

Can Grammar be taught through Games?

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□ ABSTRACT □

Given the pursuit of excellence in second language (L2) teaching, this paper aims at discussing the issue of teaching grammar through game activities. Some definitions of grammar, followed by the place of grammar in L2 teaching will be introduced. In approaching games as a good way to teach grammar, some background information on games will be presented with regards to its place in language description nowadays. To give punch line in advance, what this paper will suggest is that games in language teaching must depend on such factors as the learners' age and level, the motivation and interest in games, the size of group, the time devoted for the course and so on. This paper concludes that game activities, no matter how ingenious and sophisticated, are only one avenue of approach to improving language teaching.

Key words: Second Language (L2) - Grammars- Game and game-like activities

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مناقشة بحثية حول إمكانية تعليم القواعد النحوية من خلال النشاط

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□ الملخص □

يتناول البحث المقدم مسألة تعليم قواعد اللغة من خلال النشاط والتي تستنبط أهميتها من السعي وراء التفرد في تعليم اللغة. وفقاً لذلك سيستعرض البحث بعض التعاريف النحوية، يتبعها التعريف بالمكانة التي يرتقيها النحو في مجال تعليم اللغة. سيركز البحث على الموازنة بين الصيغة و التطبيق. إن استخدام النشاط كوسيلة مجدية لتعليم القواعد النحوية، يدفع بالبحث إلى استعراض جدوى استخدام النشاط وتوضيح مكانته في مجال توصيف اللغة في الوقت الحاضر. يستخلص البحث عدة جوانب من أبرزها اعتماد النشاط في مجال تعليم اللغة على عدة ركائز، أهمها: عمر المتعلم ومستواه اللغوي، حافز المتعلم واهتمامه بالنشاط، عدد أفراد المجموعة الواحدة، الوقت المكرس للدورة الدراسية، وما إلى هنالك. في النهاية، يقدم البحث عدة اقتراحات من بينها أن النشاط ماهر إلا أحد السبل لتطوير تعليم اللغة وذلك بغض النظر عن صعوبته.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة الأجنبية كلغة ثانية - القواعد النحوية - التعلّم باستخدام النشاط

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Introduction:

This paper discusses the issue of teaching grammar through game activities, which derives its importance from the pursuit of excellence in language learning and teaching. At this point it is probably a good idea to start with some definitions of grammar, followed by the place of grammar in language teaching. In this context, researchers speak of the *grammars* of a language rather than of the *grammar*. Therefore, different methods of teaching a language will be presented and two of them will be discussed individually; that is to say, structural and communicative. What I would like to take into consideration here is that balance between the product and process or form and function. To take an example of how to achieve that balance in the field of language description, a proposition of an effective way to teach grammar will be presented; namely, games and game-like activities.

In approaching games as a good way to teach grammar, some background information on it will be presented with regards to its place in the language description nowadays. This paper goes a step further towards investigating the function and influence of such activities in the language description. The focus will be mainly on some of the various functions of games in the second language (L2) classroom that operate most effectively through pair work and group work. Moreover, games influence the roles of both teachers and learners and bring them closer in the language classroom. What is important here is that interaction in the game activities; namely, the teacher-learner *ping-pong* exchange.

To give punch line in advance, what this study will conclude is that games in the language learning and teaching will not be just a way to analyze grammar but rather utilization of what we already have: speakers of the language. To achieve this target appropriately, games and game-like activities must depend on the learners' age and level, the motivation and interest in games, size of group, the time devoted for the course and so on.

This paper will not be the first, of course, to point out and analyze teaching grammar through game activities. In the conclusion, I will give an overall view of the topic under discussion and my own point of view. I will suggest that game activities, no matter how ingenious and sophisticated, are only one avenue of approach to improving language teaching. Anyway, it's worth a try.

What is Grammar?

Before starting to talk about the place of games in the grammar description and whether it can contribute effectively to the mastery of a language, it is suitable here to start with a definition or two of grammar:

I. Grammar is the rules of a language set out in a terminology, which is hard to remember, with many exceptions appended to each rule (Rivers, 1968).

II. Grammar is the way a language manipulates and combines words (or bits of words) in order to form longer units of meaning (Penny UR, 1988).

