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Making language learning fun and the concept of "edutainment"

To learn English properly, students need many opportunities to practice and apply what they have learned in class. The English language classroom often poses challenges in this area due to rote teaching methods, dull curricula, or limited opportunities to use the language outside of the classroom. At the same time practicing a new language can also be intimidating, especially for students with a high affective filter or negative emotional factors that may interfere with language learning.

Modern language teaching is learner-centered, which means that the conditions of the individual student have to be taken into account, as has their native language, their personal, social, and cultural background as well as their motivations for learning the language. And since the predominant setting for learning a foreign language in school is the classroom, future teachers also need to become familiar with effective learning strategies and the context of formal, institutionalized and instruction-based language teaching.

A great way to give students meaningful opportunities to apply their learning and lower their affective filter is to make learning fun! When teachers use activities that make learning engaging and fun, students are more willing to participate and take risks. If language learning is seen as fun students will retain information better because the process is enjoyable and memorable. The concept of language learning as a "fun" activity comes particularly from the North American continent. In the United States, it's estimated that 43 percent of all schools provide ESL programs and 46 percent of all schools have ESL students. The number of ESL students in some states is very high, especially in Arizona, California, and Hawaii where more than 85 percent of the schools have ESL students. However, the challenge to learn and teach English is not specific only to the U.S. teachers, but most Romanian teachers of English of a foreign language face similar situations. The rapid development of today's society, the higher exposure of students, even from early ages, to a multicultural and multilingual environment, the intrusion of mass-media, many times in an aggressive way, in learners' life, the social, economic,

and even the political changes that gave a greater influence in modern society, all these come to create premises for a more challenging environment when it comes to teaching English as a foreign language in our country. The global village that we live in, work force mobility, the many opportunities for young people to travel and work or to study abroad through the benefits of European educational programs such as Erasmus Plus, the increasing demands of today's society for better prepared and more complex professionals, place a higher pressure on the process of language learning and teaching, both for the teacher and the student.

If not too many decades ago language learning began at the age of 10 in most public schools in Romania, nowadays kindergarten students have their first contact to a language they do not have a great exposure at outside the classroom. But the parents' increasing desire to better prepare their children for whatever may life have in store for them, in addition to the already mentioned changes of the contemporary society, made consistent reforms in national educational policies. Therefore, learning English from an early age has become not only a necessity, but also an expectation that teachers have to meet. And this is where the concept of "fun learning" makes most sense.

To get the student interested, teachers have to incorporate fun activities and games into the lesson plans. When the language activities in foreign language lessons are fun, students will be excited to learn, making it much easier for teachers to teach. Fun EFL activities and games can be effective tools for ESL students and teachers. Whether the teacher teaches adults or children, games will liven up the lesson and ensure that students will leave the classroom wanting more.

The term "**edutainment**" is a blend of 'education' and 'entertainment'. This term is used to describe various forms of entertainment that also educate. One industry that is loaded with edutainment products is children's software. Most language games for children are developed not only to entertain, but to educate as well. For example 'Reader Rabbit' is a popular line of games that help kids learn to read in a fun way. Edutainment typically seeks to instruct its audience by embedding lessons in some familiar form of entertainment: television programs, computer and video games, multimedia software, and so forth. Nowadays many teachers believe that in foreign language learning enjoyment and success go together. Language teachers who have direct access to the Internet can quickly find and easily use materials suited to a communicative style of teaching. In this way the teacher can use materials designed to develop

learners' skills within a relaxed context involving interaction. Many believe that a foreign language must be brought to life in situations by gestures, by handling or touching things, by actions and incidents, by pictures, by dramatization, by interesting stories spoken or in print, and not least by contests and games.

Games can be used to warm up the class before the lesson begins, during the lesson to give students a break when the teacher is tackling a tough subject, or at the end of class when there are a few minutes left. There are literally hundreds, probably thousands, of games that can be played in the language class. EFL games are used to test vocabulary, practice conversing, learn tenses - the list is endless.

Even though most teachers are familiar with Howard Gardner's *Theory of Multiple Intelligences,* they may still struggle with the implementation of this theory into teaching and learning activities. Since classrooms are made up of diverse learners and the teacher needs to differentiate the teaching and learning strategies. "The classroom is often a direct reflection of the teacher who has physically set it up and expressively established the ambience of it. The teacher's attitudes, emotions, and educational pedagogy affect the way he/she physically arranges the room, and these things also affect how the teacher establishes the classroom procedures and routines. This in turn affects how students, parents, and others feel as they walk into a classroom."[1]

A classroom with a positive learning environment will hopefully include students who feel confident about their abilities and efforts. One of the best ways to help a student develop healthy self-esteem is to find and emphasize his/her strengths. Self-esteem and motivation are essential aspects of the teacher's successful attempt to make the learning process enjoyable. The ability to institute discipline should be a complementary ability of the teacher, who should try to manage the language class enabling both a positive atmosphere and a well- organized, structured learning environment. Teachers have to encourage students in areas of both strengths and weaknesses and find ways to recognize each learner as special. They should avoid the natural tendency to compare one student with another. Experience tells us that some students learn English as a foreign language with greater ease, more quickly, or with better results than others. "As a teacher, practice active listening, in which you repeat what students have said to you and then speculate and recap how certain situations might make them feel. This will help you to

