

Foreign Research
Чуждестранни изследвания

GAMES AND COMPETITIONS TO TRANSFORM AN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES CLASS INTO STUDENT-CENTERED

Oksana Chugai

Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute – Kyiv (Ukraine)

Abstract. The article addresses the problem of using games and competitions to transform traditional teacher-centered English for Specific Purposes (ESP) class into student-centered. The basic features of games are distinguished: following rules, getting immediate feedback and achieving a goal. Gamification is defined as a process of using games in education aimed at bringing democracy into educational environment and achieving better learning results by motivating students. The characteristics of teacher-centered and student-centered models are discussed in the article. Detailed descriptions of games and competitions are provided, the guidelines of introducing gamification in an ESP class are outlined. The author comes to the conclusion that gamification of education, aiming at achieving better learning results and employability of graduates, is effective if properly applied.

Keywords: competition; English for Specific Purposes (ESP); game; gamification; student-centered

1. Introduction

Global educational trend of changing a teacher-centered class into student-centered requires creating the atmosphere of trust which is possible when the authoritative style gives way to democratic. Transforming a traditional class into students-centered is especially important for teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) considering the fact that one of the basic characteristics of ESP is focusing on the needs of learners. However, such transformation may be difficult and painful as both parties are involved: teachers should be willing to give some power to students, while students should be ready to take responsibility for their own learning getting a certain degree of autonomy. Games and competitions are those means which make it possible to transform a traditional ESP class into democratic by means of placing students at the centre of educational model.

The student-centered or person-centered approach is based on the Humanistic School and associated with the names of such renowned researchers as Dewy, Roger, Piaget, Knowles, Vygotsky. The value of gamification for education, the ability of

games to transform the way people learn in particular, are proved by investigations conducted by Apostol (2013), Deterding (2011), Gee (2008), Haywood (2004), Kapp (2012), Lee (2011), Whitehill (1999); strategies of using gamification in technical higher education are presented in works by Iosup and Epema (2014); the taxonomy of player types is developed by Bartle (2013). Many prominent scholars conducted research in the field of ESP considering a learner-centered approach (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987), singling out the absolute and variable characteristics, developing a multi-disciplinary approach (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998), investigating case studies (Mackay and Mountford, 1978), focusing on key issues in curriculum development (Gatehouse, 2001), discussing practical ideas and options in teaching ESP (Basturkmen, 2006; Master, 2005; Robinson, 1991; Strevens, 1988). The ways of assessing student-centered courses are presented in the works of Gibbs (1995), Cobb (1999), Knight (2002), Lea, Stephenson and Troy (2003), McCombs and Miller (2007); the strategies of changing traditional teaching practice into learner-centered are defined by Weimer (2002), Jones (2007), Brown (2008).

However, there has been little discussion about using games and competitions as means of transforming an ESP class into student-centered.

The aim of this paper is to consider the possibilities of using games and competitions to make a traditional ESP class student-centered. In order to achieve the aim it is necessary to:

- focus on the meaning of such basic terms as games, gamification, competition, student-centered, ESP;
- critically examine advantages and disadvantages of games and competitions, consider using gamification as means to make a shift from a traditional teacher-centered model;
- provide some practical suggestions related to using games and competitions in an ESL class.

2. Definitions

The problem with defining games precisely may be explained by the fact that they are part of the history of humans existing in all cultures. Nevertheless, a game may be defined as “a composite category of multiple necessary conditions” (Johnson, 2014: 11). The term “game” has been applied to situations when people, involved into a meaningful activity, follow a defined set of rules, get immediate feedback and achieve a goal. Rules define the range of the choices for players, feedback refers to the consequences of the actions, goals map the path to success. In addition to these three main characteristics, there are two more: games are supposed to be voluntary and enjoyable. Considering exploiting games in education, a game may be defined as a specially organized activity for students to implement theoretical knowledge in the process of active communication which improves habits, develops their problem-solving skills and creativity (Tkachova & Tur, 2017: 142).