What, then, is grammar? Batstone (1994) remarks that grammar is 'an immensely pervasive phenomenon'. People used to accord the rules of grammar a very special position. These rules have been taught since schools were established and may not be questioned. They describe ways, in which people can write and say, and anyone who had sufficient knowledge of these rules means that he has learned the language.

The Place of Grammar in Language Teaching

To many people, language learning and teaching is essentially a question of grammar. Hence, language teaching should concentrate on linguistic units or forms or language structure, which is the trend of the day. Despite the fact that the mastery of a language entails knowledge of the rules of grammar, some attempts of a new description of the language have arisen. The goal is to shift the emphasis in the area of grammar from the formal study of grammatical structures to the more actual use of language. Consequently, the interest in the language description, which has been keen during the last few decades, results in the emergence of several new approaches to language description. It is therefore more appropriate at the present time to speak of multiple *grammars* of a language rather than of the *grammar*: formal grammar, functional grammar, transformational grammar and the minimalist grammar. The newer approaches to grammar lead to different teaching methods such as structural and communicative which, in turn, require more explanation and will now be discussed individually.

On the one hand, the structural approach to language teaching is 'more top-down, giving forms and structures, a focus on form rather than meaning or use' (Good, 2003). Such focus on form, as Ellis (1985) states, aids the acquisition of grammatical knowledge. Grammar in this approach is, therefore, an essential part of the *product* of language teaching and this, in turn, entails adopting the product-based teaching method as Good (2003) points out that 'the product approach (tightly controlled target language) utilizes noticing and structures, analyzing language into structures, notions and functions'. The approach to structure grammar is associated with the names of such linguists as: Bloomfield, Fries and Bloch. The focus is, as Fries (1957, p. 8) points out, on the grammatical system and 'physical terms' in which the linguistic units can be combined. Fries goes further to suggest that the essence of grammar lies in the structural meanings which are 'specifically singled by a complex system of contrastive patterns'. For instance, by analyzing the members of a sentence, one is supposed to know the meaning of the sentence. In other words, it lets language use to take care of itself.

On the other hand, the communicative approach (hereafter CA) to language teaching and learning is 'more bottom-up, starting from content and task-based, completing a task' (Good, 2003, p.27). Therefore, grammar in this approach is considered to be a major part of the *process* of language learning. The emphasis is on the use of L2 without a thorough understanding of its systematic operation. Such emphasis manifests itself in the process-based teaching method as learners, in this context, are very fluent in using the language for communicative purposes. By focusing on meaning and self-expression, learners develop their ability to actually use a language according to their communicative needs. In this context, Littlewood (1981, p. 77) points out that 'learning communication seems to be an alternative to learning grammar'. Structure is not that single most important factor in language teaching and language learning. To exemplify it, let us take a sentence such as 'why don't you close the door?' According to Structuralists, it is unambiguously an interrogative. But from a communicative point of view, it is ambiguous as it may function as a question or as a suggestion or even as a complaint. Therefore, the communicative competence and rules of use must be given more emphasis in language learning. As Littlewood puts it 'grammar exists not for its own sake but in order to serve communication'

(http://cd.ed.gov.hk/eng/references/all_levels/grammar_communicative.doc).

What I should like to do here is to suggest that the grammatical system and structural patterns of every language enable learners to use more effectively this language

for communication. That is why linguists such as Widdowson (1978) wanted to make a balance between the two approaches. In other words, knowledge of the structural system of a language may be transitory unless it is described in terms of communication within a meaningful context. This leads to the interaction between the product and process in language teaching. Wilkins (1974) states that ‘the notion that an individual can develop anything other than a rudimentary communication ability without an extensive mastery of the grammatical system is absurd’. One could go on but the message is clear: ‘there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless’ (Hymes, 1971). Thus, any proposition of a successful way to teach grammar will have to take into consideration both product and process or form and function. On this basis the following few pages propose to devise a suitable way to teach grammar; that is to say, games and game-like activities as shown by figure (1) below:

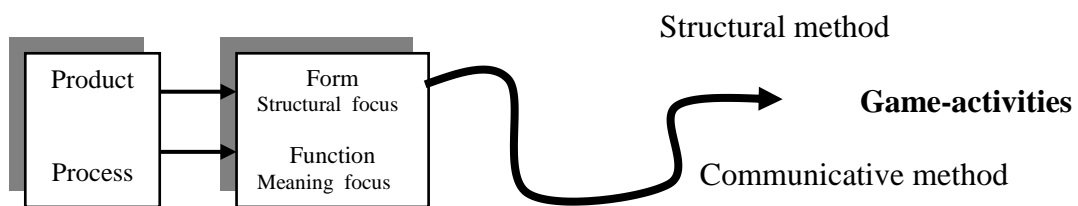


Figure (1) Interdependence between Product and Process or Form and Function in Game-activities

Games and Grammar Teaching/ Learning Background of Grammar Games

There is neither to my knowledge a particular person who is recognized as the founder of using games in L2 description nor a long history behind using it. John Harvey and John Francis worked together in developing the notion in the early 1970s. It is an undeniable matter that others such as Delbert Groberg, Wade Fillmore and Michael Sudlow have contributed as well to the concept and elaboration of this notion, and gave prominence to what came to be referred as grammar games.

Therefore, many books and articles have been written considering the juxtaposition of grammar and games. Rinvoluceri (1984), for example, demonstrates the fact that there is a place for ‘an innovative approach to grammar’ in the classroom. There seems to be a ready market for more books describing more grammar games for language classes. Today, there is hardly a language teacher who is not interested in using games to remove the dustsheets from the long-hidden grammar and to engage L2 learners in game-like activities in order to develop their grammatical competence and communicative competence alike. Now the idea of classroom games no longer meets with disapproval.

Function of Games in the field of Grammar

Usually when L2 teachers think of *grammar*, they think of drilling methods and dictation of rules but this is not sufficient for acquiring a language effectively as a language can be learnt only by using it. As Corder (1981) puts it ‘efficient language teaching must work with, rather than against, natural process, facilitating and expedite rather than impede learning’ (p.7). Game-activities can be very useful at this point since they can provide a framework for the correct use of language and are at the same time a means of generating conversation in addition to their motivational value as an enjoyable

form of activity. Needless to say that games strike a balance between encouraging learners to use the language freely and correcting their mistakes. Crossword puzzles, for instance, do the job effectively. In addition to acquiring a language, puzzle solving is challenging and amusing. (See a further example in figure [2] in the Appendix).

Therefore, there are many functions of games in the language classroom. Through carefully planned game-activities new materials can be introduced, certain themes and learnt language items can be practiced, and even relaxation can be absorbed. By combining both the non-linguistic and the linguistic objectives in a language, game-activities lead to the most successful grammar exercises and are actually engaged in with the language. Moreover, they help to transform the roles we traditionally play in classrooms. It is much easier to achieve these objectives if there is a list to be written out, an interesting story to be spoken and discussed, a picture to be drawn or marked...etc. For example, a series of pictures may be presented to the students who then have to make up a story that describe the events depicted. The teacher may ask them, for example, to tell the story in the past or in the future and so on. L2 learners are then involved in the process of learning the grammar and are stimulated at the same time. (See figure [3] in the Appendix for a clear model of the activity).

Bearing in mind that games 'facilitate the acquisition of the foreign language rather than its learning' (Johnson and Morrow, 1981), one could go through to state the high interactivity and interpersonality of game-activities and the co-operation of language learners and teachers alike. The focus here is on what the L2 learner is *really* doing and what he is *really* learning, and we have to be sure that he is *really* using the language, not just appearing to use it. Then, there will be nothing particularly mysterious about the process of learning a language on the game basis (For more details see figure [4] in the Appendix). Therefore, one way to serve this process, as McCarthy (1991) states, is using pair work and group work. As Stevick (1980) points out that group work 'provides learners with the feelings of loyalty and brings less threatening atmosphere' (p.202). Thus learners are working simultaneously and are less likely to become bored. Furthermore, working in groups can reduce the dominance of the teacher and so gives learners more control over their learning (Richards and Lockhart, 1994).

The roles of teachers and learners in the Game-activities

The problem of the relationship between teachers and learners must eventually be analyzed in all methods of language teaching. In the game-activities, the roles of the teacher and learner may be analyzed into two relatively different roles.

