

Playing with Words: Motivating Young Learners to Construct Correct Sentences in English

Jugando con las palabras para motivar a los estudiantes en edades tempranas en la construcción de oraciones en inglés

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Abstract

This article shows how a group of students of English with difficulties with productive skills in terms of sentence order learnt how to produce correct sentences. In order to solve their problem with sentence structure (and other questions derived from it such as demotivation and disruption), a game with different cards with which students could literally manipulate the language was designed. With the help of a motivating activity with different variations –from guided activities to more creative ones–, students learnt different strategies to apply when producing a message. By making them the protagonists of their own learning when playing this game, students moved from a more traditional methodology to a more engaging and significant one, becoming active and motivated learners who were finally able to construct correct sentences in English.

Key words: motivation, significant learning, sentence structure, games, English in primary education.

Resumen

Este artículo muestra cómo un grupo de estudiantes con dificultades relacionadas con las estructuras sintácticas en las destrezas de producción aprendieron a construir oraciones correctas en inglés. Para resolver esta cuestión, y otras derivadas de esta, como la desmotivación y el mal comportamiento, se diseñó un juego con distintas tarjetas con las que los alumnos pudieran manipular literalmente la lengua. La creación de una actividad lúdica y motivadora con distintas variantes, de más guiadas a más creativas, hizo que los alumnos adquirieran distintas estrategias para producir un mensaje correctamente. La práctica de este juego convirtió a los alumnos en los protagonistas de su propio aprendizaje, y esto supuso un cambio, de una metodología más tradicional a otra más significativa e integradora, por lo que finalmente, los alumnos pasaron a estar más motivados al verse capaces de construir oraciones correctas en inglés.

Palabras clave: motivación, aprendizaje significativo, estructuras sintácticas, juegos, inglés en educación primaria.

1. INTRODUCTION

The group of students I have been working with for this project is made up of 8 year-olds. They are a small group in the third year of Primary education who need extra help with English. At this stage, they are able to identify vocabulary and pronounce it correctly, and most of them can understand the main ideas in a simple text, both in oral and written form. However, they need help with speaking and writing (Hedge, 2008). Producing a message, either orally or in written form, is more difficult for them, as encoding language is more challenging than decoding it (Boonkit, 2010).

Grammar is another important point here. Even though these students were good at vocabulary, they could not say or write a grammatically correct, complete sentence. They knew how to fill in the gaps in grammar exercises with simple structures, but could not produce a complete sentence with meaning following the correct word order on their own. After repeating the same structures once and again, students were able to learn some of them, but they only identified these structures when they saw them written or understood them when they listened to some information or conversation. When it came to their own production, they would not use them correctly. As the competition model of linguistic performance (Macwhinney and Bates, 1989) suggests, the influence of their mother tongue, Spanish, is one of the key elements for their failure at structuring sentences and producing written or oral texts in English. Students tend to make hypothesis about how language works and then apply them to the foreign language. Unfortunately, in terms of word order, as well as in many other aspects, Spanish and English are quite different, and therefore, most times, these hypotheses do not work.

Some teachers thought the fact that students made mistakes with word order in a sentence was not a major problem as long as they could make themselves somehow understood. However, in my experience this was not an issue that could be easily solved with time. One of the most common problems I find with higher-level students, in high school and even with my University students, is precisely that they make many mistakes with English sentence structure. For this reason, I believe that if we teach our students how to organise words correctly in a sentence from the lowest levels, then it will be easier for them to acquire the English language making no mistakes.

In order to achieve this aim, apart from helping students learn, there was an essential element to take into account: motivation. As stated above, these students are not very good at English, and most times they felt demotivated because they were not able to follow the lesson as quickly as the rest of their classmates. Moreover, when it came to practising grammar, they were found usually off task. When asked, students reported they did not like doing exercises from the book as they were «boring» or «made no sense». Teachers play a crucial role in this concern: motivated teachers are able to motivate their students by taking into account the group's needs and preferences, becoming interested in their learning styles and preparing activities that will help students reach their objectives in an easier and more enjoyable way (Dörnyei, 2001).