The term “gamification” is generally understood as “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” (Deterding, 2011: 9). Gamification may be also broadly defined as “the integration of gaming elements, mechanics, and frameworks into non-game situations and scenarios” (Johnson, 2014: 42). In this paper we consider gamification as a process of using games in education, in an ESP class in particular, aimed at bringing democracy into educational environment and achieving better learning results by motivating students.

The term “competition” is related to the terms “game” and “gamification” considering ambitious spirit of players who try to win and achieve a goal. For the purposes of this paper we use the term “competition” to refer to a contest in which participants try to win by being better than others.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is defined by Orr (2007) as “a branch of applied linguistics devoted to the research and teaching of English and related skills that are required for successful participation in specific academic and workplace activities”. ESP is also understood as a branch of English Language Teaching (ELT) which is based on the specific needs of the learners (Pradhan, 2013: 1).

There are many approaches in defining the terms “student-centered”, “person-centered” or “learner-centered” which are used interchangeably in the literature. In general, “student-centered” as an umbrella term is usually applied to situations in educational environment when students have the right to actively participate in educational activities, make choices and take decisions, when the power shifts from teacher to students (O’Neill, 2005: 29). In this paper instead of more general “person-centered” or “learner-centered” we use the term “student-centered” as we focus on higher education.

3. Advantages and disadvantages of games and competitions; a shift from a traditional teacher-centered model

The basic characteristics of games are so-called “four freedoms of play” which are defined by Scot Osteweil: the freedom to fail, the freedom to experiment, the freedom to make an effort and the freedom to self-express which, when used in education, ensure a shift from traditional model of teaching.

It is necessary to emphasize the fact that in real life, in teaching practice there is no distinct division between traditional or teacher-centered (TC) and student-centered (SC) model. We agree with O’Neill (2005) who presents this relationship as a continuum; TC model is characterized by low level of student choice because students are passive and disempowered, SC model is characterized by high level of student choice when students are active and empowered. According to TC model, students are deprived of “the four freedoms to play”; they do not have the right to fail, as they are punished for wrong answers, that is why shy students are not engaged actively; experimenting is connected with the freedom to fail: experiments are not supposed to be always successful; making an effort is connected with motivation, when students intrinsically or extrinsically are pushed into an activity, a decision-making process, or they want to stop playing; there are few opportunities to self-express when students choose different roles or identities,

when students' opinion and individuality really count. Reflecting on teaching experience, educators may locate their ESP class on the continuum and decide what should be done to move to student-centered model. One of possible ways to do that is gamification.

Military, business and education quickly recognized the potential of gamification to influence and change the behaviour of players (Dicheva, 2015: 75). The most popular game mechanics are points, badges, levels and leaderboards which are used to quantify the performance, mark special achievements, compare with the results of others, show the progress and represent it visually (Dicheva, 2015: 78). Such characteristics of gamification as visual status, social engagement, freedom of choice, freedom to fail and instantaneous feedback are especially important in education (Dicheva, 2015: 79). One of the strongest arguments for gamification of education is an immediate feedback which provides opportunities for students to change their strategies and achieve better results (Arnold, 2014: 37). Another advantage is that feedback is usually provided by other players. Gamification is the opportunity for students to become more autonomous: motivated students who enjoy playing a game following the rules, getting feedback and achieving the goal, do not need teacher's control and supervision. Therefore, traditional TC model gives way to SC model when teacher is not the only one who knows "the right answer", therefore, instead of teacher correction peer correction takes place.

A game is not only recreational, but a powerful training and motivational tool which is proved by the fact that an increasing number of educational institutions and programs are trying gamification. That situation may be explained by support from educators who recognize the ability of games to stimulate productivity and creativeness among students (Johnson, 2014: 42).

Gamification increases motivation of students by satisfying three core needs: competence, the need to learn something new; autonomy, the need to be in control of their learning; relatedness, the need to connect with others and socialize.

