

Main Features of a Game and Their Implications for Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

In the field of language teaching the word *game* has been used so loosely that it has become a very vague term. This article identifies main features of a game in various definitions given in the literature. It is found that games have the following main features: goals, rules, competition, engagingness, and unpredictability. In traditional Chinese culture, there exists the concept that games distract the mind from learning. To work out a game's potentialities in language teaching, this article continues to explore the implications of the main features of a game for language teaching. At the same time, the ways in which the main features can function properly and beneficently are examined in detail within the framework of a game in the language class. The conclusion is that well-conceived and well-managed language games are useful in making learners more active participants in their language learning. Therefore, we should not belittle the value and significance of language learning games.

Key Words: games, language teaching, main features of a game

遊戲之主要特色及其語言教學之含義與運用

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摘要

「遊戲」一詞在語言教學領域中寬鬆之使用已使其詞義相當模糊。本文考察文獻中遊戲之各項定義，設法找出遊戲活動之主要特色，結果發現遊戲含有下列五項主要特質：目標、規則、競爭、趣味、不定性。傳統中華文化中有一種對遊戲持負面看法的觀念，認為遊戲是會干擾學習的。為了探索遊戲在語言教學方面的潛在作用，本文接下來探討遊戲之主要特色在語言教學方面之含義與運用，詳細檢視其主要特色如何在語言課堂遊戲的架構中適切有效的發揮其作用。結論是規劃經營良好的遊戲有助於學生積極學習語言，因此語言遊戲之價值與正面作用不容低估。

關鍵詞：遊戲，語言教學，遊戲之主要特色



I. INTRODUCTION

Games saturate our daily life. We are often gratified by participating in or watching a wide variety of games—face games, ring-a-ring-o’-roses, hide-and-seek, jigsaw puzzles, basketball, Olympic games, chess, on-line games, bridge, lotteries, roulette, love games, and many more. A game is a remarkable instance of the alleged fuzziness of human concepts. Wittgenstein [51] saw from various games a complicated network of overlapping similarities like amusement, skills, and luck. He argued that we would not see something common to all games, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them. Thus games form a family, with family resemblances crisscrossing among them. Ellington et al. [13] pointed out that it was not until the early 1970s that the majority of workers in the gaming field were able to agree on what a game should be, namely any contest among adversaries operating under constraints for an objective.

In the field of language teaching, the word *game* has become a rather vague umbrella term for all kinds of activities considered or intended to be fun. After a close examination of many language game books and English coursebooks commercially available, one may be aware of the amazingly ample scope what is called ‘game’ can embrace. Among others, McCallum [31] includes sheer role play, drama, and debate in his game book. In another game book written by Shu [43] there is a game in which young learners simply transcribe large letters into small ones. Purkis and Guerin [34] treat many mere reading, writing, and speaking activities as games. In addition, Claire [7] takes some songs and chants coupled with some actions or mimes as games. In a four-book series for teenage and adult learners of English in an international context, Maple [30] presents a number of controlled dialogue exercises under the heading of “conversation game.” Further along, Cameron and Epling [5] view “find the difference,” a pure information-gap activity, as a game. Howard-Williams and Herd [22] treat odd-man-out vocabulary exercises as games. In one of Stowe’s pseudo-games [46], learners are simply requested to choose from a word list the words that belong in categories like people, animals, and so on. Finally, Byrd and Clemente [3] refer to a mere question-and-answer activity as a game, simply asking learners to explain the meanings of words like *pride*, *love*, and *boredom*. None of these games or activities involves a contest or operates under explicit rules.

All these atypical instances of language learning games seem to reflect the fuzzy concept of game that Wittgenstein [51] brought up. And yet it is very difficult, if not impossible, to identify the family resemblances among them. It is probably because the language game designers feel the above-mentioned

activities may be fun that they consider them to be games. Since fun or amusement is one of the features of a structured game, not the only one integral element, these activities are nothing more than exercises intended to be fun. They are neither spontaneous nor structured games in the generally accepted sense of the word. In other words, the language game designers might have used the word *game* in its metaphorical sense—as is the case where one says that ‘life is a game’—to attract teachers’ or students’ attention. The danger is that a pseudo-game may disappoint learners’ expectations. Once it fails to keep the learners engaged, it will pall and produce opposite effects. In addition, if the meaning of the term *game* is extended so far as to denote all language learning activities considered or intended to be fun, much of the research involving language games may become more or less pointless due to unclear research scope or subject matter. Therefore, it is necessary to explore main features of a game and their application to language teaching granted that it could be impossible or unfeasible to determine an absolute definition of what a game should be.

