

## THE APPLICATION OF LANGUAGE GAMES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A CASE OF THE MERU DISTRICT COUNCIL (TANZANIA)

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### ABSTRACT

*Language games are one of the significant techniques appropriate for teaching and learning a foreign language. This paper examines how language games are applied in teaching and learning the English language in lower secondary schools: a case of Meru District Council (Tanzania). The paper is guided by the Communicative Language Teaching Approach. This study was qualitative; hence, data were collected from eight secondary schools through interviews and observations and then analysed thematically. Thirteen English language teachers were involved in data collection. The findings show that the majority of English language teachers do not use language games in language classes. The reasons for this are that many such teachers have had little exposure to a variety of games and lack awareness of language game instruction being among the techniques for teaching and learning the English language; hence, they lack the knowledge, skills, and competencies to apply such games in the language class. This study recommends that capacity building for English language teachers is needed, particularly in the language games technique.*

**KEYWORDS:** Language games, English language, teaching and learning, communicative language approach

### INTRODUCTION

Teaching is both an art and a science; it involves creativity and planned procedures, respectively, as well as effective interaction between teacher and students (Chauhan, 2023: 9). The teaching and learning of a foreign language require a creative, organised, cheerful, and self-motivated teacher, capable of making the class attractive, interactive and active. The teacher should also be able to apply various teaching and learning methods and techniques. Techniques for teaching a foreign language need to be very focused because the language is either used infrequently or not at all by the learners' communities. According to Moeller and Catalano (2015: 327), "a language is considered foreign if it is learned largely in the classroom and is not spoken in the society where the teaching occurs". Rajagopalan (2016: 1) further asserts that a foreign language is not easily learnt because it lacks the natural environment for learning compared to the second language, which is used in many contexts by many speakers outside the classroom. Teaching English as a foreign language needs more attention regarding the methods and techniques used in the teaching and learning process. Language games are a significant technique appropriate for teaching and learning a foreign language. These are designed activities with specific language goals and rules

while, at the same time, being fun. According to Gozcu and Caganaga (2016: 133), language games play a significant educational role as they encourage students to interact and provide successful communication in a real context.

In Tanzania, the English language is taught as a subject and is also the medium of instruction for all subjects, except Kiswahili, in lower secondary schools. This strategy follows the revised Educational and Training Policy of 2014, which states that English will be used as a medium of instruction from lower secondary schools onwards, except for the Kiswahili subject (United Republic of Tanzania, 2023: 58). Although English is considered the second language of Tanzania since it is used as a medium of instruction, in reality, it is still a foreign language, because of the many challenges encountered within the various contexts in which speakers are obliged to apply the language. The language lacks common features used to characterise a second language, such as being used in many contexts (formal and informal) by the majority of speakers (like Kiswahili speakers in Tanzania). Due to this trait, this paper regards English as a foreign language and one of the subjects taught in lower secondary schools.

The evidence for viewing English as a foreign language can also be found in the national examination performance. The performance of many students in English as a subject, and even in other subjects taught in English is not encouraging compared to Kiswahili as a subject (NECTA, 2023: 1). This refers to the National Examinations Council of Tanzania (NECTA) results of 2021, in which 77.3% of 487,541 students scored D (Satisfactory) and F (Fail) grades, while in 2022, 71.18% of 522,013 students scored D (Satisfactory) and F (Fail) grades in English language (NECTA, 2023: 2). Similar scores also appeared in many other subjects taught in English, like geography, history, chemistry, and civics, while for basic mathematics and physics, many of the students scored F (NECTA, 2022). Many studies are based on exploring the advantages of language games (Constantinescu, 2012: 110–115; Mubaslat, 2012: 1–12; Gozcu & Caganaga, 2016: 126–135; Ibrahim, 2017: 140–150), but how this technique is applied in the language class is not discussed as often. Therefore, this paper examines how language games are applied in teaching and learning English in lower secondary schools. The paper specifically answers two questions:

- To what extent do teachers use language games in the teaching and learning of the English language?
- What challenges are encountered by teachers when applying language games in the teaching and learning of the English language?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Several scholars have conducted research on foreign language teaching techniques, including language games. Mubaslat (2012: 1–12) assessed the effect of using language games on students' achievements in English in the primary stage in governmental schools in Jordan. Specifically, the study attempted to determine the role of language games in learning a foreign language and to compare games with more traditional practices as effective learning tools for students. This study used experimental research design to determine the relationship between foreign language learning and language games. The findings revealed that language games had a significant effect on improving the students' achievements and created an interactive learning environment. Therefore, the study recommends using games, particularly at primary levels, in teaching and learning a second language. However, language games are also very effective for students at the secondary

level, not only at the primary level for foreign language teaching. Hence, this paper examines how language games are applied in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in lower secondary schools.

