THE USEFULNESS OF GAMES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Using Games as an Aid and Motivation in Language Lessons

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1. Introduction

The importance and usefulness of games in foreign language learning has become more and more vital in the current world. Basic lesson activities such as written exercises and chapter translations tend to be tedious after a while. In order for the teacher to invent motivating and fun language learning experiences for students, games can be used to link the spare time of the pupils to learning. By using games in foreign language learning students can learn grammar, vocabulary and oral skills unconsciously in a supervised situation. Ideally the students would acquire various skills and knowledge concerning that said language – the terms “learn” and “acquire” are used correspondingly here. Thus the intention of this thesis is to study how useful and why games can be so educational in language learning. The theory part focuses on the actual reasons behind playing board games in a language class, especially why games are so effective in language lessons. In the analysis section the intention is to study the character and usefulness of board games that are already much used in language classrooms but also to investigate video games and their more advanced possibilities. By researching the games’ advantages and disadvantages according to their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, the reader should notice what sort of games are and could be used in language learning, but also when and how they are the most useful. Additionally, the usefulness of the SWOT analysis method will be evaluated in order to understand why the SWOT analysis is a practical way when studying games and their advantages and disadvantages.

In this thesis the focus will be on games used in primary schools and in upper comprehensive schools even though it is acknowledged that games and plays can be used in teaching for many age groups. However, children are more motivated and ready to play games, therefore perhaps gaining more from the games, so it is more profitable to study their usefulness among younger students. Nevertheless, some references will be drawn to grown-ups and adult games along the thesis as well.
It would seem important and useful for future lessons of every foreign language teacher to study the argument behind language learning games. The aim of this study is therefore to find and investigate evidence of why games should be used in foreign language lessons. I personally find different games interesting and useful when teaching English and I would like to incorporate them more into teaching situations. Indeed, the theory sections of this thesis try to show why games could be useful in language learning. The analysis sections continue this topic by giving practical examples of what games could be used in classrooms and how exactly those certain board and video games highlight the possibilities of language learning. In the evaluations of the games, the SWOT analysis method will be used as the base. By evaluating the games through their strengths and weaknesses and simultaneously referring to the theoretical issues that are brought up, one should get a broad enough perspective on the possibilities of game usage in language classrooms.
2. Theoretical background

Because this thesis focuses on the terms “language” and “game” and their meaning and transformation, it is necessary to discuss first what those two terms actually signify. By “language” one can mean different things: it is for example “a set of social conventions about how to combine words, phrases, clauses, and sentences to communicate meaning” (Gee & Hayes, 2011:15). Besides these rules, “language” can be viewed as something physical, such as speech, audio recordings and writings (Gee & Hayes, 2011:6). Moreover, it needs to be noticed that because language has its rules of grammar, people follow them in order to communicate correctly. One can learn more about language and its various forms of communicating, such as oral and written language, by communicating with other people and by studying books about grammar.

The definition of “game” is similarly a broad concept. A “game” can be said to be entertainment that simultaneously stresses immersion, interactivity and problem solving, to name a few (Gee & Hayes, 2011:77). According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2014), a game is an “activity engaged in for diversion or amusement” or “a gainful activity”. This gives a nice insight into the character of a game, that it distracts students into playing: they learn and gain knowledge while they amuse themselves. Sinnemäki (1998:13) quotes Avedon and Sutton-Smith (1971) when giving a definition of a game and writes that “a game is an exercise of voluntary control systems in which there is a contest between powers, confined by rules in order to produce a disequilibrial outcome”. A combined definition of these two could therefore be that a game has certain rules to follow in order for the participants to compete against each other but also to have fun. The end result of the game benefits all. Most games require some special equipment in order to work, and these could include for instance a board, a ball, some music, game consoles or playing cards. In my mind a game can also be like a theatrical play: copying actual happenings and reacting to them. It could be argued that every child
in the world has played some kind of a game, whether the game was using sticks or digital equipment.

Even though many professionals know games exist, the challenge in incorporating them into language learning situations is difficult. Because many of the researchers’ childhood memories revolve around games, they seem to consider them childish (Carstens & Beck, 2005:22). Childish games are therefore not their first choice when teaching a new language to pupils, especially to adults. However, while many students are considered to be achieving below their grade level in schools, they often successfully complete and are motivated to perform complex tasks outside the school (Barab, Pettyjohn, Gresalfi, Volk & Solomou, 2012). Games could be the solution in aligning the gap between learning in schools and learning outside of schools; the games would only need to be designed properly.

In order to understand the overall picture of learning and especially language learning, the term needs to be explained more fully. Language learning can be said to be viewed as an isolated individual phenomenon and as one inherently embedded in and shaped by situated social interactions (Hawkins, 2004a:3). Thus language learning can occur in a personal level or due to social conversations, for example. The sociocultural theory takes these two notions into account and states that the physical environment and classroom discourse, among others, are important resources when learning a foreign language (Hawkins, 2004b:93). Moreover, the views of Vygotsky (see pages 19-21) agree with the sociocultural view about people learning more effectively in a social environment. However, the end result of language learning is that a person learns to express himself or herself in another language than his or her mother tongue, whether fluently or not.

2.1. Context and central intentions of games

Video games have an exciting potential because they can offer entire worlds in which learners are central, important participants; if the player does something in the game, his actions are directly related to the outcome of the game itself (Barab
et al., 2012). In transformational play the idea is to position the person, the content and the context in a way that supports and motivates the player to learn more. It is also important to remember that the content needs to be legitimate, the player needs to have a clear intention and the context needs to be significant (Barab et al., 2012). Otherwise the player will not be bothered to play and improve his language skills. However, even though video games have recently been studied more and researchers are more interested in their possibilities in learning situations in today’s electronic world, personal experience has shown that normal board games are still more commonly used in classrooms. What is more, online video-games are not available to every school. Therefore it is vital to first study the basics of gaming and only then computer games: an active board game includes similar qualities than a more complex computer game in socialising and teaching the student (Sinnemäki, 1998:2). These similarities will be studied in detail in sections 4 and 5 (see pages 36-55).

Various studies have been conducted on the role of play in language learning and they have given new insights about how learning could occur with the help of games (Azarmi, 2011). Naturally there might be some teachers who disagree with this idea of games being a natural part in language classrooms. However, even the skeptics should agree that play is a major part of young children’s lives and therefore it makes an important context for language learning for young students. Isenberg and Quisenberry (2002) have studied the matter and written that

“preschool children develop and refine motor skills, experience the joy of mastery, and develop and use basic academic skills such as counting, reading and writing while they engage in play” (Azarmi, 2011:412)

From this quote one can gather that the whole process of learning and teaching should most importantly be fun. Naturally grammar rules and vocabulary need to be included in the teaching in order to start the learning process and continue it, but when fun games are used in the classroom, the motivation of the students rises. According to the previously mentioned study by Isenberg and Quisenberry (2002),
playing gave the students a relaxing and comfortable environment to practice a new language without the need to worry about making mistakes: the students saw games as “concrete”, “hands-on”, “fun”, and “manipulative” activities that gave them a natural connection between past experiences and language learning (Azarmi, 2011:412). As was said earlier, the context and the content of the game need to be significant and current to the students. If they can understand the connection between their studies and the future, they will be more motivated to learn.

Examples of good and concrete contexts which would place the student in the centre of learning are numerous: current issues on the news, hobbies, travelling, family-life and friends, to name a few. In all of these examples the student has the possibility to form phrases and even entire conversations that he or she has personal interest in. Therefore the student is at the centre of the activity, which was the goal behind transformational plays (see page 6). Moreover, contexts and contents that are realistic prepare the students better for their future.

2.2. Learning concepts in second language acquisition

In this chapter the basic concepts of language learning will be discussed, how languages with their rules and conventions are normally taught in classroom situations. In this case the rules and conventions imply grammar, vocabulary and oral skills of the pupil. The intention is to find out whether games fortify a student’s language skills or not, and why games should be used in language teaching. Indeed, although teachers consider play to be a valuable and beneficial activity, most learning environments are designed for individual activities that only require brain work (Hyvönen, Kangas, Kultima & Latva, 2007). Most language exercises consist of grammar exercises, listening to a chapter and translating it. Luckily the current curriculum has changed a little over the years, and oral skills are becoming more and more important. Additionally, playing seems to be diminishing in young children’s spare time: children seem to stop playing earlier than for example a decade ago, while concerns about their appearance start earlier. It is regrettable
that this seems to be the case every now and then. By adding plays and games to the teaching environment children could start to see the fun and use in plays and games, and thus in the end the amount of play in children’s lives could increase.

According to Azarmi (2011), teaching languages by games is one of the best methods for learning foreign languages: as play is the basic means for processing information for youngsters, learning new skills and practicing old ones should be done by adapting childhood games into the learning situation for getting better results. By cleverly incorporating grammar to the game’s rules, students should learn or repeat grammar structures and vocabulary while playing. Naturally oral skills are improved simultaneously – in the end the talking speed and the fluency of the language learner increases as well. Moreover, the students are mostly not aware that they are practising a foreign language; they are too immersed in the game. Macedonia (2005) for example discusses the traditional way of teaching morphology and syntax: by learning rules and practising these rules by doing written exercises does not lead to spoken language (Macedonia, 2005:135). Because oral skills seem to become more important in today’s curriculum – and in the current international world – games could offer a suitable way of elevating accuracy and fluency to a level that matches real-time speech. In short, Azarmi’s (2011) conclusion is that

“Playing in language classroom helps language practice to be fun, repetition not to be boring and declarative knowledge is converted to procedural knowledge unconsciously.” (Azarmi, 2011:412)

The terms declarative and procedural memory need to be described here in more detail. The brain has two memory systems that order the learned information: declarative and procedural memory. Declarative memory is a long-term memory that stores facts and events, consciously. Declarative knowledge can for example be English vocabulary or recalling yesterday’s events. Procedural memory refers to unconscious memories such as skills, for example, knowledge of how to ride a car (Macedonia, 2005). When we learn to drive a car, we first get theoretical instruction, which is stored in declarative memory. Then this theoretical knowledge
is translated into practice and as we practice driving, we are finally able to drive without consciously thinking about it – this is then procedural knowledge. In language learning the knowledge about foreign languages is usually in the declarative memory but involving procedural memory to it as well could be a huge advantage for learners. They do not want to recite the rules of a foreign language, but to produce living language from words and rules: clearly language learners want to speak as well, not only write (Macedonia, 2005:137).

Somewhere along the line of education, learned grammar and vocabulary should merge into sentences and so motivate language learners to speak (Macedonia, 2005:135). In the best case scenario games could offer language learners that motivation which is lacking from dull, written exercises. Games and plays are already much used with pupils with special educational needs (Macedonia, 2005), so the proposition that games should be used in general English classrooms as well does not sound that far-fetched.

The usefulness of games for young learners of foreign languages is also quite obvious from these previously mentioned points. Adult learners can also get much from games but in that case the games need to be more advanced and social. However, this thesis will focus more on games used in primary schools and in upper comprehensive schools. Mainly this is done because games are more popular with younger children, but also because the importance of early education and learning is immense: psychologists and experts of young children have placed the child’s expression in free play and free creative work at the centre of pedagogical activity (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999:45). Thus, if a student learns something early on, he or she has the potential to develop even more as he or she grows. It has been even written by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) that the path of a child to full realisation and maturity is similar to a ladder: the first steps of the ladder form the basis of learning and help in the actual starting progress of learning (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999:46). If the beginning of learning is incomplete or even missing completely, the older person cannot learn as efficiently. Therefore successful
learning needs to start in primary schools and continue in upper comprehensive schools.