The purpose of this article is to establish main features of a game and investigate their implications for language teaching. In Section II we identify main features of a game in various definitions given in the literature. And Section III focuses on implications of the main features for language teaching.

II. MAIN FEATURES OF A GAME

This section considers definitions of the term *game* given in (1) dictionaries and encyclopedias and (2) studies on games in an effort to identify important features of game activity.

1. Dictionary and Encyclopedia Definitions

Encyclopedias and larger dictionaries usually provide two definitions of game activity. On the one hand, a game may be an activity people participate in for fun or diversion. Thus games may include such a spontaneous and unorganized activity as a child’s repeated actions of throwing a ball at the wall and catch it again. On the other, a game refers to a competitive activity people participate in according to a set of rules. The following are some examples:

A. *New Webster’s Dictionary* [6]:

- a. Any playful activity for amusement or diversion
- b. A contest played for sport or amusement according to rules

B. *The Oxford English Dictionary* [32]:

- a. An amusement, diversion, or pastime
- b. A diversion of the nature of a contest, played according to rules, and displaying in the result the superiority either in skill, strength, or good fortune of the winner or winners.



C. *Encarta World English Dictionary* [40]:

- a. Something played for fun
- b. Competitive activity with rules

D. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* [45]:

- a. An activity providing entertainment or amusement
- b. A competitive activity or sport in which players contend with each other according to a set of rules

E. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online Article* [14]:

- a. Any of the amusements and pastimes that may involve spontaneous, unstructured activity
- b. Organized games with set rules

F. *Infoplease.com* [23]:

- a. An amusement or pastime
- b. A competitive activity involving skill, chance, or endurance on the part of two or more persons who play according to a set of rules

G. *Grolier Encyclopedia of Knowledge* [18]:

Games are models of real-life situations in which—unlike real life—the issues are quite simply drawn and the participants can become engaged without all the confusions that surround everyday action and decision making. Typically, games simulate the more intense human experiences: physical combat, intellectual contest, and the expectancy and excitement involved in random occurrences.

Thus games may be regarded in the broad sense as playful or amusing activity. And games in the narrow sense of the word have two primary elements, namely competition and rules. It is worth noting that fun or engagingness is overtly treated as a basic feature of games in the first definition (the broad sense), but not in the second (the narrow sense). And yet out of a competitive activity with rules—like Tag, Monopoly, basketball, Musical Chairs, and gin rummy—voluntary players also get more or less fun. In addition, a somewhat distinct view of games is advanced in (G), where games are defined as simplified representations of real-life situations, typical instances of which include various war games. This definition, although it does not take rules into consideration, recognizes competition as a typical feature of games because, as stated in (G), the simulated intense human experiences in games include physical combat and intellectual contest.

2. Studies on Games

Very few studies on games formally characterize their main features. Eight studies are available to me in which an attempt is made to capture the invariant of the concept ‘game.’ We will briefly discuss their characterizations of a game in the remainder of this section.

Caillois [4] describes a game as an activity that is voluntary, enjoyable, separate from the real world, uncertain, unproductive, and rule-governed. Such a game is uncertain in that its result is unpredictable, depending on how the players act and react according to the rules. In this view, a game is separate from the real world, with its unproductive nature preventing it from having external value. It follows that this characterization inclines toward games as amusements and pastimes. The elements ‘goal’ and ‘competition’ are absent from this characterization. If a well-defined learning goal is incorporated into an amusement-oriented game, it can become an educational game and, accordingly, can possess some external value.