Similarly, Ibrahim (2017: 140–150) explored the advantages of using language games in teaching English as a foreign language in Sudanese basic education. The study revealed that language games were useful to students in building a good relationship with the new language. Gozcu and Caganaga (2016:126–135) also examined the importance of using games in teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL). They stress that language games are a very useful technique in the EFL class as they provide a relaxed environment for both students and teachers, meaning they create a friendly relationship between teachers and students. This situation helps the teacher deliver the material effectively and simplifies the language-learning process for the students. However, even though language games are a significant technique in the EFL class, if the teacher is not conversant with the rules and procedures of applying those games, they might become more of a fun activity than a language learning technique.

The teacher of language as a foreign language should be well equipped with sufficient knowledge and skills in language games. According to Gozcu and Caganaga (2016: 134), when the teacher chooses a language game, for example, playing cards when teaching vocabulary referring to family members, they must consider that a game must be more than just fun; it should encourage students to focus on the use of language rather than on the language itself. This means that the game should help the learner develop communication abilities rather than focus too much on the rules and principles of the language. In addition, Turkey (nd:5) advises that language games should be short to prevent students from losing interest in playing and must also be appropriate for the students' ages and levels of knowledge. Despite all these well-defined advantages and principles of language games, many teachers still do not use them in the teaching and learning of the English language in secondary schools.

Moreover, Diana (2010: xxiii) indicates five significant steps to follow when applying language games: 1. The Motivational stage, which includes greetings and a warm-up. 2. The Presentation stage, during which a teacher begins to explain the material by providing some skills the students must master in learning the language. 3. Skills practice is the stage at which the teacher gives the students various exercises through language games. This activity aims to measure the students' abilities and understanding of what they had learnt before. 4. Assessment is the step in which the teacher gives the students homework to examine their progress in language learning. 5. Closing is the stage at which the teacher provides a summary of the materials learnt during that particular period. These strategies are very general as they are more like lesson-planning steps, although they include the appropriate stage for using games when teaching a language class. Still, the specific steps followed when applying language games in the EFL class should be examined.

In general, most previous studies investigated the significance of using language games in language teaching. Some advantages previous researchers have discussed are that language games create challenges, encourage collaborative learning, are a welcome break from the usual routine of the language class and help students develop their efforts in learning. Language games provide language practice in various skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing; they also encourage students to interact and communicate and create a meaningful context for language use (Constantinescu, 2012: 110–115; Mubaslat, 2012: 7; Gozcu & Caganaga, 2016: 127; Ibrahim,

2017: 146–147; Koele & Awung, 2023: 47–48). Again, language games reduce the student’s stress around language learning and even encourage reluctant students to develop a positive attitude towards the learning process (Gozcu & Caganaga, 2016: 133). Nevertheless, language games could lead to students becoming noisy, less time being spent on teaching content and game losers might become demoralised (Diana, 2010: xxxvi; Talak-Kiryk, 2010: 7–8; Han et al., 2022: 361). Therefore, teachers should be well prepared because language games can function as either a motivator or demotivator in the language class; accordingly, this paper examines how language games are applied in teaching and learning English in lower secondary schools.

## **APPLICABLE APPROACH**

This paper was guided by the Communicative Language Teaching approach (Hymes, 1979; Krashen, 1982; Long & Porter, 1985). Communicative Language Teaching focuses on providing examples of authentic language use; it fosters the move from grammatical competence to communicative competence (Richards, 2006: 2–3). The approach asserts that communication should not take place in a vacuum but in clearly defined situations that call for different communication purposes (Emelogu, 2019: 226–227). Therefore, language learning should be context-based. Learning should not only be based on equipping students with linguistic competence but also on communicative competence. According to Emelogu (2019: 227), errors are part of learning; hence, the focus is more on fluency than accuracy.

