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Role-Playing Games and the Improvement of Francophone Learners' Communicative Competence in English in Cameroon

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Abstract

Purpose: The objective of this study is to provide an answer to the following question: how does role-playing game improve francophone learners' communicative competence in English? According to Bruner's scaffolding theory, learners benefit more when tutors accompany them in carrying out a task, and then withdraw as soon as they are in position to carry it alone.

Methodology: The sample has been chosen randomly: 63 learners in year 1 in Technical high school, Charles Atangana in Cameroon took part in the study and they were divided at random as follows: 32 for the experimental group and 31 for the control group. The collected data has been analyzed with the students' T test, a statistical instrument.

Results: From the difference from the mean: The research hypothesis which stipulates that role playing game fosters francophone learners' communicative competence is confirmed with a value of 1.83, a confidence interval of 95% and a $P < 0.00$ which is significant.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: Therefore, Role-playing games has contributed to boost the less confident learners to freely express themselves in English language thus, improving communicative competence in English.

Keywords: *Role-playing games, Improvement, Communicative Competence.*

Résumé

But: Notre objectif est de répondre à la question suivante : quelle est l'impact du jeu de rôle sur les compétences communicatives en anglais des apprenants francophones ? pour ce faire, nous formulons l'hypothèse suivante : le jeu de rôle améliore les compétences communicatives en

anglais des apprenants du sous-système francophone. Selon la théorie de l'échafaudage de Bruner, les apprenants bénéficient davantage lorsque les tuteurs les accompagnent dans la réalisation d'une tâche, puis se retirent dès qu'ils sont en mesure de la réaliser seuls.

Méthodologie: L'échantillon a été choisi au hasard : 63 apprenants en 1ère année du Lycée technique, Charles Atangana au Cameroun ont participé à l'étude et ils ont été répartis au hasard comme suit : 32 pour le groupe expérimental et 31 pour le groupe témoin. Les données recueillies ont été analysées avec le test T des élèves, un instrument statistique.

Résultats: L'hypothèse selon laquelle le jeu de rôle améliore les compétences communicatives en anglais des apprenants du sous-système francophone est confirmée, car la différence entre les deux moyennes est de 1.83, avec un degré de confiance de 95% et un $P < 0.00$, ce qui est significatif.

Contribution unique à la théorie, aux politiques et à la pratique: Ainsi, le jeu de rôle a permis aux apprenants peu confiants au départ de pouvoir s'exprimer librement en anglais.

Mots-clés: *jeu de rôle, amélioration, compétences communicatives*

INTRODUCTION

Cameroon, officially a bilingual country after the reunification of the northern and southern parts in 1972 has adopted two languages (French and English) that enjoy an equal status (Cameroon constitution). Both languages are mandatory in schools so much so that French is taught as a subject in the Anglo-Saxon sub-system of education the same with English in the francophone sub-system of education. However, the issue of bilingualism has faced so many controversies in the Country linguistic landscape.

English as a second official language suffered from marginalization, stigmatization, a situation which prevented the francophone in the learning and the acquisition of the language. However, the negative situation is changing as the interest for English language grows bigger so much so that parents, students and often ordinary Cameroonians have seen the need and use of English and have in their own way decided to project the language to the extent of making it pose as the first official language in Cameroon. It cannot be denied that English speaking skills is one of the most required skills in the global communication and an asset in the job market. Therefore, English is no more considered as an identity marker of a group of people, but as a bridge to international success that everyone, irrespective of official language background wants to cross (Achimbe ,2005; Mforteh, 2007; Ubanako,2012).

Improving the level in English is becoming important for Cameroonians especially for the francophones. After academics, learners should be able to speak English fluently and accurately (Syllabus of English language to francophone). But, many still face challenges when interacting with the English language. One of the common reasons is lack of confidence, shyness of making

mistakes and lexical limits. Base on the theory of affectivity, Piaget (1962) claims a constant relationship between cognitive and affectivity. This paper does not only explore some communicative teaching methods but also demonstrates the importance of affectivity in the process of language learning.