Ellington et al. [13] hold that a game is any contest among adversaries operating under constraints for an objective. This definition identifies three main features of a game: competition, rules, and goals. A game involves competition between individuals or teams (as in bridge) or between individuals or teams who are each competing against the game system (as in golf). The rules of a game not just constrain but guide the players’ actions to achieve the goal of the game, which is winning, payoffs, and the like. It seems that this definition excludes from the class of games the activities in which there is only one player, such as solitaire, crosswords, and pinball. However, this problem can be solved by regarding the game system as one of the adversaries.

Hadfield [20] thinks of a game as an activity with rules, a goal, and an element of fun. A game should be fun so that it can motivate voluntary participation. This is the reason why educational game designers usually treat fun, pleasure, or engagingness as an essential element of a game. Moreover, Hadfield (ibid.) treats competition as an optional element, holding that a game can be either competitive, in which case players or teams race to be the first to reach the goal, or cooperative, in which case players or teams work together toward a common goal. As I see it, a game can also be both competitive and cooperative. We shall return to this in the next section.

Wierzbicka [49] suggests that the following components are essential to the concept of game: human activity, duration, pleasure, suspension of reality, well-defined goals, well-defined rules, and an unpredictable course of event. Since activities are states of affairs that are not instantaneous, ‘duration’ seems to be redundant in the whole set of essential game components. Among the other essential components, ‘suspension of reality’ is seldom treated as a game feature in other studies. Reality is suspended temporarily in a game since the players imagine that they are in a world apart from the real one. The goal of the



game has no meaning or value outside the game. If the players were not playing the game, they would not work toward the goal, such as tagging an adversary or killing a monster.

In order to differentiate language games from other activities in the EFL classroom, Lewis and Bedson [28] bring forth four defining features of a game. First, games are fun. Second, players try to reach a goal which is not directly related to language. Third, games have a visible set of rules. Finally, games contain an element of strategy—to win the game the players must successfully apply their skills, linguistic or otherwise. This characterization can best define games of strategy like baseball, chess, poker, and the like, or the language games based on them, whose outcomes are more or less determined by rational decision making. Like Hadfield [20], Lewis and Bedson hold that games can be competitive or cooperative. Thus in their view, competition is not a defining feature of games.

Based on a review of the literature, Garris et al. [15] conclude that game characteristics can be described in terms of six broad dimensions of categories: rules and goals, fantasy, sensory stimuli, challenge, mystery, and control. The rules of a game describe, among other things, its goal structure. Games involve fantasy in that there is no activity outside the game that literally corresponds. Sensory stimuli are sights and sounds that stimulate and intoxicate the senses, as enjoyed by the public at amusement rides and theme parks. Game players are optimally challenged by activities neither too easy nor too difficult to perform. Mystery—enhanced by violation of expectations, incongruity of information, and so on—arouses players' curiosity. And games evoke a sense of personal control when players are allowed to select strategies, manage the direction of activity, and make decisions that directly affect the outcomes. It should be clear from the foregoing that all the other dimensions of categories than rules and goals pertain to sources of fun or engagingness of games.

According to Dempsey et al. [9], a game has goals, rules, constraints, consequences, and payoffs. It is rule-guided and involves some aspect of competition, even if that competition is with oneself. On the ground that goals entail payoffs and consequences and that rules provide guidance and impose constraints, this characterization may as well be condensed into three major components: goals, rules, and competition.

Shie [42] defines a language game as a rule-governed and competitive activity intended to produce engagingness as a means to the goals attainable only via use of the target language. Four general game features can be extracted from this definition: rules, goals, competition, and engagingness. In this view, a language game functions to motivate and facilitate

language learning. Thus a functional design can make the goal(s) of a game have meaning and value outside the game.

The foregoing analysis and discussion of games suggest that the main features of games may include goals, rules, competition, engagingness, and unpredictability. After all, these five features can be identified more frequently than others in the existing definitions of a game. Of the 21 definitions discussed in this section, 14 deal with rules, 13 with engagingness, 9 with competition, and 7 with goals as a game feature. Unpredictability is treated as a game feature in only three definitions. But an unpredictable course of event is the corollary of game rules. Thus it is reasonable to look upon unpredictability as a game feature. In the following section, we shall discuss implications of the five features for language teaching, especially the ways in which they function within the framework of a game in the language class.