The majority of researchers and practitioners positively assess gamification of education: they report more active participation of students in learning activities, increased attendance, better learning results, minimization of the gap between low and high achievers. In addition, students consider the gamified courses to be more motivating, interesting and easier to learn when compared with the traditional ones (Dicheva, 2015: 83). Gamification turns traditional assignments into intellectual challenges, provides reward system and fosters leadership; it promotes critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork skills which are in demand at any workplace thus increasing student employability (Johnson, 2014: 42). Eventually, gamification may be one of the ways to solve the problem of the "educated unemployed", the situation when large numbers of graduates are not equipped enough to be hired. This problem may be explained by the fact that post-education outcomes depend not only on knowledge, but on creativity, entrepreneurial and analytical skills of graduates which are possible to develop by means of gamification.

Considering advantages of gamification, educators should also be aware of possible challenges. A serious drawback is a common belief that gamification can solve all the problems which exist in education systems in the world, when in real life it is only one way of solving some them.

Ineffectiveness of gamification may be connected with “anti-gamer” mentality and negative stereotypes of students; their inability to accept the changes in the traditional class, connect playing with learning which may lead to their resistance and, finally, prevent students from finishing the course or succeeding at project work (Dicheva, 2015: 83).

Another danger may be distracting attention of students from their educational goals: motivated to play and win, they may focus on finding loopholes to succeed more easily. Instead of focusing on the meaning and form, namely, the target language, they mostly think of winning strategies.

As in case of any competitive activity, gamification may trigger social tension by demotivating more able students when the whole team receives the same grade or excluding shy students who do not want to participate in group activities.

Another drawback may be the inability of teachers to use gamification effectively due to the bandwagon effect, when teachers just follow the trend and try new gamification strategies without preliminary assessment of students’ needs (Arnold, 2014: 37). Such mechanical application of new ideas may lead to negative teaching experience and abandoning of gamification. In order to prevent such poor execution more universities start cooperating with companies which conduct research on the relevance of gamification to the curriculum and students’ needs (Johnson, 2014: 43). Another possible solution to this problem is training in-service teachers to use games in education, as well as including gamification into pre-service teacher preparation.

There are several possible strategies to prevent social tension: individual approach to students’ assessment, using leaderboards wisely in order not to shame the students with low score, observing students and intervening when it is necessary.

To conclude, in order to benefit gamification, get positive learning results and enjoy the experience, both teachers and students should be well-prepared, flexible, knowledgeable and committed to turning a traditional ESP class into student-centered.

4. Application of games and competitions in ESP

The goal of ESP is reaching the necessary level of professionally oriented English language communicative competency. Motivating students, engaging them in the lesson is extremely important considering the fact that, as a rule, English is not the core subject in technical universities.

In order to transform a traditional ESP class teachers do not have to start with drastic changes. A good example may be “freedom of choice” application: students are allowed to complete an assignment in different ways; it may be an essay, a video, a multimedia presentation, etc. (Dicheva, 2015: 79). Gradually teachers may

provide more choices for students. Another example of this is following “freedom to fail”, when students should be allowed to retake tests, revise and resubmit assignments (Dicheva, 2015: 80).

According to the results of research and our teaching experience we may claim that practically any game may be adapted to the needs of ESP. Teachers may choose any vocabulary game like word snakes, crosswords, jumbled letters, crosses and noughts, etc., and use it in an ESP class focusing on the terminology which students should learn or revise. In order to engage students more actively, ESP teachers may ask students to prepare the tasks for each other based on the keywords from the technical text. It is possible to play games checking reading comprehension, for example, “True / False Game”: students write five statements based on the technical text one of which is false; after that working with a partner they have to name which statement is false or true, obtaining one point for each correct answer. The role of teacher is to observe and supervise, time the activities and encourage students.

Using games as part of competitions make them even more effective considering the fact that motivation is based on getting better results, personal development and social status: the winners obtain additional points, sense of achievement, recognition of peers and teachers.

Taking part in competitions on the topics related to their specialization provides an opportunity to break the routine of the lesson and make students survive in a competitive environment preparing them for real life situations. In addition, students reveal their creative potential, develop critical thinking and participate in teamwork generating the final product which is assessed by independent judges. The board game “Technology addiction” and “English Class Contract” may serve as examples of exploiting competitions in an ESP class.

