



Perceptions of First Grade Secondary School Students in Mexico in the Implementation of Games for English Language Learning Purposes

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study is to describe students' perceptions of the use of games for learning purposes in the English language classroom at a public Mexican Junior High. The study evaluated the perceptions regarding the use of bingo, wordsearch and crosswords. This cross-sectional study implemented observations, field notes, questionnaires and surveys as data collection methods to provide detailed descriptions of the participants' feelings.

Keywords: gamification, game-based learning, English language learning and vocabulary.

1. Introduction

English language learning and teaching are complex processes that require the constant implementation of activities to motivate students. Most teaching training programs provide tools to help trainees discover or start creating a teaching philosophy about how teaching and learning should be including the activities, materials, methodologies to use. There is a large number of different activities and materials for English learning purposes, one of this different activity are games.

The use of games for English learning purposes has been of great interest in research on how its implementation may or not benefit the learning and teaching process of English. This paper explores how the implementation of games works in the context of a public junior high school in Mexico.

English classes in Mexico normally focuses on the use of traditional activities and materials. We know all these aspects directly affect students' performance in the language, in this case negatively. This is because students start creating (or it is already created) the idea of how English is learned and how this process is. This idea is supported by Banks (2017) who in her study it is claimed that 48.76% of the participant teachers have students with lack of interest in English and unmotivated to learn this language at a junior high school in Mexico.

A source of motivation for this study was the lack of material in the classroom. This guided me to be creative and design my own materials and activities. Quezada (as cited in Millán & Basurto, 2020: 127) carried out research and he concluded that teacher used to complain about the lack of materials and school support. Another study carried out by Blanks (2017) reported

similar results by concluding that Mexican English teachers complain about not enough and inadequate materials and teaching resources. In this study teachers highlighted the fact that materials (books) are not adequate for students' real English level and needs which forces teachers to look for better and different materials to use in their classes. Another source of motivation was the desire to change students' ideas of how English learning is. As Hidalgo, Cifuentes and Flores (as cited in Banks, 2017: 28) observed, English learning in Mexico is surrounded by complex and contradictory ideas and opinions that affect Mexican English learners' motivations, perceptions and attitudes towards English learning.

The purpose of this study is to describe and analyze the perceptions of first-grade students in a secondary school in Mexico regarding the implementation and use of games for English language learning purposes. English language learning is more than copying from the board or writing vocabulary lists. It is about experimenting and playing with the language in ways that are meaningful to students. Researching the implementation of games could help language teachers (not only at a secondary level) who are struggling in deciding what activities and materials to incorporate the English classroom and how to teach vocabulary to their students in an interactive and engaging way. Moreover, this research could shed light on the benefits of using games for a particular context. The research questions guiding the study is: How does first grades students in secondary school perceive the implementation of games in the language classroom for learning purposes?

2. Literature review

This section presents an overview of the topics underpinning the study. First, I will explain the differences between gamification and game-based learning. After that, I discuss some of the benefits and drawbacks of implementing is bingo, crosswords, and word search in English language learning and teaching.

2.1 *Differences between gamification and game-based learning*

First, it is important to start distinguishing the terms gamification and game-based learning since these are commonly misunderstood. According to Nah et al. (2014), gamification is the integration of game elements such as leaderboards, badges, points, etc. with the purpose of increasing motivation and engagement. Another definition by Kiryakova et al. (2014) describes gamification as the implementation of game elements and game thinking in non-game activities.

On the other hand, Al-Azawi et al. (2016) define Game Based Learning as the use of games as part of the learning process and use these games to enhance the learning process. Dimitra (as cited in Dahalan et al., 2023: 6) explains that there exist 7 types of GBL: memory, simulation, interactive, quiz, strategy, testing games and puzzles. It could be assumed that the game used in game-based learning is a digital game, but this is not always the case as Plass, et al. (2015) commented. This idea is supported by Grace (as cited in Adipat et al., 2021: 542) by commenting that they can be digital or non-digital. In this research, the games used are non-digital.