The intention of this thesis is not to propose that general exercises of filled-in words, vocabulary learning or chapter translations should be omitted completely. These kinds of exercises are also immensely useful and they need to be incorporated in the overall lesson. However, the original assumption is that a good and balanced outcome will arise when both theoretical and practical methods are used when teaching languages. The practical method examined here is the use of games, respectively.

2.3. Intentional and incidental learning

In the second section (see page 5) the definition of language and game was discussed in detail. It was written that a “game” is an entertaining activity that amuses or distracts the player in some way. For language learning situations however, what is important is that the game is especially designed for that class with a proper content and context. The game and its results need to be connected to language learning. As was written earlier, the students do not always realise they are learning new vocabulary or grammar because they are too focussed on the game itself. Anyway, for the teacher the learning process should not be an afterthought (Hays, 2005:106). Therefore, games and their evaluation are conscious and intentional for the teacher, but unconscious for the students.

According to Westwood (2004), there are two important distinctions between learning: intentional and incidental learning. Intentional learning works in a situation where the learner is deliberately trying to acquire knowledge or skills, and is putting an actual effort to the task. In a classroom situation this means that students are consciously learning the grammar for example, and trying to memorise the rules. Incidental learning occurs when an individual is not making any conscious effort to acquire that information but is only exposed to that said information by chance. Therefore the student is unconsciously learning that same grammar he or
she tried to memorise just before, but now with a more indirect way. Usually that indirect way of teaching involves some sort of games or plays. Westwood claims that contemporary classroom approaches rely quite heavily on children’s incidental learning capacity when acquiring skills and knowledge.

“It has been argued that basic number skills and concepts will be discovered effectively through activity-based, problem-solving methods, rather than from direct teaching, drill and practise.” (Westwood, 2004:9)

Incidental learning is preferred with children as it is considered to be more “natural” for them, due to their own games that they play in their spare time. This practical way of teaching however relies on the fact that the teacher needs to know the exact manner of playing and the goal of the exercise.

Hence, the teacher’s role in foreign language acquisition is to plan pedagogical and intentional activities whose focus is on children and playful environments (Hyvönen et al., 2007). For starters, the environment needs to be transformed in order to provide good playing and learning ground. Children learn the best by being active learners who examine, inspect, wonder, sing, and create roles for example. While the teacher controls the game and sees the game’s purpose is fulfilled, the children playing the game do not always think about what they learn while playing. They focus on playing only. Playing is always conscious and intentional while learning is not necessarily conscious (Hyvönen et al., 2007:316). Teachers should and do always connect games with education, even though the students might not realise this.

According to personal experience, young students are mostly eager in doing anything physical in an English classroom. Once, a group of third years had the topic of countries and the phrase “Where are you from?” in their language lesson. For my practical lesson I decided to make them all different shaped papers, the shape of a certain European country. Thus every student in the classroom had a different country where they were supposedly from. The students had to move in the classroom and ask from the others “where are you from?” and “what do you think X
is like?” Here, the “X” meant the country the student was presumably from. A pupil answered the questions and eventually the country-shaped papers had many adjectives on them, according to the answers of all the students. When the countries and their adjectives were later shown from the projector, every student was very keen on showing his or her country.

Fundamental features in these playful processes such as in this country-game are that children are engaged in physical activities – not just sitting in the classroom – and the whole body is used in learning activities. However, Hyvönen, Kangas, Kultima and Latva (2007:324) admit that general classrooms are designed for sitting and staying still. It is in the hands of the teacher to modify the classroom to the students’ needs. In my exercise with the various countries the students were forced to move around the classroom and interact orally with others. The idea behind that game was that the focus of the students was on their specific country and finding as many adjectives as possible, while simultaneously repeating the phrase “Where are you from?” which was the main objective of the class. Therefore the pupils moved, examined, questioned and created roles in one simple exercise. These kinds of active assignments got me much positive feedback from the supervising teacher. Another simple way of changing the dynamics of the classroom is to change the seating order, even for a day. Moreover, an English lesson with all the pupils on a circle, playing together could be an excellent inspiration for language learning, especially in oral exercises (see section 4.3. for the example) which use features from suggestopedia (for definition and examples, see pages 44-45).

2.4. The role of motivation in foreign language learning

The problem with young students is most of the time their restlessness; without learning motivation students hardly ever are able to concentrate the full lesson (Hakkarainen, 2002:70). Therefore elementary school language teachers need to uphold a high level of motivation during the lesson. Otherwise language is not taught in an effective way. Hakkarainen (2002) suggests that one way to motivate
and to sustain the interest of the students’ is to teach English – or any other subject – through games. There is a belief that when students have opportunities to use language and vocabulary that is personally meaningful to them, the content learning is more illuminating and personally motivating. Such presumptions have been pointed out in terms of literacy levels, where students who are performing at very low rates in schools are showing high levels of commitment and performance when the content is personally meaningful to them (Barab et al., 2012). Moreover, teachers feel more successful when they see their students actually engaging in the use of the learned language. One can easily see the skills and the development itself when the students are speaking about their own interests in the classroom.

Pakarinen (2012) has studied learning motivation in kindergarten activities and she refers to other studies when saying that when an individual is motivated or interested in a particular task or subject, his or her behavior is more likely to be focused on the task (on-task) than to be task-avoidant (off-task). Learning motivation, in turn, is influenced by previous experiences, expectancies and beliefs concerning achievement and learning. Thus, if a student has good experiences about learning something in a certain way, and the teacher is motivational and supportive to him or her, he or she will most probably be motivated in the future as well. Additionally, motivation seems to play a role not only in students’ overall academic achievement but also in the development of specific skills, such as reading (Pakarinen, 2012). Therefore the matter of motivation is necessary in all learning situations, even though its role might seem minor at first.

These ideas of Pakarinen (2012) can be connected to the views of Baer and Kaufman (2012), who describe some examples of creative exercises which raise the motivation of the students. Baer and Kaufman (2012) portray two different motivational concepts: extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation occurs when people do things for rewards, when they expect their work to be evaluated, or when they are aware of someone evaluating them (Baer & Kaufman, 2012:8). Intrinsic motivation is connected to the pure joy of doing something, when people
are actually interested in what they are doing (Baer & Kaufman, 2012:8). It seems quite obvious that games with their fun character mostly increase the intrinsic motivation of students. However, games do offer people extrinsic motivation as well due to various rewards. It is common knowledge that all people enjoy winning and getting some kind of a reward for their superior actions or skills. The idea or promise of a reward can even motivate people to do things they otherwise would not do (Baer & Kaufman, 2012:68). Parents give weekly pocket money to their children for cleaning their rooms, employers pay a monthly salary to their workers, and teachers reward their students with gold stars for example. All these previous instances are different kinds of rewards, either conscious or unconscious. In a school environment, whether the reward is a planned gold star or a candy, or an automatic smile or a nod of approval, the students are motivated and the teacher is able to influence their learning behaviour (Baer & Kaufman, 2012:68). Indeed, if the reward for the best mark in an exercise is more than an approved nod and smile, such as a lollipop, the enthusiasm and rush of the students to start the exercise will most likely be noticeable.

These ideas of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation have their drawbacks and advantages as well. The biggest advantage of intrinsic motivation is that people tend to be more creative when they actually enjoy what they are doing (Baer & Kaufman, 2012:8). If people only do something for the promised reward, their creativity decreases and thus the end result can be something less when compared to intrinsically motivated activities. In addition to the decreasing of creativity, activities with rewards can also make behaviours less likely to occur under certain conditions (Baer & Kaufman, 2012:68). In their example Baer and Kaufman (2012) describe the actions of young students who were rewarded with golden stars for choosing drawing over other activities. At first the percentage of children who chose drawing was 16, but when the teacher started to award them for drawing, the number of children drawing rose immediately. Naturally this happened as children love rewards. However, when the extrinsic motivation was later taken
away, the children who chose drawing decreased to only eight percent. Thus the reward actually decreased the frequency of the desired activity and rewarded behaviour (Baer & Kaufman, 2012:68). This decrease occurred because the children were used to the reward: they saw no reason to draw again when there would be no rewards. Baer and Kaufman (2012) conclude that it seemed as if the children thought drawing was work that needed an award, and when the reward was taken away, they chose to do something fun instead. From this example we can deduce that if and when a reward is used in order to motivate students, the reward cannot take control of the whole situation. Therefore the teacher could only once in a while offer the reward, and thus the learning situation would remain to be controlled and creative learning would take place, but every so often the students would be simultaneously interested and excited about the learning. This way their motivation would be increased from time to time.

Moreover, Selwyn (2011) has addressed this topic of motivation in his book concerning schools in the digital age. He quotes Johnson (2009) when portraying the role of motivation in educational computer games: according to him, when the students were able to choose what they learned and when they learned, they saw the medium in which they did it as a form of leisure (Selwyn, 2011:126). Moreover, when the learning situation was not as planned – or appeared to be so – the students did not have to be so concerned about hierarchisation and failure (Selwyn, 2011:126). Traditional schooling determines competence and failure in a different way when compared to computerised learning, and by including technological aspects to the classroom, the students can be more motivated to act, learn, and even make instructive mistakes (Selwyn, 2011:126). If the computer programme gives a student a low mark for his or her answers, the student will most likely be more ready to renew the exercise in comparison to traditional paper exercises marked as low.

Finally, it should be noted that the term “motivation” is linked to the explanation of human behaviour: the goal is not to describe certain happenings, but to explain why
something occurred (Hakkarainen, 1990:24). This fact needs to be remembered in the analysis part of this thesis (see sections 4 and 5) for although the descriptions of the example games are detailed, the explanations and thus the reasons behind the games are the main intention.

2.5. Language learning as participation

The thought that a child develops according to the surrounding materials and people seems to have interested psychologists for years now. Psychologists have tried to study human development and the development of thinking by contemplating how “far and in what ways is the process of development dependent on the material and human environment of the growing child” (Harré, 2006:25). The intention of this chapter is to display the studies and thoughts of Vygotsky and Piaget, two psychologists closely connected to the education of children.

Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky were two leading developmentalists of the 20th century. Even though the ideas of the Swiss Piaget and the Soviet Vygotsky differ from each other, they both portray important developmental thoughts about the learning and knowing of children. In their studies they have both remarked how children develop and learn through participation – either participating with a material, active life or with a social life. By studying their views on the matter one can learn useful ideas and, most importantly, proofs of why one should incorporate various kinds of games into learning situations in primary schools and in upper comprehensive schools.

Through his studies Piaget (1918a) came to the conclusion that children learn by being actively involved in their environment – that child learning and training evolves by behaviourism, so that when the child participates in various actions, he or she constructs personal thoughts and views (Burman, 2010:243-244). In his investigations Piaget (1918a) was firstly interested in children’s reports and opinions, therefore their verbal output, but his later studies became more focused on the actions of children and what their actions actually said about their character
and development (Burman, 2010:246). Here one can see the personality of a biologist coming up: Piaget (1957) was foremost a biologist, so his description of a child who systematically encounters problems in the material world and develops hypotheses like a scientist and thus learns by discovery and activity resembles that of a biologist studying a mollusc, for example (Burman, 2010:251).

Additionally, according to Piaget (1918a) children’s thinking is remarkably different when compared to adults, and the way of thinking develops through certain phases that occur at certain ages (Burman, 2010:243). The cognitive development of a human being can be seen in the way a child reasons rules and what he or she thinks about morale (Sinnemäki, 1998:21). As Sinnemäki has explained, the Piagetian model of development occurs in four stages. In the first stage a play or a game with rules is only a motive and an individual happening, where one can only talk about motive rules, not social ones (Sinnemäki, 1998:21). The first stage occurs until the child is three years old. The second phase is called the egocentric phase as the two to five year old child plays only with him or herself: the child only copies the rules of the play but the aim is not at winning (Sinnemäki, 1998:21). Piaget (1932) claimed that young children cannot take the point of view of another person, that they only perceive the world from their own perspective; this is egocentrism (Piaget, 1932:26). In the third co-operation phase the child does aim to win but even though he or she does follow the common rules, the actual understanding of the rules is not fully internalised (Sinnemäki, 1998:21). In this third stage the child is 7-8 years of old. The last stage occurs when the child is 11-12 years of old, and then the rules of the play have been fully understood as a legal contract, so to speak. The child understands that the rules are known by everyone and that only a common agreement can change the rules of the game (Sinnemäki, 1998:21). This is an important aspect of the development: at first, when the rules were understood, they were not broken but taken as granted. As the child develops its thinking, he or she understands that the rules can be modified and even broken.
Harré (2006) describes Piaget’s main contributions to developmental psychology and they include for instance the development by stages and egocentrism. These two concepts are important to mention for the meaning of this thesis to come across. Harré (2006) has outlined in his text that in child development one of the principles is

“...that children are actively exploring the environment, much as scientists do. They can be thought of metaphorically as making experiments and trying to understand the results.” (Harré, 2006:37)

While Piaget gives much credit to active involvement in child development, Vygotsky highlights the importance of language and culture. Vygotsky (1978a) describes how the conversations in the family and amongst one’s peers make the psychological development possible (Harré, 2006:30). In the family and in a social environment the “child is in intimate contact with the culture in which he or she will eventually find a place as a competent and respected member” (Harré, 2006:30). According to Vygotsky the learning process begins when a child is confronted with a task that he or she is incapable of doing, which is beyond one’s abilities. After performing the task and failing, a person close by (whether an adult or a child) fills in the missing movements, either verbally or nonverbally (see page 20 about the zone of proximal development). Next time the child is confronted with a similar task, he or she knows what to do. Therefore this social interaction with another person has taught the child something new. It seems that every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first on the social level and later on the individual level (Harré, 2006:31). The first function occurs between people and is thus interpsychological, while the second function happens inside the child and is intrapsychological (Harré, 2006:31). In short, Vygotsky (1978a) has argued that all higher functions of forming concepts and learning new skills originate as social relationships between individuals (Harré, 2006:31). After the child has had interpsychological experience by socialising with others, he or she can learn by individually connecting old and new information.
Vygotsky thinks playing is the leading factor in the development of a child. In a play it it necessary to create an imaginary situation, so therefore a play simultaneously frees the child from the limitations of the actual world and gives him or her a possibility to maximize pleasure (Sinnemäki, 1998:19). With playing a child can fulfill all hopes that would not be possible in the real world. This idea of a game developing the child’s imagination is important because Vygotsky (1978a) does not make a difference between plays and games: according to him they are both achieved through imagination and certain rules control their direction (Sinnemäki, 1998:19). A parallel to Piaget can be drawn here. While Piaget also discussed children’s understanding of rules and later on their modification possibilities, he did not draw attention precisely to plays and games, as Vygotsky does. The inclusion of imagination and games is included in Vygotsky’s work, but Piaget, who was a scientist by heart, mostly focused on action itself. Naturally the action can be a game as well, but this comparison shows the difference between the views of the two psychologists.

Even though Piaget and Vygotsky were both developmentalists who emphasized the influence of the environment to the development of a child and they also share some common views concerning learning, one can see notable differences in their models. Indeed, while Vygotsky (1978b) was critical of Piaget for his neglect of attention to language and culture, he regarded Piaget’s method as his most important contribution (Burman, 2010:246). This quote displays that while Piaget and Vygotsky had their dissimilarities, it is vital to examine and compare their studies for then one can get a broader view on the subject of children’s growth and learning. One of these similarities between Piaget and Vygotsky was the idea that the researcher has participation within the experimental task (Burman, 2010:247). However, while Vygotsky (1978b) believed that “the experimenter is an active participant in the context of a study aiming to help children construct new means to solve the problems posed to them”, Piaget thought that the experimenter only observed the process by which the solution was later reached (Burman, 2010:247). From this one can notice that although the experimenter is included in the research
in both cases, Vygotsky saw the participation as more active on the experimenter’s part: in the Piagetian case the children under study were the more active ones, the experimenter only taking notes of the activities and teachings.

Another difference between the views of Piaget and Vygotsky was the idea of the zone of proximal development. According to Vygotsky (1978a) the relationships that the child has around him affect his or her learning; these relationships form the zone of proximal development (Harré, 2006:31) (see also page 19 for more). Therefore everyone who is in the child’s zone of proximal development affects his development (see section 2.6.1. for comparison). Piaget (1932) was very distrustful of this theory because he had noticed that children at about the age of three speak only about themselves: their egocentric character means that they do not listen to others (Piaget, 1932:27). While the child is in this egocentric speech stage, it tries to first understand various problems itself (see page 18 for example). Only when the child has developed enough does he or she start listening to others. This thought differs from Vygotsky’s views completely, as he thought the social influence starts occurring very early on.

In terms of games these views of Piaget and Vygotsky offer a valuable perspective on what sort of games develop children the best. The most important idea is naturally the view that some sort of participation needs to happen. Piaget saw the participation of children as an important factor in their development: their active participation in the play or game improves their cognitive skills and they also learn to handle abstract forms of thought (Harré, 2006:25). A good Piagetian game could therefore be something practical where the children would for example build something. A general grammar exercise with filled-in words would not be very active when compared to playing a grammatical dice game (as shown in appendices III and IV, see also section 4.2.), which certainly can be counted as being an active game. For Vygotsky (1978a) the participation occurred between people: children socialise with others and thus learn as they develop their linguistic and practical skills which they receive from their environment (Harré, 2006:25). While the
Piagetian model accepts that a person can learn by itself, the views of Vygotsky dictated that development occurs more efficiently between many people. Therefore a good classroom language game could be the Alias game where students are forced to speak with and listen to each other. The word explaining game can be linked to the Vygotskian model as it is a socially active game that improves the students’ linguistic skills among other skills as well. The courage to speak and explain a word when not all words that are needed for the explanation are known requires a lot of practice and even bravery: in a real-life situation circumstances like these are very common for a foreign language speaker and by playing the Alias game students would be prepared a little better in order for them to not freeze when talking.

2.6. Games as an environment for language learning

Now that the justification and some advantages of game use in learning situations have been established, one can examine the difference between the use of board games and video games in a language learning environment. For clarification, this thesis will use the term ‘video games’ when describing various games that need some electronic equipment. Thus a ‘video game’ can be a game played with Sony PlayStation 3, Microsoft Xbox or some other video game console, but also a computer game. Therefore the term ‘computer game’ would not display the complete truth about digital games in today’s modern world. Moreover, even though it is acknowledged that games without any electronic equipment are not all board games, the focus in this thesis will mostly be on games that require some sort of a board in order to play. Some general games will naturally be presented as good examples of action games, but the major examples under study in chapter 4 are all games that need an actual board or something similar.

The introduction of video games into education has occurred during the last ten or twenty years ago. Before that the classroom was mostly bare of electronic equipment, with the exception of the teacher’s computer and an overhead projector. Furthermore, even the computer was not in use of a private person thirty
years ago. The situation has progressed immensely during the last few years and nowadays it is very common for industrialised countries’ schools to use for instance computers, SMART Boards and digital pens in the classroom. Nevertheless, although the electronic richness might be prominent, Selwyn (2011:5) argues that the technological transformation of schools and schooling has yet to take place. Indeed, it might be that even though the amount of computers or SMART Boards in a school is satisfactory, the teachers and the students would not be able to use them as best as they could. In this case the educational technology would not perform as well as it could in a formal educational setting (Selwyn, 2011:5). Therefore the academic discussion of the use of digital forms of learning should be developed but, moreover, teachers should be taught to use these electronic equipment to their best abilities in order for the learning to be as effective as possible (Selwyn, 2011:5). The teacher needs to be at the centre of learning and he or she needs to know what, how and when learning takes place. If an incompetent teacher uses a SMART Board without knowing how the board itself works, a huge amount of possibilities will be lost.

According to Selwyn (2011:7), many academic perceptions appear to display the belief that the digital age represents something new: this allure of “the new” seems to be the force in modernising classroom equipment, among others. The idea that the outdated ideas and views are forgotten and developed into something more effective surely does sound tempting. However, there can be weaknesses with this notion as well. Selwyn addresses one problem by writing that

“many general discussions of the digital age tend to be informed by a notion that the development of digital technology represents a distinctively new and improved set of social arrangements in relation to preceding “pre-digital” times...” (Selwyn, 2011:7)

Basically this means that although modern equipment is used in various activities in the classroom, it does not necessarily mean that it is a better way of doing things and learning. People learn in different ways. Thus, although one student might learn English from a video game, another student might learn better with general,
theoretical ways. For this reason one should not forget the pre-digital equivalents of learning games, such as board games, but one should modify and borrow from the earlier practices and processes (Selwyn, 2011:7). Only later on can the modern view possibly surpass the out of date, pre-digital practice: but only if one has truly come to the conclusion of its superiority (Selwyn, 2011:7). Even then the modern practice will most likely include some aspects from the old one.

A board game or a game with no digital devices can be said to be the original form of playing, the form or idea from which most video games have developed. Playing itself is one of the most natural things in human behaviour. Sinnemäki (1998) has described how a playful activity is said to be seen as frivolity and happiness (Sinnemäki, 1998:11). James Paul Gee, one of the most known researchers in the area of discourse analysis, sociolinguistics and bilingual education, has also studied playfulness and its importance in learning new skills (“Who’s who in the games-based learning : James Paul Gee”, 2014). His and Elisabeth Hayes’ book concerning language learning in the digital age (2011) discusses among others how schools have gotten a rival from video games due to their playful character. Although the character of a video game can be immensely wide – such as the massively multiplayer online role-playing game World of Warcraft –, Gee admits that those video games as well are a form of play (Gee, 2009:4). Moreover, according to the example given by Gee and Hayes (2011), a person can learn more from a game played in one’s free time than doing course work at school.

In their example, Gee and Hayes (2011) tell the story of “Jade”, a teenage girl who enjoyed playing video games, especially The Sims. The Sims is a video “game where the players constructs and maintain a household, a family, and a neighbourhood through long periods of time” by creating and playing their own virtual people (Gee & Hayes, 2011:73). When Jade joined an after-school club which tried to get students interested in technology, she became fascinated not by the game itself – which she had stopped playing by then – but by the potential to create clothes from pictures of real clothes, using Adobe Photoshop (Gee & Hayes, 2011:74). These
virtual clothes could be then used by the Sims, the virtual people. Although none of Jade’s teachers in the after-school club knew how to create these virtual clothes, they directed her to some online tutorials. By studying and following the tutorials Jade could after many weeks of training design her own virtual clothes for the Sims. These designs eventually became famous worldwide and downloaded by many. Even though Jade’s successful story continues after this, it is interesting to see how her success in the virtual world did not help her at all in her school work. Her computational skills, which she had learned by herself, were arguably more important for her future than much of what she learned in school but still, unfortunately, only school could give her an official credential to verify her learning (Gee & Hayes, 2011:75).

In the example of Jade one can see that even though school is the primary place for learning, learning can also take place at home and anywhere, anytime. Games make this learning possible: one only needs to persevere and use other sources of help when that cannot be gotten from the teachers. Furthermore, it is vital to notice that one needs to stop dismissing one’s own negative experiences concerning educational technology as many students can learn through it. Indeed, as modern technology is getting more advanced and accessible, the youngsters get more and more familiar with its use. Therefore it is the teacher’s job to develop his or her views and invent new practices that answer the needs of the students and their best abilities to learn new language skills. Naturally, if the teacher’s skills lack in some area, his or her job is to direct the student to the right direction, such as online tutorials mentioned in the example of Jade. However, it needs to be remembered that even though the usefulness of video games has been largely discussed in the last few paragraphs, one should not forget the use of general practices as well, as they can offer practical views and examples too.
2.6.1. Passionate affinity-based learning

More in terms of the environment where learning takes place, Gee and Hayes (2011) have pointed out some interesting views when writing about language learning and language itself. The form of a language and especially its formality should be mentioned here as it portrays some interesting points about what sort of language is more learner-friendly. The following two texts given by Gee and Hayes (2011) show the description and definition of a term called the bonding-distancing continuum.

“I can FINALLY edit my pictures! My cover 4 LH 1.7 looks SICK! I am sooo excited to release it!!!! Check bac 4 it! Should b out either this weekend or next!

The destruction of a land surface by the combined effects of abrasion and removal of weathered material by transporting agents is called erosion.” (Gee & Hayes, 2011:23)

According to Gee and Hayes (2011), there are two poles of language that these two texts represent. The first is informal and socially bonding language while the second is formal and distancing language (Gee & Hayes, 2011:23). By the word “distancing” one means that such academic language is not necessarily distancing to scientists who use it to get their work done but it is distancing to people not familiar with it (Gee & Hayes, 2011:23). Even though the two texts are both written texts, many people associate the second writing as more correct while the first writing is deemed as “unschool-like” and definitely informal (Gee & Hayes, 2011:23). It is said that any language lies somewhere on the continuum between informal/bonding language and formal/distance language (Gee & Hayes, 2011:24). In a gaming situation the language is usually more informal and bonding when compared to textbook-based learning and the language within it. Certainly a formal and distancing language can scare some learners away from the teaching, thus preventing successful learning. Informal language is closer to the language that
young students themselves use, so thus using games with their informal and bonding language one could teach a foreign language in a more motivating way. It could be even argued that less complex language creates interest in the matter and raises passion in the eyes of the students.

This idea of interest and passion directs us again towards Gee and Hayes (2011), who have invented a term that describes a certain type of learning that is complex but produces knowledge: passionate affinity-based learning (Gee & Hayes, 2011:69). Passionate affinity-based learning happens when people organise themselves in the real world and/or via the virtual world to learn something connected to a “shared endeavour, interest, or passion” (Gee & Hayes, 2011:69). Here already one can see the connection to games and plays: people playing a game can be said to have interest and passion in the activity. Just as school is a place where students and teachers gather to learn, passionate affinity-based learning occurs in a place that Gee and Hayes call a passionate affinity space (Gee & Hayes, 2011:69). At school the leader of the passionate affinity space is the teacher but for example in the Internet, in an online virtual world, the leader can be anyone: there the leader is more like a mentor, a more flexible term (Gee & Hayes, 2011:70). Moreover, passionate affinity spaces can compose of people from all over a country or the world (Gee & Hayes, 2011:89). Indeed, it has already been established in this thesis that learning does occur in people’s free time as well, not only in school. The fact that the people in the passionate affinity space share a same passion and understand that they can all contribute to a same clause matters immensely: their goal can be to achieve something, share their knowledge or just enjoy themselves. Usually their interaction is informal, bonding their personalities together. The same goals and actions happen in a game too. By playing a game the people in the passionate affinity space all interact with each other and thus learn in the process in some way.

Gee and Hayes (2011) describe how knowledge in the affinity space is “distributed” in the sense that different people know different things and can share that
knowledge when necessary: no one person has to or is expected to know everything all by themselves (Gee & Hayes, 2011:70). This view reminds their idea of “the wisdom of the crowd”. According to this fairly well studied phenomenon, if a crowd is large and diverse enough, the crowd is “wise” (Gee & Hayes, 2011:45). For instance, if a scientist wants to know the number of candies in a jar, he or she needs to ask a crowd and get the average number of their answers. Although it is possible that not one of the answers was truly correct, there is wisdom in the crowd so to speak and their average guess is very close to the actual number of candies. How can this idea be connected to games then? The players in the passionate affinity space learn from each other. Even if one student does not know the answer, he or she learns from the actions of the others and their interaction between each other. Vygotsky’s idea of the zone of proximal development (see pages 19-20) is very similar to the passionate affinity space: in both cases the zone or place is a site of learning where different people with the same goal work with each other. Therefore, once more, games and general group works can be said to help in the learning process.

Additionally, passionate affinity spaces and their importance has been studied by Selwyn (2011) as well, although he uses different terms and views. He has researched the advantages and possibilities of video games, and he writes by quoting Suppes (1965) as well as Bennet and Bennet (2008), that computerised technologies allow the learner to break free of the physical confines of classroom-based teaching (Selwyn, 2011:11). Furthermore, a physical confine preventing learning can also be formal/distancing language. With video games the students have boundless access to various forms of learning on an “any-time, any-place, any-pace basis” (Selwyn, 2011:11). In the best case scenario the students would practice their language skills while at home as well, playing a game that stimulates their motivation. Selwyn (2011) thinks that they would gain pleasure from the actual playing and learning while simultaneously improving their foreign language vocabulary, among others. Negroponte (1995) and Shaffer (2008) have both addressed this strength of video games by writing that there have been some
arguments concerning the notion that individuals can learn through the “hard fun” of creating and playing video games “rather than being subjected to the ‘teaching disabled’ pedagogies of the conventional classroom” (Selwyn, 2011:11). Indeed, it seems highly possible that video games with no boundaries and no certain leaders concerning time or space and their shared community spaces – or as Gee and Hayes (2011) would say, passionate affinity spaces – contribute to the students’ persistence and motivation to learn (Selwyn, 2011:15). Because computers and mobile devices are a massive part of communication today, their use has become mundane regardless of one’s age. Therefore, in addition to the boundless limits of video games and their motivational character, one should not forget the fact that youngsters today use many different electronic devices in their day-to-day life. Thus it is no wonder why children in elementary school are more excited about using a computer in their language lesson when compared to writing something on paper – the last option seems old to them. By making the passionate affinity space more modern and thus appealing for the majority, the teacher can develop the learning process into a more affective one with different people and versatile knowledge.

In the following (section 3), the data and methodology of this study will be delineated in more detail. In order to understand the reasons behind choosing certain learning environments and examples (see board games in section 4 and video games in section 5), their origins and background need to be outlined and the evaluation methods discussed.
3. Data and methodology

The main focus of the research was to read and study various texts concerning learning and the usage of games in language classrooms in order to evaluate the usefulness of games in foreign language learning. No additional interviews or surveys were gathered but it was concluded that the vast amount of research done by so many others would offer a versatile view on the advantages and disadvantages of game-based learning. Moreover, personal experience had shown that fun and motivating games are useful in teaching situations; therefore studying the theory of it proved to be profitable enough in the theory section. In the analysis sections the focus will also be on the SWOT analysis method (see section 3.1.) which attempts to explain the advantages and disadvantages of language learning games.

The actual games that are given as examples in sections 4 and 5 were mostly gathered from text books and previous research. Out of the three examples of board games presented in section 4, two were gotten from the Aktivoi kielitaitoa - rakennepelein = aktivera språkfärdigheter - med grammatikspel = activate language skills - with grammar games by Björnfot and Lattu (2010) and the third example was gotten from an actual teaching situation personally experienced. The two games from the book were chosen due to their general character and their modification possibilities. Indeed, many board games already included in school language textbooks are games that require a dice. Moreover, the third game, the ball game, was chosen due to its different form when compared to the first two examples. It is vital to understand that actual movement can be preferred in classrooms. In section 5 the second example of a video language learning game was gotten from a study about constructing 3D virtual worlds for language learners by Chen and Su (2011) while the first example is purely theoretical, copied and personally modified with the help of the characteristics of the board games in section 4. However, although the first video game is only an imagined example, the basics of it lie on the general video games that are most common in language lessons. These video games were
chosen because it is important to notice the vast difference in technology and difficulty between video games: the video game presented by Chen and Su (2011) displays an improvement in technology and skill, while the general video game example portrays a more common aspect of using computers in a classroom.

3.1. Evaluating language learning games

In this thesis, the language learning games will be assessed for example by their various uses of creativity, imagination and social learning, in addition to how the students learn to ask questions and access different data. A popular method used widely in technology development is the so called SWOT analysis, and that form of analysis seems to be sufficient for this thesis as well (Hyvönen et al., 2007). The SWOT is an abbreviation for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. By estimating these four points one should get a simple but a broad enough view about the character of the game and the possible uses and disadvantages of the language learning game in question.

A closer study of the SWOT analysis method shows that it has been used as a strategic planning tool and it identifies and evaluates the internal (strengths and weaknesses) and external (opportunities and threats) factors that are favourable or unfavourable to achieve the given objectives (Narayanasamy, 2009:259). The study by Narayanasamy (2009) has examined the existing conditions and situations of some rural areas in order to plan improvements for the people’s living conditions. Although Narayanasamy (2009) seems to have interviewed the rural people for his SWOT analysis and asked their views on the four topics, and thus getting a more detailed and usable outcome, this thesis mainly uses arguments from the theory sections and general logical reasoning when assessing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Indeed, even though SWOT analyses are mostly used in the management field and in development fields, individual use is also common: such an analysis can help the project researcher or participant to better understand
what he or she is facing and therefore improve the organisation or the community – or the language learning game in question (Narayanasamy, 2009:264).

Ideally the SWOT analysis tables should portray theoretical features which were presented in section 2. The theory sections did conclude that motivation is one of the driving forces behind successful learning: without it the students do not put the effort into their work (see section 2.4.). Learning by having fun and not even noticing that one is truly learning is important when designing good and interesting language environments. In addition to motivation and incidental learning, the views of Piaget, Vygotsky and Gee will also be vital when evaluating the games in section 4 and 5. Piaget offers an action-filled perspective on games, dictating that a child learns through discovery by studying his surroundings himself (see page 17). The egocentric personality is important to notice here. The Vygotskian approach on the other hand highlights the social surroundings of the child and its influence on the child’s learning (see page 19). It should be interesting to compare games that are different in their character, as Piaget and Vygotsky were in their studies. Moreover, the views of Gee and Hayes (2011) displayed the importance of informal language which makes the students to bond with each other (see page 26). These features will be looked at when evaluating the board games and video games and although other qualities will be presented as well, these theoretically proven properties should form the backbone of the SWOT analyses.

By combining the theory part and its vital information with the games’ positive and negative characteristics one should be able to deduce how useful a certain game could be in a language learning environment. Thus the intention of this thesis is not to give a certain correct answer or a certain well-designed, functional game, but mostly to contemplate the strengths and weaknesses of language learning games. At the end of the analysis part a discussion will be drawn from these findings that should give an indication of what, how, when and especially why one should use games when teaching foreign languages.
3.2. Analysis of the basic characteristics of language learning games

We have now discussed the definition of game and its role and justification in foreign language classrooms. Certainly games can offer a fun, a motivating and an unconscious way of learning after mechanic written exercises. However, the entertainment aspect of language learning games is only a positive side effect, an advantage over written exercises. This section is about the ideas behind language learning board games and video games, how they are and should be organised in a classroom and what kind of games are and could be used in foreign language acquisition in elementary and secondary school curriculums. Later on in sections 4 and 5 some examples of language games will be given and studied in more detail according to the presented data search methodology. However, it is necessary to discuss first about the basic characteristics of games used today in foreign language learning. Only then can one realise the position and possibilities of games in schools.

