

The Games Issue – Adam Simpson

By [Adam Simpson](#) – December 6, 2013 Posted in: [Games](#)

Games in the language classroom: the ‘When’ & the ‘How’ - Adam Simpson



I love playing games in my classes; as far as I’m concerned, games can play a range of roles in the language curriculum. Nevertheless, you’ll find that, traditionally, games have been used in the language class merely as warm-up activities at the beginning, fill-in activities when there’s that extra ten minutes towards the end of class, or often as not as a bit of fun lobbed randomly into the curriculum to spice things up and motivate or energize a tired class.

While I don’t have a problem with any of these approaches, I increasingly feel that games can and should constitute a more substantial part of any language curricula. Indeed, games are a tremendously flexible way of achieving all kinds of objectives: games can be used either for practicing particular language items or skills, or in practicing communicative language production. Likewise, games can also be used as a means of revising and recycling recently taught language.

Younger learners are especially enthusiastic about games, but older students quickly find that they enjoy classroom games too. Having said that, it is particularly important that we as teachers explain the aims and objectives of the game: games can be viewed as a frivolous activity and be resented if the reasons for playing aren’t made clear. Nonetheless, older students can take a great deal from games, more even than young learners, especially when they take a role in deciding how it should proceed.

As with any other learning activity though, we need to pay careful attention to the level of difficulty in our games. A major part of the appeal in participating in a game lies in the way that it challenges us; if the challenge is too great or too straightforward, many students may become discouraged and lose interest. Perhaps one of the most important things for us to remember is that this ‘challenge’ comes in two forms: 1) understanding how to play the game, and 2) understanding the language content. With this in mind, I’ve compiled a list of ideas for making sure that we address both types of understanding. When planning a game for your classes, bear these things in mind:

1. Don't underestimate the value of demonstrating the game

A quick demonstration of how the game is played can prove invaluable. You can do this in two ways; a) you as the teacher can demonstrate with a group of students, or; b) a group can demonstrate for the class.

2. Always give clear directions

Directions often make a natural accompaniment to demonstrations, but it can be boring to start off with a big list of instructions before you even begin the game. Alternatively, think about what you absolutely have to explain first off, and then consider giving further directions as and when needed. An important point to think about is that – no matter how well you plan a game – there is always room to make it more fun. Therefore, be flexible: some student-initiated modifications to 'the plan' can and often should be accepted.

3. Script out the metalanguage

Consider the language learners will use to play the game. You can either prepare a list of key vocabulary or a list of useful phrases that they might need to use, or perhaps a sample script of the typical ways in which questions are phrased to obtain information.

4. Where possible, use game formats to review already known content

I tend to stick to common, popular game show formats from television. That way, a large number of students will have at least a vague idea of how to play. This helps a lot in cutting down the amount of time needed to do the things I've mentioned in points 1, 2 and 3. This in turn enables you to get on with playing the game, which is only ever a good thing.

5. Use games to revise and recycle previously studied content, rather than involving new content

Experience has taught me that games are no place to be bringing in new vocabulary or grammar, unless you do so in a very friendly test-teach-test manner. If you do bring in new stuff, do so in a team game and in a way that activates schemata or allows the class to share and display their collective knowledge on a subject that's coming up in the course book. Sticking to things you've recently done in class is good, as it creates a situation in which the students have to recall and use language in the game, which is itself a reasonable facsimile of a real life situation with all the pressures to recall and use grammar and vocab in the 'there and then'.

6. Mix up those groups... with care

Group games are good as they (obviously) contain groups which are heterogeneous in terms of current language proficiency. Carefully selecting who is in which team means that we create a situation in which the more proficient members can help others.

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