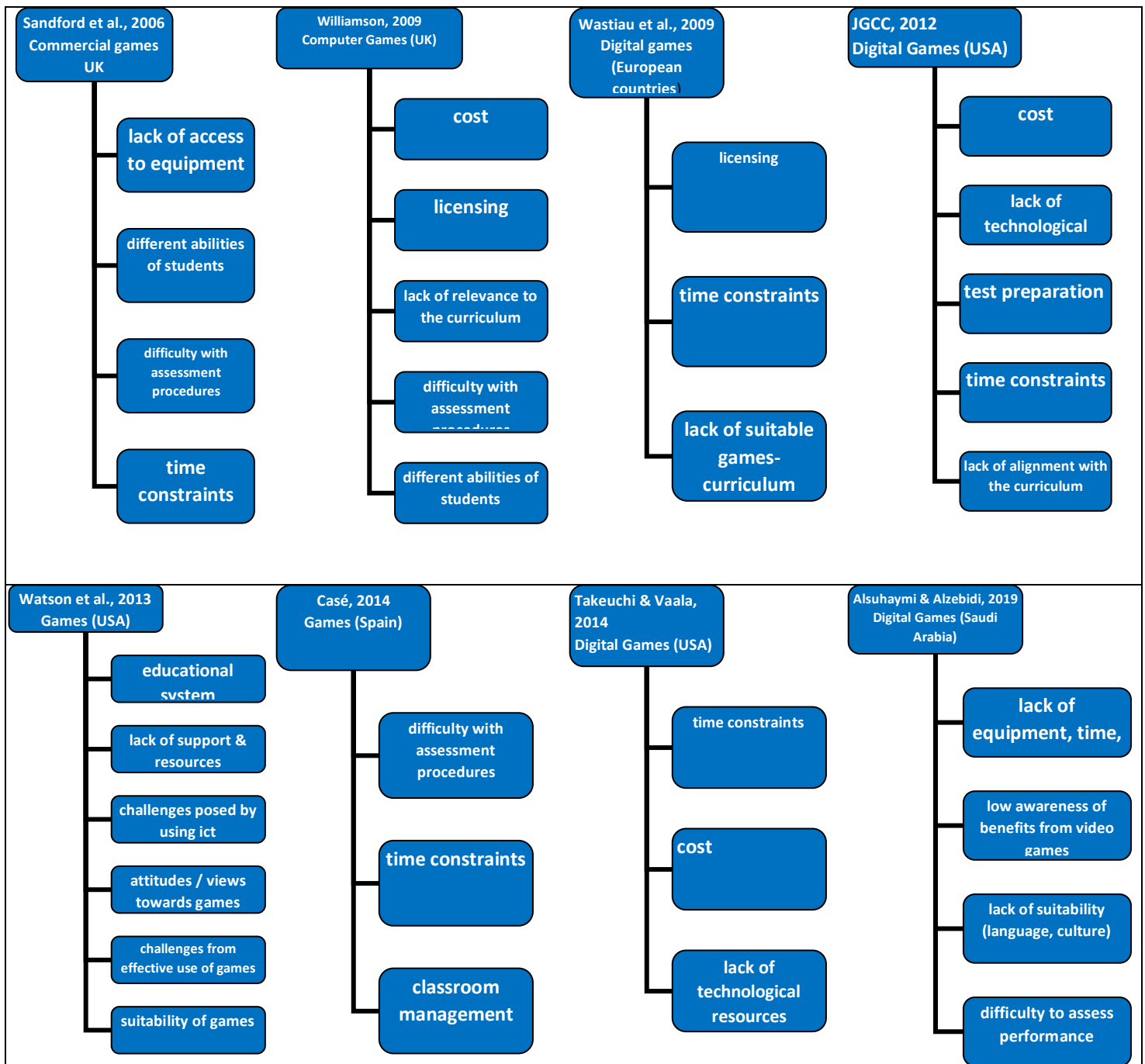


Figure 1: A visual presentation of barriers in the use of games

The surge of students’ interest in digital games has been alarming to some researchers who assume this kind of games boost anti-social behavior and are addictive. Although that could be an understatement based on misconceptions about technology as a whole, there are teachers who condemn digital games

