

MORPHEME CONSTRUCTOR OR “EMPTY PHRASE”: LEARNING WORD FORMATION IN A GAME WAY

Yulia M. Alyunina

Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, Miklukho-Maklaya 6, Moscow, 117198, Russia

Abstract

This article debates the question of using games in the classes of foreign language word formation teaching at a university level for students learning a language for professional linguistic purposes. In the frame of the research, no games of such kind were found, still, the word formation is one of both essential and difficult topics (if a language has a developed morphological structure, like Russian). A huge boring theoretical material precedes practice, and the last one is the key to successful communication in a foreign language. Games in classes may help to avoid boredom, boost language creativity, and add motivation to learn the ways and rules of making words. This paper describes a game titled "Empty Phrase", which is an example of a method of foreign language teaching. It looks like a morpheme constructor, which means that each morpheme is a separate component – a playing card. "Empty Phrase" allows seeing and “touching” how morphemes participate in creating words, how words form phrases. Its goal is to create a complete phrase from disconnected morphemes. The game personify the mechanism of a new word and appearing to life, the formation of its meaning step by step – morpheme by morpheme. In this paper, on the example of the Russian language, a complete game plan is presented. The game may be adapted to any second or first language teaching, as far as a language has a developed morphology.

Keywords: language game teaching, derivational morphology, word formation, second language learning

Don't use words too big for the subject. Don't say infinitely when you mean very; otherwise you'll have no word left when you want to talk about something really infinite.

Clive Staples Lewis

Without knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know more.

Confucius

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays foreign language skills play an immense role not only in a daily life communication but also in a professional sphere, and Russian by being one of the international communication languages is becoming more popular in a professional sphere.

To some formal extent, a language consists of words and the meaning of a word is hidden in its structure. A word structure is what word formation deals with. In the word components, one can find the lexical meaning of the lexical unit. Word formation mechanism is very rich and resourceful, still, it is quite complicated, and the Russian language is a good example of it. It has a wide range of morphemes and their meanings that are conditioned by linguistic and extralinguistic factors (i.e. parts of speech, speaker's intention, speech style etc.) Learning word formation of Russian as a foreign language, students have to break through the ice if theory. Mainly it is subject to the students learning Russian for professional linguistic purposes, like future teachers and lecturers, interpreters and translators, lexicographers and editors, who are well educated regarding hundreds of grammatical rules and be experts of a language (Alyunina, Nagel, Komissarova 2017). Yet, to learn the rules is a half of the deal. Quite more important is to remember them, use in speech correctly and identify in a context.

A well-known fact, that word formation or lexical derivation makes an independent language competence and is based on creativity (Vizmuller-Zocco 1985, p. 305), as far as it helps to see words from inside, to understand how tiny components fill a word with sense, change or add the sense, how they can express both ideas and emotions. However, traditional teaching practice of Russian word formation for international learners is not emotional and creative at all. The manuals are organized in a theory to practice way when a rule to learn is firstly and an exercise to perform is secondly. This methodology is effective which is proved by its long-term and widely-spread usage, but it is also boring and demotivating.

Motivation and interest to learn second or foreign language make the core component of an educational success. To eliminate the boredom and boost the interest, on every level of educational process games can be used by being one of the methods to bring fresh air into the classroom. They have a special role in any foreign language teaching. Both students and teachers benefit from including games during class time. More than that, teachers may achieve all the educational outcomes through applying this methodology. Teaching word formation and morphology by means of games is essentially important for international language learners because games sustain enjoyment and interest in learning and encourage using the language in a fearless and creative way (Jessen 1983, Maritza, Armando, & Vilma 2007, Sahar 2016).

In this paper, I will present a word formation game, titled “Empty Phrase” or morpheme constructor. The game was practiced in a class of Finnish students learning Russian in the University of Turku. After that, the method was put into practice in National Research Tomsk State University (Russia) in a group of Italian learners. These reality check steps made possible to develop the method, to see its advantages and disadvantages and the students reaction to it.

The paper didn’t have a target to analyze the learners’ reaction to the game. The idea of the article is a methodological description of the morpheme construction as a game way to teach Russian word formation in an international auditory.