This study has been carried out in a technical high school in Cameroon, a purely francophone sub-system education where learners are trained for autonomous professional insertion after academics. The Objective of this study is to improve francophone learners' communicative competence in English through role-playing game. Piaget (1962) believes that playing enables a child to develop cognitively, emotionally, socially and physically. As a child plays for playing sake, the activity is 'autotelic'; in case where an interest is involved in the process, it becomes an 'heterotic' activity. Indeed, playing for the sake of play, enables freedom, ludic spirit, autonomous initiative whereas achieving pedagogical objective through playing links the concept to game, understood as an activity framed by rules, controlled by an educator for educational final scope (Musset, Thibert in Fedolack, 2017; Besio , 2018)

Besides, several research works highlight pedagogical objectives realized through using games in classroom: storytelling develops children's language and body skills (Amana, 2017; Ballester,2017), the table role-play game enhances learners' creativity (Périer,2017). This study, framed by Bruner's scaffolding is experimental. A treatment is administered to participants in the experimental group during a length of time and the researcher assists the participants in carrying out their tasks until they present skills to handle situations themselves.

1. Game, Origins and definition

Gaming origins is as far as every expectation. In the ancient Greece the practice was reserved to a particular social rank and gender. It had a particular social and ideological meaning as it was intended for the male higher class. In this period, women practicing game like playing dice or board games were never depicted and this could be a status maker for them. Besides, findings reveals relationship with education in that period. (Ki-Zerbo, 1980; Cagiltay et al, 2015; Sebatai, 2020, Caré et al, 2020).

Meanwhile, gaming is a practice common to several societies and African societies are not set apart whenever this practice is concerned. But one aspect surely common is that, gaming irrespective to societies involves two or more players who are expected to demonstrate skills and creativity.

According to the Webster's New World Dictionary, 'game' as a noun is defined as any form of play or way of playing; amusement; recreation; computer simulation; or sport involving physical or mental competition under specific rules; football, chess, or war games. It is also any test of skill, courage, or endurance. When used as colloquial, for instance 'play the game', it means to act according to the rules of a game. It also means to behave as fairness or custom requires. Game as a verb (intransitive), gamed or gaming refers to play.

The concept of game is also defined by scholars who see ‘rules’ as one of its fundamentals. “ a game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004).

A clearly stated definition of Role playing games is proving difficult due to several discussions by authors about the concept. However, Role-play is derived from drama and implies action from somebody who incarnates a role of a character.

Role-playing games and role play can sound the same but authors discussed issues that apparently stand as difference markers. For instance, RPGs is usually more structured and goal-oriented, learner incarnates a role of a character following particular rules provided by the tutor or conceived together with the students. One of these rules might involve the learners in creating a scenario around the table with their peers before acting on stage so as to enable learners’ prepare and develop more skills (Coralie, 2015; Périer; 2017; Fedolack, 2017).

Whereas Role-play is defined by spontaneity, players act spontaneously without any prepared script, prior memorization, unknown ending and mostly meant for class animation. Authors defend that the unpredictable character of role-play enables the learner to adapt in any interactive situation (Leblanc, 2002; Tabensky, 2002 in Fedolack, 2017: 4-5)

Besides, plurality of forms (Table-top RPGs, Live-action RPGs, Computer RPGs) and multidisciplinary with different ends (RPGs is discussed in the context of trade, media, education) seems characteristics to RPGs . Another point is that, RPGs like games is used to denote both physical objects people can point to (board games) and activities that must include actors and will cease when people stop enacting it. (Zagal & Deterging, 2018)

2. Game, pedagogy, child’ development

Several works in the field of psycho-pedagogy, acknowledge the importance of playing and its educative value for the child’s cognitive, emotional and physical development (Piaget, 1962). Since the beginning of these disciplines, researchers over centuries and under different perspectives have analyzed the issue of playing and the results of its efficiency on the child are unquestionable.