and highlight the case of potentially vulnerable students (Williamson, 2009). The fast-paced technological innovations in tandem with lack of experience with ICT could be an inhibitor to teachers' decision to integrate technology of any form in their lessons (Mumtaz, 2000). Thus, inadequate teacher training justifies teachers' reluctance to implement game-based lessons. If cultural appropriacy is examined, lack of suitability is to some extent a well-grounded reason for the teachers to avoid some digital games (Awan, 2011). In countries like China and Saudi Arabia, local language and cultural identity are reasons to avoid digital games, especially those which express and portray the Western world (Alsuhaymi & Alzebidi, 2019, Chengxin, 2016/2017).

To cater for the needs of students, practical matters are to be examined. When a digital or non-digital game is chosen, equipment requirements are important. Not only are teachers skeptical in relation to the equipment readily available in their teaching contexts but without any financial support they often cannot afford to buy materials and gadgets which may differ from game to game (JGCC, 2012; Takeuchi & Vaala, 2014; Williamson, 2009). To make matters even more complicated in terms of finances, digital games are accompanied with licensing with limited time validity (Wastiau et al., 2009). Last but not least, lack of relevance to the teachers' objectives is an additional constraint to playing games (Mozelius et al., 2017).

3. Research design

3.1. Purpose of the study

The research presented in this paper focuses on using games as an educational tool and explores teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards playing games in the context of primary EFL education in Greece. To investigate teachers' views the research questions formulated are as follows:

- 1) What are Greek EFL teachers' attitudes towards games and digital games?
- 2) What are Greek EFL teachers' perceptions about the way games can be used?
- 3) What factors/barriers influence teachers' choices and use of games?

3.2. Research instrument: The questionnaire

In an attempt to collect factual, behavioural and attitudinal data a questionnaire was designed. It comprised close-ended questions which are easy to analyse statistically and minimize the chances for ambiguous responses often associated with open-ended questions (Dornyei, 2003). They also minimize the researcher's subjectivity which could potentially interfere in the research. There were four types of questions: checklists, numeric items, Likert scale items and a rank order scale. An electronic version was created using Google Forms and was distributed to teachers from various locations in Greece to collect efficient and accurate data. The purpose of the research was outlined in a cover letter accompanying the questionnaire. Emphasis was placed on the confidentiality and anonymity issues as well as on the value of the participants' role.

The questionnaire comprised six sections. An effort was made to order questions according to increasing difficulty as Bell (2005) proposed. In Section I participants completed personal information in check boxes. The following four sections included four- or five- item Likert scale questions. In Section II teachers gave details about the equipment available in their teaching settings along with the frequency

of computer use and online games played at school and at home. The questions in Section III referred to playing games in class (frequency, age and level of students involved) as well as the types of games and the teaching objectives they can serve according to Lewis and Benson's classification (1999). In the next two sections (IV and V) information about teachers' beliefs about students and computers and about special features of games (both traditional and digital) was collected. For space economy, the choices appeared next to the question items as presentation of choices does not have an impact on the answers (Javeau, 2000, p. 115). In the final section, teachers were given nine reasons why they might avoid playing games and had to rank them in order of importance.

Following the guidelines given in the literature, wording, length and piloting were considered. Each statement was four to twelve words long and idioms as well as words with negative connotations were eliminated. Present tenses and active voice were preferred throughout the questionnaire (Debaty 1967 quoted in Javeau, 2000). In its printed form, the questionnaire was 4-page long and after piloting it with colleagues it was estimated that ten minutes was enough time to complete all parts.

3.3. Participants

Convenience and snowball sampling were selected as the most appropriate means to explore the views of primary EFL teachers who live and work in different geographical areas of Greece. The questionnaire, which was designed by the author, became available online between December 2014 and March 2015, and was completed by a total of 164 teachers, 150 female and 14 male. Nearly half of the participants were between 31 and 40 years old and had been teaching for more than 25 years. State school EFL teachers comprised the majority of the sample and most of them held a Master's Degree and a computer skills certificate.

