

Games as a Tool for Oral Skills

In daily second language teaching for adults, I often find it challenging to get my students to speak in their L2. There is no doubt that it is much easier to communicate in one's native language, especially in larger group settings where several people speak the same L1. Language is a part of one's identity, and therefore communication in L2 may feel unnatural, intrusive, and alienating. But practice makes perfect, so how does the teacher initiate communicative activities in daily instruction on L2 that learners can transfer to everyday use, thereby helping to break the unnatural, boundary-crossing, and alienating? The answer may be "games in teaching." Overall, games and learning are defined within two central concepts: game-based learning and gamification (Teglskov 2015).

Game-based learning involves a type of learning where the learner, for example, creates their own games or produces language in games. Gamification refers to the instructor incorporating small daily game elements into the teaching, but the teaching itself does not revolve around games. The teacher incorporates game elements to add aspects to the teaching that other educational tools cannot provide, such as competition, exploration, and role-playing (Erkman & Lomholt 2018).

In my daily teaching, the use of games is characterized by the concept of gamification, as the games are used as a goal for the participants' communication in L2. Oral skills are promoted by using the games as an object for negotiating meaning. Likewise, the games serve as a supplement to the daily teaching, where the goal is always to get the participants to interact and communicate with each other in L2.

VASADU – the game

At VUC Storstrøm, we have developed a communicative game for Danish learners. The game is called VASADU and was created in collaboration with VEU (Adult Continuing Education Support) and teachers of Danish as a second language at VUC Storstrøm. The game is aimed at students in Danish as a second language (DSA), Danish basic, and G-level at AVU (9.th grade), but it can also be used in DU2 and DU3. The goal is for participants to develop some of the aspects of the Danish language as bilingual individuals can benefit from, practicing in a different, informal, and fun way (Teacher's Guide VASADU), where oral communication is the focus, both in the organization and management of the game, but also in the collaboration within the games, which promotes oral skills among the participants.

It is the teacher's role to divide the students into playing groups of 6-10 people, depending on how many are in the class. It is advantageous for all groups to have an

equal number of participants because the participants in each group need to pair up in twos. This means that a group of six people sits together in pairs, resulting in three pairs in the group. Each group is given a game and must then start reading the rules. Once the participants have understood the rules, it is up to them to take ownership of the gaming experience, as the game functions as a student-led activity, where the teacher's role is to observe the students and actively listen to their conversations. The teacher has the opportunity to identify situations where the students encounter linguistic challenges or demonstrate a high level of language proficiency, which can be used later in the summary. However, the intention is for the group of players to come to an agreement on defining the rules, etc.

The game consists of 1 game board, cards within 5 basic categories, 12 choice cards, 1 first chooser card, 5 x 5 tokens, and 1 hourglass. The 5 basic categories are as follows:

1. Parts of speech (yellow)
2. Form sentences (green)
3. New words (red)
4. Guess a job (blue)
5. Word domino (purple)

All five basic categories can be replaced with expert choice cards. As the students become more skilled, there is a need to increase the difficulty level of the tasks. This is done by replacing some of the basic choice cards with expert choice cards.

The tasks vary within the five basic categories, but the starting point is that the players work in pairs to solve a task together. To vary the tasks, one can replace "parts of speech" with "prepositions," "guess a job" with "math words," and "form sentences" with "sentence jumble," thus ensuring that there are always five categories in the game. The couple that starts solves together the task that corresponds to the chosen choice card. When the time is up, the result is shown to the rest of the player group, which collectively assesses whether the task has been completed so that a point can be awarded.

Communicative Language Pedagogy

Two important elements must be considered in determining the legitimacy of the game in a communicative context:

1. Does the game meet the criteria for being a communicative activity?

2. Does the game promote the acquisition and use of L2?

First, the concept of communicative language pedagogy must be considered.

Communicative language pedagogy means that the learner uses their communicative competencies in the teaching process. Communicative competence is based on the understanding that language is learned by being used in meaningful situations where there is a genuine exchange of meaning, as it is important for the conversation partners to understand each other. When discussing communicative competence, the focus is on the individual, meaning a competence that an individual has or is in the process of developing. The linguistic aspect of communicative competence encompasses the four skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing, and it does not refer solely to speaking, which has been a widespread perception until now (Lund 1999).

One can assess communicative activities based on the established criteria by Pica, Kanagy & Falodun, as described by Karen Lund in the article “Is Communicative Teaching Communicative?” (Lund 1999):

1. Does the activity require two-way communication – must both parties contribute in order to solve the task?
2. Do the parties have the same/convergent goals? Are they moving in the same direction to solve the task?
3. Is there an inherent requirement in the activity for the parties to arrive at, for example, one common solution?