2.2 *Advantages and disadvantages of using games in the classroom*

It is important to highlight the benefits of using games in the classroom. As pointed out by Mubaslat (2012) games are not only fun, but they can also be challenging, and it is a way of developing cooperation between the students. They are also a tool for recalling knowledge in an entertaining and pleasant way. Another advantage is that they capture students' attention and they

lower students' level of stress and anxiety. In addition to these benefits, Mubalast (2012) pointed out that besides these benefits, there still exist teachers who believe games are only a waste of time, and they assume the only purpose is to have fun. For this study, three different types of games were used: crosswords, bingo and wordsearch.

2.3 Crosswords in English language learning

Moursund (2006) comments that crossword is a way to recall words by words, sentences, definitions or information. The author also commented that from an educational point of view, they help to improve vocabulary, spelling and reading skills. Orawiwatnakul (2013) highlighted that crossword puzzle they can be either used for practicing, learning or reviewing terms. According to a study carried out by Tabtimsai (as cited in Orawiwatnakul, 2013: 417) the use of crossword as an after reading activity helped students to enhance and grow their vocabulary knowledge. Nevertheless, crosswords can also be used with a different skills like listening, or writing.

2.4 Bingo and English language learning

Rahmasari (2021) describes that bingo is a game that encourages students to review vocabulary words. Finch (as cited in Rahmasari, 2021: 29) establishes that vocabulary Bingo game also help students to learn new words. Rahmasari (2021) also concluded based on the research carried out that Bingo is a way to enhance students' engagement and interaction in the classroom while they are playing. This activity creates a good learning environment in the classroom which promotes and facilitates learning.

2.5 Word search puzzle for English language learning

Vossoughi, and Zargar (2009) pointed out that many researchers suggest that playing games is a good way to learn vocabulary. They also claimed that word search puzzles are good strategies to review vocabulary without making students feel tired. According to a study carried out by Yulianti and Bharati (2017) it was observed that wordsearch games help students to increase their vocabulary for both students with high and low interest in the English language. Based on the results from a study carried out by Goumas et al. (2020) all the students who participated in the study commented that using wordsearch is more amusing than traditional ways of learning.

3. Methodology

As the title suggest the study aimed to describe students' perceptions towards the use of games in an English classroom in a Mexican context, and a qualitative research method was the best option to achieve this purpose. As Williams (2007) described, qualitative research has the purpose to describe, interpret and analyze data. This author also affirmed that in this type of research, the researcher has the opportunity to better understand the phenomenon and the people being studied. Bryman (as cited in Hammersley, 2012: 1) describes that qualitative research focusses its attention on words rather than in the quantification or numerical analysis of the data. This is a case study method and according to Cohen et al. (2002) it focuses on a group of individuals and how they understand or perceive an event. In other words, this type of study is strong in showing the reality. Geertz (as cited in Cohen et al., 2002: 254) reported that this type of study tries to picture "what it is like" to be in a certain situation. Case study was selected because to better explore, analyze and report how people reacted to the phenomenon, which is the

implementation of games in the English classroom. This is deductive research since according to Li et al. (2019), it starts with a theory and then through different instruments we try to confirm or reject the theory. In this study, the theory is how games benefit English language learning, more specifically vocabulary. For this study, four data collection instruments were selected because as Hood (2009) stipulated that a case study method uses multiple sources for data collection. The four instruments used were questionnaires (Q), surveys (S), observations (Ob) and field notes (FN).

3.1 Participants of the study

A group of twelve participants three boys and nine girls was the final sample. They were 11-12 years old at time of the study. For the majority of the students, it is their first-time learning English. Their level of English is A1. So far, they have presented both positive and negative opinions about the language and the classes in general. In order to participate the students were required to sign a consent letter where the purpose of the study was clearly explained. Considering that they are minors, the school and parents were informed of the purpose of the study, the instruments and steps of the data collection. In order to protect students' identity, participants names were changed by numbers. In order to accept participate in this study, participants were required to sign a consent letter where the purpose of the study was clearly explained.