This paper is divided into four main sections. The first one deals with a literature review of teaching Russian morphology to international students. The second section discusses the importance of using game methods in teaching lexical derivation of the Russian language. The third section gives the “Empty Phrase” plan in details followed by the fourth section which examines advantages of the game and its possible adaptation to different learners according to their language studied, language proficiency, age, education, and professional background.

The prime reason for choosing this topic is a personal interest in creating new methodological mechanisms for facilitating language teaching and making students engaged in an active classroom work. “Empty Phrase” was developed by the author of the paper in the frame of pedagogical practice of teaching Russian as a foreign language within the “Russian Morphology and Word Formation” course at the Faculty of Humanities, Department of Russian language in Finland. The game received a positive feedback from the students and the pedagogical practice advisor from the University of Turku.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Teaching Russian word formation*

In the following part, the role of word formation competence for a language proficiency is discussed. The examples of word formation tasks in exams are described. After that, a brief overview of traditional teaching of Russian word formation to international learners is given as well.

2.1.1. *Word formation competence for language proficiency*

Teaching word formation at a university level for professional linguistic purposes is always correlated with theory in first and practice comes in second. That is why if a game method is to be implemented in a study process, it should include both a theory and a practice check.

In practice of teaching Russian as a foreign language at a professional linguistic level in universities, there are no morphological and word formation games. Most of the word formation games are connected with teaching vocabulary to young learners and pupils at schools, where a practical part of the game process is in the first flight (Feber 2013). There are morpheme games aimed at practicing particular morphological components or vocabulary groups/lexical topics (Astbury 2017, Hoffner 2015, Romanycheva 2013, Pinterest). A great variety of word formation games exists for preschool and school native Russian speakers and in remedial teaching (Konik 2014). In all of the games, the theory is never controlled by its own for obvious reasons – this is not relevant for the enumerated types of learners.

Word formation is one of the basic competencies among foreign language skills, especially in Russian as a foreign. Word formation skills make an independent language proficiency component (Gorelov & Sedov 2001). The ability to create words from language structural elements is a necessary requirement for professional command of a language which contributes to the consolidation of lexical material and both active and passive vocabulary build-up (Hajrullin & Hajrullina 2014). The urgency of developing the word formation competence is explained by, firstly, the mistakes learners make when creating new words that caused by the lack of word-building mechanisms understanding, incorrect part of speech identification, difficulties in suffixes or prefixes spelling, affixes semantic misunderstanding, secondly, by the obligatory examination check of the competence for both native and non-native Russian language speakers (Alyunina 2017, p. 18).

In classes of Russian as a native language, the word formation part is included in morphology and is taught in the 5-7 grades, when pupils learn the lexical derivation rules and perform practical tasks. Some of them are checked on Common National Examination of the Russian language for all country citizens studying at school here (native Russians, heritage speakers, and immigrants from the former Soviet Union republics).

One of the mechanisms for testing international Russian speakers' word formation skills is foreign language proficiency tests and exams. In a C2 level Russian as a foreign language exam, there is a task to insert the correct derivatives, which should be derived from words or root words given (Pushkin State Russian Language Institute). A C1 level exam has a task to make active and passive verb forms using proper suffixes for the verbs to be in coordination with the other sentence words (Pushkin State Russian Language Institute). Except for the written part of the examination, word formation skills are checked in oral and essay tasks where learners should perform their ability to comprehend different word forms and derivatives and use them correctly in a context.

As we can see, the word formation competence for Russian language proficiency is one of the main competencies for all (native and not native) speakers.

2.1.2. The overview of word formation competence for teaching

Several approaches and methods could be used to teach Russian word formation to international learners.

The Russian language as a foreign didactics has special word formation manuals, which cover the main theoretical aspects of the topic and give tasks for self-practicing and -checking. The theory and tasks give the perspective of the basic part of speech markers in Russian, help to acquire the main issues of lexical derivation. Traditionally, tasks are the following.

Example 1

Define the root words of the following derivatives and make phrases with them. Example: [Russian] смуглолицый – смуглое лицо – человек со смуглым лицом ([transcription] smuglolicyj – smugloe lico – chelovek so smuglym licom; [English translation] swarthy-faced – swarthy face – a person with a swarthy face). (Plotnikova 2008, p. 98)

Example 2

Make semelfactive and perfective verbs from the words given. Example: [Russian] ой – ойкать – ойкнуть ([transcription] oj – ojkat' – ojknut'; [English translation] oh – to exclaim "oh" – to have exclaimed "oh"). (Plotnikova 2008, p. 107)

For the most part, such tasks are routine as far as they aimed at memorizing the temple and the rule mechanically via multiple repetitions. This format of mastering the skill has a negative side effect on learners' motivation and decreases study interest. That is the key reason, which makes highly important to develop original and creative forms of teaching Russian word formation for international language learners.