...beyond his/her social, bio-physiological, cultural, economic, politic, etc. conditions, a rewarding and vital experience linked both to the condition of pleasure and enjoyment connected to it and to its crucial importance for the overall development of child’s cognitive, socio-relational and psychological skills (Winnicott, 1971 in Giraldo, 2018:50).

Conditions like motor impairment or social grievances should not prevent a child from playing as the activity enables development: (Besio, 2018:12-13; Giraldo, 2018: 49-51). Development embodies many aspects of human life. Games like: storytelling, dramatization, simulation and role play game are used in the classroom to enable learner develop skills for

instance, motor, language etc. A study carried out in Cameroon with pre-nursery children between the ages of 03 to 06 years old within the national language acquisition framework reveals that storytelling enriches children vocabulary, develops their speaking skills, mathematical, the motor and sensorial education. Besides, storytelling has an impact on children's affectivity as they are prepared to live and free themselves from the excess energy and from conflicts which are positive for their intellectual equilibrium. It is also a motivational activity for the child as the latter uses gestures that help to overcome the challenges of lack of vocabulary (Amana, 2017, Ballester, 2017: 34-38).

3. Theoretical consideration.

This study is based on the scaffolding theory of Bruner (1983) who, following Vygotsky's (1978) works considers the teacher as a guide, but nevertheless emphasizing on the tutor's skills. Indeed, the child development is organized around know-how and the tutor should demonstrate enough skill to accomplish the child's intentions which are inborn and are expressed through actions. Thus, tasks should be performed through a skillful tutor who should guide the child to achieve the final goal, called the "process of Guardianship". Scaffolding process also consists in taking in, elements of the task which initially exceeded the abilities of the beginner, allowing him to concentrate his efforts on the only elements which remain in his field of competence and bring them to fruition. Moreover, the tutor should carry out strategic actions in the classroom. For instance, awaking the child's interest toward the activity to be carried out (enrollment), breaking down the main objectives of the task into sub goals in order to render the task easier for the child, maintaining motivation and attention so that the child follows the defined objectives, underlining relevant aspect of the task to be executed, controlling frustration so as to prevent that learner's mistake turn into feelings of failure or resignation and also presenting a model from which the child can be inspired to complete achievement. In a pedagogical point of view, Bruner (1983) believes that for learning to be efficient, the tutor should help the child on what is useful on carrying out the task.

Methodology

This part is labeled with research question, hypothesis and research method.

3.1 Research question and hypotheses

English language in Cameroon is compulsory for the francophone learners irrespective of the level and the cycle (general, technical or vocational) and at the end of their academic, should be able to speak accurately and fluently to solve problems in their immediate environment. But francophone learners still face challenges in speaking the language at the completion of their academic though playful and interactive activities susceptible to develop their speaking skills are introduced in the syllabus of English language to francophone.

The question is how can role-playing games foster francophone learners' communicative competence in English? Based on the question formulated above, our hypothesis is that, Role-playing game improves francophone learners' communicative competence in English.

3.2 Research method

This study was carried out within an experimental framework in order to test the effect of the independent variable Role-playing games (RPGs) on the dependent variable (communicative competence).

We got our participants from Technical high school Charles Atangana whose criteria correspond to our study: the participants are learners in the francophone sub-system of education and the English language is their LO2 (second official language). Meanwhile, a participant whose family had English as LO1 (first official language) was excluded.

The sample technique was random. The level 1 had two classrooms and we considered the first classroom of 32 learners as the experimental group and the other classroom of 31 learners as the control group.