3.2 Research setting

This study was carried out in the city of Irapuato in central Mexico. The school where the research was carried out is a public secondary school located in Irapuato, this school is located in dangerous neighborhoods with economic and security problems. English classes are taught three times a week for 50 min.

3.3 Data collection instruments

3.3.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed using three types of items: fill-in, open and close response questions (Brown, 2009). The questionnaire had 10 open questions, 3 close questions and 3 fill-in questions. The questionnaire was designed in Spanish to make it easier for participants to complete it. This instrument was selected because it provided written explanation of participants' perceptions and ideas about the different games implemented in the classroom.

3.3.2 Survey

Ponto (2015) claims that surveys are an efficient research tool because they help participants to describe, analyze and explore the interest being studied. As stated by Li et al., (2019), surveys can produce a summary of beliefs, perceptions, opinion, etc., of a population or group of people but they do not pretend to test a hypothesis. In this study, survey was selected as an instrument because it can collect written information about participants perceptions and opinions of the use of games in the classroom. Also, because of the time available, participants could complete the survey by themselves.

3.3.3 *Observations*

According to Cohen et al. (2002), observations can be used as an instrument to gather live information in a natural setting. In this study, observations of different classes were used in order to find any discrepancies between what participants answer in the survey and what happened in the real classroom setting, or to find extra information not mentioned in the surveys by the participants. One observation was conducted before the survey was carried out and two observations after the survey was carried out.

3.3.4 *Field notes*

Field notes of each class observed were written by the researcher to support the observations and the responses from the survey. As Li et al. (2019) described, field notes can be used to recollect the observation data. The notes were written after each class finished, reporting the most meaningful data. One reason to do the notes in this was because of my positionality as a teacher and researcher.

3.4 *Data analysis procedures*

Once the data was collected through the instruments described above, it was coded and organized in a table. The information was classified using thematic analysis and patterns were identified. This process allowed to find emerging themes that were organized and divided into 6 different themes based on the three games researched.

3.5 *Limitations of the study*

One of the biggest limitations of this study was that the researcher was also the teacher. While this situation could have some benefits in terms of rapport with the participants. Playing both roles also raises challenges which could potentially affect students' responses to the survey as they could feel observed or influenced by the presence of the teacher. That is why a different data collection instrument was used to corroborate their responses, check for any discrepancies and make the study reliable with solid results.

Another limitation was the small sample of participants, since this study was only carried out with 12 students from the same group, and at the same school level. This limitation directly affects the study as results cannot be generalized to different English teaching contexts such as working with younger (kindergarten/primary) or older students (high school/university, adult learners) or for a different language.

4. Findings and discussion

The results were based on the information gathered from the surveys, observations of different classes and field notes written by the teacher about what was observed in the classroom. A thematic analysis was required to explain the data collected. Scharp and Sanders (2019) pointed out that thematic analysis is a way of recognizing, examining and reporting the data collected in qualitative research by the use of patterns named themes. I decided to use thematic analysis to look for patterns of their responses.

The following themes emerged: 4.1 Bingo as a tool for practicing listening and learning vocabulary. 4.2 Identifying words through word search puzzle. 4.3 Crosswords as a way for

practicing spelling. 4.4 Games as a tool for developing cooperation and competition. 4.5 Games more than having fun. 4.6 The dark side of games.

4.1 Bingo as a tool for practicing listening and learning vocabulary

While analyzing the responses gathered about the use of bingo, it can be said that 100% of the participants reacted positively to the use of this game in the classroom. Participants commented that one of the benefits of the use of this game is that they feel words can be easily remembered. Three participants out of twelve commented something similar by mentioning that bingo is a good game that helps them to enhance their memory retention about the vocabulary.