[1] Walters, Jims & Frei, Shelly, *Managing Classroom Behavior and Discipline,* Shell Education, 2007, p. 34

better understand their points of view. When you have the time, invite students to express all their feelings appropriately."[2]

As Harmer (2007: 157) mentions the rapport the teacher establishes with the students is crucial to effective teaching and learning. In this respect, he makes a list of things that a teacher can use in order to make the learning process enjoyable: " start as we mean to go on (students will find it extremely difficult if we only begin to insist on certain behavior when things go wrong)"; "know what we are going to do (students are far less likely to cause problems if we give them interesting things to do)"; "plan for engagement (students who are interested and enthusiastic do not generally exhibit problem behavior)"; "prioritise success"; "equality rules (in any dealings with the members of the group, the group has to see that we treat everyone in exactly the same way, irrespective of who they are)"; "praise is better than blame".

Despite all the best efforts of a teacher to make the learning enjoyable and to create premises for successful language learning, sometimes things get out of hand and students behave in inappropriate ways.

Some of the most frequent situations of disruptive behavior a teacher must face are listed below, together with possible solutions.

Issues / Solution Suggestions Table

Issue	**Possible solution**
1. Undermining the instructor's authority	This is tricky as it speaks to "attitude". A student might belittle the instructor or engage in a battle of the wills. This student would need to be privately told that their attitude was confrontational and asked how this might be resolved mutually.
2. **Leaving class too frequently**	Classes are divided as to whether or not students should ask for permission to leave for bathroom breaks or wait for a break. When breaks are taken too frequently, this may affect the lesson. The teacher might privately ask the student if everything is OK so that the student know that the teacher is concerned by his/her behavior.

[2] idem, p. 40

3. **"Spacing Out" or Sitting With Back to Instructor**	If this is a repeated problem, students need to know that their non-verbal behavior is perceived as disinterest. Sometimes it is all about a shy student who needs more time before he/she opens up enough to make sustained eye contact or face the teacher completely.
4. **Poor hygiene (possible cultural considerations)**	Poor hygiene, too much perfume, cigarette odour or other strong odours can be distracting or even nauseating to students. This can be a real problem for some teachers and in order to address the issue properly they have to talk to the master teacher , the school counselor or the parents. It might be suggested that for the class the odour can be masked in some way.
5. **Verbal or physical threats**	Verbal or physical threats are serious matters. They are not to be neglected or ignored. As a general rule the teacher must consult professional experts for assistance immediately, if the situation requires prompt intervention.
6. **Gum, Food, and Cell Phone Disruption**	If decided upon by class, consequences for breaking this policy might range from the loss of participation points to the offender having to do some extra work such as to present on a topic of interest to the class. Although all Romanian schools have strict rules about the use of cell phones in class, there are situations when teachers allow cells to be on the vibrate setting. Teachers need to allow for at least one mistake per student as accidents do happen. The idea here is to prevent habitual disruption from gum popping and phones ringing.
7. **Repeated Tardiness:**	There should be clear parameters set around this issue up front – either in the syllabus or in the class decided norms. The teacher must stick to the policy. Some fair policies might include 3 tardies equals one absence. It might be best to discuss this with students individually; some are habitually late because they are dependent on bus routes.
8. **Monopolizing Discussions**	This is common, but manageable. Many students are excited and talkative so it might be good to give them a few class periods

	to settle in. If the issue is not solved by itself, the teacher might approach this type of students initially by saying that he or she is pleased with the amount of enthusiasm the student has for discussion, however he/she is hoping that the student might come up with suggestions for getting the other class members equally involved.
9. **Refusal to Participate or Speak/ Reluctant students**	We cannot force students to speak in class nor participate in group projects. This can be addressed and become a win-win situation by either giving the student alternative options to verbal participation (unless it's a speech class) or simply carefully coaxing some response out of them and praising whatever minimal effort you receive from them.
10. **Sharing/Copying Work**	Sometimes students work together to produce homework, so they assume they can submit identical work. To avoid a delicate situation, the teacher must give clear instructions and must make sure the students understand precisely the rules of group work and individual assessment.
11. **Too Much Chit Chat**	The teacher may give 2-minute chat times for groups or before class begins. However, the teacher should let the students know that he/she has material to be covered and that their talking is not helping them to achieve the goals for the class. The teacher must also be aware that some students occasionally translate a word or phrase to a desk mate who might not have as strong an understanding of English.
12. **Disrespectful Behavior**	The reality is that sometimes students refuse to cooperate and disturb the class. Either they do not like the teacher or they have outside classroom issues that interfere with their learning process. The teacher should try to identify the causes of disrespect and he/she should look for a way to positively invite the student to engage more deeply in the class. A hidden talent of the disruptive student may be exploited to the benefits of the whole class.