

Teachers' Perceptions toward Using Communicative Language Games in Teaching Young EFL Learners

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Abstract: *More and more parents all over the world are sending their children to English as a foreign language classes (EFL) hoping that these young learners will gain good language competences at the early age. These parents believe that with good English competence their children will have competitive benefits over other children when they grow up in the era of globalization. However, EFL teachers must be aware of the fact that young children have distinctive characteristics and one of which is that they cannot concentrate for more than 20 minutes in the classroom. Therefore, communicative language games are considered as useful tools to help young learners learn when playing. Up to now, few studies have been conducted to explore what EFL teachers think or believe about the use of communicative language games for young learners. Within that context, the current study was conducted with 93 Vietnamese EFL teachers to explore their perceptions toward the roles, the benefits and the challenges of using communicative language games to teach English to young learners. The study results reveal useful insights into the issue and provide useful recommendations for EFL teachers on how to deal with the challenges originated from the implementation of communicative language games in young learner classrooms*

Keywords: *young learners, communicative language games, benefits, challenges, teacher perception,*

I. Introduction

Teaching English for young learners can be considered as a rewarding and demanding experience. Young learners have their distinctive characteristics such as being active and easy to get distracted. In one way, their activeness makes the classroom atmosphere exciting and interesting. In another way, their easiness to be distracted makes it hard for teachers to keep them focusing on the lessons. Therefore, teachers have to select teaching methods or techniques that can optimize their language learning and acquisition.

In many areas of Vietnam, traditional teaching methods such as Grammar Translation Method or Audiolingual Method are popularly employed by English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers. In such classrooms, young learners are required to memorize grammar rules and repeat intensive drills on sentence patterns. Practicing on English conversations is hardly found, which causes learners' inability to appropriately use the language to communicate confidently. Even worse, in these English classrooms, there is insufficient contact with authentic English and minimal chances to use what young learners have learned in the outside world. Consequently, young learners have difficulties in developing their communicative competence in the target language. In such a context, it is advisable for teachers to creatively apply and take advantage of appropriate teaching methods and techniques in order to minimize young learners' suffering from studying English at the very early beginning.

Hence, effectively acquiring a language was probably taken into consideration with the aim of fostering the language learning of young learners more satisfactorily. Four noticeable conditions for language acquisition include exposure to the target language, opportunities for learners to use the target language for real communication, motivation for learners to engage in the learning process and instruction for drawing learners' attention to language form [1]. According to Littlewood [2] and Richards and Rodgers [3], the second language teaching method named Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has the intention to develop learners' communicative competence through creative tasks which enable them to use suitable linguistic forms in real situations to communicate meanings effectively. As mentioned above, carrying out creative tasks consisting of games, dramas, songs or role playing is the chief technique of CLT to attain the communicative goal. Among them, games are considered to be communicative activities that encourage learners' interest in learning and can be utilized to teach new items, practice language forms and revise previous lessons.

Although communicative language games (CLGs) may have been applied in many English classes all over the world, few studies have been conducted to explore English teachers' perceptions toward the use of CLGs in teaching English to young EFL learners. Since understanding such teachers' perceptions will shed some lights on the issue and provide useful lessons to different stakeholders such as institute administrators, course planners and EFL teachers, a study to explore teachers' perceptions toward the use of CLGs in young learners' classrooms is worth conducting.

II. Literature Review

1. Young learners

The term young learner has become to be used to refer to children who are five or six years of age to eleven or twelve years old [4]. This definition is close to those of Linse [5] who define young learner as children aged five to twelve. A further definition is given by Slattery and Willis [6] who highlight two groups of young learners; the very young learner whose age is under seven and the other one from 7-12 years. To be more general, young learners also popularly mean children at elementary school. In the present paper, the concept of young learners and children are used interchangeably to mean primary school learners in Vietnam who are typically between the age of six and eleven.

Children are different from adults in many aspects. They have different characteristics which enable them to learn much faster than adolescents and adults and these characteristics are useful when teaching English as a foreign language to them. The first characteristic is that children are able to understand the meaning without understanding every single word in an utterance. It means that when we try to use only English when giving instructions, children do not usually have any problems with understanding the meaning of the message in general.

Second, children appreciate concreteness, that is, they learn well with what they can really see and touch. Therefore, it is very beneficial to use visual aids in a foreign language lesson. It is often the case that when children see what we are speaking about, it is easier for them to get the meaning [7].

Another important characteristic of young learners is that they have no or less fear to make mistakes as compared to older learners. Thanks to that, they can learn to imitate native accents more effectively. As the courage to speak and make mistakes is one of the crucial aspects, we should be aware of this fact [8].

The fourth trait of young learners is that they are creative. This is useful in learning a foreign language because although their vocabulary is quite limited, it is enough for them to be able to communicate. Pupils do not have problems to ask and answer set phrases but it is much more difficult for them to construct sentences in unpredictable situations. Therefore games are so important and useful [7]. If a teacher prepares games (activities) where children are made to communicate, he/she creates such unpredictable moments when children have to use their vocabulary and grammar as much as it is possible. It does not matter at all that the children make mistakes. What is important is the fact that they have to be creative in the foreign language they learn, which naturally leads to the development of their communicative skills [8].

Last but not least, young learners are not able to pay their attention for more than 10 - 20 minutes and after that they start to be bored and tired. Therefore, teachers are recommended to take children's capacity for indirect learning and their instinct for games and fun as a great advantage. In other words, for young learners classes teachers should not spend so much time on real direct conscious learning because children have the extremely developed sense of imaginative thinking [8].

In short, young learners have different characteristics with those of older learners which makes place for the useful use of CLGs in the classrooms.

2. Benefits of communicative language games to young language learners

Games are considered to be the most suitable instructional activities for young learners because they are a natural part of their existence. Nedomová [7] argues that "young learners are not able to pay their attention for more than 10-20 minutes and after that they start to be bored and tired." In that context, CLGs are supported by educators for teaching and learning a foreign language for young learners in schools since they are claimed to provide the pupils with various benefits.

First and foremost, language games are highly motivating to learners because playing games "encourage learners to direct their energy towards language learning by providing them with a meaningful context" [9]. As Adam [10] indicates, games are self-motivating to stimulate learners' interest and curiosity, which benefits learners best to play with the language in their first stages of language learning. According to Krashen [11] with a low affective filter, game-like activities are meaningful and playful, thus they motivate children to learn, arouse their interest, and develop positive attitudes towards language learning. Such classroom activities are particularly suitable for primary school pupils who like to play games. When pupils are enjoying playing games, at the same time, they are learning language unconsciously.

The second benefit of language games is that they supply learners with opportunities to use the target language in authentic contexts. Learners experience language use through performing activities in the form of games. That is, in game situations, learners are exposing themselves to the target language environment. They use whatever language resources available to them in order to achieve task goals, for instance, solving a problem, sharing or comparing opinion and culture. Therefore, according to Littlewood [2] games provide learners with chances and authentic contexts where they feel the need to use real-life language to communicate with others meaningfully and purposefully.

The third benefit of CLGs is providing practice on language use and language usage. Wright, Betteridge, and Buckby [9] state that many games are designed to offer young learners a density of communicative language practice as conventional drill exercises, but in a rather meaningful way by working language as living communication to convey information and opinion. In playing games, learners are immersed in using the target language in all four skills, which assists them to better internalize a new language. Therefore, games can be viewed as integral parts of communicative lessons and can be used, at any time whenever necessary and appropriate, to warm up a lesson, to present new items, to provide practice for previously introduced language points, to serve as a substitute for unsatisfactory materials, to end a lesson as follow-up activities.

The fourth benefit of CLGs is creating an agreeable and supportive learning environment. While conventional teaching methods bring language learners frustrating experiences of language learning, games present them with communicative or problem-solving situations that are enjoyable and relatively stress free. In game situations, the teacher encourages all attempts at communication in the target language rather than continuous error correction. In such a way, without fear of failure or public correction, young learners will feel emotionally secure and will be more confident to explore and take risks with new language [12], which further enhances young learners' active involvement as well as intrinsic motivation, and above all, leads to better learning.