“... así ubico más mi vocabulario y me lo aprendo más fácil”

In that way I recognize the vocabulary and I learn it easier. (S/Q8/Participant 7)

From this it can be said that this tool facilitates the learning process and the recognition of vocabular. Besides the benefit this game has on vocabulary learning. Another participant commented that it is also a way for practicing listening and identify how words are pronounced. This is because they have the opportunity to listen to the teacher reading out loud different vocabulary words, but at the same time identify how they are written and compare with its pronunciation.

“...también al momento de divertirnos aprendemos a escuchar las palabras en inglés”

At the moment we are having fun we learn to listen to the words in Spanish. (S/Q8/Participant 11)

From both quotes it can be concluded that participants like the game, they can practice their listening ability, they can recognize written words and enhance the learning process. This game has the advantage to be adaptable to any English vocabulary and level. Teachers can use this game at the beginning or at the end of the lesson.

4.2 Identifying words through wordsearch puzzle

Now moving to what participants think about the use of wordsearch, thanks to the survey we can gathered that they think its implementation is beneficial for vocabulary. More specifically, some participants commented it is a way to learn how words are written and increasing vocabulary retention:

“...podemos memorizar palabras y su escritura”

We can memorize the words and its writing. (S/Q9/Participant 12)

Apart from learning vocabulary and how these words are written, participants commented they can also visually identify words. Which is related to know how they are written.

The answers from participants show the benefits of using wordsearch and the impact it has on students' learning and improvement of vocabulary. But is this an efficient activity for learning? Participant 7 said

“...yo opino que es una manera muy eficiente para mi”

I think it is a very efficient way for me. (S/Q9/Participant 7)

So far, it can be highlighted that wordsearch help students to memorize, learn, identify and increase their vocabulary about different topics. From the observations it can added that students get engaged in the class and seem to have fun and enjoy the class. It is important to also highlight that 91.6% of the participants reacted positively to the use of wordsearch.

4.3 *Crosswords as a way for practicing spelling*

All of the participants seem to respond positively to the use of this material for English language learning purposes. Five participants out of twelve (41.6%) mentioned that crosswords have helped them to remember how words are written.

“Está bien porque así aprendemos a escribir bien las palabras en inglés...”

It is ok because in that way we learn to write correctly the words in English.
(S/Q10/Participant 3)

Wordsearch has the benefit to force students to write the words correctly to fit in each space. Also, since they need a clue to know what word to write, they can also read small definitions of the word hidden or just use images. From the observations and field notes, it was also noticeable students were engaged in working.

4.4 *Games as a tool for developing cooperation and competition.*

From the data gathered through the observations and the field notes, it can be said that while participants are using the games in the classroom, it was noticeable they look for help with other classmates and supported each other while working. They commented explicitly in different classes they like to work with another classmate. The observations demonstrated that they like to work with the classmate next to them or behind them. This is closely related to communication and interaction between student-student which is important from creating a good environment in the classroom. This is also supported by the responses in the survey.

One participant commented in two occasions that games are a way to compete with their classmates and make the class challenging.

“...es entretenido y podemos competir entre todos y todas”

It is entertaining, and we can compete with each other. (S/Q6/Participant 10)

From this comment it is explained how this type of game provides to the students the opportunity to share time together for having fun but also for competing with each other which facilitates learning.

“Está chido porque competimos y mientras jugamos aprendemos”

It is cool because we can compete and while we are playing, we are learning.
(S/Q8/Participant 10)

This competition is positive since it creates an interactive, communicative and mainly a motivational environment for the students and all of them keep focused and interested on working.

4.5 *Games are more than having fun*

Based on the previous answers provided by the participants, we can say that games are more than having fun, they are great tools for learning, not only vocabulary. Besides these two incredible advantages, participants recalled more. One of the most mentioned was that time flies and the class is more enjoyable.