One of the main problems university lectures face is, how to enhance motivation of students and make foreign language classes more productive (Kazancev & Kazanceva 2012, p. 20). The problem solution may be found in organizing classes in a game format. This may help to change a routine atmosphere, give additional motivation, and put the wind in language learning (Agapov 2010, p. 221). Game classes are made not to teach new things but to activate the theoretical knowledge and develop the practical skills (Vorob'eva, Pticyna, & Hripunova 2011, p. 157). As a rule, students by being engaged in a game do not pay attention to the deductive and estimative aspects of the lesson, while the teacher has an opportunity to see students' strong and weak points in language proficiency and to see his/her own strong and weak points in language teaching. Therefore, a game class is helpful and effective for both language learners and teachers.

3. MORPHEME CONSTRUCTOR GAME DESCRIPTION AND PLAN

3.1. Game planning and performing

This game is titled "Empty Phrase". This is an example of a method of foreign language word formation teaching which looks like a morpheme constructor. The game allows seeing and "touching" how morphemes participate in creating words, how words form phrases. It combines theoretical knowledge and practical skills check. For a teacher, this is a good opportunity, on the one hand, to see the students' ability in word formation, and on the other hand, to involve students in active language learning by showing them what the language practically consists of.

The game was developed for an extra-curricular class within the course "Morphology and word formation of the Russian language" in a class of Russian as a foreign language. However, the game may be applied to teach a native (first) language and any language with developed derivational morphology (French, English, German, Finnish, Italian, Spanish etc.).

In this section, on the example of the Russian language, the plan of the game will be described.

3.1.1. Description

In a team or two teams, students play morpheme game using a set of materials prepared by a teacher. One team game performance is possible, still, the playing and competing components are lower, as far as students stay face to face with a teacher as in a usual class. More than two playing groups are also possible, but rather complicated from the organizing perspective, that is why a two teams combination is most appropriate.

The methodological goal of the game is to consolidate the theoretical material and develop practical skills in word formation. The game goal is to create a complete phrase from disconnected morphemes.

There are two obligatory steps in the Russian morpheme game that should be taken into consideration by a teacher: preparatory and performing ones. This section describes those steps.

3.1.2. Preparation

Before the game, there are two preparatory components: a longstanding one and a short. As far as the game was created for international learners studying Russian for professional linguistic purposes, the longstanding preparation lies in the students to take a full-time course of Russian morphology and word formation including theoretical and practical parts. This course should teach the main topics of the subject in the frame of a university program related to Russian linguistics. This preparatory component is under the responsibility of both students and teacher. The second component includes the preparation of the game materials, which is implemented by a teacher who should take into consideration the theoretical and practical topics, studied within the course.

3.1.3. Materials

The game package includes two sets of cards: a set for a teacher and a set or sets for the team(s).

3.1.3.1. Team(s) materials

The teams' sets include:

1. A card with an empty phrase with grammatical and morphemic categories marks for the words included.

Phrase example for Team 1

Empty phrase 1 – $\square - \square \wedge \square <conjunction> \neg \square \wedge \square <conjunction> \square$.

Full Russian phrase – Язык — лучший посредник для установления дружбы и согласия.

Full transliteration phrase – Yazyk – luchsh-iy posred-nik dlya u-stanovl-eni-ya druzh-b-y i soglasi-y-a.

Full English translation – Language – the best intermediary for establishing friendship and harmony. (Erasmus of Rotterdam).

Phrase example for Team 2

Empty phrase 2 – $<conjunction> \square \wedge \square \square, <conjunction> \square \square <preposition> \square \neg \square$.

Full Russian phrase – Чем хуже владеешь языком, тем меньше можешь на нём со-вр-а-ть.

Full transliteration phrase – Chem huzh-e vlad-e-esh' yazyk-om, tem men'sh-e mozh-esh' na n-em so-vr-a-t'.

Full English translation – The worse you can speak a language, the less you can lie in it. (Friedrich Hebbel).

2. A card for each team with the empty phrase elements' names (roots, suffixes, prefixes, flections, prepositions etc.) and the quantity of the elements. In addition, the card shows the elements' prices. The game money unit is a Letter (L). For example, each root costs 6 L, and each suffix costs 4 L. If you have four root marks and four suffix marks in your empty phrase, you should earn 24 L and 8 L respectively. The Tables 1 and 2 below exemplify two cards of empty phrases elements and their quantities for each team.

Elements	Quantity in phrase	Price for an element (L)	Total price (L)
Root $\square$	6	4	24
Flection $\square$	6	3	18
Suffix $\wedge$	4	2	8
Prefix $\neg$	1	2	2
Conjunction	1	1	1
Preposition	1	1	1
Total	19	-	54

Table 1. Elements of the “Empty Phrase” for team 1

Elements	Quantity in phrase	Price for an element (L)	Total price (L)
Root $\frown$	7	4	28
Flection $\square$	5	3	15
Suffix $\wedge$	4	2	8
Prefix $\neg$	1	2	2
Conjunction	1 (consists of two components)	1	1
Preposition	1	1	1
Total	19	-	55

Table 2. Elements of the “Empty Phrase” for team 2

All phrases used in the game are taken from quotes about a language. All phrases should be quantitatively equal in elements to make the game fair; however, it is not always possible. Therefore, a team with one or two more L to earn has one or two pre-game L.

3.1.3.2. Teacher's materials

The teacher's set includes:

1. Four envelopes with questions (each envelop has questions of different difficulty mode, each correct answer of asked question brings a team from 1 L to 4 L to buy elements of the phrase they have). Examples of the questions are in the Appendix.
2. An envelope with L (pieces of money), which teams get for correct answers;
3. Two sets of the elements each team should collect to fill their empty phrase.

3.1.4. The game course

1. Game participants should divide into two teams and get cards with empty phrases coded with morpheme marks and with special symbols for connective words (prepositions, conjunctions).
2. Each team gets a starting amount of L. The team with 54 L to collect gets 5 starting L. The team with 55 L to collect gets 6 starting L.
3. If a team has a word coded like $\frown\square$, it means the team needs 4L to buy the root, 2L for the suffix and 3L for the flection. So, 9L in tot.
4. A team answers questions or perform tasks for 1L and 2L. Now in combination with the starting L, it has 8L to spend.
5. A team buys the root for 4L and the suffix for 2L paying 6L and gets the word *posred-nik* $\square$ (*intermediary*) from the second empty phrase. This is already a word, still, in Russian, some inflections are zero, which means there are no letters in some forms of a word, but we mark the flection for marking the place wherein other forms of the word letters should appear. This is the *posred-nik* $\square$'s case where the empty square shows the zero ending. Therefore, the word is not completed before the zero flection is collected.
6. The team collected the whole phrase first, is the winner team.

3.1.5. The Game bonuses

Each big game has bonuses, and the morpheme constructor is not an exception.

The “Empty Phrase” bonuses are:

1. Each team has a card “Correct Answer” which can be put to use before looking at a question card. Whatever the answer is, the team automatically gets the question points.

2. Among the question cards, one is without a question. It is called “Five L for free!”. If a team tears this card, it gets 5 points without answering a question. (See Appendix: Questions and tasks to earn 1L, question number 7).

3. If a team does not know which word a morpheme relates to, the team may ask the teacher, but the clue costs 1L.

4. DISCUSSION AND VARIATIONS

The morpheme constructor has variations, which make the game adaptive to learners according to the language they study (foreign or native), language proficiency, age, education, and professional background.

This game may be used in classes with different language proficiency and different languages studied by the learners. If the students are learning English as a foreign language, the game may be organized with English phrases and English word formation and morphology theory. If French, then all in French, and so forth. The example below gives an empty and a full phrase in English.

English phrase example:

Empty phrase – <article> $\frown$ $\square$ <preposition> $\frown$ $\frown$ $\square$ $\frown$ $\square$ <article> $\frown$ $\square$ <preposition> $\frown$ $\frown$.

Full English phrase – *The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.* (L. Wittgenstein)

Another game modification can be made in consideration of the field students are majoring in. If the language learners don't have a professional orientation to linguistics and do not learn the theory that much (i.e. medical students, students of the department of mathematics), the theoretical questions and practical tasks to earn L may be easier. Furthermore, the empty phrase itself may be different. It can be an expression more relevant for the students' professional field.