The basic curriculum creates the foundations for the learning environment and therefore language learning games should be based on that curriculum (Hyvönen et al., 2007:324). The goal of the study plan depends also on the student himself and on the society; various learning difficulties for example can affect the progression of the game, which is supposed to teach the student a certain grammar for example. In that case the game needs to be modified to meet the expectations and the abilities of the player.

However, even though language learning games differ in their goal and manner, they all have something in common. Hyvönen, Kangas, Kultima and Latva (2007) describe that the intention of education is to show the student that he himself can have an effect on his success in learning. When the student is conscious about his own learning, he can see the development he makes – and therefore he will simultaneously motivate himself into learning more. Additionally, it is essential to maintain that joy and enthusiasm of learning, and to encourage the child into challenging him- or herself with new demanding exercises (Hyvönen et al.,
As mentioned before already, games are central when teaching young students because they focus on imagination and play. A good play can offer a versatile interaction between the students while simultaneously enriching the child’s experiences and schooling in a natural way.

In an oral game, whether we are talking about card games or movement games, language learners repeat the assignment very frequently to achieve the game’s goals (Macedonia, 2005:138-9). This enables repeated oral practice for all participants. Thereby a certain verb ending might be used orally fifty or one hundred times and so repeated, heard and possibly corrected within the group. After this procedure has occurred repeatedly, the students can automatically perform that said verb ending without consciously thinking about verb endings. As was discussed before, this means that declarative knowledge eventually becomes procedural knowledge (see page 9 for more). Therefore the form of a verb, which previously was only memorised, is now unconscious knowledge. This learning was enabled by repeated oral practice, a practice that is perhaps one of the most used methods in language learning games.

Language games do therefore serve the function of oral repetition of grammar structures and vocabulary in a playful way. Students are able to use their imagination and personal experiences while playing in a classroom, but they are not always aware that they are truly practising grammar (Macedonia, 2005:139). Townsend (2009:244) has written that after-school programmes should include fun, mentoring, enrichment, and support of academic learning, but this notion makes one wonder why these fun and interesting forms of learning should mostly be incorporated in after-school programmes – there is no reason why general, daily lessons could not be rich in game as well.

However, as Macedonia (2005) discusses, course books contain exercises in inadequate quantity and in ineffective modality, where written exercises are built to teach oral competence. This certainly does sound odd: oral competence is naturally best taught by oral exercises, not written ones. Especially high school books have
very few games and other oral exercises in them, at least when looking at the Open Road series by Otava. Naturally a high school is much more advanced than an elementary school or upper comprehensive school, but perhaps this is the reason why students often possess only knowledge of rules in the foreign language, yet cannot speak the language. It would certainly be interesting to study the actual development of a student’s language skills, if he or she was taught by using more games and oral exercises from the beginning of his or her schooling.

It is also essential to mention the presentation of games during the lesson, at what point during the lesson should the games be presented. Pakarinen (2012) refers to other studies when exclaiming that classroom organisation, meaning routines and management in the classroom, is displayed in how teachers manage time and activities to promote children’s engagement in productive learning. Usually the time for games and plays seems to be at the end of the lesson, when students are getting restless and have little interest to follow difficult grammar rules. The remaining lesson can therefore be used to make something fun but simultaneously productive. Perhaps this kind of ending would give the student a more positive feeling about learning languages, so that when a pupil comes back the next time, he or she would remember the success of playing a game and thus be motivated to be active in his or her language studies later on as well.
4. Board games used in language teaching

It could be argued that board games are the most used games in language lessons from the first grade onwards. At least they are the easiest to understand by the young students and their collection and presentation is quick and easy. Most of the used board games can be found from textbooks themselves but the teacher can also take liberties and either use a general board game in class or design an original game him or herself. Depending on the game, either the students learn by actively doing and experimenting themselves (a Piagetian perspective, see pages 17-18) or by socialising with other students and learning by following their actions (a Vygotskian approach, see pages 19-20). Whatever the method is, some active involvement occurs. Thus procedural knowledge happens via fun, incidental learning. The three examples in sections 4.1., 4.2. and 4.3. show some important characteristics of board games, what sort of board games could and are used when teaching a foreign language. By researching their strengths and weaknesses among others one can notice their level of usefulness in language learning.

4.1. The tray game

In the tray game (see appendices I and II) a game board is folded along the dotted line to form a “tray” (Björnfot, 2010). In the tray there are different sections with verbs, for example, that the student needs to use, such as in a sentence. A dice will be thrown in order to decide the assigned task. For instance, if the gotten verb is “write” and the students are practicing different verb forms, the student would need to answer “write, wrote, written”. After getting the answer correct, the student can write his or her initials in the said section. A player may have to throw several times, especially as the game progresses, in order to land on a space that is not marked. At the end of the game the initials are counted to find the winner.

The tray game can be useful when used correctly as it can be used in the practice of many different subject areas: the conjunction of verbs, comparison of adjectives,
verb structures in imperatives, questions and statements and so forth. I myself have
used the tray game when teaching the future tense, “will/won’t”. Then the game
board was sectioned with different verbs that the students needed to use in a
sentence, such as “will you watch television when you get home?”. Some of the
sections had additional markings on them: “-” or “?”. In the sections marked as “-”
the sentence needed to be negative, “I won’t listen to music tomorrow”, and in the
case of mark “?”, the sentence needed to be a question, “will you come to the city
the day after tomorrow?”. Therefore this tray game practised the future tense in
many ways, so that the students were forced to form sentences from various verbs
into different sentence forms. It is a simple game but quite effectively forcing the
pupils to repeat the rules of the taught grammar.

When this tray game with future tense was practiced in a classroom of Finnish
seventh graders, the game was played at the end of the lesson. The first half of the
lesson was used to remember and rewrite the rules of the future tense into the
chalk board and to every student’s notebook. Therefore the rules were fresh to
everyone and one could easily understand the rules of the game itself. Groups of
three or four were formed in a classroom of around twenty people. Although one
must admit that the game itself was very uninteresting to the hyper-active students
ready to go to lunch, the sentences that were formed were good and according to
the rules of the future tense grammar. Hence the main idea behind the game did
work. Furthermore, the actual structure of the lesson was planned well with its
opening revision, even according to the supervising teacher.

When inspecting and questioning the tray game according to the SWOT-analysis
(see section 3.1. for the framework of SWOT), one can nicely sum up the positive
and negative aspects of the said board game. By being able to easily evaluate the
context and content of the game, one can understand the possibilities of the tray
game.
Table 1: SWOT-analysis of the tray game

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- easy to follow</td>
<td>- might be too quick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- very adaptable</td>
<td>- materials are needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- strengthens oral skills</td>
<td>- boring for the hyperactive students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- strengthens social skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- informal and thus bonding language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- can be very easy or difficult, depending on</td>
<td>- if too many rules, such as negative or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the motivation of the students and the subject</td>
<td>interrogative clauses, the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>itself</td>
<td>might get confused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- can be improved</td>
<td>- the actual interest of the students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From table 1 one can notice that even though there are certain problems and possible hindrances concerning the simplicity of the game, there are some good qualities about it as well. It is possible that in some classrooms the easiness of the game is a disadvantage because students can easily get bored with playing. However, the younger the students, the more enjoyable the game can be – younger students are always more ready to learn and try new skills and methods, especially games. The enjoyment aspect certainly can be elevated if the teacher prepared the board game and its rules in order to make the tray game as active and challenging as possible. In that scenario the game would be more motivating and fun for the students and the actual playing of the game would go smoother. In the experienced situation the hardest part was to get the students to listen to the rules and to actually play it. Most of them did not care about playing, so even though their sentences were good, the whole playing activity was over too quickly. In another time, for another class the game might have worked better, but nevertheless it was interesting and enlightening to use this tray game in an educational situation.
Hopefully the students enjoyed it at least somewhat more when compared to general written exercises about the future tense.

Perhaps the most useful characteristic of this tray game is the fact that it highlights social interaction between the students and practices their oral skills. As was depicted, orals skills cannot be learned well from written exercises. As the number of oral exercises is quite minimal in school books, spoken assignments such as the tray game offer a useful way of learning and repeating grammar in a more realistic manner. Moreover, the students are forming their own sentences which means that the language used is mostly informal and thus bonding. However, the teacher or the supervisor needs to design the lesson correctly in order for the students to understand the rules and the meaning of the game – in addition to relaxing and focusing on the assignment itself.

4.2. The dice game

Perhaps the most common material in basic language learning board games is the dice. The dice is used in order to move the player to a place, where he or she needs to use his or her language skills. This was already shown in the first example, but experience has shown that most school textbooks contain some kind of dice games. The game book by Björnfot and Lattu (2010) has another good example of a language dice game designed to teach passive sentences, verb tenses, personal pronouns with verbs, various sentence structures or the use of auxiliary verbs in those languages where there are six alternative forms. This game is therefore quite useful in various grammar circumstances, especially because the game can be modified into many other language lessons as well.

In the dice game students need a game board (see appendices III and IV) and a dice. Each player of the group rolls the dice twice on his or her turn moving both horizontally and vertically according to the number on the dice. The player carries out the task in the box that he or she has landed on and marks one’s initials on that section when completing the task correctly. Even though the board game itself is
quite difficult to fathom with its many verbs and points, the idea behind the game seems to be sufficient. By throwing the dice twice the tense and the personal pronoun will be concluded, thus the player is forced to think about the rules of sentence forming from different angles at differed turns. This game as well has additional markings on the boxes, such as “not” and “?”: thus forming a question and putting the verb into the negative will be practiced.

Table 2: SWOT-analysis of the dice game

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strenghts</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- can be challenging or easy</td>
<td>- a little complicated to understand at first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- practices various sentence forms from the negative to the interrogative</td>
<td>- might be boring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- different personal pronouns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- practices various tenses in a broad way</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- strengthens social skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- strengthens oral skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- an informal learning environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- can be used in many languages</td>
<td>- as with all dice games, eventually the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- it is possible to make the game more challenging by adding adjectives or</td>
<td>throwing of the dice can get boring or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adverbs to the sentences</td>
<td>too funny, and then the actual gaming comes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- the motivation of the students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compared to the first example, the tray game, this one is much more advanced in its grammar. Naturally both of these games can be made easier for the students, but all the different tenses and personal pronouns add their own challenges to the dice game. This, however, is only a good thing, as the game can most certainly be used with older students. Younger students in the elementary school would presumably need more advice on the game, how it is played and what kinds of
answers would be needed. In that case some answer example sentences could be written on the board first so that everyone could see the aim of the game better. The answers themselves can be very versatile, which complements the game well. The answer sentences could be very simple, such as “I will make a cake tomorrow” if gotten numbers 1 and 5 on the dices, but the more advanced sentence could be for example “We certainly had not done anything wrong to him” if gotten a 4 and a 4 on the dices. Here, naturally, the motivation of the students’ plays a major role: if they are not bothered to play, the formed sentences will most likely be less advanced and thus informal. Although informal environments were proven to be successful by Gee and Hayes (2011) (see page 26), the sentences formed in the dice game seem to be more formal when compared to the tray game. Indeed, integrating an informal environment with formal example sentences might be a functioning combination. The teacher’s job is, again, to make the game and its rules and aims as appealing as possible according to the age group of the students.

