DEVELOPING LEXICAL COMPETENCE OF PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS THROUGH SPORTS GAMES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSES

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Summary: Modern students spend the majority of their time sitting. The lack of physical activity in any form leads to many negative consequences like tiredness, reduced attention spans, and lower efficiency. The article highlights the application of sports games in English language classes as a method to improve learner engagement and develop lexical competence.

Keywords: English language teaching, primary school, sports games, lexical competence, New Ukrainian School, game adaptation.

1. Introduction

According to the State Standard of General Primary Education in Ukraine, learners are expected to acquire several key competences throughout their studies. One of these includes the ability to communicate in a foreign language both in oral and written forms [1]. This ability is based on the knowledge of the target language’s functions, resources, norms, main styles and genres, and types of speech interaction. We can generalize it as lexical competence.

While developing lexical competence in the classroom, teachers face multiple difficulties. Among them are learners’ low engagement, efficiency, and attention spans. These issues often occur due to the lack of physical activity of students. It is obvious that learners spend most of their time sitting both at school and at home, resulting in a higher degree of tiredness and muscle tension [2].

Following the concept of the «New Ukrainian School» developed by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine [3], we propose integrating sports games into primary school English language classes. This decision is based on the idea of developing a new approach to language teaching and the general physiological and psychological peculiarities of the primary education age group [4].
It is known that games are the leading activity during the preschool period. Primary school brings in a new environment that requires games to be constantly substituted by learning. Therefore, it is necessary to make the transition process as seamless as possible, applying all kinds of gamification techniques.

We define sports games as any activity that involves physical and mental exertion, a challenge, and a competition. These activities may be designed for both teams and individuals depending on their base features and final goals. Additionally, sports games are characterized by great adaptability, meaning that developing a new activity is not always necessary, as it is possible to adapt nearly any game to the lesson’s topic.

Simultaneously, sports games are capable of involving students with auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learning styles. The reason is that most games require learners to perform certain movements, react to visual and auditory signals, and reproduce vocabulary items. As a result, there is reason to believe that sports games are an effective method for the majority of students.

Research conducted by I. Bidzan-Bluma and M. Lipowska proves that physical activity has a positive impact on learners’ cognitive functioning. It is indicated that children who participated in physical activities improved their selective attention, inhibition, planning abilities, working and visuospatial memory, and other features [5]. Considering these benefits, we came to the conclusion that sports games would have a positive impact on primary school learners.

It is necessary to note that while the application of sports games may be similar to the TPR and CLIL methods, there are some differences. Sports games require a higher degree of physical and mental exertion, provide learners with additional freedom by removing the teacher’s total supervision, and are mostly applied as one of the elements in the lesson plan.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the application of sports games in primary school English language lessons, justify the approach’s efficiency, and describe the activity’s implementation in the educational process.

2. The results of the study

To test our hypothesis, we have conducted a series of activities in two environments: a regular English language classroom in Chernivtsi Lyceum № 5 and a football pitch during an outdoor event named «Naukovyj piknik». This choice was based on the idea of testing the approach in different conditions to determine its efficiency and learners’ interest.

We have conducted the first test in Chernivtsi Lyceum № 5 with two separate groups of first-grade students. Each group included up to 14 students who were beginners in learning the English language. We shall further name them «Group A» and «Group B». The learners studied according to the lesson plan based on their «Quick Minds 1» course books. The lesson topic was «Weather». Its goal was to teach the learners to ask basic questions and use vocabulary to describe the weather. In both groups, we used sports games as an additional activity to practice the usage of vocabulary and questions after the general explanations were given.

Two activities were used. The first activity required learners to throw a ball at each other. The student who threw the ball had to ask the question “What’s the weather like today?” while the student who caught the ball had to provide an answer “It’s sunny/cloudy/hot/cold/raining/snowing”.

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The second activity is an adaptation of the game “Keep away”, also known as “Piggy in the middle”. One student is put in the middle of the classroom, while the others form a circle around him. Students must throw a ball to each other and the person in the middle must intercept the throw. Learners are required to pronounce any new weather-related words from the lesson before each throw. If the student in the middle fails to intercept the throw, he also pronounces a word or phrase from the lesson. However, if the throw is intercepted, the person who tossed the ball stands in the middle.

During our test using the first activity, the learners from both groups were able to understand the rules from a single explanation. We spent 3 to 5 minutes conducting the activity. The learners enjoyed the activity and appeared to be very engaged. It was also noted that while some students seemed to be tired and in a bad mood at the beginning of the class, the activity helped to improve their mood and well-being.

During our test using the second activity, there appeared to be some differences between group A and group B. We spent 5 minutes conducting this activity right after the first activity was over. In group A, the learners became over-excited and frequently omitted the usage of the lesson vocabulary. The students were more interested in tossing the ball at high speeds to prevent the student in the middle from intercepting the throw. Additional monitoring and guidance were required from the teacher to ensure all rules were followed. In group B, the learners appeared to be somewhat more self-disciplined and followed all the rules without the teacher’s intervention. It is believed that the reason is that both groups have different homeroom teachers, and group B probably had a higher emphasis on discipline. Generally, both groups liked the activity very much and were capable of reproducing the target vocabulary without hesitation by the end of the class. It is also necessary to note that the students asked for more similar activities to be applied in their next lessons.

We have conducted a similar test in a different environment during the outdoor event «Naukovyj piknik», translated as «Science picnic». The location was a football pitch where each department of the Chernivtsi National University had its own stands. We represented the department of foreign languages. Our goal was to demonstrate that it is possible to develop lexical competence in a foreign language by doing sports. Many primary school students visited the event.

Our activity was based on the application of boxing techniques, specifically mitt-work. Mitt-work is an activity where the instructor presents targets or threats a learner must punch or avoid at a given speed, order, and duration of time. To develop lexical competence, we used a number of basic commands the learner had to follow. These included “left, right, faster, slower, one, two, dodge, duck, stop”, and other simple words. The first explanation was always accompanied by a demonstration of the command executed by the instructor. If the learner did not understand the command, we repeated the demonstration slowly, asking the learner to perform each step simultaneously. We omitted the usage of the learners’ first language to emphasize the focus on the English language in the activity.

During the event, we were able to test our approach with 15 primary school students. It took up to 10 minutes for each learner to participate in the activity. We
noted that children had a high degree of engagement and were very interested in the activity. Simultaneously, we have noticed a tendency that the majority of learners only remembered the words used during the introductory part of the activity which lasted up to 2 minutes. The reasons might be an informal learning environment and the fact that mitt-work appeared to be a new activity for each learner. Nevertheless, learners were able to differentiate at least six different commands by the end of their sessions.

Summing up, the application of sports games in English language classes seems to increase the engagement and interest of primary school learners. The introduced activities brought additional physical activity within the learning process and helped us improve the acquisition of the elements of lexical competence in the tested topics. We believe that the topic requires further practical research within formal and informal learning environments.

References: