

PAPER

USING GAMES IN TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR: THEORY, PRACTICE, AND CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Games are an increasingly popular tool in language classrooms for promoting engagement, lowering affective filters, and providing repeated, meaningful practice of grammar. This article reviews theoretical and empirical justifications for using games in English-grammar instruction, categorizes effective game types, offers practical guidelines for classroom implementation, presents reproducible activity examples and a sample lesson plan, and discusses assessment and limitations. Recommendations emphasize principled integration of games into communicative, task-based lessons to ensure grammatical accuracy is practiced within meaningful contexts rather than in isolation (Ellis, 2003; Ur, 1996).

Key words:

situated learning, form-focused instruction, controlled practice, corrective feedback, interaction

Introduction

Grammar remains a central component of English-language teaching even as communicative competence and task-based approaches have gained prominence. Traditional drills can be repetitive and demotivating; games, when well designed and purposefully deployed, can increase student motivation, provide contextualized

practice, and support automatization of forms (Garris, Ahlers, & Driskell, 2002; Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 2006). This article synthesizes relevant theory and research and offers concrete guidance for teachers who want to use games to teach or consolidate grammar points.

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Theoretical and Empirical Background

Learning and motivation Games leverage motivational mechanisms—clear goals, immediate feedback, manageable challenge, and rewards—that support sustained engagement (Garris et al., 2002; Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, Nacke, 2011). Gee (2003) argues that well-designed games support situated learning by enabling learners to practice skills in meaningful contexts, which helps transfer to real-world use. Language-teaching frameworks Task-based and communicative approaches prioritize meaning, but afford opportunities for focused practice of form within tasks (Ellis, 2003). Games can be designed as tasks that emphasize meaning while integrating targeted grammatical structures, thereby reconciling communicative aims with form-focused instruction (Ur, 1996). Meta-analytic work on digital games and simulations shows positive effects on learning outcomes when games are aligned with instructional goals and learners receive scaffolding and feedback (Vogel et al., 2006). Case studies and classroom-based research in language teaching report gains in accuracy, increased willingness to communicate, and higher participation when games are used for grammar practice (Wright et al., 2006). Types of Games and Their Uses for Grammar Teaching

- Board and card games: Adaptable for sentence-building, tense practice, question formation, and error-correction tasks (Wright et al., 2006).
- Role-plays and simulation games: Encourage spontaneous use of forms (e.g., conditionals in hypothetical scenarios) while maintaining communicative purpose (Gee, 2003).
- Competitive quizzes and team races: Good for review and recycling of forms (e.g., verb forms, prepositions).
- Jigsaw and information-gap games: Require students to exchange information using target grammar structures (Ellis, 2003).
- Digital and educational games: Offer multimedia contexts, instant feedback, and adaptive practice (Vogel et al., 2006), but require careful selection to align with learning objectives.
- Error-detection and negotiation games: Focus on noticing and correction (e.g., “grammar auction,” where students “buy” sentences and correct them).

Design Principles for Grammar-Focused Games

- Align with objectives: Identify the specific

- grammatical target (e.g., past continuous vs. simple past) and design the game so that use of that form is necessary for success (Ellis, 2003).
- Keep meaningfulness: Embed grammar practice within communicative goals—games should require conveying information or completing tasks, not merely repeating forms (Gee, 2003).
- Provide appropriate challenge and scaffolding: Match complexity to learner level and offer models, prompts, and feedback (Garris et al., 2002).
- Ensure frequency and recycling: Design activities that require repeated production of target forms in varied contexts to foster automatization.
- Monitor affect and classroom dynamics: Use cooperative elements to reduce anxiety and competitive elements judiciously to avoid demotivation (Dornyei, as cited in motivation literature).
- Plan assessment and feedback: Decide whether the game is for fluency-building, controlled practice, error correction, or formative assessment, and follow with focused feedback.