2. LOOKING FOR A SOLUTION

Once the main problem was identified, the next step was to look for a method to help students overcome it. To do it, two central issues were to be taken into account: firstly, how to explain word order in English to students this age, and, secondly, how to do it in a way that was motivating for them, given that traditional grammar exercises as such (filling in gaps, repeating structures, etc.) were, obviously, uninteresting and tedious for students who, as a consequence, went off task most of the times. This fact affected the classroom dynamics in a negative way: while some were just distracted, other students adopted an inappropriate and disruptive behaviour.

As far as the first question is concerned, the age of students brings in another difficulty: the use of metalanguage. When using language to talk about itself, some specialised words are normally used. For instance, explanations such as «in English the adverb is normally placed between subject and verb», or «in the first conditional we use the present simple in the subordinate clause and the future simple in the main clause» are quite normal among adults. However, they are impossible to use with this group of students because their knowledge of those grammatical or syntactical concepts is very limited or non-existent. For these eight-year-old students, tenses, direct objects, subordinations, adverbs, or conjunctions, are just strange words that, most of the time, mean nothing to them, not even in their first language. For this reason, another solution had to be thought about, as it

will be shown later. As for the idea of motivating students and keeping them on task and willing to learn, the activities to work on English sentence structures had to be attainable but challenging at the same time. A positive atmosphere and an interesting environment had to be created to practise this aspect of English; therefore, they had to be involved in a task that was encouraging and appealing to them.

Taking these aspects into account, the best possible way to help my group of students with English word order was through a motivating activity which kept their interest on the task while learning. There was no other option than presenting the task as their favourite type of activity: a game. Many research experts have shown the positive aspects of introducing games in the classroom. In their studies, they consider that games are not only beneficial for the acquisition of communicative competence in a foreign language (Gaudart, 1999; Crockall & Oxford, 1990), but also for children's social and moral development (Piaget, 1972; Mead, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). Games are one of the most motivating activities for students at any age or level: introducing a game in the classroom keeps students' motivation high, as it takes them out of the ordinary lesson structure. Therefore, playing with the language itself could be a possible way to give my students a good opportunity to learn, that is why I decided to create a game and present it as a project that could be developed over time.

Since teaching English word order is not easy, I did not want a one-day game or activity: students were going to literally manipulate language; they were going to play with words and send messages that were meaningful to them. By doing this, we could keep the positive impact of teaching grammar to develop students' writing skills (Myhill, 2010; Myhill, Jones, Watson & Lines, 2013) and at the same time we could get rid of traditional grammar exercises and increase motivation, as students would not feel like they are neither studying boring grammar nor making repetitive exercises, but playing a game about correctly arranging sentences in English.

3. DESIGNING THE GAME

The idea of manipulating language and playing with words led me to consider some other aspects before I started designing the game. The first one is

that all students should be involved in the task and feel part of the process; therefore, as the objective was to keep their motivation high while learning, I had to prepare an activity to approach all the different learning styles in the class. If this was going to be something that students were going to use frequently, diversity had to be catered for. Whatever their most developed way of learning: visual, auditory or kinaesthetic, the task had to be inclusive and engage all the different learning strategies and multiple intelligences present in the classroom. Moreover, even though the main objective of this activity was for students to learn how to organise a sentence in English, it also had other specific objectives such as revising vocabulary and using it in context; revising spelling; practising pronunciation and intonation, and something we often take for granted: punctuation.

After having considered all these aspects, the activity I had in mind was the following: to create different cards in different colours, so that students could directly manipulate and play with language. I would assign one colour to each element of the sentence: yellow cards for subjects and green cards for verbs so that students could create sentences with them. We would start with only those two parts; this way, students could familiarise themselves with the game. Of course, I would not tell them the corresponding name of each part, for students did not need to know that a given part of a sentence was called «subject». The only aspect they should know about is that they needed one card of each colour to create a correct sentence, in this case, a yellow one followed by a green one.

