# THE PROPAGANDA GAME IN THE ESL CLASSROOM *

Macey B. McKee

University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona, USA

As I read, go to conferences, talk to teachers, and listen to students, I am impressed with an increasing concern for two apparently dissimilar or even opposite skills: reading skills and communicative skills. Every year brings the publication of more and more texts which emphasize one or the other of these areas, but very little has appeared which unifies the two. The combination is just as necessary in an intensive, five hours a day program such as the one I teach in, as it is in the one-hour package course found in other types of ESL programs. It was a shock, then a pleasure, to hear Henry Widdowson say that teaching language was teaching reading[1]; it became clear to me as he developed his point that we were in the same track. The activity to be described here is called a critical reading/critical thinking game. As played in the ESL classroom, it becomes far more than that.

An advertisement in the MEXTESOL Journal (V, 2) states that, "In a class of 20 if only 1 person speaks at any one time, each student will speak for an average of one minute per hour's class." This problem, long of concern to language teachers, has fostered a variety of small group activities, which in turn have created other concerns, such as lack of appropriate model and correction, dominance by aggressive students and even more silence on the part of the shy, value of the activity per se, etc. Where the focus is on the product, such techniques have generally been found wanting.

---

* This paper was presented at the National Mextesol Convention, 1981, Guadalajara.

Widdowson recommended giving students something real about which to communicate: a problem to solve which requires the use of language for solution. This game is one way of following that advice, enhanced by the fact that language use is the focus of the game.

Students are divided into teams (which should be permanent for as many days as one set of techniques is to be used) and seated in teams facing the screen. They are shown a passage or dialogue while the teacher reads it aloud. Each student then votes individually for the flaw in argumentation or language use that he believes is present in the passage. The teacher then announces the plurality vote, and the team members consult with each other to see if they are in agreement or if someone wants to challenge the plurality vote. If there is a challenge, a defender from another team is appointed and a debate ensues. This is followed by group discussion, with the teacher asking questions when necessary to guide them in the direction of the correct answer or the right reason for that answer. The process is repeated, about 8-10 passages being viewed and argued in a typical class period.

The shy student is not allowed to sit and quietly be right. The members of his team will notice that he has been right in previous episodes, and they will ask him what he voted for and why. He will find it easier to respond to direct questions in the small group, and if he convinces them, they will help him formulate his challenge. The overly talkative student will quickly learn that quality is more important than quantity. They will learn these things from each other, as they talk to each other, and they will be forced to try to clearly and logically express themselves as the other students are not ESL teachers trained to interpret what they really meant to say. They really do learn more from each other than from the teacher. In line with Vygotsky's theory of zone of proximal development[2], the more capable thinkers teach the others how to arrive at the right answer, and the best speakers help the others to clearly express their ideas.

My class is a reading-writing block. The students view this game as a talking activity, so they always ask me where to discuss it when they write their evaluations of the course. I tell them to classify it as "reading", but it really makes no difference. The benefits in their writing are even more visible. It has been used in reading and writing courses at the University of Arizona and in all-purpose classes elsewhere.

My class is an advanced class, from which students go into undergraduate or graduate work in an American university, but this activity is by no means restricted to that age, command of English, or level of education. The idea has been used with students as young as second grade, in special education classes, and in adult education. The kit from the commercial game contains six sub-games, and it is very easy to make up a game using newspapers, political material, magazine and television advertisements, etc. For many of the techniques and language flaws, numerous examples can be found in the students' own writings. Once they understand the general idea, I send them out to collect materials of this type, which I then add to the appropriate game next semester. They become very good at identifying irrelevant arguments of various types (words and pictures), so prevalent in advertising, a real-life skill of some value. It makes them more critical readers and more skillful writers in their own languages because it makes them better thinkers.

The language sub-game is the one most obviously related to the learning of a second language, particularly to English due to the ambiguities and shifts of meaning possible in English because of its syntax and high incidence of polysemy. This facet of English becomes a source of fun and learning rather than a constant frustration, and when the student can recognize these tricks or mistakes in the real world, he has really learned. Outside an English-speaking country, where English magazines are costly or not easily obtained, the teacher might provide a collection of materials for students to use. Again, their own writings will yield examples. Advanced students can be assigned papers of persuasion to

be exchanged for critical reading by others. Really advanced or politically-inclined students might write deliberate parodies of political propaganda or advertising. The variations are countless. Shift of stress causing change of meaning at the sentence level can be worked into dialogues, and dialogues can be created around such techniques as "appeal to pity".

Students always rate this the number one learning activity of the course, and even the ones who are uncomfortable with all the talking they have to do, praise the activity, stating that this is what they need and that the format helps them to speak up.

For several semesters, reading test scores have been collected from classes using and not using this game. Even though the tests used give a distinct advantage to the Science ESP class, which does not use this activity, comparison of the scores reveals a consistent statistically significant greater gain for the PG players in a general academic program. Since this is not the only difference between the courses, it cannot be claimed that there is a cause-effect relationship here; however, I am personally convinced that this "game" is the principal contributing factor. Approximately one-third of the reading class time is spent on this activity, and the gains have remained constant in distribution/comparison throughout changes in texts and other activities. The students who score lowest on the pretest show the greatest gains (in the PG groups). The tests are not sufficiently discriminatory for the best readers, so this finding cannot be interpreted as evidence that the worst learn the most. It can, however, be used as evidence that the worst do learn, a substantial amount. The tests emphasize critical reading, but not any of the techniques used in the game (e.g. determining reference in a complicated sentence is a frequent test item; the game does not deal with reference).

## REFERENCES

1. MEXTESOL Convention, Guadalajara, October, 1981.

2. Vygotsky, Lev. Mind in Society, Harvard, 1978.

The Propaganda Game is published by: WFF'N PROOF Publishers, 1490 South Boulevard, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104.