“...es muy divertido y así se pasa el tiempo más rápido...y así aprendemos mucho más”

It is funny and time flies faster and, in that way, we learn more. (S/Q4/Participant 1)

From this participant we can highlight how students enjoy the learning process when using these types of games, and they actually feel they are learning more. When students feel there are progressing in something they feel they are not good at all booster their motivation.

“Bien, siento que no me aburro tanto”

Good, I feel I do not get bored that much. (S/Q5/Participant 7)

In this comment it can be observed how this game benefits students since it is entertaining in the class and the topic.

“siento que así aprendo más y me intereso más por el tema”

I feel I learn more, and I am more interested in the topic. (S/Q6/Participant 9)

From participant 7 and 9 it can be said that games help to increase students' interest in English. There are no doubt students tend to get bored in any class at some point but participant 7 said that games help students to avoid boredom during the classes.

“Muy bien ya que me despejo un poco cuando me divierto y puedo aprender más”

Very good because I “free my mind” and I can learn more. (S/Q5/Participant 10)

When teaching you need to realize you are working with people, they can get bored, stress or tired and providing time for them to have a relax time where they can enjoy and feel good is important. As teachers we need to know having fun does not mean we cannot learn.

4.6 *The dark side of games*

While there are many benefits of using games, there are aspects to consider and problems that may arise. Not all students like the games teacher use in the classroom. From the survey and different observations some comments were captured.

Participant number 7 share their opinion towards the use of crossword in the classroom:

“Me parece bien, pero a la vez mal, bien pues porque me parece eficiente, pero mal porque no me gustan tanto.”

It looks good to me but also bad because, good because it is efficient and bad because I do not like it all. (S/Q10/Participant 7)

From this extract we can conclude that not all students like the same game. There is a variety of likes and dislikes in the same classroom. For some students a game may represent more like a challenge.

During the observations some students struggle with listening since they are truly beginners. That is why they needed to repeat the word more times, in order to play successfully. These frustrations were not answered in the survey, but they were captured by observing and taking notes. Students tend to say what they feel or think out loud. We can see this by listening the following.

“Ay, ya me perdí”

Ay, I got lost (Ob/student)

In this comment, participant feels lost because of the difficulty the game represents to the participant.

“¿Qué dijo?”

What did you say? (Ob/student)

A similar situation happened in this second comment in which the participant expresses feeling lost because his/her misunderstanding of the vocabulary mentioned during the game bingo. Even students seem enjoy playing, they may get frustrated too since playing bingo involves listening and for the majority of the students, it is a big challenge listening to English.

Now moving to wordsearch, 91.6% of the participants reacted positively. Nevertheless, Participant 8 commented the following.

“Puede que sea bueno, pero a mí no me gusta mucho, se me hace muy difícil”

It may be good, but I do not like it that much, it seems very difficult.
(S/Q9/Participant 8)

It is important to also consider this last extract, since it may benefit students to learn vocabulary, but not all students can feel that happy to play it. They may look engage, but it does not mean that students are enjoying the class.

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of the study was to investigate students' perceptions towards the use of games for English language learning. The research question was answered after a deep analysis of the data collected through different instruments. It can be concluded that these three types of games have multiple benefits on English students such as learning vocabulary from a more enjoyable, engaging, and non-traditional way. It also helps students to change their already settled perceptions about learning a language and how they can navigate this process, make students aware that they can learn by having fun and playing with the language. These three types of games are helpful for learning vocabulary and practicing English skills like listening, writing but also spelling. Learning vocabulary is important, although it could be perceived as boring or repetitive. Despite the positive aspects, it was also found some negative thoughts about games, such as boring or difficulty.

The implications of this study pointed at important aspects that teachers may not ignore while choosing a game for the classroom such as considering their students, what type of games they like, and if they can be able of playing that game based on their mental and physical abilities.

Finally, it is important to highlight that besides games, there exist an extensive list of different ways of teaching English, not only through vocabulary. Being a teacher involves being creative, so teachers always need to be asking themselves what else is besides games.

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