First, I decided to start with the simplest structure: the verb to be. I created green cards with the present tense of the verb to be and yellow cards with subject personal pronouns. I expected this first step to be rather easy for students, but my objective was that they got used to the dynamics of the game. This first encounter with the activity was made as a whole class task in the interactive whiteboard. In order to explain the functioning of the game to the whole group, the possibilities that new technologies offer gave me an idea of how they could learn to play the game. Introducing new contents through the interactive whiteboard is something that helps to catch the students' attention and motivate them, since manipulating language in this way is easy and enjoyable for students (Beeland, 2002; Wall, Higgins & Smith, 2005). For this reason, I decided to make this first approach to the task by showing some words in green (verb to be) and some words in yellow (personal pronouns) on

the screen. Different students came to the whiteboard and moved and matched one yellow word with its corresponding green word. As I had expected, it worked well. They were perfectly able to match «I» with «am», «she» with «is» or «they» with «are».

However, my intention was that all of them could manipulate language at the same time, this is, that the activity could be used with different classroom arrangements: individual work, pairs or small groups, and that students could create their own sentences. This is the reason why from then on, we would have several sets of laminated cards to play. Depending on the classroom arrangement chosen, all students would have the same set of cards or different ones.

4. PLAYING THE GAME

Once they had learnt the basic dynamics, I decided to introduce other words instead of personal pronouns. As mentioned above, this activity would also involve revising vocabulary; therefore, as students had previous knowledge of semantic fields such as family, animals, food and drink, clothes, or the house, the game was made more challenging by using some of these words as subjects. Even though this vocabulary was familiar to them, this time the association between the subject and a form of the verb to be was not based on memory (as it had been with the verb to be and the pronouns); students had to apply some reasoning to link the subject to the correct form of the verb as they should now take into account if words in the yellow cards were singular or plural, if what the card named was a person or a thing, etc.

It was at this very first stage of the activity where I actually encountered the first hindrance. Some of my students had problems identifying, for instance, that «my mother» was equivalent to «she» and so they had to choose the green card with the verb form «is». Because of this, and before moving on, I had to practise with subjects and equivalents in pronouns and forget about the verbs for some time. Proper names were not a problem: students knew that «Mary» corresponded with «she» and «John» with «he». «My friends» were «they» and «Anna and Lucy» were «they» too. It was more problematic with subjects such as «My family and I». Whenever students got the word «I», they immediately chose the bit of the verb saying «am», so they had to

be careful with that and learn to identify those constructions that can be replaced by «we». Once this problem was solved and students could perfectly match any subject with the correct form of the verb to be, I decided to introduce some subject complements and locative complements.

For this last part of the sentence, I created some pink cards for complements using also previously learnt vocabulary, mainly adjectives and phrases with prepositions of time and place. The idea was therefore that students could see that in order to create a correct and complete sentence in the English language they needed to use three cards: first a yellow one naming someone or something; then a green one with the verb (to be in this case); and finally a pink card to qualify the yellow one.

At this point, and after a few examples as a whole class with the interactive board, students practised this activity in small groups. Each group of three had the same cards and they made sentences with them. At first, they had three words of each class: three yellow cards with subjects, three green cards with verbs and three pink cards with adjectives for subject complements. Their task was to organise them and create three different sentences. When time was up, each of the groups wrote one sentence on the blackboard and read it aloud to practise pronunciation. Then, as a whole class, we checked the sentences they had created and discussed whether they thought the sentence was right or wrong and why. For each correct sentence, each group received one point.

Despite the fact that this activity was working well, we still needed to add two essential components in any game. The first was chance and probability, and the second was an even more motivating element: creativity. As for the former, another version of the game we put into practice involved each student in the group taking a yellow card as the subject of their sentence, while the cards were facing down in different piles organised by colour. Then, they took one card from the green pile (verb). If the card with the verb was compatible with the yellow card, they kept it, if not, they discarded it. They would wait till it was their turn again to try their luck with another green card. Once they had an appropriate green card which was suitable for the yellow card, they took a card from the pink pile (complement), and the process was repeated. If the pink card could be added to the sentence they kept it; if not, they discarded it. The first player who had a complete, correct and meaningful sentence won the game. By doing this, apart from learning how to construct a

sentence, students could also realise that not only organisation was important, but that they also had to look out for meaning and vocabulary in context: grammatically, the sentence «the window is hungry» could be considered as well constructed, but it does not work in terms of meaning. Thus, both the importance of presenting vocabulary in a meaningful context and the link between the learning of grammar and vocabulary (Cameron, 2012; Pinter, 2017) are included in the task.

As for the creativity aspect, another version of the cards game was played. Now, the game was less guided. If students had to just organise a given set of words, we ran the risk of them becoming demotivated, because there was no room for expressing themselves and the game they were so interested in playing would turn into yet another repetitive and uninspiring «write-the-words-in-the-correct-order» activity. Because of that, the set of cards that students received this time had more words than they needed to construct three sentences. Consequently, different statements could be created with the same set of words. Having all the cards in front of them, each student in the group created one sentence by choosing the words he or she considered adequate. When each member of each group had created their own sentence, the rest of the group could say whether or not they thought the sentence was correct and why. In this way, students were not told directly if the sentence they had created was well ordered, but they had to reflect on how language works. As in the previous task, students had to be aware that in order to encode any spoken utterance or written message, they needed not only well-constructed structures but also words that were appropriate to the context.

After having practised sentence structure through the different tasks proposed, the students' initial reaction to playing the cards games was positive. They liked the activities, they could create sentences by moving cards, they could work in groups, and the element of competitiveness was something that they found motivating too. What is more important, they were improving. This could be appreciated when they had to say or write anything in English when practising other types of activities as, in general, they made less mistakes. Every day they asked to play the sentences game; they were fully engaged and showed enthusiasm when they were involved in this task. Since it enhanced students' motivation, it was time to make the game a bit more demanding to keep them improving learning effectively.

5. MAKING THE GAME MORE CHALLENGING

Once we had practised with the verb to be in the affirmative form, it was time to move to negative and interrogative structures. One of the advantages of this activity is that it can get as complex as we choose. Creating and introducing new cards to the game is easy and fun, so the game is valid to practice with more than one structure and modify the level of difficulty once students are able to handle its dynamics. Therefore we added the negative particle «not» to the affirmative structure, which was easily assumed by students.

Next, we introduced questions. This was the first actual challenge: inversion. In order to work with the interrogative form, I first of all chose the yes/no questions structure, as it was the easiest. When students wrote questions, the influence of their mother tongue, Spanish, was noticeable again. When they were told to ask questions, students normally constructed an affirmative sentence and wrote the question mark at the end, or in speaking, they uttered an affirmative sentence but giving it an interrogative intonation, as they did in their mother language in oral form.

Again, English works differently, and in order to practise yes/no questions, students were asked to create an affirmative sentence as they had previously been practising. Once this sentence was produced, it was easy to turn it into a question; all they had to do was modifying the order. In questions, the green card (verb) comes before the yellow card (subject), while the pink one (complement) remains in the same place. Cards for question marks were also created so as not to forget the importance of correct punctuation and to point out that in English we only use a question mark at the end of the sentence and not one at the beginning, as we do in Spanish.

There was another important point students worked with when making yes/no questions: the answers. Once the affirmative sentence was created and inversion had taken place for the question, students took a card from another pile, which might contain either the word «yes» or «no». With these, if the card said YES, they had to find the correct pronoun to refer to the subject and the correct form of the verb («Yes, it is»; «yes, I am»;). Conversely, if the card said NO, they had to construct the correct answer with a negative structure («No, we are not»; «No, she is not»).