VASADU is based on a communicative language pedagogy that focuses on interaction among participants, where the criteria for communicative activity are met. The participants in the game work in pairs, and both parties must contribute to solving the task. All parties share the same goal: to complete the task within a given timeframe. Everyone must arrive at a common solution together with the rest of the group. The activities in the game require the learner to "understand input, engage in meaning clarification when there is something they do not understand, and provide feedback on what they hear/receive feedback on what they say" (Lund 1999).

Similarly, there are acquisition elements in the game, as participants are faced with tasks where they are compelled to negotiate meaning (ibid.). This applies both in pairs and collectively within the entire group, where the tasks encourage the receiver to ask for clarification. Thus, communication becomes not just the goal, “[...] communicative activities are the very means through which one learns the new language. One learns to communicate by communicating” (ibid.). The purpose of the

game is not, as such, the competitive element of being first. If one is a skilled strategist, one can quickly figure out which categories one excels in and thus be clever in choosing them, but viewed as a communicative activity that stimulates conversation in L2, it is extremely useful. Participants are communicatively challenged, as the task requires mutual communication both verbally and non-verbally, for example in "guess a job," which can be compared to "charades," as well as encouraging hypothesis formation and testing. For instance, there was a couple who, in the task "word classes," had to write five adjectives based on a picture and wrote the word 'beard.' The rest of the participants in the group thought they meant the noun 'beard' and therefore would not accept the couple's answer. In this way, both senders and receivers should understand and clarify the meaning of the word. The game also meets the requirement for student autonomy, as all participants in the group must agree on whether the task has been solved correctly. If there is no consensus, participants must present their arguments, answers, and especially their academic understanding. Thus, there are some external frameworks for the game, but the content helps the participants to assist each other in solving it.

The game, as mentioned, promotes an autonomous learning environment where the learner has the opportunity to develop language on their own terms and not just in relation to the closed questions in the game, for example, in the form of discussions that arise along the way, or the rules of the game that need clarification. For instance, I have experienced a discussion in a group between two pairs about whether the written words should also be spelled correctly, or if the task was completed simply by having written the words down. The group had to come to an agreement on how to solve this problem. In this way, communication in L2 is involved as problem-solving tasks, not only in relation to solving the game's challenges, but as applicable, relevant communication with arguments and viewpoints as "in the wild" (Eskildsen & Wagner 2018), where language learning occurs implicitly. The teacher's role is like a helper in extreme need, available when necessary. Otherwise, the teacher stays in the background and lets the students solve the challenges themselves. The teacher's role is also to provide feedback when the rest of the group falls short. In this way, oral communication is constantly at play, as tasks must be solved in pairs and through communication, and when communication fails, there is a helping hand from either the rest of the group or the teacher.

The game provides an additional opportunity for language acquisition, as participants receive answers to whether, for example, the word 'freezer' is a verb or a noun. This leads to language acquisition through a task rather than through teaching the individual components of the language – grammar is incorporated and discussed in

context, curiosity arises, and clarification of the problem occurs – learning takes place. The category "sentence jumble" works with syntax. Here, it can be a significant challenge to form the correct sentence from, for example, the words: some – friends – the parents – had – and – good – helpful. This leads to good conversations among the participants and the involvement of the teacher. The game also provides opportunities for differentiation. As previously mentioned, the teacher's role in this game is to observe and guide. One gets the chance to discover the learner's use of hypothesis formation and testing, as well as communication strategies (Holm & Laursen 2010). Based on this, participants can be divided into different groups next time they play, for example, placing the verbally strong together in one group and the verbally weak in another to avoid always having the same individuals speaking, thus allowing others to have a chance to participate and become familiar with the language.

The summary of the game can be shaped by the teacher as they choose. I have based it on the challenges that have arisen during the game, for example in the category "sentence jumble," where it is difficult for the entire group, and not just the pair assigned the task, to find the correct solution. Or to provide examples of the complexity of language in relation to the fact that words can have multiple meanings and parts of speech. So, to summarize what led to discussions and questions along the way. I have observed that the use of communicative games in teaching is an important element in second language acquisition and in keeping learners engaged in communicating in L2. Games encourage communicative language actions that can resemble "in the wild" (Eskildsen & Wagner 2018), for example in the discussions across the team that arise during the task-solving process. The games can vary greatly and are something that both teachers and students can produce themselves, making the games relevant to the daily teaching learning objectives and topics.



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