In other words, communicative activities in the form of games play a crucial role in Communicative Approach (CA) to language teaching and learning to young learners.

3. Considerations when implementing communicative language games to young language learners

Although communicative language games can bring enormous benefits to teaching a foreign language to young learners, teachers have to take into account the following issues.

First, EFL teachers have to choose suitable games for their young learners. Young learners they are imaginative and creative and they use their previous experience, knowledge, several skills, and abilities in learning, which help the teachers present the new information by enabling children to practice the new knowledge on top of their previous knowledge [7].

Second, EFL teachers should be aware of applying praise and encouragement in the classroom because young learners always love to be the centre of attention [13]. Young learners may be discouraged if they do not get compliments while playing games.

Third, teachers should be careful about choosing games if they want to make them advantageous by decide on the purpose of a game and the level of the game. By considering the purpose of the games, teachers can avoid using games which may have little or no purpose. Nedomová [7] underlines the fact that teachers "should consider whether the game-like activity is for children only to make the lesson more attractive and protect them from being bored or whether we tend to revise and practise some particular part of grammar, vocabulary, etc." when choosing a game. Moreover, considering the level of the game is equally important. Teachers must decide whether the level of the game fits students' language level because a game may become difficult when it is beyond the learners' level or it may become boring when learners find it too easy to carry on.

Forth, teachers must be aware that games enable social interaction and participation. Learners, especially the young ones, learn better when they interact with their peers. Some games may include both cooperation and competition together. While students cooperate within a team, they, at the same time, compete against another team [14]. Hence, what teachers should consider while choosing a game is the fact that children learn best with games which require physical action, interaction, competition and participation.

Fifth, teachers should also be aware of other factors such as the size and the physical properties of the classroom, the equipment, materials and the time available for a game [15]. In other words, teachers should take all these factors into account while choosing a game because a game which seems to be most appropriate may turn into a complete failure in the end.

Sixth, teachers have to consider when to use communicative language games. Very often, games are used when there is some time left at the end of the lesson to keep students quiet. However, Lee [16] proposes that "games should not be regarded as a marginal activity, filling in odd moments when the teacher and class have nothing better to do." With this in mind, games should be put into the center of classroom teaching and they should not be treated as a merely warm-up activity. Rinvolverci [17] clarifies that a game can be used in any of these three stages while using them as a part of grammar instruction:

- a) Before presenting a given structure, especially to find out diagnostically how much knowledge is already known by the learners;
- b) After a grammar presentation to see how much the group have grasped;
- c) As a revision of a grammar area (p. 3).

Last, appropriate class organization increases the success of a game. Many games require the class to be divided into groups or pairs. This gives the teacher a chance to monitor the activity of the learners while they

are playing the game. McCallum [15] asserts that learners should be in the same team during the year because it both saves the teacher's time and helps learners develop team spirit that promotes exchange of ideas among themselves.

All in all, it can be concluded that teachers have to be very careful in implementing communicative language games to the classrooms of young learners. The communicative language games can only benefit the learning of and teaching to young learners when the teachers are well aware of students' characteristics, which games to use and when to use them.

III. The Study

1. Research questions

The current study was conducted to find out the answers to the two following research question:

What are Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions toward the use of communicative language games in teaching young learners?

2. Participants

Ninety-three EFL teachers having experiences teaching English to young learners were invited to participate in the current study. There were 79 female and 14 males with the average age of 29. Most of them (70 participants) had BA degrees while the rest gained their master degrees in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages).

3. Research instrument

A five-level Likert scale questionnaire was designed by adapting questions in Wang's [17] and Sobhani and Bagheri's [18] studies. The questionnaire consisted of two part. The first part of the questionnaire explore the participants' education level, years of teaching English in general and years of teaching young learners in specific, frequency level of teaching English to young learners, and whether they have been trained to teach young learners or not. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of 22 items which were grouped into 4 clusters concerning teachers' perceptions towards (1) the roles of communicative language games in teaching English to young learners; (2) the benefits of using communicative language games for young learners; and (4) challenges of using CLGs for young learners.