3.4. Data analysis

The data were analysed using SPSS 19. Frequency was analysed in the first four sections while Cronbach's alpha co-efficient was estimated for sections IV ($\alpha = .520$) and V ($\alpha = .714$) of the questionnaire (see Appendix) to check internal consistency of the questions.

4. Presentation of Findings and Discussion

4.1. Teachers' attitude towards traditional and digital games

The findings suggest that computers are treated as assistive means to the teachers' purposes. The vast majority of the participants take advantage of the resources they can find through computers both in their life and their lessons. In a similar vein, Korean teachers favour computers and online resources (Shin & Shon, 2007). As far as equipment is concerned, the availability of a computer lab did not coincide with a more frequent arrangement of a lesson there. A wireless connection and an interactive whiteboard (IWB) though, correlated with a higher frequency of playing online games ($p < .001$). An analogous trend was detected in the USA where IWBs occupied the second position in a national survey regarding the devices teachers prefer for digital games (Takeuchi & Vaala, 2014).

From the teachers' viewpoint, students treat computers as a resource of information as they do (59,1% Agree, 13,4% Strongly agree). In addition, those teachers who realised that their students were fond of

games, engaged them in digital games more often (Question 8 & 13, $p = .001$, Questions 8 & 14, $p = .009$). Not surprisingly, the teachers who play online games more frequently are those who give digitally prepared handouts to their students ($p = .001$). Yet, despite the beneficial and enjoyable features which are attributed to games in literature, in this study a number of participants feared that computer games may have an addictive nature. This was especially true among those teachers who had their computer skills certified ($p = .034$). That attitude might be a spurious conclusion due to the widespread use of computers and mobile devices by young people in Greece. Contrary to previous research by Awan (2011), the correlation between gaming as a free time activity and students' engagement in online games was not significant in this study. As regards the frequency of playing games, the data showed that half of the participants play games in class once or twice a month (45,7%) (Chart 1). As far as the setting is concerned, in private schools pupils are more often engaged in playful activities ($p = .017$) as the quality of the learning experiences is highly valued (Tsairi, 2007) and there is more room for amusement given the fact that English is taught on a daily basis in these schools.

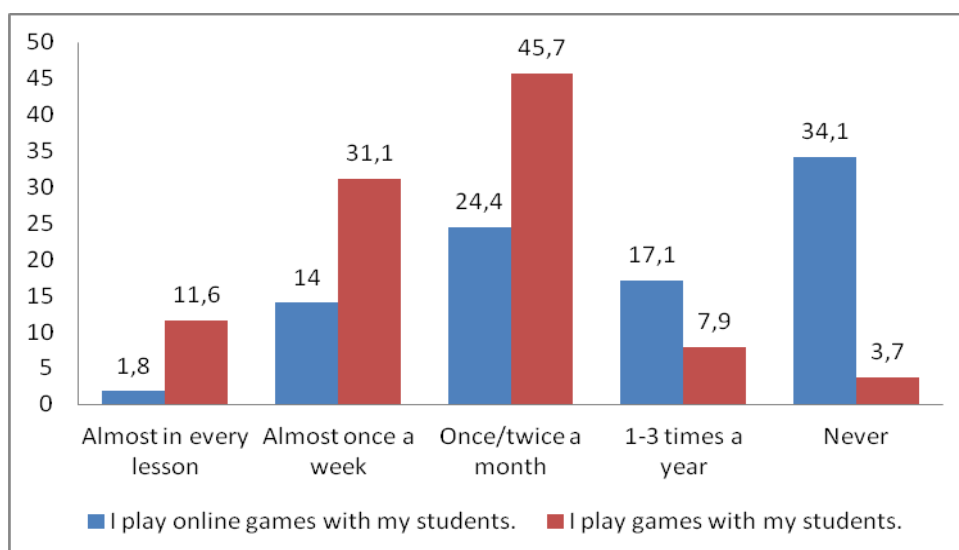


Chart 1: The percentage of teachers playing traditional and online games

Teachers' age is another parameter that seems to affect the choice of playing games as older teachers tend to play fewer games ($p = .038$). Regarding students' level, a sharp drop is observed in the occurrence of playful activities between A2 and B1 level of the Common European Framework (CEFR) in the private sector. Learners' level, then, can be a decisive factor as a demanding syllabus can hinder teachers from incorporating entertaining and relaxing activities in their lessons (Milatonić, 2012).