If you want to play the game with young learners, toddlers, or pupils, it is possible as well. Here the theoretical questions should be minimized or eliminated. They can be substituted by a kind of fairytale questions or active tasks.

5. CONCLUSION

The materials (cards) and tactics (competition behavior, group work, and teamwork) involved in the game enable students to activate and use all way of information perception: visual (cards work), audial (reading questions and answers), kinesthetic (compounding words from morphemes and phrases from words). This approach contributes to the better consolidation of new expertise, knowledge, and skills, got and mastered in classes.

Thus, the methodological goal of the game lesson is achieved by means of involving students in the educational process and estimate their course deepening. The game gives an opportunity to estimate the students' knowledge and skills, to check whether the course was taught clearly and understand what should be taken into consideration in further teacher's work. During the game, learners show their interest to particular tasks types. “Empty Phrase” received a positive reaction from students about this method of practicing morphology and word formation.

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APPENDIX

Questions and tasks for the morpheme game

In the appendix, questions and tasks for the “Empty Phrase” game are presented. They are divided into four sections. The first section questions and tasks give 1 point or L for the correct answer. The second gives two L per each question and answer. And so forth.

Questions and tasks to earn 1L

1. What is the difference between initialisms and acronyms?
2. What is a derived word?
3. What is a source word?
4. What will you do to define a flection of a noun?
5. What is compounding?
6. Give the definition of prefixation.
7. Five L for free!
8. What is a reflexive suffix? What part of speech is it used with?
9. Find the odd word. Explain your choice? – [Russian] *белить, белоснежный, белка, побелка, белизна, Белоснежка* ([transliteration] *belit', belosnezhnyi, belka, pobelka, belizna, Belosnezhka*; [English translation] *paint white, snow-white, squirrel, whitening, whiteness, the Snow White*).
10. What type of word formation mechanism was used to make these nouns: [Russian] *бег, синь, высь, зелень, ход, хворь* ([transliteration] *beg, sin', vys', zelen', khod, khvor'*; [English translation] *race, blue, height, green, move/pace, malady*).

Questions and tasks to earn 2L

1. What is a suffix?
2. What is a prefix?
3. Define a root.
4. Define a flection.
5. What do you call a connecting vowel?
6. What can a stem of a word include?
7. What does an -l- verb suffix mean?
8. Can a word have two prefixes? Explain your answer.
9. Can a root appear after a suffix within a single word? Explain your answer.
10. Is that true that only adverbs have an -o- suffix?

Questions and tasks to earn 3L

1. Make ten derivatives with the root [Russian] *люб-* ([transliteration] *lyub-*; [English translation] *love*).
2. Make ten derivatives with the root [Russian] *мороз-* ([transliteration] *moroz-*; [English translation] *frost*).

3. Make ten derivatives with the root [Russian] *добр-* ([transliteration] *dobr-*; [English translation] *kind*).
4. Make ten derivatives with the root [Russian] *ум-* ([transliteration] *um-*; [English translation] *mind*).
5. Make ten derivatives with the root [Russian] *стар-* ([transliteration] *star-*; [English translation] *old*).
6. Make seven derivatives with the root [Russian] *смел-* ([transliteration] *smel-*; [English translation] *brave*).
7. What parts of speech are uninflected?
8. Make five words with diminutive suffixes.
9. What suffixes have a meaning of a profession/job/occupation? Give six examples of the suffixes and the words.
10. Give six examples of conversion.

Questions and tasks to earn 4L

1. Give the definition of a noun.
2. Give the definition of an adjective.
3. Give the definition of a verb.
4. Explain the difference between an adjectival participle and an adjectival participle.
5. Define an adverb.
6. When the prefix [Russian] *пре-* ([transliteration] *pri-*) is used?
7. When the prefix [Russian] *пре-* ([transliteration] *pre-*) is used?
8. What is a lexeme?
9. What do you call a part of speech, which is used in place of a noun that has already been mentioned or that is already known, often to avoid repeating the noun?
10. What do you call a form, typically brief, such as one syllable or word, which is used most often as an exclamation or part of an exclamation?
11. What is a word? Give the definition.