Language games are part of Communicative Language Teaching. The approach insists language learning must be contextualised and interactive. Language games are usually played in pairs or groups, which enhances opportunities for students to develop social skills. The games should also be context-based and develop the learner’s communicative competence in all four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Therefore, the Communicative Language Teaching approach is very useful in examining how language games are applied in teaching and learning English in lower secondary schools.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study was qualitative, an approach in which a case study design is noted to be useful. The case study was appropriate because this study examined in-depth how language games were applied in teaching and learning the English language in eight selected secondary schools from Meru District Council. The design was also useful because the study was based only on Meru District Council lower secondary schools in which a project called the Participatory and Integrative Teaching Approach (PITA) operates. The PITA project provides in-service teacher training in 33 lower secondary schools in Meru District Council. Among its themes is language supportive pedagogy (PITA, 2021: iii). The case study design specifically helped in acquiring data on the extent to which teachers use language games in teaching and learning English and the challenges teachers encounter in using language games in an EFL class.

The sample involved eight secondary schools from the Meru District Council, Arusha Region. The study expected to involve two English teachers from each selected school; however, only five schools provided two teachers each, while three schools had only one English teacher. Therefore, in total, the study managed to involve thirteen English language teachers from eighty selected lower secondary schools. These teachers teach English as foreign language, though the language

is also used as instructional media for other subjects, excluding Kiswahili as a subject (United Republic of Tanzania, 2023: 58). The study employed expert sampling, a type of purposive sampling (Etikan & Bala, 2017: 215) to select participants, whereby only teachers of English in the lower secondary schools under the PITA project in Meru District Council were involved in the study.

Two instruments were used for data collection: semi-structured interviews and observations. Both face-to-face and telephonic interviews were conducted with the English language teachers. The study collected the teachers' awareness, opinions, and experience with how language games are applied and the challenges with using language games through the interviews. The observations were conducted in English language classes to confirm whether or not teachers were applying games in their teaching and how they applied them. The challenges these teachers encounter when applying language games were also noted through classroom observations. Only seven of the thirteen English teachers were involved in classroom observations, while six declared during the interviews that they used language games either rarely or not at all. Hence, there was no need to undertake classroom observations with them. The observation process took forty minutes per teacher, which is one teaching period per timetable in all lower secondary schools. The observer noted the following aspects: the variety of the language games used, instructions for the game to be played, stage of the lesson development in which the games were applied, time spent playing the game, the relevance of the game to the topic, effectiveness of the game, challenges in using the game, and other significant observations. However, among the seven teachers observed in the classroom, only two were conversant with the use of language games. As a result, very little data were collected through this technique.

During data collection, the researcher requested the consent of the heads of the schools for their teachers to be involved in the study and obtained consent from the individual English teachers to be interviewed, recorded and observed in the classroom. The participants were also assured that all data provided would only be used for the purposes of the study. This ethical consideration helped the researcher to obtain the data which answered the two research questions:

- To what extent do teachers use language games in the teaching and learning of the English language?
- What challenges are encountered by teachers when applying language games in the teaching and learning of the English language?

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the findings of the study and a discussion; it is divided into two parts, namely the extent to which the teachers use language games in teaching and learning the English language and the challenges teachers encounter when using language games.

### **The extent to which teachers use language games in teaching and learning English**

The first objective assessed the extent to which teachers use language games in teaching and learning English. In this part, the English language teachers were asked to rate the items that measure the extent to which they use language games in teaching and learning English. The question was: *“How often do you use language games in teaching and learning English? Is it*

always, often, sometimes, rarely, or never?” followed by explaining *why* or *how* any choice is made. The data are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: The extent to which language games are applied in teaching and learning English**