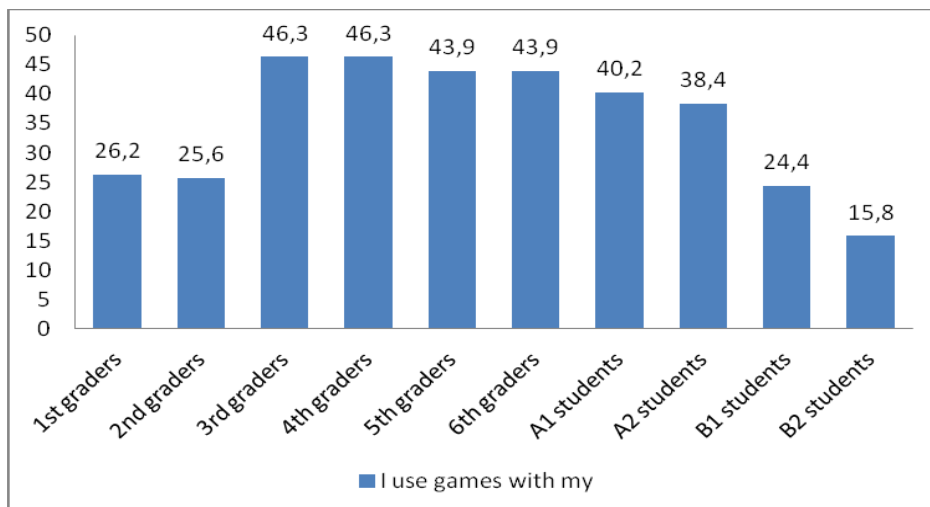


Chart 2: Grades and levels of students engaged in games more often

4.2. Teachers' perceptions about the use of games

The way teachers select their material is associated to their objectives. The games which were favoured by the teachers in the sample are word games, team games, guessing games and other games not included in the classification of Lewis and Bedson (1999). Having recognized the fun element of playful activities, half of the respondents reported that they always use them to entertain students and help them relax. Besides amusement, nearly 50% of the participants teach, practise and develop their students' vocabulary through games. In a regressing order, team games ($p = .005$), guessing games ($p = .02$) and singing and chanting games ($p = .036$) are the types of games applied in the introductions and practice of new words while word games were marginally correlated to being appropriate for revision and consolidation purposes ($p = .034$) (Charts 3 and 4).

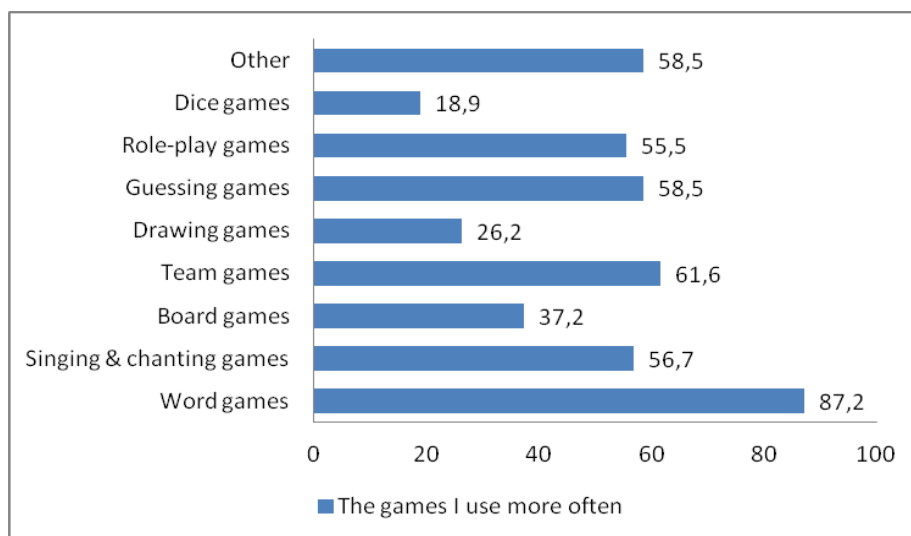


Chart 3: Types of games teachers use more frequently (percentage)

Unlike vocabulary, grammar, is not so commonly associated or revised through games. The data suggest that the traditional approaches are mostly used in teaching grammar. As Yolageldili and Arikan (2011) had claimed in the past, teachers advocate the beneficial role of games, yet, they stick to rules while teaching grammar.