As with all games, especially with dices and counters, the game can and will eventually change into a play, students throwing the dice hard or even to the floor, laughing. In these cases the teacher needs to be in charge, making sure that all behave properly. Additionally, because the sentences can be challenging, it would be a good idea to ask and pronounce some phrases from students at the end of the lesson, checking that the grammar of the sentence was truly correct and understood by all. This practise would further enhance the oral skills of the students, which naturally is one of the main goals of the assignment.

4.3. The ball game

A supervising teacher once had in her English lesson a ball game that taught students grammar in an interesting way: the students were all standing in a circle in the middle of the classroom and throwing a ball between each other. The topic of the lesson was future tense. The student with the ball said the name of the next student for clarification’s sake and asked him or her “What will you do today?” and threw the ball to that pupil. The student then had to answer that question with the
future tense. Also, one had to invent a new phrase that had not been used before. If a student said a sentence with a verb that had already been said before, he or she dropped out from the game. The last student in the circle won.

This game would actually seem quite perfect in its simplicity. By being in a circle the social interaction of the students is highlighted and the grammar in question is repeated several times. This oral repetition, as discussed before, is a very useful way of repeating grammar structures and vocabulary in a fun way. Moreover, a small competition of who will stand last might as well motivate students, making the learning process enjoyable. This inclusion of a competition was also presented by Baer and Kaufman (2012), who wrote about the extrinsic motivation of students: the motivation behind actually winning something concrete or just being the best in the group gives a person a motivation to reach or gain something (see pages 14-15 for the definition). The following SWOT-analysis table evaluates the characteristics of the ball game.
Table 3: SWOT-analysis of the ball game

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Strengths</strong></th>
<th><strong>Weaknesses</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- an active exercise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- quick and easy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- not much materials or planning is</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>needed by the teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- strengthens social skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- strengthens oral skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- an informal and bonding situation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- good for all age groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Opportunities</strong></th>
<th><strong>Threats</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- many topics can be chosen for the</td>
<td>- some students might favour their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>game</td>
<td>friends, so that other students get</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>left out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- someone could be on low spirits after</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dropping out from the game soon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From table 3 one can see that the ball game offers more positive aspects than negative, at least that I can think of. The only threats to the game are if the personalities of the players clash together and thus some students might get discriminated, or if a young student is not happy about dropping out of the game first. In that case the teacher would need to be alert. Otherwise these kinds of ball games seem sufficient in teaching students grammar and oral skills while constantly being alert, ready to invent a sentence with a new verb. Their imagination will certainly be in use in this exercise. However, perhaps the best thing in this is the fact that students are actually actively doing something. In the previous examples, and especially in most of the dice games offered in school textbooks, the activities were mainly just sitting and throwing the dice. This game actually makes students physically move.
In his text Sinnemäki (1998) repeatedly discusses the importance of inner motivation and the level of activity. As long as the student is once in a while actively involved in the teaching situation, he or she will be spontaneously creative and curious, and thus learning. Whether the students learn by the Piagetian model, by actually doing things, or by the Vygotskian approach, by socially interacting with other people, they are nevertheless learning by being active in a certain way. In this ball game example the students are doing both: they are actively throwing the ball while standing in a circle and simultaneously listening to the others’ sentences, thinking what sentence one could say next. These kinds of ball games and other sports games offer a useful way of learning foreign languages, as these active situations certainly are more interesting and motivating than sitting still by the table, at least for the majority of students.

The idea that the student is present and heard in the classroom is noteworthy here. The teaching method called suggestopaedia offers views on learning well and fast and it can be linked to the ball game. Thus its brief presentation needs to be executed. In suggestopaedia the teaching method is developed so that the creativity and communication skills of the student are accentuated without forgetting the personality of the student himself (Sauvala, Lukka, Nyyssönen, Pakarinen & Pulkki, 1989). Generally suggestopaedia utilises laughter and relaxation in creating a positive environment (Sauvala et al., 1989:9). It is believed that due to this pleasurable environment, the self-confidence of the students will improve and therefore results are gotten quicker (Sauvala et al., 1989:9). This idea can naturally be connected to the importance of motivation (see section 2.4.) In the example of the ball game the students are fulfilling themselves with the help of creativity: by forming sentences they are describing their own free time and their personality comes through. Thus the students get the feeling that they are listened to and that their own phrases are good, whether they were simple, informal sentences or more formal ones.
5. Video games used in language teaching

A new subject area presents itself every once in a while when studying games in education: edutainment. At the course of the development of technology and school curriculums, education and entertainment have closely become linked together and thus the term edutainment has become integrated from words education and entertainment, respectively (Chang, Hwang, Chen & Müller, 2011). As technology continues to advance even more with various mobile devices, computers, software, games and virtual reality applications, edutainment and its use in learning has quickly been promoted by experts and accepted by the public (Chang et al., 2011). As was discussed before, the modern youth is very much used to these various electronic devices from an early age, so their incorporation to the school system certainly seems to make sense. Children connect these electronic devices to entertainment, as they are used to playing different games with them at home. The following examples in sections 5.1. and 5.2. display some instances of what sort of video games could be used in language learning situations instead.

One of the reasons why children are interested in virtual games could be the games’ realistic appearance. By replicating the real world into virtual environments (VE) according to realistic attributes one can construct a believable environment to play games with (Manninen, 2004:85). According to Manninen (2004), the intention of all interactive media is to attempt to mimic the real-world human experience as closely as possible (Manninen, 2004:86). When the virtual environment is realistic and people are there able to interact with others by talking, walking and seeing things, learning can occur effectively. This is possible because learning from interaction with a virtual world is similar to learning from interactions with the real world (Manninen, 2004:86). Manninen (2004) continues his explanation by writing that

“...if the interaction is implemented in a straightforward, consistent, and believable manner, users will be able to develop a mental model from the VE exactly like they would develop a mental model of a new
city they explore. The guiding principles for interface design should follow the argument, which states that “if we want our own artificial worlds to communicate most effectively, we will model them after the real world, following its rules whenever appropriate”. (Manninen, 2004:86)

Therefore the potential advantage of replicating real worlds into virtual environments is easy learning and familiarity with the learning platform (Manninen, 2004:86). Naturally the rules of the real world can be modified in games but the most realistic content can be said to be more useful. In the following examples one can evaluate the differences between two video games, from which the second (section 5.2.) clearly tries to model a realistic environment by following the rules and laws of the real world.

5.1. General video game exercise

Whenever an English language class has been taken into a computer room to study, the computer exercises there are mostly exercises that require a word or a sentence to be filled in a blank spot. Personal experience has shown this. The basics of a grammar are first taught in the classroom and then at the end of the lesson the students are given the chance to practice their learning via computers. In this example here the video game is a computer, but one needs to remember that other digital equipments are also possible. The intention of this section is to question how useful these kinds of computer exercises are in learning a foreign language. Moreover, the idea is to only study a theoretic computer game. The tray game and the dice game from sections 4.1. and 4.2. will be used as the basis of this theoretic game: therefore the computer game under study practices different personal pronouns and verb forms. Although an actual language learning computer game could have been used as an example here, it should prove more useful to compare the tray game and the dice game to their theoretic computer game counterparts. This way one can get a broader perspective on how actually board games and video
games differ from each other, and which could prove more useful in various situations.

The character of the computer game, modified from the tray game and dice game respectively, could be quite simple. The computer screen could give the student the personal pronoun and the verb in their basic, first form, which the student would need to modify according to a given tense. For example, the given words could be “he” and “will do”, while the given tense would be a future tense and an interrogative clause. Thus the correct answer that the student would need to write on the screen is “what will he do tomorrow?” The other words could already be given but the student would need to decide where he will place the new words. Irregular verbs and their various forms could also be practiced really easily with computer games, as the screen would immediately tell the student whether his or her answer is correct. These kinds of computer games offer a quick and simple way of repeating learned grammar and memorising the grammar rules better.

The SWOT-analysis table will therefore be purely a theoretical one which portrays the positive and negative sides of a computer game that with filled-in words teaches the student to use English vocabulary with its personal pronouns and different verbs forms. However, as the intention of all the SWOT-analyses was only to understand the game and its possibilities by defining the internal and external factors and not to actually design a perfect language learning game, this theoretical approach is sufficient enough (see section 3.1.).
Table 4: SWOT-analysis of a general computer exercise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- quick and simple</td>
<td>- depending on the exercise, the game might even be too quick and simple, the students completing the assignment easily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- tells the students immediately whether the answer is correct or not</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- the pressure of being correct in front of the whole class decreases</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- gives a needed change to the general classroom situation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- egocentric character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- the grammar under study could be anything one could design or find from the Internet</td>
<td>- students will do something completely different on their own on the computer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- if there is too much hassle with the changing of the classroom and opening the programme, time will be lost</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As one can see, the strengths and opportunities of the theoretical computer game exercise are quite versatile. Perhaps the biggest strength of the game is its simple nature that quickly tells the student whether he or she has learned a certain grammar. In a paper test another person – whether a teacher or a student – needs to check the answers and thus write the gotten mark on the paper: for the most part a ballpoint pen or even a red marker. If the mark is quite low or if the paper is written full with red, the student might get disappointed or depressed, and thus his or her motivation to study might decrease. With a computer exercise this is avoided as it is hard for others to see the screen of others. The egocentric character of the game can be seen here: a student is not dependent on anyone but can choose his pace himself and therefore learn personally (see the Piagetian view on page 17-19). Additionally, a low mark can quickly be improved by repeating the test. As the
questions or words are the same as before, the student can easily remember and repeat the correct answer and this way finally learn the correct vocabulary and grammar. Moreover, being in a different environment than in most lessons, the computer classroom presents the students a certainly much needed change with interesting exercises.

This theoretical computer game exercise has its difficulties as well. Although the actual video game might prove to be too simple and quick for the students, the biggest threat comes from the students themselves. The temptation to do something completely different on the computer is always high, the students every once in a while checking their various social media websites when the teacher is not looking. This always happens, personal experience has shown this. However, this problem could be best avoided with the help of a school helper who would circle among the students while the actual teacher would instruct the students at the front of the class. Therefore, as in every game situation presented before, the teacher needs to be in control of the situation and direct the playing towards a focused learning. The teacher should also make sure that time is not lost on stupidities.

Finally, it should be examined how the computer version of the language exercise differs from the board game version. First of all, both the tray game and the dice game were portrayed in the SWOT-analysis tables (see pages 38 and 40) as quick and easy to follow board games which were very adaptable according to the needs of the lesson. These points certainly are true in the computer version as well, as can be seen from Table 4 (see page 48). The basic idea and motivation behind the games is similar: building phrases and modifying them according to grammar rules in order to get the best score of a group. What is more, the weaknesses and threats of the board games and the theoretical computer game also remind each other. In both cases the actual simplicity of the game might become a problem and make the students unfocused on the task. When the task is secondary to playing and having fun, learning is not as active and efficient as it could be. When making a conclusion
of this comparison, one could state that while both games, the board game and the computer game, offer a language learning medium that can be fun, motivating and adaptable for the students, they both face the problem of the students themselves and their interest in the matter. In the worst case scenario a computer offers the students the means to do something else than learning but at best it gives them an opportunity to revise and verify their learning via the digital world – which could be much more interesting to the modern youth.