On the one hand, learners in game-activities are not any longer those seated students or bottles waiting to be filled with the good water of dictation. They are free to be themselves not someone else. Game-activities allow L2 learners to have some control in the classroom and show their personality whenever they participate in them and, moreover, liberate them from the traditional stillness and passivity. In this context, learners will practice the language structures effectively as the focus changes 'from the accurate production of isolated utterances to the fluent selection of appropriate utterances in communication' (Johnson and Morrow, 1981, p.71).

Despite the recent valuable focus on the learner, the teacher, on the other hand, is the most influential variable in the language classroom. Besides functioning as an instructor and classroom manager, the teacher may participate as a player himself. Moreover, he'll be the one who chooses the appropriate game to fit the content and prepare students for the process of learning as 'effective teachers consciously vary their behavior

and their activities' (Moore, 1989, p. 140). It is imperative to say that only well-trained and qualified teachers are needed in this field because of its special requirements and difficulties.

What really matters at this stage is that games and game-like activities bring, as Lee (1965) explains, both teachers and learners closer in an agreeable way, and that too helps to ease the process of language learning and teaching. Games, therefore, empower both teachers and learners in their language learning/teaching and function as a force to unify them in the language classroom as shown by figure (5) below:

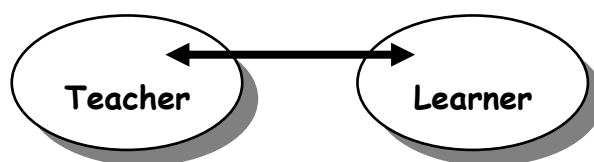


Figure (5). Interaction between teachers and learners in game-activities

Factors affecting Grammar Games

Games and game-like activities which help language learners to achieve the right balance between form and function must depend on such factors as: age, ability in the target language, motivation, size of group, time ... etc, as discussed below:

1. Age. It is beyond doubt that the age of learners determines the appropriateness of the game and whether a game will be meaningful to language learners. Moreover, it is generally accepted that the use of games is mainly restricted to the elementary stages when children are very willing to play games. In addition of being a way of manipulating structural patterns, games are considered to be among the most successful techniques of involving the child in practice. Through them, children happily and consciously, can learn L2 structures willingly as they enjoy it. Games, then, represent a milestone in their learning process as Lewis and Bedson (1999) state that, 'games are fun and children like to play them...playing games is vital and natural part of growing up and learning' (p.5). What makes games more crucial in the learning process is that they link the home and school life of children as well as being lively and fun (Brewster et al., 1992, p.174).

Conversely, this useful teaching technique may be rejected by adults as 'teenage learners might be reluctant to play games' (Wright, 1983, p.3). For instance, some adults may be offended if you asked them to jump on one foot in the classroom in order to learn the word 'jump'. Moreover, they are not expected to sing or repeat a rhyme for their fear of being foolish to participate in such activities. Accordingly, adults will not take benefit from the total physical response, a teaching technique that has proved to be of great advantage to language learners (Philips, 1993, p.13). Adults dislike any activity that exposes them in public. Therefore, role-play and simulation are in conflict with their adult anxiety (Cook, 2001, p. 135).

The real question that imposes itself here is not 'which groups are games for?' but rather 'how appropriate is the games, and what is the role of the player in them?' What I want to suggest is that successful game-activities may go beyond age. Their effectiveness is not restricted by age. For example, some individuals, regardless of age, may be less conscious of games than others. Consequently, language games play different roles at various stages of age (Lee, 1965). If, however, we have adults looking at games as unnecessary, we must clearly respect their point of view. Instead of making them play the

game unwillingly, we must justify the use of the game in terms of the meaningfulness of the practice it provides. Whenever they see the language learning point behind each game, adults will like playing it. For instance, using simple little exercises based on interesting themes like the ever-interesting theme of love ensures that it will attract all learners' ages with some extra spices added to it like competition.

2. Ability in the target language. Different games appeal to different learners' types and, consequently, they must be adjusted to the varying levels of language learners. It is important to note that learners can enjoy and value games if the content and language used are relevant to them and match their abilities and level of proficiency in L2. It is always argued that the problem in teaching grammar through games lies in the too many differences in learners' abilities in L2 within the same class. To overcome this problem, the teacher may, I assume, team up stronger learners with weaker ones, so they can learn from each other. The more L2 learners can relate to what they are being presented with, the more successful the learners are.