S/N	Item	Frequency
1.	Always	0
2.	Often	2
3.	Sometimes	5
4.	Rarely	2
5.	Never	4

The data in Table 1 show that five English language teachers sometimes applied language games, two rarely applied the technique, and two teachers often applied the technique. Four teachers reported that they never applied language games in the teaching and learning of English. However, the class observations of those who claimed that they sometimes applied language games indicated that they applied the same category of games, that is, one or two games. Some of them did not know how to apply the games effectively, which indicates that they have little exposure to a variety of games that could facilitate the teaching and learning of English. In their interview, one teacher affirmed this finding by saying, “I sometimes apply language games, but I am not competent enough”. Only two English teachers had knowledge of and skills in different language games. When asked where they had obtained those skills, one of these teachers said:

*I get these skills through trainings provided by various education stakeholders like PITA Project, Tanzanian English Language Teachers’ Association (TELTA), and others, but I also search myself from social media like YouTube, google engine, and the like. This is because I have passion to become the best English teacher. (Interview with English Teacher, May 2023)*

Nevertheless, those who reported that they never used language games in teaching and learning English affirmed that they did not have any knowledge and skills with language games. They could not even mention a single game they knew when asked. However, the data indicated that many of the English teachers indeed knew some games, as indicated in Table 2.

**Table 2: Types of language games common to many English language teachers**

S/N	Name of the game	Frequency of being common among English teachers
1.	Snake game	5
2.	Mixing and arranging cards	6
3.	Word puzzles	3
4.	My Best Friend	2
5.	Bingo	2
6.	Spelling Bee	1
7.	Tongue twisters	1
8.	Speech writing game	1
9.	What is your Father’s/Friend’s Name?	1

Table 2 shows that mixing and arranging cards and the snake game are frequently used by English language teachers as they have six (6) and five (5) frequencies, respectively, followed by word puzzles (3), *My Best Friend* games (2) and *Bingo* (2). The rest of the games, i.e., spelling bees, tongue twisters, speech writing, and *What is Your Father's/Friend's Name?* were each mentioned by only one English language teacher. The reason was that many teachers lack knowledge, skills, and exposure to varieties of language games that could best be applied to various English language topics, in which they could help students acquire listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

Moreover, on the question of how language games are applied when teaching and learning English, two English teachers were able to demonstrate how some games were applied. One of the English teachers explained how the snake game is played:

*Usually, I use language games in the reinforcement stage. In applying snake game let say in teaching parts of speech (i.e., noun, pronoun, verbs), first I prepare pieces of paper in rectangular shape according to the groups of students in the class, I write each part of speech in the paper and its meaning in a separate piece. Then I put students into groups, and I give instructions to students on how the game is played. Each group have to arrange parts of speech with its agreeing meaning, and make sure that at the end they get the snake shape. Time for playing will be clearly allocated. The first group to get the snake shape with correct arrangement will be the winner. After getting the first, second and the third winners, we congratulate them accordingly. Finally, I give the summary on language content extracted from the game. (Interview with English Teacher, May 2023)*

Another English teacher explained how the game, *My Best Friend* is played:

*When I want to teach my form one students on how to introduce others using My Best Friend game, first I take all students outside the classroom. Then, I give explanation to them how the game is played and the goal of the game. Students should stand in a circle, then one starts to name his/her best friend, the named friend has to join the speaker who is in the centre of the circle. The process repeats until all students are in the middle. Then finally the teacher closes the game by emphasising on how to introduce others using the English language. The game is played like this:*

Jerome: Do you know *My Best Friend* X2? Asha is my best friend.

Asha! Who is your best friend? Come and introduce your best friend.

Asha: Do you know *My Best Friend* X2? Sarah is my best friend.

Sarah! Who is your best friend? Come and introduce your best friend.

Sarah: Do you know *My Best Friend* X2? Ivan is my best friend.

Ivan, who is your best friend? Come and introduce your best friend.

All: All, we are best friend, let us love each other.

(Interview with English Teacher, May 2023)

From the data presented on how language games are applied in an English language class, the study noted five main steps followed by the English teachers during this process: 1. Preparation stage. 2. Introducing the game, providing instructions to students on how the game is played and showing the main focus/purpose of the particular game. 3. Playing the game. 4. Motivational stage. 5. Summing up the game, the stage at which the teacher emphasises the language aspects.