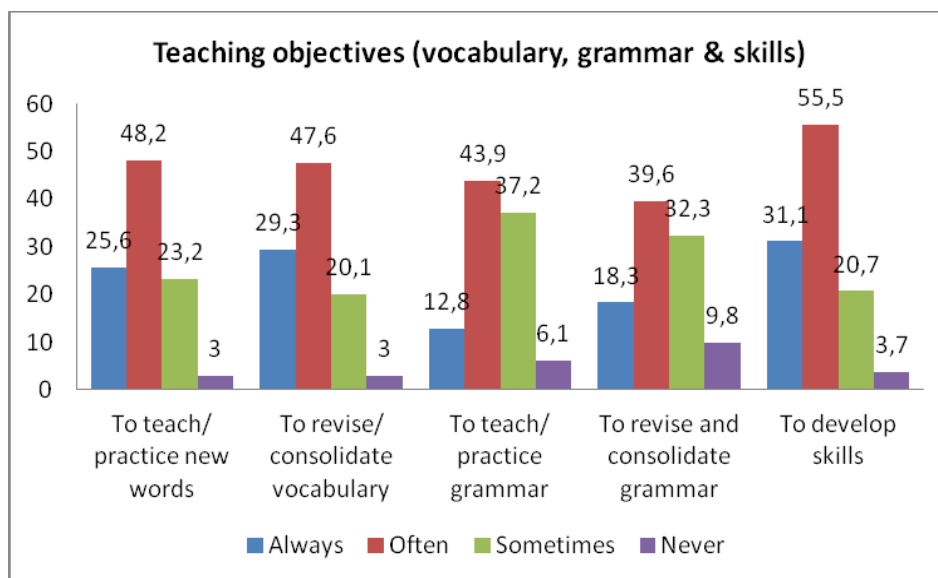


Chart 4: The frequency of using games for particular teaching objectives

Regarding other benefits of using games, most teachers expressed their skepticism about the contribution of games to autonomous learning and the idea of independent learning while playing displayed a low correlation to using games for assessment purposes ($p < .001$). (Neither agree or disagree 34,1% vs Agree 17,1% and Strongly agree 2,4%).

4.3. Factors influencing teachers' choices and use of games

In the last part of the questionnaire, the participants had to order nine statements describing the reasons forcing them to avoid playing games in class according to their importance. According to *Figure 2*, time constraints was the most prevailing reason teachers highlighted no matter what their age, experience, academic qualifications and ICT knowledge was. Lack of the necessary equipment was ranked second as a barrier, corroborating findings in other studies (JGCC, 2012; Sandford et al., 2006, Takeuchi & Vaala, 2014). It is self-evident that this is true about digital games and not about simpler games which require simple stationary found in any classroom, like a pen and paper or chalk and blackboard. Almost equally significant is the factor of noise caused while playing games. This factor appeared in the third place and does not seem to be connected to teachers' age or years of experience as one might expect. Older and more experienced teachers, though, are cautious towards using games with mixed abilities classes and are more worried about monitoring students' progress than younger participants (fifth and sixth statements in *Figure 2*). This trend could be attributed to the different methodology teachers have been trained to use and a general difficulty to follow changes over time (Lee, 2017).