5.2. Virtual life in language learning video games

Macedonia (2005) wrote that somewhere along the years grammar and vocabulary should merge into sentences so that one’s communication skills are developed. Indeed, Chen and Su have also concluded that modern language learning techniques do aim to help students in developing their real-life situation, social interactions (2011:46). Being able to discuss and connect with people is essential in living, and thus language courses should help students to learn how to communicate meaning in a genuine context (2011:46). In their article about 3D virtual worlds in foreign language learning, Chen and Su (2011) have pondered the question whether 3D virtual worlds could offer a useful solution in teaching foreign languages through the interaction with objects or other students by using avatars. Very rarely can foreign language learners actually practice the target language in an authentic and meaningful context, but virtual worlds and avatars could present a possibility for this (Chen & Su, 2011:46). According to Chen and Su (2011),

“Through the game-like tasks, the 3D virtual platform could provide a carefree, motional environment for apprentices of language use where students may learn languages more interactively, in less time, and with less expense than by visiting countries that speak the target language.” (Chen & Su, 2011:46)

The main idea and goal of virtual worlds certainly seems worth looking at. The actual 3D virtual world is a simulated environment on the Web where users can inhabit and interact in via their own graphic self-representations called as avatars (Chen & Su, 2011:47). At first these virtual worlds were only employed in the
gaming industry but gradually they were adapted to education as well: the idea behind the term edutainment might have fuelled this development (Chen & Su, 2011:47). Perhaps the main advantage of virtual worlds is their versatility because with their rich digital media they can provide learners multiple environments and limitless possibilities to communicate, collaborate and explore (Chen & Su, 2011:47). Moreover, as the use of computers has risen among the youth, various versions of avatars and 3D worlds will surely interest students, at school as well as at home. Chen and Su mention that the most used 3D virtual worlds for language learning are Active Worlds and Second Life (Chen & Su, 2011:47). Another virtual world similar to these previous examples is The Sims, which is more commonly used by the youth at home. The Sims does not occur on the web as it is a computer programme but if one should change the language into a foreign one that one wants to learn, one would quickly adapt new vocabulary. However, Chen and Su have studied virtual worlds in general but at times referring to Second Life. Therefore the main focus of this section is not to study the character of Second Life in detail but to examine what virtual worlds in general can and should offer language learners.

The central idea behind 3D virtual worlds is to design the programme with interesting scenario-based tasks that are life-like and socially possible (Chen & Su, 2011:50). As Chen and Su (2011) describe, students prefer learning by playing and engaging in multi-playing gaming and competitive interactive tasks that connect them with other players and give them the freedom to decide what to do and learn. Virtual worlds offer a learning platform of this kind, a platform where students can interact with objects and other users in order to develop their linguistic knowledge and communication proficiency. Moreover, the context is more meaningful with its possible environments. Chen and Su (2011) present some activities and environments that have been used in virtual worlds to instruct students and to take them to the right direction in their language learning. Perhaps the most interesting instructive activity for this thesis is the scenario-based activity used in some English
courses. Chen and Su had designed various English study tour lessons that included some vital social interactive skills, including proper vocabulary fit for the certain environment. These scenes included an airport, a hotel, a campus in a university, a house or an apartment, a mall, a restaurant, a hospital and a bank (Cheng & Su, 2011:50). All of these instances have their own actions and vocabulary. For example, in the airport environment the student would need to know how to do the check-in or find a lost luggage, and additionally one would learn how the boarding and safety instructions go in English (Cheng & Su, 2011:51). The whole concept of including virtual realities to education seems already very versatile when looking at the endless social environment possibilities.

In the classroom the students would therefore all need a computer with an Internet connection where to play the virtual world game, such as Second Life. The lesson plan itself would contain vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and oral skills depending on the chosen environment. Presentation screens with a model conversation and appropriate vocabulary would appear on the screen when needed, an object could be clicked and the correct pronunciation and word forms would appear, and video chats with other students or with the teacher would challenge the user every now and then: these are only a few examples of what one can do with a virtual world game (Chen & Su, 2011:50). Additionally, one could even do the assessment on the virtual world via vocabulary hunts and quizzes (Chen & Su, 2011:50). From the appendices V one can notice how the computer screen with various presentation screens would look like. Figure 1 in appendix V for example displays a Map and Vocabulary HUD, HUD meaning a heads-up display. The Map HUD is used to teleport to different places while the Vocabulary HUD gives the pronunciation and word form of the said object. Figure 2 in appendix V presents a word card, giving example sentences of the newly learned vocabulary. The slide screen in figure 3 on the other hand can present PowerPoint slides made by the teacher, pictures or dialogue that is appropriate to the certain happening. The last figure, Figure 4, shows a chat with a non-player character. All of these actions
develop the learner’s grammar, vocabulary and oral skills in various ways, but in all of them the student is actively interacting with other people, whether they are in the same room or on the other side of the world.

Now that we have discussed the presentation and possibilities of virtual world games with the help of Second Life, we can take a closer look at the SWOT-analysis table of it.

Table 5: SWOT-analysis of Second Life virtual world

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- visually interesting and motivating</td>
<td>- might be too advanced for the younger students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- multiple scenarios that offer versatile language in a life-like environment</td>
<td>- computers are needed for every student; this is not always possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- modern and digital, thus interesting for the students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- more active than general board games</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- not limited to space and time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- egocentric character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- multiple scenarios, that can be developed even further</td>
<td>- the actual learning situation could become playing without learning in the worst case scenario</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- the development of language learning through various examples and situations is possible</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the SWOT-analysis table of the Second Life virtual world one can notice that the strengths and opportunities of the virtual life game are numerous while the weaknesses and threats are more questionable – and perhaps even avoidable. The students learn the targeted language through life-like scenarios that offer them various possibilities of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and even oral skills with
the help of microphones and voice-over commands. The technology of a virtual life game is advanced and as well as being interesting and motivating for the youth of 2014, it can develop even further as time goes on. The possibilities are therefore endless. Although major developments might affect the understanding of younger students, this could be avoided by making different versions and levels of the virtual video game. That way many age-groups could profit from these kinds of learning games. Moreover, the actual character of the game would need to be built as such, so that learning would take place without the situation becoming too playful. Even though the game itself is playful and the students perceive it so, the teacher would need to make sure of the game’s suitability for the language lesson. Therefore money is not the biggest weakness in teaching a foreign language via virtual games, although that definitely helps.

In their study, Chen and Su (2011) have discussed a research project of Molka-Danielsen, Richardson, Deutschmann and Carter (2007) who developed a language course in Second Life. Their study’s preliminary results showed that

“students are motivated to participate and may wish to spend even more time in-world. It shows the setting is believable enough, that the role play can be related to real life situations.” (Chen & Su, 2011:47)

Indeed, Second Life and other similar virtual games are beneficial resources which present students a possibility to use their language and conversation skills in a wider cultural environment (Chen & Su, 2011:47). The language itself can be either informal or formal, depending on the student and his or her avatar’s doings. The various experiences and scenarios together build a language learning platform that is simultaneously advanced and productive, but also interesting and motivating. The high degree of participation and the learner-centred interaction have made it possible that virtual lives in the Internet can also present a good strategy of language learning in addition to general board games (Chen & Su, 2011:48). Chen and Su (2011) describe in their article that different studies have shown the potential of 3D virtual worlds in language learning and teaching. They seem to
present a dynamic, motivating and engaging context where the students interact with other language students in and outside the classroom no matter where and when they study (Chen & Su, 2011:52). The 3D virtual environment gives a possibility to study a foreign language in a concrete context where the students are forced to do things, to read directions and to travel over the landscape (Chen & Su, 2011:52). This means that the student himself or herself is in charge of the learning, highlighting his or her egocentric personality. This form of learning is more concrete and reality-based when compared to general textbook-based teaching, meaning learning words and phrases only by memory.
6. Discussion of the findings

When looking at the overall picture that is drawn from the theory of games in language learning, it is noticeable that a few matters surface every once in a while: the importance of motivation and having fun. Generally games are considered to be child’s work, and fun and joy as the antithesis of learning (Carstens & Beck, 2005:22). However, as discussed in this thesis by studying various researchers in the field of education, games do offer an escape from the general environment and feeling of a classroom: sitting still and memorising words and rules is not active enough for the students to be motivated to learn. In order to make the learning situation stimulating, the teacher needs to change the learning environment into a more relaxed and fun one. This would make it possible for the students to socialise better with each other and, more importantly, not to be so afraid of interacting in a foreign language. Indeed, for many students, no matter their age, the biggest problem and fear seems to be the actual speaking: even if writing English would be easy for a student, he or she might have immense problems in pronunciation and speaking in general. If a person fears to speak a language he or she in reality knows quite well, there is no use to know that said language. Foreign languages need to be used, not just learned.

When foreign languages are spoken in a classroom, the form and way of learning to speak and speaking itself should be planned carefully. It was established that if a person learns accidentally, without realising the actual consequences of an exercise, he or she will learn faster and the teaching is stored in the long-term memory. A game is an example of an exercise which teaches students incidentally. In a game people are repeating what they have learned but while the gaming process is incidental, it is informal as well. Gee and Hayes (2011) stated that informal language made the students bond with each other better and thus learning occurred in a friendlier and more positive environment. Furthermore, an informal situation
reminds more closely of a realistic situation: certainly students of all ages need to be prepared to speak in various circumstances, informal or formal.

The usefulness of board games is perhaps the easiest form of playing in a classroom. The examples shown in section 4 portray how practical simple board games could be. By dividing the class into groups and forcing the students to interact with each other in a fun way has many beneficial points: language is taught in a motivating and inspiring way, games offer a change to general learning, and the relationships of the students are improved while they work towards a common goal. Moreover, the rules of the board games in section 4 all have simple rules to follow and they repeat a certain grammar. By combining what Piaget, Vygotsky, Gee and Hayes all conclude, physical activities, social interaction and a relaxed environment with informal language helps the students to learn. Indeed, according to various studies, knowledge is better restored to the long-time memory when the learning situation is designed after these learning.

Looking at video games and their possibilities more closely, one can notice that while they also develop social skills and improve the relations of the students, the possibilities of video games are huge when compared to general board games. The game is necessarily not confined to the classroom or time anymore, but learning can take place at the students’ own homes as well. While the first example of a video game (in section 5.1.) is closely related to school and grammar, the second example (in section 5.2.) portrays a virtual game which is most likely played in one’s free time, not in a supervised classroom. However, they both have qualities that teach the students in a fun way via repetition. Given the possibilities and the rising interest of online video games, it could be even predicted that this kind of learning will become more and more popular as time goes on and technology develops. Students and teachers alike are beginning to understand the potential and enjoyment that video games can offer.
Nevertheless, it is necessary to remember that virtual worlds cannot replace actually communicating with native speakers in the real world (Chen & Su, 2011:52). For example, speaking a foreign language when face to face with a café worker is a completely different matter. Writing phrases online or talking to a friend who is also a learner of that said language is much easier. Words and speech can be forgotten in a stressful situation, and the speaker might even think other people would judge him or her according to the wrongly pronounced words, for instance. However, Chen and Su (2011) nicely propose that

“while the time, money and native speakers for real world language learning are not available for all language classrooms and learners, the 3D virtual worlds may be an option to provide a viable supplement to traditional textbook instruction to create experiences that help students understand places, people, language and processes better.” (Chen & Su, 2011:52)

Indeed, this medium of virtual worlds could provide teachers and students an opportunity to use language in a more realistic environment. Language learners could explore and experience new channels and environments that normally would be impossible to access in their current situation (Chen & Su, 2011). In an ideal world every English language class would make a class trip to the United Kingdom for example, but naturally that is very unlikely to happen due to money and other resources. As virtual worlds continue to evolve and become easier to use, the language skills of the students could be developed with the help of virtual worlds, such as Second Life. In the virtual world the students could wander around a virtual London, designed as believable as possible according to realistic attributes. Now, it needs to be reminded at this point that the best case scenario is not always possible – and the intention of this thesis is to study just those scenarios with their various versions. However, by studying possible improvements and new ideas concerning language learning one can eventually develop one’s own teaching methods but perhaps even a certain country’s school system.
Not all learning via virtual worlds occurs in a classroom though. It has been noted that some learning can take place because the students actually enjoy a virtual world and use it in their free time. The story of Jade and her interest in virtual clothes, as presented by Gee and Hayes (2011), portrays well this enjoyment in virtual worlds (see pages 24-25). Moreover, The Sims is a good example of a computer game where the players invent an artificial world and different characters. By playing and interacting with the secondary characters they are likely to learn vocabulary that is related to furniture, work and relationships, for example. In this case the learning occurs accidentally. Only after a while does the person playing the game realise that he or she has actually learned some new words and phrases. At the age of the Internet this kind of learning seems to become more and more common. Certainly just browsing the web and various websites that are in a foreign language teaches the reader something new every once in a while, if not always. This idea of the World Wide Web and its endless possibilities and environments can be further linked to the ideas of Vygotsky and Gee and their thoughts concerning the passionate affinity space or the zone of proximal development (see Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development on page 20 and Gee’s passionate affinity space on section 2.6.1.). The main view behind these two notions was that the relationships of a person affect his or her learning: people with similar interests form a group and those relationships in the group teach a person various ways of thinking (Harré, 2006). The power of the group seems to be dependent on the size of the group and the knowledge inside it.