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

Games have become a well-known teaching technique. They are used in a variety of teaching methodologies, especially Communicative Language Teaching (Savignon [41]), Desuggestopedia (Larsen-Freeman [27]), The Lexical Approach (Harmer [21]), Task-Based Learning (Willis [50]), and Experiential Learning (Kohonen [25]). However, the use of games does not seem to be endorsed in traditional Chinese culture, as can be seen from the negative connotation of the common Chinese expression *er xi* (兒戲; 'children's games') and the guiding principle of the Chinese motto *yeh jing yu qing huang yu xi* (業精於勤荒於嬉; 'Diligence gives rise to excellence in work, while play deprives work of excellence'). It may be that games are common in children's language classes in Taiwan. But in secondary and tertiary education, games are not used frequently. A recent survey of 441 freshmen at seven universities in Taiwan (Tsou [47]) shows that, among 30 different types of classroom activities, games rank fourth in their perceived capability of motivating oral participation, but they rank a lowly 29th in their actual occurrence frequency. To diminish the cultural bias against games and to provide a rationale for the use of language games, we address in this section how main features of a game can be associated with and applicable to language teaching.

1. Goals

A game has a goal or a number of goals, which present a task for the players to perform. Accomplishing the task(s) successfully means reaching the goal(s) of the game. Given that a pure game is played for pleasure, its goal(s) have value only inside the game. But the goal(s) of a language game



have value both inside and outside the game. We can add outside value to a pure game by adjusting its goal(s) in such a way that the players have to use the target language to reach the goal(s), which, however are usually not directly related to language.

Thus in a language game, the players are propelled toward a dual goal. The dual goal structure is composed of two kinds of sub-goals. One type is pedagogical, and the other behavioral. The pedagogical goal(s) involve acquisition or consolidation of the players' language competence, while the behavioral goal(s) specify what tasks the players are supposed to make a conscious effort to accomplish on the spot.

The conscious acts of language game players are unified by and oriented to the well-defined behavioral goal(s), which the players must know. The number of behavioral goals depends on the game format. For one thing, in the game Tic-Tac-Toe, every player tries to fill in three marks (three O's or three X's) on a grid in any horizontal, vertical or diagonal row. For another, in the game Alibi, the behavioral goal of two players is to establish the alibi, whereas the others do their best to break the alibi. Thus in this game there are two behavioral goals for the two sides respectively. The behavioral goal(s) should be unmistakably defined and made as interesting as possible. Challenge, fantasy, mystification, and personalization—the four elements frequently used to enhance the attraction of behavioral goal(s) as well as the internal value of the game—can serve as not only design guidelines but evaluation criteria as well.

Every language game must have a definite pedagogical goal—which the players may be unconscious of—or else the players may have a marvelous time yet may not learn anything effectively during the game. Such a long-range goal as 'enabling the learners to speak formal English fluently,' since it is too distant to inspire immediate confidence, should never be the pedagogical goal of any language game. Instead, the pedagogical goal should be attainable in such a short time that it will inspire confidence and maintain motivation and guide the participants in small steps up the steady ladder of language learning. Therefore, the pedagogical goals of language games should be graded for the teacher to choose the ones that match the players' current level of language proficiency.

Language games should be treated as a part of the language syllabus rather than as an independent activity used to fill unemployed class time. The pedagogical goal of a game should be fitted into the coursework and subsumed within the adequate lesson plan and curricular content. Without such integration, the use of the game would seem completely random and devoid of any serious external value. By and large, a

specific pedagogical goal is preferable to a general one. For instance, the goal of 'increasing word power' is too general to match the lesson the learners are working on, while the goal of 'reviewing the lexical items in a specific area' is far more feasible in the game. Besides, a language game, especially one for beginning language learners, should not be built around too many language functions and/or too many new language items since most learners cannot learn too many things at a time.