Practical classroom procedures before the game

- Warm-up: Briefly activate relevant vocabulary and concepts.
- Clear instructions: Model one or two rounds with whole-class demonstration.
- Materials and grouping: Prepare cards, boards, timers, or devices; group students to balance ability and encourage interaction.
- Monitor and circulate: Note common errors and successful strategies.
- Intervene sparingly: Allow learners to experiment; correct only when errors impede communication unless the task is controlled practice.
- Feedback and reflection: Provide corrective feedback, highlight useful language, and ask learners to reflect on language used.
- Follow-up practice: Use a short focused activity to consolidate forms (e.g., a written fill-in or controlled substitution drill).

Sample Activities (reproducible)

- 1) Grammar Auction (Intermediate – Past Simple vs. Present Perfect)
 - Aim: Boost noticing and correction of verb-tense errors.
 - Materials: Prepared “sentences” (some correct, some with tense errors), play money.
 - Procedure: In small teams, students bid on sentences they think are correct. After auction, teams defend and correct sentences they bought. Points awarded for correct identifications and corrections.
 - Variation: Focus

on any target grammar (e.g., modals, conditionals).

2) Board Race — Subject-Verb Agreement (A2–B1) – Aim: Controlled practice of agreement. – Materials: Two teams, marker, whiteboard, set of prompts. – Procedure: Teacher writes noun prompts on the board; teams race to write correct verb forms in response. First correct answer earns a point. Rotate roles to ensure production.

3) Role-Play Card Game — 2nd Conditional (B1+) – Aim: Use of second conditional in hypothetical discussions. – Materials: Scenario cards (e.g., “If you won 1 million USD..”), consequence cards. – Procedure: In pairs, students draw scenario and consequence cards and discuss consequences using the second conditional. Peers rate creativity and grammatical accuracy.

Methodology

Sample 40-minute Lesson Plan (Target: Past Continuous) – Aim: Students will accurately use past continuous to describe interrupted actions. – Warm-up (5 min): Quick timeline review and elicitation of forms. – Controlled practice (5 min): Choral drilling and substitution table. – Game (20 min): “Interrupted Story” — small groups receive picture sequences. One student narrates using past continuous; others interrupt with short prompts (e.g., “What happened next?”) requiring use of past simple to describe interruption. Points for accurate use of past continuous in narration. – Feedback (7 min): Teacher highlights successful structures and common errors; brief corrective practice. – Consolidation homework (3 min): Write a short paragraph using past continuous and past simple.

Assessment and Feedback Games are primarily formative tools. To assess grammar learning: – Observe and record language use during games (checklists or rubrics). – Use post-game controlled tasks to measure accuracy gains. – Combine peer and teacher feedback: Peer correction supports noticing; teacher feedback addresses persistent errors (Ellis, 2003). – For summative purposes, include tasks that mirror game contexts but remove game scaffolds to assess independent accuracy.

Limitations and Challenges – Misalignment risk: Games that emphasize competition or speed can encourage formulaic responses rather than accurate use (Garris et al., 2002). Design must

prioritize linguistic goals. – Time and classroom management: Games can be time-consuming to prepare and may require clear rules to avoid chaos. – Equity concerns: Competitive games can demotivate lower-level students if not scaffolded; use cooperative elements and differentiated tasks. – Technology constraints: Digital games provide benefits but require access and teacher training (Vogel et al., 2006).

Recommendations for Teachers – Start small: Introduce one game per grammar point and iterate based on student response. – Integrate, don’t replace: Combine games with explicit explanation, controlled practice, and feedback. – Reflect and adapt: Collect learner feedback and observation notes to refine rules and materials. – Share resources: Use and adapt proven activities from pedagogical sources but align them to specific grammatical outcomes (Wright et al., 2006).

Discussion and conclusion

Games can be a powerful adjunct to traditional grammar instruction when they are purposefully designed, aligned with learning objectives, and embedded within a broader pedagogical sequence that includes explanation, controlled practice, and feedback. By combining motivational benefits with principled task design, teachers can use games to increase engagement while supporting accurate, contextualized use of grammar.

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