The study determined that most English language teachers know some language games theoretically. The Communicative Language Teaching approach insists on using simple and contextualised teaching and learning techniques, which would encourage the learner to use the language in their daily life. According to Ibrahim (2017: 147), one principle of choosing or preparing a game for language class teaching is to ensure it creates a meaningful context for language use. Therefore, if these English teachers could be given an opportunity to train on how and where different language games could be applied in lessons, their students could easily develop communicative skills as they would be learning the language instead of learning about the language.

Generally, the findings show that 11 of the 13 English language teachers are not conversant with language games insofar as they could be used in the teaching and learning of a second or foreign language; hence, they find the games difficult to apply. The study observed only two teachers as competent in applying language games in the language class, and the findings revealed five common steps to be followed when applying language games in EFL class: 1. Preparation stage, 2. Introducing the game, 3. Playing the game, 4. Motivational stage, and 5. Summing up the game. These steps concur with some of the seven guidelines for applying language games, as highlighted by Talak-Kiryk (2010: 8–10), of which but a few are: The game must have a clear learning objective and purpose, the teacher should assign students to teams, explain all necessary procedures and rules, be consistent, be prepared and maintain a non-threatening environment.

### **Challenges teachers encountered when using language games in the teaching and learning of the English language**

The paper also aimed to determine the above-mentioned challenges, particularly in lower secondary schools. The data revealed several challenges, as indicated in Table 3.

**Table 3: Challenges teachers encountered when using language games in teaching and learning English**

S/N	Challenge	Frequency	
1.	Language games are time-consuming	11	
2.	Inability to understand English reduces student’s confidence to participate actively in the games	7	
3.	English language teachers’ lack of language games knowledge and skills	12	
4.	Lack of sufficient materials and facilities for creating/playing games	3	
5.	Incorrect view that language games are only for lower classes and lower achieving students	4	
6.	Overcrowded classrooms	2	

Table 3 indicates that 11 English language teachers reported language games are time-consuming. One English teacher explained that:

*Language games consume time because the technique needs thoroughly preparation to teachers and students. Again, it takes time to me in providing instructions to students on*



*how the game is played as our students are difficult to quickly grasp the meaning of anything that is given in English language. Hence, I waste many minutes here, even sometimes I have to codeswitch into Kiswahili language to simplify the process. (Interview with English Teacher, May 2023)*

The challenge of language games being time-consuming could be caused by a lack of skills in using the technique, which is why many of the teachers made the claim. Most teachers in secondary schools, including English language teachers, are always busy covering the syllabus. This situation is induced by the examination system, principally summative assessment examinations, which demand every teacher to have already covered all topics to be examined. If teachers could be trained effectively on this technique, they might change their minds and think of other ways around that one language game that could simplify their teaching and enable the students to acquire more than one language skill simultaneously. For instance, the game *Don't Say Yes!* is played this way: One student sits on a special chair and is supposed to answer other students' questions, who ask them about their family, hobbies, friends, and so on. They are not supposed to answer "yes". If they do so or nod to indicate "yes", they lose the game. This game, whereby students interact through oral questions and answers, improves their listening and speaking skills simultaneously. Apart from that, they develop critical thinking skills because the one in the chair must think about how to respond without just saying "yes" to win the game. On the other hand, the one asking the question must think about what question would be best at not being easy to answer. The game also helps students diversify their communication in different contexts.

In addition, 12 English language teachers mentioned a lack of knowledge and skills in language games as a challenge in applying language games in the teaching and learning process. English language teachers declared that most of them did not know the varieties of these games and were not sufficiently competent to apply even the few games they knew when teaching English. This was also noted through observation that some teachers failed to present the steps of how the card game was played in the class of form one to teach vocabulary. This technique could be effectively applied if training is provided to the teachers. Such training could be based on revealing varieties of language games and where, how, and when each of them could be applied. As the data affirmed, the few teachers who had attended some workshops on language games (including PITA workshops) and those who made an effort through online learning were revealed to be somewhat competent in applying the technique.

Another challenge disclosed was that language problems reduced a student's confidence in actively participating in the game. As seen in Table 3, this was supported by seven English language teachers. During an interview, one teacher affirmed that:

*Most of our students feel shy when it comes to play the game because they get difficult to understand the instructions and English expression found in the game. Those found active are either coming from English medium primary schools or they have any good background of English language or those that have self-motivation to the language as they don't care how other people could evaluate their level of competency. (Interview with English Teacher, May 2023)*

Under the communicative approach, assessing the correctness of the expression is not the first goal of language learning but rather developing competence in communication through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Therefore, English teachers have to encourage students to develop self-motivation since learning is effective when it is accomplished by doing.