The pedagogical goals of language games fall into three general categories: linguistic structure, communication, and a mixture of the two. The structural goals emphasize accuracy of language use, as distinct from the communicative goals, which apparently stress fluency of language use, or what Rivers [39] calls "autonomous interaction"—using uncontrolled target language independently without correction of structural errors or mistakes that do not hinder communication. Another distinctive feature of the two extreme types of pedagogical goals is that, in the structure-aimed game, the participants' target language output is for the most part close-ended, prescriptive, or predictable, but in the communication-aimed game, the participants' output is open-ended, unprescribed, or unpredictable.

The goals of structure-aimed games range from certain syntactic patterns, through some vocabulary areas and idiomatic expressions, to certain spelling skills and pronunciation points. Such pedagogical goals can be readily incorporated into the format of a card game, solitary games, or memory game, especially those involving matching, sorting, or brainstorming tasks.

On the other hand, the goal range of communication-aimed games covers such communicative functions as greeting, invitation, request, description, and narration. Such pedagogical goals are intended to develop and reinforce players' communicative competence. Achieving the behavioral goals of communication-aimed games usually involves the carrying out of one or more tasks, such as solving problems, making decisions, asking for favors, and making small talk. They give students chances to use verbal and nonverbal language purposefully in specific situational contexts.

Between the polarities of structure and communication there is a wide spectrum of mixtures of structural and communicative goals. Some of the mixtures are more structural than communicative. Others are more communicative than structural. The games with mixed pedagogical goals provide players with experience of using particular language points in various contexts of



communication.

2. Rules

Game activity is governed by a fixed set of rules. The rules vary from game to game. But some common items can be identified. First of all, the rules of a game contain direct or indirect statement of the behavioral goal(s). In the game Monopoly, for instance, the goal is to become the wealthiest player through buying, renting and selling property. Secondly, the rules delineate the process of the game, including the pattern of turn taking (e.g., the turn passes to the left) and the way in which the game is triggered off (e.g., the players do rock-scissors-paper to decide who is 'it') and wound up (e.g., a bankrupt player in Monopoly must retire from the game and the last player left in the game wins). Thirdly, the rules specify what the players are allowed and not allowed to do during the game, giving each player a fair chance to play. Such rules guide and restrict the players' actions but leave sufficient room for the players to use their skills and strategies or make rational decisions. For example, the players of Monopoly decide whether to buy an unowned property when they lands on it. Finally, the rules may impose disadvantages for their infractions, as is the case with penalty kicks in soccer game.

One aspect of the external value of a game is linked with personality development. Some language game experts (e.g., Dobson [10] and Cortez [8]) advise the game conductors to be sure to follow exactly the rules of the game to facilitate management of the activity. But here I would like to add that sticking to the agreed-upon rules of a game can also serve as very good sociomoral training. Once the players accept the rules of a game, they are obliged to behave in accordance with the rules in the activity. By condemning violation of the rules the teacher can help the players promote their sociomoral progress in the context of game activity. At the same time, by discouraging them from using gamesmanship to win the game, the teacher can help prepare them to become righteous, aboveboard citizens who do not skirt laws. In particular, games can develop young players' thinking and psychomotor skills as well as such basic life skills as how to play fairly, take turn, follow directions, and win or lose graciously.

It is desirable that the rules of a language game be few, simple and lucid. Complicated rules have their drawbacks. It may take too much valuable class time to explain them. And the players may get confused, thereby losing interest in the game. One of the advantages of adapting a well-known game, such as Bingo and Musical Chairs, is that its rules are usually easier to explain. Since the rules are familiar to the players, the teacher's explanation is nothing more than a reminder. But new rules should be prescribed and pre-pronounced plainly,

fully, and unmistakably. For ease of conveyance, the rules ought to be itemized and explained in chronological order. If the teacher can make the rules understood by explaining them in English one time or two, they will be acceptable to the participants and practicable in the game. In case complicated rules are really unavoidable, the rules need more than just explaining. They also need demonstrating via a run-through or two before the entire class.

3. Competition

As noted in the previous section, some authors do not treat competition as a defining feature of a game. But the games in which participants contend with each other are typical of the four major types of games: psychomotor games, games of chance, games of strategy, and computer/on-line games. In a great many cases, competition is the major source of fun.