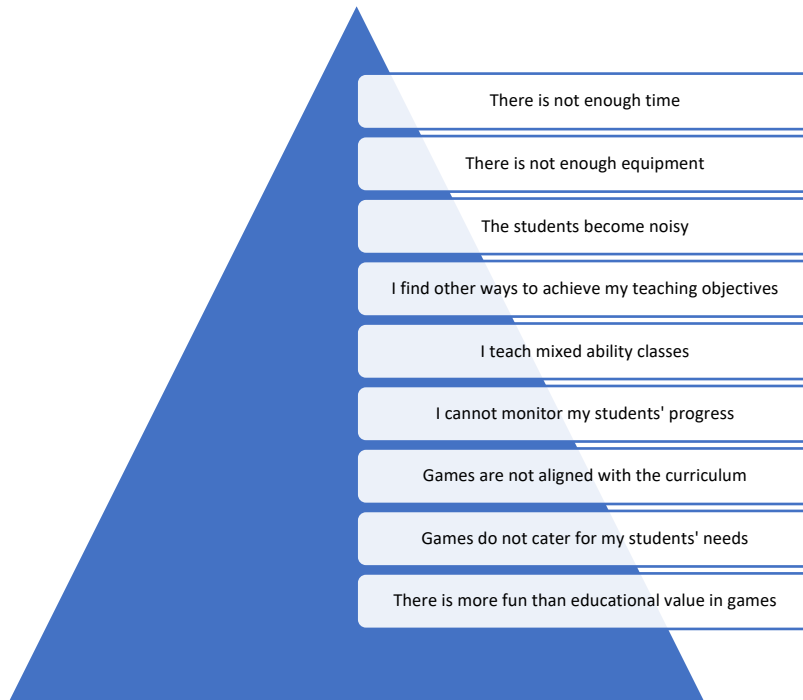


Figure 2: A visual presentation of barriers in the use of games (in order of frequency from top to bottom)

On the whole, the research findings have brought forth the positive attitude of teachers towards games. Yet, there are elements that require our attention. A prime example is the entertaining feature of games. To be more specific, although the participants admitted employing games to relax and have fun with their students, they rejected the entertaining attributes of games to a certain extent. Perhaps, a game is treated as a tool which can be entertaining if the teacher wants to have fun but it does not have such attributes per se. Similarly, access to a computer lab might only partially contribute to engaging students to games as lack of equipment was reported to be a shared demand of almost all teachers including those whose schools have an equipped computer lab. If students have ICT lessons on the same day they have English lessons, the pure existence of computers does not suffice for being at the position to using them. All in all, we can argue that teachers' responses indicated needs of improvement not only in teaching practices through training but also in foreign language education in general. By attending, game-based courses EFL teachers could expand their knowledge on ways to create and adapt games depending on their teaching objectives. Likewise, they would feel confident enough to manage their classes and learn how to assess their students' performance in games. To embrace the idea of using games as an integral part of the curriculum, teachers should be supported by the Ministry of Education and policy makers both practically, through reformations in the curriculum, and financially, by financing the purchase of equipment and resources.

5. Concluding remarks

As it has been discussed, teachers are in favour of games in class especially of non-digital ones and their choices hinge on their teaching goals which have been outlined together with certain features the teachers ascribe to games. An attempt to compare the findings to previous research revealed the international character of teachers' reasons for not using games. The Greek teachers' views on virtual reality games (VR games) would be an interesting area of future research given their international character which allows live communication of players from different countries. The educational benefits students could accrue from their engagement in this type of games could be more realistically examined after training teachers on playing VR games. There is certainly a lot of room for future research on playful activities given their popularity among people of various ages.

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Appendix I

Questionnaire

THE USE OF GAMES IN THE PRIMARY EFL CLASSROOM

I) PERSONAL INFORMATION

Please check the appropriate boxes.

1) Gender

Male

Female

2) Age

21-30

31-40

41-50

51 ≥

3) Current Employment

State school

Private School

Foreign Language School

Private tuition

Other (Please specify) _____

4) Years of Teaching Experience

1-5

6-10

11-15

16-20

21-25

26 ≥

5) Academic Qualifications

TEFL / CELTA Certificate University Degree Master's Degree in process

Master's Degree PhD in progress PhD

Other (Please specify) _____

6) ICT Qualifications

Educational Technology course

ICT Certification ECDL

TΠΕ – A

TΠΕ – B

Other

Please specify _____

II) AVAILABILITY OF EQUIPMENT

Please check the appropriate boxes.