In order to take part in the board game competition “Technology addiction” students work in teams preparing board games on the topic and instructions. The goal of the competition is to involve as many students as possible in preparing and assessing board games which involves activating subject knowledge, terminology and the language for writing the tasks and instructions in English.

For warming up at the beginning of the class students play common board games, for example, Activate Board Games or any others. The point is to gain the experience necessary for creating the board games on the specific topic related to technology addiction. After learning about the rules of the competition and the rubrics, students in groups design board games, develop the tasks (cues) related to the topic and instructions for players. Besides the topical vocabulary, the participants should familiarize themselves with such words and phrases as “clockwise, counterclockwise, roll the dice, the number of spaces”, etc., which are common among players of board games. All the stages should be timed: students should be able to finish creating the board games and not be bored. Anyway, early finishers may play the board game they have created or swap it with another group.

Using color pencils, pens and highlighters students design their board games which are to be assessed by independent judges later. Content (relevance of information), visual attractiveness (pictures), clarity of instructions (should be understandable) and language (accuracy) are the main criteria according to which points are given to the board games and the best are chosen.

Another competition called “English Class Contract” should be held at the beginning of the academic year. “Contract” in this context means the set of rules which all the participants of the learning process will follow. The aim of the competition is to develop the ways of behaviour for teachers and students acceptable in an academic environment. It also aims at revising the usage of certain patterns (modal verbs and phrases ‘must’, ‘have to’, ‘can’ for permission and prohibition, etc.), vocabulary related to the classroom language, developing speaking and writing skills, establishing the atmosphere of trust between teacher and students.

Prior to developing their own rules, students discuss in pairs some classroom rules given to them and the criteria for assessment. “English Class Contract” should present the set of rules for students and teacher (content), it should be visually attractive, the language should be appropriate. Besides, extra points may be given for using idioms, presenting original ideas, humour.

Analyzing the contracts presented by students, we may conclude that the rules for students contain attitudes for being late, going out at any point of the lesson, eating, drinking, using mobile phones, talking to each other, participation in the lesson, earning extra points, etc. The rules for teachers are about conducting assessment, giving homework, providing some freedom to students, the choice of clothes, preparation for lessons, playing games, encouraging and punishing students, individual approach, using different ways of conducting lessons, respectful attitude to students, qualities like competency, tolerance, objectiveness, etc. According to students, both students and teachers should be active, friendly, positive, they should be allowed to eat and drink in class but quietly. Such information may be the material for extra activities after the competition is over: the ideas may be the topics for further discussions, for ranking the rules, error analysis, etc.

After all contracts are assessed, they are put on display for other students and teachers to read and discuss. It is possible to have an additional activity on error correction, preparing handouts for students focusing on all statements from the contracts which contain mistakes. Working in groups, students identify the type of a mistake (spelling, wrong word order, punctuation, etc.) and correct it. Finally, they check the results together with other groups and teacher. This activity provides an opportunity for students to learn about the ideas of others focusing on the content and develop proofreading skills focusing on accuracy.

Besides reaching educational goals, the competitions “Technology addiction” and “English Class Contract” are supposed to be entertaining and enjoyable for both students and teachers.

5. Conclusion

Considering the characteristics of games and competitions it is possible to conclude that they are means of transforming a traditional ESP class into student-centered if properly applied. Teachers and students should be well-prepared, flexible, knowledgeable and committed. Gamification as illustrated by practical examples makes it possible to adapt traditional games and competitions to the needs of an ESP class motivating students, aiming at achieving better learning results and employability of graduates.

Further investigations may be devoted to gamification of ESP courses.

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Dr. Oksana Chugai, Assoc. Prof.

ORCID: 0000-0002-2118-8255

Researcher ID: I-3827-2017

Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute

National Technical University of Ukraine

Kyiv, Ukraine

E-mail: ochugai@meta.ua