As I see it, game players compete in two ways. They either act in direct opposition to their rivals or, if there are no direct, explicit rivals in the game, strive to reach the behavioral goal(s) according to the rules. In opposition to his rival(s) each player makes every effort to win and to keep his opponent(s) from doing so. This type of competitive pattern in a language game often involves a scoring method that provides the players with immediate feedback or awards (i.e., points) for every successful act or round of acts.

The other type of competition pattern—in which the players do not have any direct, explicit rivals—usually does not involve any scoring methods, but always contains certain rewards which motivate each participant to strive to reach the behavioral goal(s) and thus enliven the entire activity. Typical examples of this type of competition pattern can be found in Twenty Questions, quizzes, and puzzles.

One, probably the most important one, of the reasons why a language game can be engaging is that, if well handled, the element of competition in the game can arouse a feeling of pleasurable, facilitative tension. Competition adds excitement to game activities, whether the competition is for substantial awards or merely for the satisfaction of winning (Dornyei [12]). Brooks et al. [2] write that "struggle and conflict lie at the basis of drama." Similarly, in a language game, the conflict and struggle coming from the element of competition bring about the desired tension. But it should be noted that it takes more than just conflict to create an ambiance of pleasurable, facilitative tension in a language game. Struggle is also required. Simply dividing learners into two sides and making them come into game conflict with each other is only a job half done. The teacher has yet to make them strive for scores or the behavioral goal(s). As Barnet and Burto [1] illustrate, "there is conflict but no tension in a ball game when the score



is 10-0 and the visiting pitcher comes to bat in the ninth inning with two out and none on base.”

Thus in a language game, the teacher should equally disperse stronger and weaker learners between the competing groups to motivate greater struggle and to bring about greater desired tension similar to that which utterly absorbs the players and spectators in an overtime of a sporting event. The competitive excitement in the game will induce the players to use the target language in such a way that they will “forget their inhibitions about mistakes and being embarrassed in front of their fellows” (Rivers [38]).

The most engaging language game competition always produces one or several climaxes – the points of greatest pleasurable tension wherein the players feel a sense of urgency because the game is approaching a turning point that will determine the outcome of the competition. Some climaxes appear automatically or unexpectedly out of the participants’ dramatic or seesaw performances. Others can be prearranged. The most common prearranged climaxes arise in the language games in which the players take turns to accomplish a task of increasing amount until one participant finally breaks down, as in the game Piling Up Bricks, a memory game in which the players take turns to deliver an oral message that is repeated and extended by each player.

Awards are one of the driving forces for competition. Language game winners may receive various awards, including extra marks, honors, stickers, privileges, applause, avoidance of light-hearted punishment, and so on. Substantial awards like extra marks may work well. But when symbolic awards like applause can satisfy the winner(s), it indicates that the game is intrinsically motivating. In such an effective game, senior business managers would struggle very hard to get a bar of chocolate as a prize (Gaudart [17]). What the players strive for is not the low-priced prize but a priceless sense of achievement that the prize carries.

Some people seem to have been much disturbed by the negative connotation of the word *competition*. They are worried that, in competition, “the weaker students may tend to become discouraged by never winning” (Gasser and Waldman [16]). They feel that the competition is so threatening that it should be downplayed for most of the games (Richard-Amato [36]) or that some games should be altered into non-competitive ones to bring about a more secure learning situation.

The flinch from competition in a language learning game, whether it be on the part of the teacher or students, stems largely from problems of application rather than from competition itself. It is pointless to eliminate the element of

competition in a language game with a view of making the game more acceptable or nonthreatening. Appropriate measures can be taken to cope with the problems of game application. If properly structured, competition is an effective and harmless means to motivate learners to do their best.

Healthy competition is one of the most important contributing factors of a successful language game. In a one hundred percent healthy competition, all players are motivated to outdo their rivals, but no one feels rejected or hurt. Some measures can be taken to keep the competitive activity on its right course.

First of all, penalty points should never be used to penalize any player in front of the whole class for making a linguistic mistake or performing an inappropriate speech act. To some players, it might be discouraging or embarrassing to take points away for their failures. The intimidating effect might make some other players, whether they have been penalized or not, reluctant to keep actively involved in the game. The more sensitive players might even be hurt when they are openly penalized for their linguistic or communicative failures. The desire to protect a fragile sense of self-worth will make these students choose apathy over involvement (Raffini [35]). On the other hand, it is usually necessary to impose penalty points on the players who have broken the rules of the game.