7) I have a personal computer

a laptop

a tablet/ iPad

8a) In my teaching context there is

a computer in the teachers' office

a computer lab **If yes, answer also 8b.**

an interactive whiteboard in my classroom

an interactive whiteboard in a classroom I can use

wifi connection to the Internet **If yes, answer also 8c.**

internet connection in the computer lab

8b) I have lessons in the computer lab every

never 1-3 times once/twice almost once almost in

a year a month a week lesson

8c) I play online games with my students every

never 1-3 times once/twice almost once almost in

a year a month a week lesson

9) I use a computer in my free time to

- entertain myself
- play games
- communicate with friends
- find information on the Internet
- prepare handouts for my lessons
- find material for my lessons
- upload material
- Other _____

III) TARGET GROUP & KINDS OF GAMES

Please check the appropriate boxes.

10a) I play games with my students almost in every lesson 1-3 times a week once /twice a month almost once a year never

If yes,

10b) I use games with my

(For state/ private school teachers) 1st 2nd 3rd 4th 5th 6th graders

(For language school teachers) A1 A2 B1 B2 students

10c) The game(s) I use more often is/are Word games Drawing games
Singing & chanting games Guessing games
Board games Role-play games
Team games Dice games

Other _____

10d) I use games with my students

to help them relax	always <input type="checkbox"/>	often <input type="checkbox"/>	sometimes <input type="checkbox"/>	never <input type="checkbox"/>
to have fun	always <input type="checkbox"/>	often <input type="checkbox"/>	sometimes <input type="checkbox"/>	never <input type="checkbox"/>
to teach /practise new words	always <input type="checkbox"/>	often <input type="checkbox"/>	sometimes <input type="checkbox"/>	never <input type="checkbox"/>
to teach / practise grammar	always <input type="checkbox"/>	often <input type="checkbox"/>	sometimes <input type="checkbox"/>	never <input type="checkbox"/>
to develop skills	always <input type="checkbox"/>	often <input type="checkbox"/>	sometimes <input type="checkbox"/>	never <input type="checkbox"/>
to revise / consolidate vocabulary	always <input type="checkbox"/>	often <input type="checkbox"/>	sometimes <input type="checkbox"/>	never <input type="checkbox"/>
to revise / consolidate grammar	always <input type="checkbox"/>	often <input type="checkbox"/>	sometimes <input type="checkbox"/>	never <input type="checkbox"/>

IV) MY BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS & COMPUTERS

Please check the appropriate boxes.

	strongly disagree	disagree	neither agree or disagree	agree	strongly agree
11) Students enjoy using a computer.					
12) Students use a computer to find information.					
13) Students are interested in playing digital games in class.					
14) Students are interested in playing digital games at home.					
15) Traditional games can benefit dyslexic students.					
16) Computer games can benefit dyslexic students.					
17) High performing students can benefit more than low performing ones					
18) Students can easily become addicted to computer games.					

V) MY BELIEFS ABOUT GAMES & SPECIFIC CATEGORIES OF GAMES

Please check the appropriate boxes.

Through games in the EFL classroom students	Strongly agree	agree	neither agree or disagree	disagree	strongly disagree
19) can improve their communication skills					
20) can improve their spelling skills					
21) can improve their listening skills					
22) can improve their writing skills					
23) can improve their reading skills					
24) can practise what they already know					
25) can learn expressions, phrasal verbs, collocations etc.					
26) can learn without their teacher					
27) can assess themselves					
28) can relax					
29) are more eager to participate in classwork					

	strongly disagree	disagree	neither agree or disagree	agree	strongly agree
30) Commercial (non-educational) games can be used to teach in the primary classroom.					
31) Educational games are the only ones suitable for classroom use.					
32) Traditional games are more appropriate to my teaching context than digital games.					

VI) REASONS **NOT** TO PLAY GAMES IN CLASS

Why don't you use games in class? Please put the following reasons in order of importance to you. Start from 1 the most important to 9 the least important.

- There is not enough time.
- The students become noisy.
- There is not enough equipment.
- I teach mixed ability classes.
- Games do not cater for my students' needs.
- Games are not aligned with the curriculum.
- There is more fun than educational value in games.
- I find other ways to achieve my teaching objectives.
- I cannot monitor my students' progress through games.

Thank you very much for your help!

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