Table 1 : Sample size distribution

Groups	Size	Boys	Girls	Age
Experimental group n= 32	32 participants	08	24	13.3
Control group n=31	31 participants	07	24	13.6
Total	63	15	48	13.4

The data was collected through diagnostic and summative assessments and was analysed through the statistical significance test and measure the degree of relationship to make a statistical decision. The P. value will be calculated to determine if the null hypothesis is true about its threshold of 0.05. The hypothesis will be rejected if: $P < 0.05$ whereas confirmed if $P > 0.05$.

The experimental phase

Everything started with a diagnostic assessment administered orally to both groups (control and experimental) through which the researcher could collect participants' challenges

quantitatively. The remark is that, most of the participants were challenged in speaking English while some were afraid of making mistakes. After the diagnostic phase, before the treatment was administered to the experimental group, the tutor encouraged the learners with positive words like “English can be spoken by anyone who is willing to” “nobody is superior to his/her peer as far as learning a language, scarcely spoken out of the classroom is concerned” etc. Indeed, participants were grouped in 4 round the table and submitted to tasks inspired by their textbook module, formulated by the researcher. The learners had 15 min to provide answers in the form of dialogue. Materials like a piece of paper and a dictionary were necessary on the table. The researcher could guide the learners in word searching in the dictionary or words correction and pronunciation. Then, a few minutes were left for them to read back their production before performing. On stage, the default in pronunciation and lack of vocabulary were corrected immediately by the researcher and some competent peers. The participants were encouraged to be natural as possible using gestures, mimes and synonyms in the course of their interactions.

Assessment: after three weeks of activities, the experimental and the control group were assessed the same day but not at the same hours by their own teacher. Participants were grouped in 4 before the interaction began with the teacher and the peers. Questions related to their personal information, family and professional life were asked. Attention was led to their fluency and manipulation of words, for instance:

- participants responding to the teacher’s greetings and greet their peers
 - participants giving information about their family and their social life with the teacher.
- At the time, they were asked to explain certain words.

In the end, the marks were handle to the researcher by the teacher. The diagnostic with the summative data value was introduced in an input mask. Then, through the Excel software the difference between the means of the two groups have been calculated

4. RESULTS

The results present the diagnostic and the summative assessment mean of the participants then the difference between the two means to determine the statistical significance

Table 2: Diagnostic assessment in speaking mean distribution

Characteristics	Experimental Group n=32	Control Group n= 31	Total n=63	P. Value
Means	7.8	7.5	7.7	0.511

Analysis of this table shows that from the diagnostic assessment, participants almost share the same level in speaking. The experimental group scored 7.8 while the control group scored 7.5. The difference between the two mean is not significant as $P > 0.05$

Table 3: Summative assessment speaking mean distribution

Speaking assessment	Experimental group n=32	Control Group n=31	Difference Experimental control (95%)	P. Value
Means	2.87 (1.2)	1.05 (0.9)	1.83 [1.2-2.4]	< 0.00

The table presented above shows a significant difference between the experimental group and the control group mean as $P < 0.05$. This means that the treatment applied to the experimental group had an effect.

5- Role-playing game and the improvement of francophone learners’ communicative competence in English.

Our hypothesis stipulates that Role-playing game fosters francophone learners’ communicative competence in English is verified. The results can be interpreted in the light of Bruner’s scaffolding (1983) who states that a child develops skills when accompanied by his tutor who progressively leads the learner towards autonomy.

The fact that participants in the experimental group were involved in tasks around the tables with their peers and guided by the researcher helped them construct meaningful knowledge. Before playing on stage, they had to manipulate new words after the discovery phase of that lesson. They equally had to restructure incoherent sentences with the help of the researcher, who provided some key items like dictionaries, synonyms, mimics etc to help them search and use words. Thus, the performances of the participants were better after the summative test compared to what they had produced at the diagnostic test. Results show a significant difference from the mean between the experimental group and the control group.