IV. Findings

1. Teachers' perceptions toward the roles of communicative language games in teaching young EFL learners

Vietnamese teachers' perceptions toward using communicative language games (CLGs) to teach young EFL learners are analyzed according to the four clusters of (1) the roles of CLGs in teaching English to young learners; (2) the benefits of CLGs; and (3) challenges of using CLGs for young learners as follows.

Regarding teachers' views about the significance of CLGs, a large number of participants stand up for the use of game-like activities to teach young English learners. Table 1 reveals that 88.2% of participants agreed that it is important to use CLGs in teaching English to young learners. However, 82.8% of the respondents replied that practice was still necessary to consolidate what children have learned from games activities. More specifically, more than half of the responses (54.9%) thought that children found it difficult and confusing to play CLGs in some cases while 15.1% of teachers disagreed. In terms young learners' awareness toward the goals of CLGs implemented in the classroom, the number of participants agreed that young learners were aware of these goals were almost the same with the number of participants thought that children were not aware of them (33.4 % and 35.5% respectively). As to 'Communicative language games cannot help young learners learn anything more than they know' and 'are not as effective as other verbal explanations and written exercises', the statements were denied by more than eighty percent of respondents, with 80.6% and 80.7% of disagreement respectively.

Table 1: Teachers' perception toward the use of CLGs to teach young learners

Item	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
It is important to use CLGs in teaching English to young learners.	88.2	2.2
Practice is still needed to consolidate what has been learned in game sessions.	82.8	3.3
Some CLGs are hard and confusing for children to play.	54.9	15.1
Young learners have no awareness of the purposes of playing games.	33.4	35.5
CLGs are not as effective as other verbal explanations and written exercises	8.6	80.7
CLGs cannot help young learners learn anything more than they know.	8.6	80.6

From the above results, it can be seen that the teacher participants of the current study strongly believe that communicative language games play an important role in young learner classrooms. However, these teachers themselves also feel that they need to work harder in order to consolidate what their young learners can

learn from these games. In addition, the teachers strongly disagree the claims that “CLGs are not as effective as other verbal explanations and written exercises” and “CLGs cannot help young learners learn anything more than they know”. These findings reveal that Vietnamese EFL teachers in the current study were well-aware of the importance of CLGs. This was in line with what educators such as Littlewood [2] and Wright, Betteridge, and Buckby [9] say about the roles that CLGs play in young learner classrooms. Additionally, teachers agreed that they had to be careful in using CLGs because as Halliwell [8] stated children may get overwhelmed by the games and thus, may not acquire any target language with poorly designed games.

2. Teachers' perceptions toward the benefits of communicative language games in teaching young EFL learners

Table 2 reveals Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions toward the benefits of utilizing CLGs. The benefit that received the most agreement from the participants (94.6%) is that CLGs make lessons more interesting. In addition, the same large number of respondents (87.10%) agreed that (1) their young learners learn better with CLGs; (2) their young learners became more energetic to follow the English lessons with CLGs, and (3) conducting game-like activities gave more opportunities for children to speak English in the classroom. Besides, 83.9% of respondents believe that CLGs are good to use to present new language items to young learners.

Helping young learners learn unconsciously while playing and stimulating oral interchanges among young learners are two other benefits that received the same amount of agreement from the respondents (75.3%).

Furthermore, many participants (92.5%) disagreed that CLGs were utilized just to create fun classroom environment, which means game-like activities could bring more benefits to both teachers and learners. Meanwhile, although more than half of the respondents (58.2%) did not regard the application of communicative activities to mainly fill in time, quite unexpectedly, 20.4% of the sample admitted this to be the case. Additionally, 86.1% out of 91.5% of teachers denied the case that they took advantage of activities with games when they got tired or could not teach the learners something.