3. Motivation. Another important factor is that games should have a clear objective to get the language right and, at the same time, to get the learners involved in practicing active language without necessarily realizing that they are practicing it. Games are not, therefore, relaxation activities in which learners are not really studying L2. On the contrary, they can be turned into lively and effective structure practices. Games derive their motivation from the interest of the activity itself. The key to effective language learning is a basically an interested learner. Therefore, the more interesting the language presented to the learners the more possible it is to be learned and the more motivated and alert the learners are. Students are unlikely to be successful at learning grammar unless they enjoy the process as Blair (1982) states that 'useful and fun is better than either alone'. Therefore, game-activities not only have the capacity to engage and motivate learners in the process but also the power to make the course more memorable and more fun. If students need to do grammar presentation and practice, why not make it meaningful?. Epstein (1999), for example, suggests using Mr. Bean TV episode as an enjoyable material for a variety of grammatical structures and language practices like employing Mr. Bean's exaggerated movements and facial expressions to focus on adjectives and adverbs. Bringing Mr. Bean into the classroom is, therefore, successful in the sense that language practice that follows is engaging, enjoyable, and at the same time productive. One may conclude that the more the teacher can shift the emphasis of grammar practices in this way, the more language learners may enjoy and benefit from it. Then, the motivation behind such activities will be achieved.

Needless to say that there is 'a fundamental difference between a true *game*, played for fun and recreation, and a *game-like* language practice procedure which is a serious goal-oriented activity performed primarily for the sake of its contribution to learning' (Penny UR, 1988). Moreover, game-activities like any other tools can be overexploited when used too much so that the motivation behind them disappears rapidly. If, however, the language teacher is careful in choosing a game that achieves its motivation in terms of the interests and needs of his learners, game-activities then can provide a valuable learning experience in which learners practice and revise language meaningfully in the target language.

4. Size of group. This is another important factor to be taken into consideration whenever games or game-like activities are put to practice. The size of group in the language classroom strongly affects the suitability of using games in this context. As Mackey (1965) points out that game-activities which are devised for small classes may not be suitable for fairly large classes and quite impossible for big ones of more than a hundred. The problem is that if large groups of learners are located in the same classroom to practice the language, the learners' abilities to personally participate will, definitely, be reduced. This, undoubtedly, will encourage the taking on the role of a passive spectator. Language teachers, on the other hand will feel exhausted all the time as 'games take too long to prepare for so many students' (Toth, 1995, p.8). Moreover, some game-activities involve students to speak throughout the whole activity and learners will get too excited and this, consequently, results in chaos in large classes as they will make much noise and some teachers will get annoyed as controlling large classes is one of the hardest tasks facing even the most experienced teachers. The larger the group is, the more difficult it becomes to set up game-activities, which promote active language use. There are some effective games used with large classes that are sitting in rows, especially those based on total physical response such as *the Beehive drill*, but the shortcomings of the large classes still remain. In this context, it is best to devise techniques whereby a very large class is divided into smaller, more manageable groups in order to play games more effectively.

5. Time. Lastly, the time factor is of great importance in deciding whether game-activities can achieve the right balance between product and process and whether it is suitable for a particular group of learners. The real questions here are 'will the game take me a long time to prepare, compared with the amount of useful work learners will get from it?' or 'Is the language learner in a game course capable of learning at a fast rate when s/he is guided by games?'. Mackey (1965) explains that learning a language takes practice, and practice takes time, at least as much time as learning any other skill. What really matters here is to plan game-activities according to what the time structure of the course is. If little time can be devoted to language learning, the most suitable game-activity may be the one with the minimum learning load and the maximum range of meaning and expression and the greatest relative productivity. However, it must not go unmentioned that using games in the same lesson will take up too great proportion of the time devoted for the learning time. Moreover, dividing learners into groups in every class can easily be a time-wasting operation.

In short, considering such factors as age, ability in the target language, motivation, size of group, time...etc, not only pave the ground for games and game-activities to play a part in the learners' L2 acquisition but also make them available in the learning of their L1.