Another challenge the teachers raised was a lack of sufficient materials and facilities for creating/playing games, of whom three confirmed this obstacle. They explained that preparing games requires materials such as manila cards, rim paper, a variety of colored pencils and the like, and facilities like computers and internet, but most of their schools cannot purchase all these because of a limited budget. Although this is always an expressed challenge in many secondary schools, English language teachers should be creative in using locally available materials when needed in a particular game. After all, not all games need material; for instance, games like *Don't Say Yes*, *Tongue Twist*, *What is your Father's/Friend's Name*, and *My Best Friend* are played without any material costs, only the students' involvement. As the Communicative Language Teaching approach highlights, among the features of a good teacher of a foreign language is being creative in designing interesting activities that could help students develop their communicative abilities and enable them to express themselves and understand others in different social settings (Maryslessor, Barasa & Omulando, 2014). In Tanzania, English sounds more like a foreign language than a second language, even though it is used as the medium of instruction in secondary and higher learning institutions. Hence, English language teachers are advised to become well-equipped with all skills and techniques of foreign language teaching, including the application of language games.

Moreover, the incorrect view that language games are only for lower classes and low achievers is also noted as a challenge to applying language games in teaching and learning English, as supported by four teachers. During their interview, one teacher affirmed this by saying, "I use language games with Form One and Form Two students". Another teacher added, "It is difficult to use this technique to (*sic*) fast learners because they feel as you are wasting their time". This was noted as a challenge because most English teachers do not have a comprehensive understanding of language games as a technique that could be used in teaching a foreign language. This technique could be applied in any level of education, from nursery school to a higher level of learning, for all kinds of learners in the teaching and learning of a foreign language. However, when the teacher plans to use language games in class, they must consider the specific type of game based on the language skills and competencies they wish for their students to achieve on a particular topic, as well as the available time and characteristics of the students. For instance, games involving body movement need the readiness of the students to interact through actions and words. Some students are very passive in learning by doing. According to Emelogu (2019: 227), the Communicative Language Teaching Approach insists on interactive language classes; therefore, the teacher should find an interesting game that could motivate many or all students to participate in learning the English language.

Another challenge noted was overcrowded classes. Two English language teachers indicated that it was difficult to apply language games in a class with more than 50 students, which also made it difficult to involve each student in the game. However, here, it seems the problem is still a lack of sufficient knowledge and skills with this technique. If the teacher is creative and adequately competent, they could choose and apply the appropriate game that fits the number of students since

most classroom games are played in groups. What is needed here is capacity building for English language teachers on the varieties of games and their application in the language classroom.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper examines how language games are applied in the teaching and learning of English in lower secondary schools: a case of the Meru District Council. The investigation was guided by two objectives: to determine the extent to which teachers use language games in teaching and learning English and the challenges encountered by teachers in the use of language games. The findings show that the majority of English teachers do not apply language games in English language classes. Moreover, the study notes that many English teachers have little exposure to a variety of games that could facilitate the teaching and learning of the English language, of which the main reasons are that the teachers are not conversant with language games as a technique for teaching a foreign language; hence, they lack the knowledge, skills, and competencies to apply them in the language class. Other challenges revealed are that language problems reduce students' confidence in actively participating in games, language games are time-consuming, the lack of sufficient materials and facilities for creating/playing games, overcrowded classes, and the incorrect view that language games are only for lower classes and low achievers.

Therefore, the paper recommends capacity building for English language teachers regarding what language games are and how, when, where and for what purpose they are applicable. Therefore, the researcher calls for various education stakeholders to intervene in this challenge by providing training to English teachers on how language games and other techniques could be applied in teaching English in lower secondary schools. English language curriculum reviewers and developers could consider them similarly by including a variety of games and their procedures in English textbooks or guidebooks, which could enhance students' English language proficiency. The PITA project, which provides training on language-supportive pedagogies in these schools, could emphasise the application of language games and other useful language teaching techniques.

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## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

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