Once students were able to ask and answer yes/no questions with ease after some practice, we moved on to the structure of questions with an

open answer, which included question words. To do this, new cards were introduced. The first step at this stage of the process was to present these new cards to students, as they were not very familiar with question words and their meaning. Once this was done, students were shown that when we want to know more information about something, we need another card to complete our sentence. They learnt how this card was placed first, and then they just had to make the inversion process as they had learnt before. The procedures were as follows: after creating an affirmative sentence, students had to choose the correct question word; i.e. «when» is used to express time or «where» is used for places. To do it, they were told to look at the pink card with the complement and think what kind of question word they needed. When they had chosen the card, they had to place it at the beginning of the sentence and remove the pink card. Then, they would move the green and the yellow cards and switch their place in the sentence and add a question mark. To present it, the first time we practised the game on the interactive whiteboard as a whole class so that everybody could learn the procedures. We did it slowly and step by step, making one change at a time for students to follow and correctly internalise all the necessary modifications.

Then, volunteer students came to the front and practised it on the whiteboard. The rest of the class needed to be attentive because if there was a mistake, they could also get points, provided they were able to explain what the mistake was. Then, we practised the activity in groups as we had been doing previously. Students worked together and the teacher monitored their work, corrected mistakes and explained procedures helping them when necessary. Despite the increasing number of changes needed this time, the fact that they were learning by moving words in a sentence led to an improved understanding of what was being done and to an increase of the students' interest in sentence structure. Since they were enjoying what they were doing, their motivation was kept high and the game was proving an effective way for learning.

Apart from these tasks, some other versions of the game were put into practice. The cards offered several possibilities and we explored some other ways to play with them by using different classroom arrangements. These two following instances exemplify how we tried to make the most of the cards. As a first example, students worked in pairs. Each pair received one set of cards

with different subjects, verbs and complements. The objective was to create as many correct sentences as they could in a set period of time. Then, we worked as a whole class: each group wrote their sentences on the blackboard and read them out loud so that the rest of students could assess if they were correct or incorrect. Each pair obtained one point per correct sentence. The pair with more correct sentences won the game. As a second example, and also working in pairs, students took a pink card from a box with the name of a place, time or description. Students had to create an interrogative sentence whose answer was what was written on the card.

As a final activity, a new version of the game was prepared. This time, the cards were going to be used for a sentence auction. Students had some cards in the form of sentences in front of them. Some of them were correct and some others were incorrect. They had to guess which sentences were incorrect and be able to explain why and provide the correct form by moving, adding or removing any card. If they got their answer right, they won one point. Working with the cards in a different way was helpful for students in terms of learning and motivation. The former was shown because students were in general able to identify mistakes. Consequently, if they could discriminate right from wrong sentences, it meant they had internalised the structures correctly. The latter was achieved because a change in the rules made them change roles, making the students responsible correcting the sentences. This new way of playing the game enhanced students' motivation and increased their interest in what was being studied.

6. CHECKING THE GAME'S EFFECTIVENESS

After having practised affirmative, negative and interrogative sentence structures with the present simple of the verb to be, the following step was checking the effectiveness of the games we had been carrying out. It was time to verify if making students create statements, questions and answers with the cards had helped them internalise the correct word order of the different types of sentences. Therefore, in order to check the game's result, students were going to work with no cards now. At this point, students were aware of how sentences were constructed. In addition, they had been revising the vocabulary and pronunciation of different lexical fields, so they were ready to create sentences on their own without the help of the cards. The only help

they had was the code of colours for each type of sentence, which was on one of the classroom walls as a reminder.

The objective was to make the activity less guided by taking out the scaffolding that the cards provided and making students create sentences on their own. In order to maintain the enthusiasm the game had triggered, we would add some more creativity to the task with the aim of making students the protagonists of their own learning process and, consequently, increasing motivation. The sentences they would create would be meaningful for them, as they would not have any specific word to work with.