Conclusion:

We have seen so far that grammar has often been taught as an end in itself, divorced from the role it performs in communication. By examining its place in the language teaching/learning and the different approaches to language description, it can be agreed that there must be a constant interplay in the language classroom between product and process or form and function.

To further exemplify the way in which people can effectively master the language, a proposition of a suitable method to teach grammar is presented; namely, games and game-like activities. In tracing the history of grammar games I hope I have presented a

clear picture of its background and its place nowadays. It has been noted that game-activities have many functions in the field of grammar with special regards to the use of pair work and group work. Moreover, the roles of teachers and learners are analyzed in terms of game-activities. Perhaps the greatest contribution of game-activities in the field of grammar depend on such factors as age, ability in the target language, motivation, size of group, time...etc. These factors are crucial in the sense that they pave the way for game-activities in the field of L1 and L2 acquisition.

Yet I speak not as a proponent of games and game-activities and I'm not sure that almost all presentation and practice can take a place in the context of games. What I'm really convinced of is that games are only one of the profound different ideas on how language teaching can achieve better results with more learners. Anyway, games are in the wind and are inevitable.

Appendix

Figure [2]. A Crossword Puzzle to teach the correct forms of verbs (Useful and Fun)

‘They’ve _____’. Put the correct form of the word to solve the puzzle. (The task is mine)

<u>Across</u>		<u>Down</u>	
2. sing	11. invite	1. Visit	8. check
4. want	12. Know	2. Study	9. learn
6. talk	14. Collect	3. Win	13. clean
7. build	16. Work	4. Write	14. cook
10. have	17. Do	5. Play	15. go

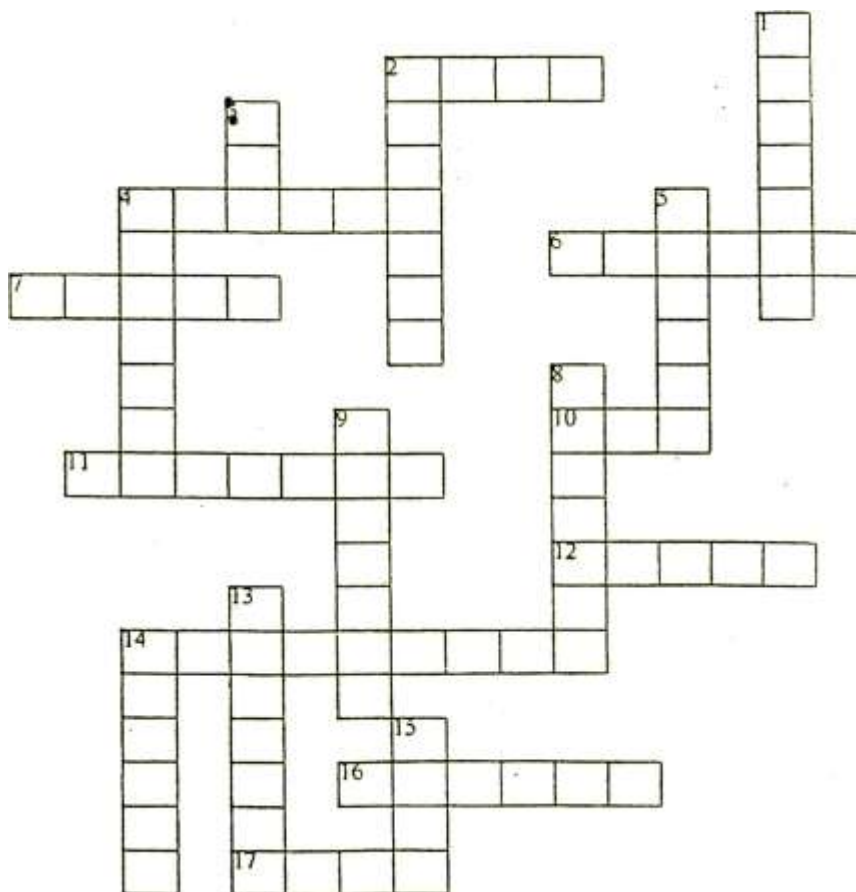


Figure [3]. Practicing Past Simple and Past Continuous through Pictures

Look at the pictures and complete the story about Mrs. Brewin. Use verbs in the *Past Simple* or the *Past Continuous*:

Rescued- arrived- climbed- killed- called- invited- couldn't get down- ran over- put up (the ladder)- offered- Was waiting- were leaving- was working- was playing.