Secondly, drop-out games should be used carefully and sparingly. Too many players will be eliminated from the activity in a drop-out game dragging on too long. The dropouts could become idle, bored spectators, some of whom might even feel rejected. Unless the competition is so amusing or exciting that it is unlikely to bore the spectators, additional steps should be taken to take care of the dropouts, such as having them serve as assistant judges, score keepers, or consultants to their teammates. Sometimes, the elimination game can be conducted in such a way that the dropouts are usually the more able participants rather than the weaker ones, as in one version of the game Hangman, in which each team can decide that a hanged man represents a more able member of the rival team. Since more able participants normally are psychologically stronger, they will not feel so much rejected as the slower learners do when eliminated from the game.

Thirdly, as noted earlier, the players of approximately equal proficiency should be evenly distributed among different competing teams. In a one-on-one contest, the two contestants should also be approximately equally matched in language proficiency. Adequate organization of players not only can be productive of the pleasurable, facilitative tension but also will effectively prevent the one-sided game in which



the player(s) playing the losing game against the vastly superior side might be subject to the feeling of hurt and frustration.

Finally, for the more serious or weaker students who would get exceptionally discouraged by losing due to poor language skills, the teacher can apply the games in which luck is needed to win, as losing a language game because of bad luck is far less embarrassing or frustrating than losing it out of poor language skills. Alternatively, the teacher can try applying games of inter-group competition, which is usually felt to be far less threatening in that in these games the students can receive help from and cooperate with their teammates.

Some methodologists or game designers (e.g., Hadfield [19], Wanadilok [48], and Wright et al. [52]) seem to have emphasized the cooperative element of the language game to the degree that the element of competition has been relegated to a secondary role. Thus language games collected in some game books (e.g., Rinvolucris [37]) are divided into two major categories: competitive games and cooperative games. Following such a typology, some subsequent studies (e.g., Hadfield [20] and Kuo [26]) tend to treat a language game as an activity that may be noncompetitive.

In recent years, cooperative learning (e.g., Kagan [24] and Slavin [44]) has come into prominence in the field of language teaching. But language teachers using cooperative learning do not necessarily shun competitive games. In fact, the cooperative learning in a humanistic language class also utilizes inter-group and even interpersonal competitive games, as shown in Prapphal [33].

In fact, a language game can be both competitive and cooperative. My experience is that cooperation and competition are not mutually exclusive in a language game. On the contrary, they may feed upon each other. The inter-team rivalry in a language learning game will facilitate intra-group cooperation and help develop team spirit. And the intra-group cooperation and team spirit thus developed will in turn beget healthy inter-team competition. In short, we should deal with competition as a useful and manageable feature of language games.

4. Engagingness

A pure game provides entertainment or amusement, whether on the part of players or spectators. If combined with a specific behavioral goal involving use of the target language, the element of engagingness can make the participants enjoy the language learning activity within the framework of a game. This suggests that the activity is intrinsically motivating in virtue of the participants' enjoyment derived from the learning activity itself. Foreign language learners are often motivated by the classroom experience itself (cf. Dornyei [11]). If

classroom activities are engaging, the teacher has a good chance to create and retain the students' interest in the target language.

Many factors contribute to the engagingness of a language game. We have seen that well-managed competition can cause pleasurable tension. Beyond that, the behavioral goal(s) of a game can be stimulating which present a challenging task, produce a sense of mystery, or relate language tasks to the players. Challenging tasks in language games often involve solving problems, discovering something, making intelligent judgments, and the like. The players will feel a great sense of achievement when completing a challenging task in the game. In doing a mystified task, game players are given one direct or indirect clue after another to a puzzle or solution until the secret finally comes to light, as is the case with a guessing game. A personalized task relates the game to the players' lives, identities, or background, as in an ice-breaking game or a name-learning game at the first class meeting. The attraction is based on the universal interest in selfhood and the unknown part of the group one belongs to.