The activity was carried out by working in pairs and creating dialogues. Student 1 would write an affirmative sentence similar to the ones they had been working on the previous days. Student 2 would read the sentence out loud, create the interrogative form and student 1 would answer the question. In order to make the activity more creative, student 2 was asked to construct another question from the answer provided by Student 1, who would, in turn, have to answer again. Here is an example of a dialogue that one pair of students created:

- Student 1's affirmative sentence: *My sister is in her bedroom.*
- Student 2 turns it into a question: *Where is your sister?*
- Student 1 answers with the information in the affirmative sentence: «*She is in her bedroom*».
- Student 2's new question: *Why is she in her bedroom?*
- Student 1 answers: *Because she is tired.*

The results were actually quite good. The answers students gave to these questions were in general well-constructed, both in terms of syntax and meaning, and pronunciation and spelling were correct too.

7. BEYOND THE VERB TO BE

Now that students were familiar with the structure of affirmative, negative and interrogative sentences (both yes/no questions and wh-questions) with the verb to be, it was time to move forward and include the rest of the verbs

in the present simple. I created new cards with verbs known to them such as *play, eat, drink, listen, write, dance, walk, read, live, see, speak, do* or *study*, and they were printed in blue cardboard.

The process was similar to the one we applied to the verb to be. The main difficulty this time was the third person singular (–S at the end of the verb). Surprisingly, the fact of having more cards now and an added obstacle with the –s and the auxiliary verbs, was not an element that brought their level of motivation down. On the contrary, students were even more persistent and engaged despite the mistakes they made at first. The fact that they were enjoying the activity they were working on kept them motivated and therefore this made them face the new challenges from a positive perspective.

This time, creating affirmative sentences was easy for them, so we moved on to the next step which took the students longer to internalise. This was the use of auxiliary verbs in the present: *do* and *does*, which were included in orange cards. As in the previous stage, the negative was not much of a problem. Students learnt quickly how third persons needed the –s as well as the auxiliary verb «does», whereas the rest of the persons did not need the –s and needed the auxiliary verb «do». It was harder for them when it came to change the verb in the third person negative. Apart from choosing the auxiliary «doesn't», they had to change the card with the verb in the third person (with –s at the end), since the auxiliary verb already indicated third person and there was no need of the –s in the main verb.

The interrogative was much more difficult for them to understand and apply. Inversion was quite different from the one they did with the verb to be. They tried to apply the same rule and change the verb and auxiliary verb. For example, in the sentence *My sister lives in England*, their first attempts were similar to **Lives my sister in England?* They were obviously following the pattern applied before correctly, but their attempt to extrapolate the previous rule did not work. When they were familiar with the use of the auxiliary verbs after some practice, the most common mistake was the mixture of both patterns, mainly with the following result: **Does live my sister in England?* However, after looking at some colour-arranged examples of how the interrogative form of the present simple works, it was easier for them. The colour arrangement was: ORANGE (auxiliary verb) + YELLOW (subject) + BLUE (verb) + PINK (complement) + QUESTION MARK for yes/no questions. After doing some activities similar to those employed for the verb to be, stu-

dents found it easier each time to complete the task and create their own questions. As for wh-questions, it was now less complex than before, once they had learnt the previous structure, since the only change they had to make was adding the wh-word at the beginning of the question.

8. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, this group of students have learnt how to organise words in different sentence structures by practising what for them was an enjoyable game. From the first time they used the cards, students were asking to play this game every day, and they really improved their productive skills in terms of sentence order. After having played the game, it was easier for them to produce messages both orally and in written form. They had learnt how to do it in a relaxed atmosphere with a motivating task, moving cards and playing with language, which was significantly different from fill in the gaps exercises.

The fact that the games kept them interested, motivated and focused on the task avoided the problems of distraction and disruptive behaviour that had taken place before. It also helped students internalise various sentence orders. Overall the game made them improve their English, since they practised not only sentence structure, but also spelling, pronunciation, intonation, and vocabulary in context.

Therefore, creating these different scenarios to work with the cards gave students the opportunity to apply different strategies for sentence structuring in a co-operative and motivating way. Through these activities, students moved from a traditional didactic model to an instructive, engaging and inspiring methodology where they were the protagonists of their own learning. They had now become active learners with an increased interest in the subject. Thus the game proved successful as it improved learning and motivation.

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