On 14 January 1978 Mrs. Brewin in her garden. Her cat, Henry, around her. It a tree in the garden and....., so sheThe Fire Brigade. While she.... for them to arrive, she..... him some fish to try to get him down. The army finally,their ladder and the cat. Mrs. Brewin was delighted andthem in for some tea. But as theyten minutes later, they The cat and it.

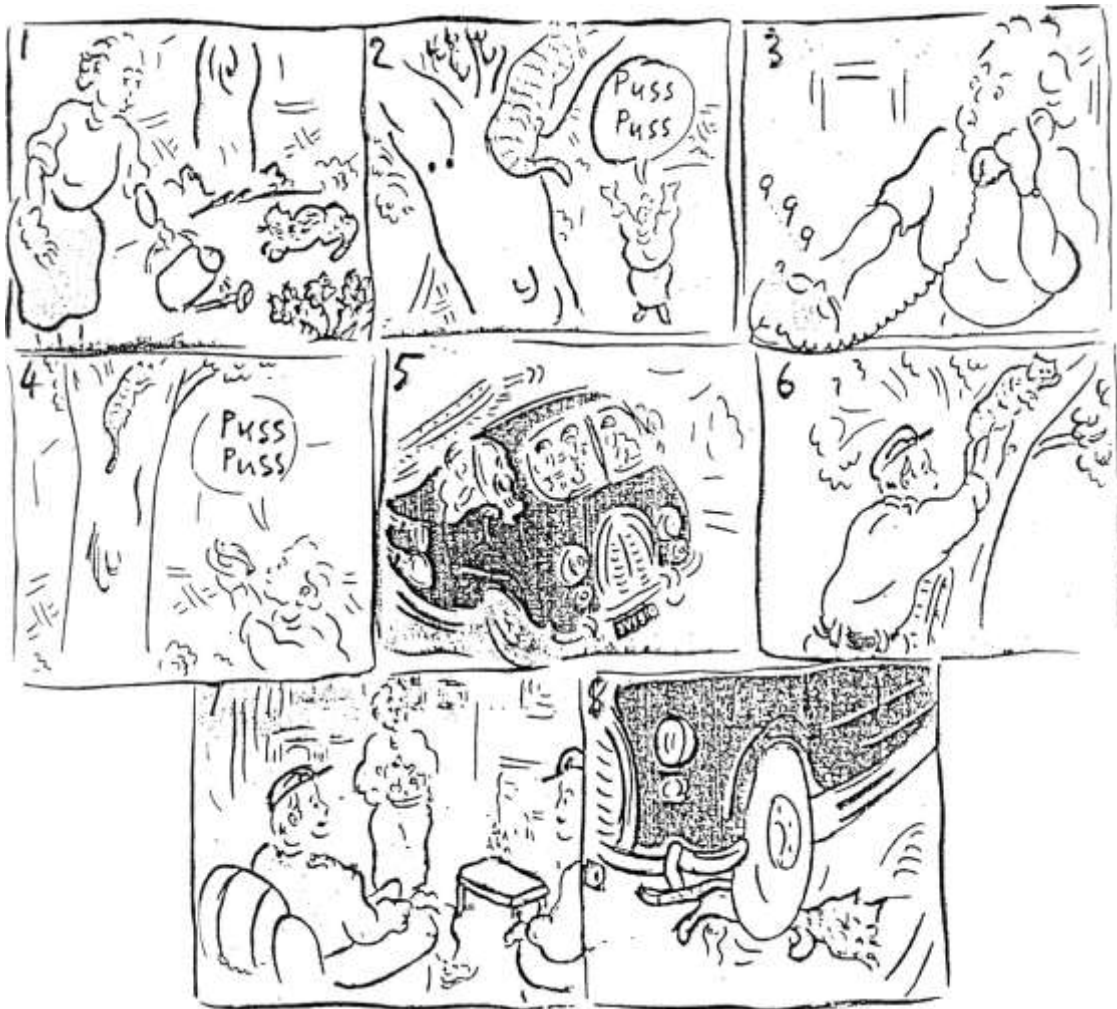
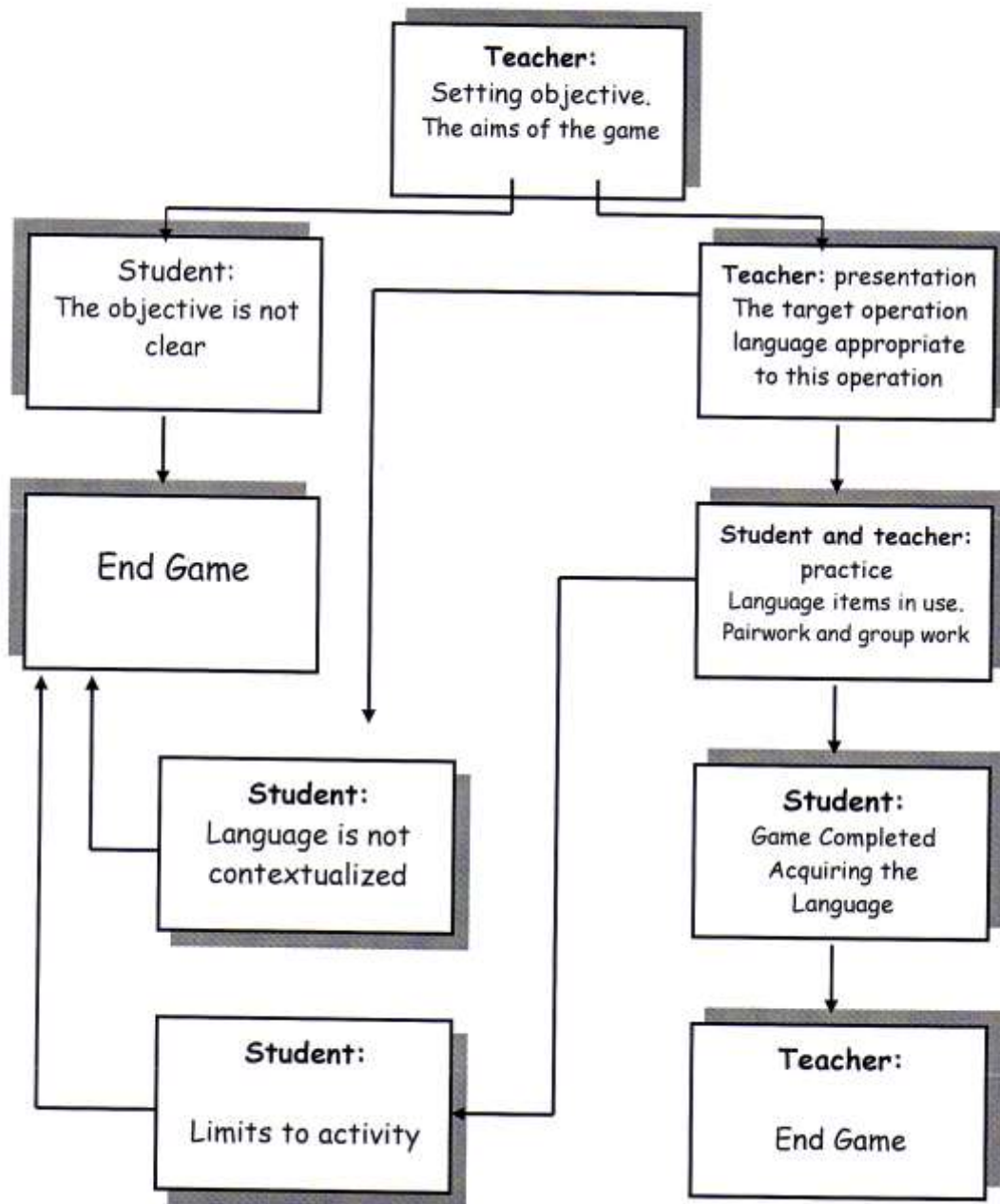


Figure [4]. The Process of Language Teaching on a Game basis



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