Fun and amusement in a language game may also stem from the course of action guided by the rules. For example, in a fantasy game the players may perform tasks in an exotic, imaginary situational context. Or they may enact interesting roles. Amusing or incongruous actions can be induced in a miming game. And humorous language or language use can excite laughter during the game, as in a game based on a verbal joke or tongue twisters or a matching game in which the players arrange various linguistic constituents and come up with ludicrous sentences like *Confucius had a date with Cleopatra*. Imminent penalties can generate pleasurable excitement in a language game as well, as in the game Tag, in which the player touched has to say, for example, the alphabet backwards and become 'it.'

The great source of pleasure is variety. Lessons consisting of the same patterns have shown to lead to a decrease in attention and an increase in boredom (Lightbown and Spada [29]). A language course built entirely around a collection of games is no doubt exciting at first, but it may pall in a month or two. This means that the players of a language game can feel its engagingness better after they have gone about a number of other types of classroom activities. By the same token, the players may soon get tired of a series of language games based on the same sort of engagingness. If language games are to be incorporated into a language curriculum, they had better offer a variety of different kinds of engagingness. Therefore, the engagingness of a language game should be evaluated in relation to the preceding language



game or classroom activity.

Finally, the engagingness of a language game can also be evaluated in terms of the number of participants actually involved in the game. Generally speaking, the most engaging language game activates the highest percentage of participants at the same time, involves all the participants in one way or another, and makes for approximately equal unforced participation of both quick and slow learners. All these behavioral responses are directly observable during the game.

5. Unpredictability

Games are characterized by an unpredictable course of event. No game can be played a second time with the same process and outcome. As noted earlier, the rules of a game guide and restrict the players' actions but leave sufficient room for the players to exercise option in the game. They know what they can do and what they cannot do, but they do not know what exactly is going to happen next. The mechanism of uncertain courses of action motivates the players to work out better means to the end of winning or reaching the behavioral goal.

As Hadfield [20] puts it, language games "provide an opportunity for real communication, albeit within artificially limits, and thus constitute a bridge between the classroom and the real world." As I see it, the real communication occurring in a game is largely attributed to the unpredictable courses of action. Language game players have to draw on their whole language resource and knowledge of the world to effect the desired outcome that is not related to language directly. Their interaction is spontaneous in the sense that it is not prescribed and cannot be rehearsed. They process utterances they hear and formulate what they want to express in real time.

Since the courses of action and utterances in a language game, especially a communication-aimed one, usually are not foreseeable, the players should be briefed carefully beforehand about the play of the game. Complicated rules and useful linguistic information (e.g., a glossary of vocabulary and a list of lexical phrases) can be described and provided in handout materials. Right after the game the players may be debriefed in whatever way that can heighten the pedagogical value of the game. The teacher can, for example, administer a questionnaire, hold a whole-class feedback session, or have the participants write a short reflective essay. In the oral debriefing, the students may be encouraged to talk about the language difficulties they have had during the game. They may also talk about their strategies for interacting effectively in groups and for working toward the behavioral goals. At the same time, the teacher may elicit opinions about the game, comment on the contents of the players' language, and if

necessary, provide feedback in the correctness of the players' language forms. If the debriefing takes the form of a questionnaire or essay writing, the participants of the game will have an opportunity to reflect on their actions, reactions, and language use in the game. The questionnaire or reflective essay, being a purposeful language exercise itself, may evaluate unpredictable aspects of the game activity, including the degree of its engagingness.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article we have examined definitions of a game in the literature and identified the following five main features of a game: goals, rules, competition, engagingness, and unpredictability. To a degree at least, these features can help us to explore the fuzzy concept of game in the field of language teaching. They combine with one another to immerse language learners in a meaningful context in which they are motivated to use the target language to achieve a desired nonlinguistic outcome. Each of the main features can function properly and beneficently within the framework of a game in the language class.

Language games are more than just playful activity. If they are integrated into the main course structure, they can be considered not just a welcome addition to a language teacher's repertoire but an integral part of the whole language learning syllabus. Well-conceived and well-managed language games are useful in making learners of all ages more active participants in their language learning. Therefore, the value and significance of language games should not be belittled.

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