When one studies this idea of group formation and interactivity more closely, one should notice the link to games. Certainly the character of games demand some sort of group formation and social activity between the players, whether the game was a general board game or a global virtual game. By playing the students accidentally and possibly without realising learn from each other and perhaps even have fun while doing it – there is nothing wrong with that. Therefore the proposition is not to teach foreign languages solely by playing and games, but to incorporate them every
once in a while to the generally quite tedious classroom situations. Learning by memorising words and grammar rules does not motivate the students as much as games do.

One notable and vital difference between all the board games and video games is that in the video games the egocentric character of the player is highlighted. From this one can assume that if a player is more comfortable with people and social situations and learns faster by following others’ examples, he or she would more preferably play board games. However, when the player would sooner play alone, video games are assumed to be more suitable. Therefore, by looking at games from these group formation and egocentric perspectives, one can conclude that games are indeed useful when teaching a foreign language but the form of playing a game and its usefulness depends on the student. Especially young students are eager to play games and their early learning seems to grow quickly through active and practical exercises. Still, one cannot forget that games are not restricted to children only: various forms of suggestopaedia are certainly used for adult learners as well. However, this thesis focused more on games used in primary schools and in upper comprehensive schools.

It needs to be mentioned here as well that my personal view on the matter at hand is quite game-positive. Theoretical parts of any lecture are mostly boring and seem to only scratch the surface for me. By actually physically doing something do I feel like learning is taking place. Therefore practical learning, moving and speaking and interacting with people, is necessary for my long-term learning. Of course reading and various tests are an important part of the learning process but their impact is small if the overall activities do not prepare the students for the real world: in order for the learning to be as realistic as possible, speaking a foreign language among others cannot be taught from textbooks.
7. Conclusion

The goal of this master’s thesis was to discuss how useful games are in learning and why they should be incorporated into foreign language learning. By evaluating the usefulness of the SWOT analysis method and then incorporating those practical lessons into theory one should realise the vast effectiveness of educational games. Moreover, it could be even said that one of the main intentions of this thesis was to study how correct my personal opinion about playing games in a classroom was. As a conclusion we can deduce that while most language classrooms are taught by using written exercises and chapter translations, having games incorporated to the curriculum could nicely give the language lessons a motivating boost. Grammar rules are naturally first taught by going over the rules but in order for the grammar to become understood, and not just memorised out loud, some kind of physical and active exercises would be preferred afterwards. Games simultaneously teach oral skills which definitely is a useful skill in the current world. However, not only do games teach grammar and oral skills to students, but they also interest and motivate students more when compared to mechanical written exercises. According to the findings of this thesis, a balanced equation of needed theoretical grammar with optional, practical games can be assumed to be the most useful method of teaching and learning foreign languages.

The motivation of the pupils is fundamental when talking about long-time interest to foreign language learning. Motivation should be taken into consideration because when students have opportunities to practically use language and vocabulary in a way that is personally meaningful to them, the content learning can be said to be more illuminating and personally motivating. In an encouraging assignment a student will most probably be more focused on the task and thus learning will become truly known, not only memorised. Additionally, rewards of many kinds can inspire the student to learn both in classrooms as well as at home.
The example games in this thesis and their SWOT analysis tables showed that even though there are many different kinds of language learning games, they all teach languages in a fun and motivating way. The students are competing against each other in a productive way while learning grammar, vocabulary or oral skills – or all of them at the same time. However, this social interaction has its drawbacks, whether it concerns the personas of the students or the style of playing. In order to insure good learning and classroom management, the teacher will need to plan the game and the playing situation properly. Otherwise the game will not teach the students anything. When done correctly, games can offer a wide range of teaching materials to spice up the language classrooms. Therefore we can conclude that both board games and video games can indeed be highly useful in many aspects when designed properly.
References


Appendices
Appendix I

**ALLASPELIT**

**Tarvikkeet:** Pelipohja taiteltuna katkoviivoja pitkin "altaaksi", 1 arpakuutio tai pelinappula/ ryhmä, pelaajilla lyijykynät


**Käyttö:** Epääännöllisten verbien ja substantiivien taivutus, deklinatiot (ruotsi), adjektiivien epääännölliset vertailumuodot, imperatiivi, kysymys- ja kielto-lauseiden muodostus sekä erilaiset sanastoharjoitukset

**BASSÄNGSPEL**

**Tillbehör:** Ett spelbräde som viks längs de streckade linjerna till "en bassäng", en tärning eller spelpjäs / grupp på 3-4 spelare. Spelarna har var sin blyertsstoppa.

**Regler:** Varje spelle tappar turvis tärningen eller spelpjasen i bassängen och löser den bestämda uppgiften. Efter att ha gjort detta skriver spelaren sina initialer på motsvarande ställe på spelbrädet. Särskilt i slutfasen av spelet kan spelaren behöva göra flera kast för att hamna på ett ovanvånt område. Läraren kan då avbryta spelet och poängen kan räknas. Resten av uppgifterna kan lösas tillsammans.

**Användning:** Börjning av oregelbundna verb och substantiv, deklinationer (svenska), komparation av oregelbundna adjektiv, oregelbundna pluralisformer av substantiv, imperativsatsar, frågande och nekande satser, eller övning av ordförråd

**TRAY GAMES**

**Materials:** A game board folded along the dotted line to form a "tray", a dice or a counter / group of 3-4 students, pencils for the players

**Rules:** The game is played in groups. Each player in turn throws the dice or counter into the tray and carries out the task assigned for the space where it falls. The space is marked with the player's initials. A player may have to throw several times, especially as the game progresses, in order to land on a space that's not marked. The game can be stopped at this point and the score added up. A player scores a point for each space marked.

**Use:** Can be used in practicing such things as the conjunction of verbs, declension of nouns (Swedish), comparison of adjectives, verb structures in imperatives, questions and statements etc., in addition to various vocabulary exercises
Irregular verb forms

Say all the forms of each verb
Appendix III

**ARPAKUUTIOPELIT**

**Taulukkopeli**

**Tärkeät:** Pelipohja, arpakuutio ja yksi pelinappula / 3-4 pelaajan ryhmä

**Säännöt:** Kukin pelaaja heittää vuorollaan noppaa kaksi kertaa ja suorittaa silmä- lukujen määräämän tehtävän. Pelinappula voidaan käyttää osittamaan suoritettavana olevaa tehtävää, jolloin toisilla pelaajilla on helpompi seurata peliä. Tehtävän suorittaminen voidaan merkitä pelipohjaan esim. nimikirjaimilla. Peli loppuu kun kaikki ruudut on merkitty, opetajan antama aikaraja täyttyy tai kun tietty määrä tehtäviä on suoritettu. Ratkaisemattomia tai vaikeita tehtäviä voidaan tarkistaa pelin lopussa yhdessä.

**Käyttö:** Taulukkopeli sopii erittäin hyvin passivilauseiden, verbin eri aikamuotojen, nousunapoimminen ja verbien, eri lausetyyppien sekä apuvärien käytön harjoittelun useissa kielissä kun käytettävänä on kuusi eri vaihtoehtoaa.

**TÄRNINGSSPEL**

**Tabellispel**

**Tillbehör:** Ett spelbräde, en tärning och en spelpjäs / en grupp på 3-4 spelare

**Regler:** Varje spelare kastar tärning turvis två gånger och får på detta sätt se vilken uppgift han/hon ska lösa. Spelpjäsen kan användas som markör för att de andra spelarna skall lättare kunna se vilken uppgift det gäller. Spelarna markerar de lösta uppgifterna med t.ex. sina initialer. Spelet är avslutat då alla rutorna är markerade, spelstiden är slut eller ett visst antal uppgifter är lösta. De svårare uppgifterna kan sedan löses tillsammans.

**Användning:** Spelet passar utmärkt till att öva bildandet av passivkonstruktioner, olika tempus, olika menings typer och hjälpverb i flera olika språk, om det finns sex olika alternativ att välja emellan.

**DICE GAMES**

**Table Game**

**Materials:** A game board, a dice and one counter / group of 3-4 people

**Rules:** Each player roles the dice twice on his/her turn moving both horizontally and vertically according to the number on the dice and carries out the task in the box that’s landed on. A counter can be used to show the task being done to enable the other players to follow the game more easily. On completing the task the initials of the player can be marked in the box. The game ends when all the boxes have been marked, the time-span given by the teacher is up or when a designated number of tasks have been completed. Incompleted or difficult tasks can be checked together at the end of the game.

**Use:** These games are very good for practicing passive sentences, verb tenses, personal pronouns with verbs, various sentence structures and the use of auxiliary verbs in those languages where there are six alternative forms.
What do - did - will they do?

Roll the dice twice to determine the person and the tense and put the verb into the correct form accordingly.
For a question mark form a question to ask someone; for (not) put the verb into the negative
For a more challenging version make whole sentences adding appropriate adverbs etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>present simple</th>
<th>present continuous</th>
<th>past simple</th>
<th>past continuous</th>
<th>future simple</th>
<th>future continuous</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>(not) wash the car</td>
<td>run in the park</td>
<td>answer the phone</td>
<td>swim in the sea</td>
<td>make a cake</td>
<td>marry soon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td>read the newspaper</td>
<td>? travel abroad soon</td>
<td>(not) make up one’s mind</td>
<td>look out the window</td>
<td>be surprised</td>
<td>have breakfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he/she/it</td>
<td>watch TV</td>
<td>have a bath</td>
<td>? study English</td>
<td>close the door</td>
<td>(not) come tomorrow</td>
<td>? ski in Lapland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we</td>
<td>listen to music</td>
<td>send some e-mails</td>
<td>find some money</td>
<td>(not) do anything wrong</td>
<td>? be back soon</td>
<td>wake up early</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td>? work late</td>
<td>cycle to school</td>
<td>write a letter</td>
<td>make lunch</td>
<td>buy a bike</td>
<td>(not) have a holiday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they</td>
<td>play tennis</td>
<td>(not) build a house</td>
<td>eat the sandwiches</td>
<td>? garden</td>
<td>meet friends</td>
<td>travel by plane</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix V

Fig. 1. HUD of map and vocabulary system

Fig. 2. Word card

Fig. 3. Slide screen

Fig. 4. Non-player character