

Learning English While Playing a Game

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As a member of the Field Institute, Azim Premji Foundation, I visit schools in our districts and interact with teachers regularly. I am sharing my experience in a government higher primary school in Bengaluru, which I had visited many times earlier. The school had been closed due to the pandemic for many months. The children had just returned to classes after a long break and teachers were making all efforts to get them back to 'learning'. Shortened syllabus, intense teaching coupled with regular tests – all of this seemed clinical and what was probably missing in these efforts was the awareness that for these teenage boys and girls, the loss in learning had to be understood in the context of complex family situations, trying times and poor emotional health. Overall, the environment was sombre, to say the least, and anything that could cheer us all up was very welcome.

I had developed an acquaintance with these teachers earlier through my work with them, so when I proposed to interact with these children by reading a story to them, the teachers readily agreed. I walked into the class of about 20 children in their teens, all seated on the floor waiting for their teacher to come in and teach. I introduced myself and asked them how good their English was. There were no responses. It was not surprising because English is taught in most classrooms as a mechanical exercise – children 'copy' answers in their notebooks and rote-learn to answer questions in tests. Speaking remains an aspirational skill even for many teachers. I quickly switched to Kannada and could sense their relief.

Now, I put forth my idea of reading a story in English but discussing it in Kannada. The children nodded in approval. I had taken with me a storybook with the story of Siddhartha and Devadatta. While reading the story in English and showing the pictures to the students, I was trying to prompt responses from them and writing those (words) down on the blackboard. The reading of the story, the pictures along with explanations in Kannada seemed to help the children comprehend the story and the class was

quite engaged. Some children even volunteered to read a few pages as we moved ahead. At the end of this reading, the blackboard was full of words like *garden, swan, arrow, hit, save, king, servant, court, kindness, fight, fluttering* and many more – all from the story we had just read together.

I then asked a few general questions, like how did they like the story? What did they like most and what they did not? Children, by now, had opened up and started to speak in a mix of English and Kannada. They said they liked the story and realised that good deeds will always be rewarded. I probed a little further and asked if it is not difficult to be good always? To this, one girl responded that it was true, but they could try.

Meanwhile, a teacher came to the classroom and informed me that I could continue for the next half an hour, if I wanted to. I now asked the children if they would like to play a game. A roar went up with a big 'yes'. I asked them to open their notebooks or take a sheet of blank paper. To play the game of *Bingo!* with a slight variation, I asked them to draw boxes in a 3x3 matrix and copy any nine words from the blackboard into the boxes. I cautioned them to not copy from each other. This took about ten minutes for all to carefully select and copy words. Once they were ready, I explained the game.

Step 1. I would call out a word randomly from the blackboard and they would need to check if the word was on their sheet. If they had the word, they would scratch it out.

Step 2. When a row or column of three words had been scratched out, they would raise their hand and read the words out.

Step 3. Once all nine words on their paper/notebook were scratched out, they would call out *Bingo!*

The game was played in an extremely good spirit. All the students looked cheerful and satisfied that they had completed their game. As I called out a word, I erased it from the blackboard, so, in the end, the blackboard was clean.

How does a game like this help in language learning? Here are some thoughts:

Vocabulary-building: Needless to say, many of the words that came in the story were new to the children. They now had a new vocabulary of English words.

Meaning-making: The story provided a context to learn the language. While the students learnt the new words, they learnt their use in meaningful sentences.

Learning spelling: As against a dull dictation by the teacher, while they copied the words, the students tried to understand how they were spelt. When they said *Bingo!*, I had already rubbed the word from the blackboard, so they had to spell it out the way they had written it down.

Pronunciation: English, as we all know, is tricky when it comes to pronunciation. Hearing people speak in English is not common for these children. While they listened to my reading, they also tried to read out and pronounce the words themselves.

Original thinking: Children were able to derive different ideas from the stories. While one said, 'Good deeds lead to good rewards', another observed, 'Caring is important, be it for humans or animals.'

In the end, it was an hour judiciously spent. Children showed enthusiasm and were completely engaged in learning. As I was about to leave, a girl asked me if I would come back the next day. I said only if all of them wanted me to and all the children shouted in chorus that they wanted me to come to class every day and play this game. That, for me, was the best moment of the day.

Play can create a non-threatening environment for teaching-learning in the classroom. While it enables a teacher to teach something new and connect better with the learners, carefully designed play can even act as a tool to diagnose learning challenges in children. Play ensures that children involve actively, learn effectively, and reflect on their own performance in subtle ways. Play can teach lessons beyond academic subjects, such as being competitive and sporting, working in teams and most importantly, it teaches learning from failures. Play has this unique ability to combine learning with life situations. As we all wait for this pandemic to end, and for normalcy to return to all aspects of our lives, including classrooms, games such as the one mentioned can be planned to make language teaching-learning engaging and meaningful for teachers and students alike.



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