Table 2: Benefits of using communicative language games

Benefit	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
Communicative language games make lessons more interesting.	94.6	4.4
When I use CLGs, my young learners learn better.	87.1	2.2
When young learners play CLG, they are more energetic to follow the lessons.	87.1	4.4
When young learners play CLG, they can speak English more.	87.1	3.3
It is good to present new items of learning using games.	83.9	4.3
CLGs help my young learners learn unconsciously while playing.	75.3	14
Oral interchanges among young learners are stimulated when they play games.	75.3	5.4
CLGs are played during the lessons, not after that.	28	44.1
I mainly use CLG for filling in time.	20.4	59.2
I use CLG for my young learners when I am tired and cannot teach them something.	5.4	86.1
I conduct CLGs just for fun not for learning.	4.4	92.5

These responses show that Vietnamese EFL teachers in the current study recognize that games will benefit their classrooms and their learners. Their perceptions in this cluster show that most Vietnamese EFL teachers in the study were well aware of their young learners' learning traits as claimed by Nedomová [7] and Halliwell [8] such as young learners appreciate concreteness, are not afraid to make mistakes and are not good at direct conscious learning. Moreover, these teachers perceived positively toward the benefits that CLGs have been claimed to bring young learners by different researchers such as Adam [10], Krashen [11], Littlewood [2], and Wright, Betteridge, and Buckby [9]. The Vietnamese EFL teachers may have gained these perceptions from their teacher training program or first-hand experience of practicing teaching EFL young learners in their teaching career.

3. Teachers' perceptions toward the challenges of communicative language games in teaching young EFL learners

The last part of the questionnaire gained useful insights toward the challenges that Vietnamese EFL teachers encounter when using CLGs in young learners' classrooms. Table 3 shows the obstacles teachers confront when they organize CLGs for young learner in their English classes. When being asked about the high level of noise, a large proportion of the respondents (84.9%) considered it as a potential discipline problem while games were conducted. Similarly, a large number of Vietnamese EFL teachers (70.9%) also showed their agreement about the fact that their young learners, even in game sessions, still found it too embarrassed to speak much English in class while more than ten percent of respondents did not regard this factor as a key prevention to use game-like activities.

Table 3: Challenges of using communicative language games (figures in percentages)

Challenge	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
Young learners make a lot of noise when they play CLGs.	84.9	3.3
There is a lack of materials for good CLGs in the textbook.	78.5	8.7
Some young learners are too shy to speak English in front of their classmates, even in game sessions.	70.9	10.8
I take a lot of time to prepare for CLGs.	68.9	8.6
There are too many young learners per class to play games.	37.7	31.2
The physical environment of classroom is not suitable for playing games.	23.7	47.3
When young learners play CLGs, I find it difficult to evaluate the learning which is supposed to take place during games.	19.4	54.9

Considering time-consuming preparation, nearly seventy percent of teachers stated that they may encounter such difficulty when employing games in lessons. Moreover, 78.5% of the participants agreed that there was a shortage of adequate supply of communicative games in the textbook. Meanwhile, approximately fifty-five percent of the participants did not stand for the idea that it is difficult to evaluate young learners' learning from game activities whereas 19.4% showed their agreement. In addition, more than one third of participants (37.7%) concerned the challenge related to class size, which is almost equal with the number of participants saw no problem about this. In addition, nearly half of participants (47.3%) disagree that the physical environment of the classroom is not suitable for playing games while only about one-fourth of them (23.7%) agree with the statement. These challenges can be coped with by implementing the recommendations of different researchers for EFL teachers when implementing CLGs to young learner classrooms. The suggestions include (1) choosing suitable games for young learners [7, 15] to fit the classroom physical condition and class size; (2) applying praise and encouragement in the classroom [13] to help young learners conquer their shyness; (3) deciding on the purpose of the games [7] so that they can see noise as a demonstration of learners' involvement rather than a nuisance; being careful in choosing games for young learners [7] so that they can find good materials for CLGs and evaluate young learners' learning while playing.

V. Conclusion

The current paper provides insight into Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions toward the use of communicative language games for young learners. The positive attitudes toward CLGs and the challenges that these participants encounter are useful in raising the awareness of EFL teachers of young learners around the world about what they can and should do with CLGs in their own classroom. Further study should explore the perceptions of EFL teachers toward the use of CLGs for young learners in other countries and parts of the world as well as interview the participants to explore their ways to cope with the challenges of CLGs in their classroom. With the growing tendency of letting children to learn English as early as possible all over the world, these findings are hoped to provide useful references for parents, teachers, educators and administrators of foreign language schools and centers globally.

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