Meanwhile, the tutor’s duty as described through the scaffolding was actually apparent in the experimental classroom as the students confronting new words could not move forward with their task until they were unlocked by their tutor who provided dictionary to them. Still, some were confronted with challenges like word searching in the document, understanding and pronunciation. In this situation, only the researcher could help them solve the problem learners

encountered. Besides the interaction at times were conflicts as the learners could not share the same idea until the tutor's intervention. This situation called socio-cognitive conflict arises when people hold different views or ideas about the same object but has a positive effect as it promotes learning and cognitive development (Vygotsky,1978). After the playing phase around the table (preparative phase), participants joined the stage to interact with their peers. At a certain moment, they needed assistance from the tutor at the level of pronouncing words that were not obvious for them to pronounce without assistance. Interaction on stage with peers and the tutor's help was positive for the amelioration of their fluency in English language.

6- Discussion

However, scaffolding in the course of the tasks by the tutor highly impacted participants results and as they could achieve greater learning goals. Indeed, learners engaged in a goal oriented game whereby submitted to rules and guided by a tutor could achieve communicative competence. This result confirms Piaget (1962) allegations about the positive impact of game on cognitive development. Besides, the nature of the game (goal-oriented) did not prevent the learners from developing skills (fluency) nor raise psychological barrier towards the practice as claim Leblanc, 2002 and Tabensky,2002) . Being implicated in the whole process of the game, the learners felt responsible and secured with the teacher.

As the researcher showed sympathy and friendship through a positive address to the learners from the beginning, the atmosphere of reluctance broke down. The learners needed to understand that no one is better than the other as far as learning a second language is concerned since English is not regularly used in the immediate environment. Therefore 'any effort to interact in the language should be a pride for the learner'. The fact that the unwilling learners started participating actively in the play and therefore ameliorating their performance corroborates with the idea that game develops affective relationship between tutor and learner (Amana2017)

Affectivity is a stimulator that can impact everyone action irrespective to psychological factors. Indeed, a child as a social entity needs social contacts. Then, within the society and through the relationship with others, the child constructs himself while manifesting the desire for security, protection and confidence. He will therefore start attaching himself to significant people that surround him, depending on how his needs are being responded to. Adolescents are not exempted from attachment since the feeling is active throughout their lives (Bowlby, 1980; Amana, 2017).

Our learners aged between 11 and 14 years, received positive words about English language learning and the sympathy the teacher expressed enabled them to feel more confident in themselves. Out of the activities that enhance their competence in the learning process, participants needed to perceive affection from the teacher which acted as a stimulator and enabled confidence. Besides, the learners were getting progressively attached to the researcher. Attitudes like starring, smiling, looking for proximity with the researcher and expressing their

need could clearly demonstrate that learners were seeking for affection to express themselves and to show what they were capable of. Indeed, the ‘security base’ that will enable the child to explore his environment and further demonstrate physical, intellectual and social competencies. This means being skillful in problems solving, developing relationships with pairs with less anxiety and hostility (Ainsworth, 1978 in Atger, 2007)

CONCLUSION

This article experimented Role-playing games on the francophone learners’ low performance in English in Cameroon. Through the data presented above, role game stands as an efficient tool which enables the francophone learners in Cameroon to improve speaking skills. Throughout the experimental phase, the learners easily adapted with the approach which implied creating scenarios round the table with friends within a restricted group, before acting on the stage. This enables them ameliorating writing a skills which is an influencer for the speaking skill (Essberger, 2011; Goh and Döyle,2013). The different actions (scaffolding) of the tutor significantly impacted the learners’ knowledge and know-how and gradually, they could complete some actions related to language learning alone and in a veiling manner, language skills were achieved. Afterward, interacting on stage did not constitute a major problem with the learners. Meanwhile, positive words in the beginning stimulated the learners’ willingness to participate and they could perform better.

This article is significant as it focuses on teaching-learning technics in general and Role-playing games in particular, showing how to carry out the activity in other to achieve greater academic goals especially that of developing communicative competence in English language from francophone learners in Cameroon.

We recommend that tutors should be trained on how to carry out role-playing game in other to reach expected results

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