I've long been an admirer of the use of games in teaching. Indeed, the most popular posts on my Twitter feed English blog (http://www.teachthemenglish.com/) are those that offer advice on how to play games in the language classroom. Games remain a fundamental part of my teaching as they can be used to liven up lessons, while also creating a relaxed learning atmosphere where learners feel confident to practise new language skills.

The importance of games cannot be underestimated in the role they play in providing alternative ways of learning, or in showing that you can recall what has been learned. In order to incorporate games into a positive learning experience, teachers nevertheless need to link games with the outcomes laid out in our curricula and make sure students understand how they will benefit from the game. Here, in the broadest of terms, are all the things you need to remember when bringing a game into your lesson.

1. The what and the why

Establish what the learners are going to learn from the game and choose which game(s) will provide support to these learning objectives. For example, you might want to focus on one skill at a time (speaking, listening, reading, and writing are skill areas that a particular game might target) and choose a game that reinforces that skill.

2. Suits you, sir?

After selecting which skill you want to focus on, you also need to find a game that is suitable for the number of learners in the class, one that matches their current level of English and that is also appropriate for their age group. Young learners, for instance, enjoy games involving plenty of movement around the classroom, whereas older learners might – although not always – prefer to stay seated. Also, make sure the game is simple enough to explain and be understood by the learners. Take note that what is simple for adults might not be so for younger learners, so choose accordingly.

3. Adapt or die?

Don't ever forget the importance of adapting games to the given situation, either in terms of simplifying the task or shortening the amount of time it takes to complete. An example of this would be a game like Hangman or Blockbusters. When preparing the game, make sure that you choose only the vocabulary you know the learners are aware of. Basically, always make it possible for students to accomplish the task. They won't be able to do this with vocabulary they don't know.

4. It's all in the preparation

Gather all the equipment or necessary materials for your game. For instance, certain games may need dice or markers, while others require printed cards. Believe me, it's easy to forget that vital piece of equipment, so play through the game in your mind before you enter the classroom. That way, you'll soon see if you're missing anything.

5. Make it as clear as possible

There's no such thing as explaining the rules of a game in too simple a way. Plan out the easiest possible way to explain how the game is played. One thing you can do is to rehearse the instructions that learners will need to grasp the game before going into class. If possible, give a practical, hands-on demonstration of how to play.

6. Involve, involve, involve

Make sure that you get the most out of your learners' involvement by guaranteeing that everyone in the class has a turn. In speaking games, for instance, it's as simple as giving all learners a chance to speak, whereas in listening games you need to make sure that everyone can hear what is said. In many situations, you might need a team to appoint a captain. Even when this is the case, don't allow quieter members of the class to hide and not get involved.

7. Make it rewarding

End the game on a high; positive note – this is supposed to be fun and motivating! When possible, give simple prizes, such as candies, or even other forms of recognition such as praise, applause, or a special privilege such as choosing the homework for the lossing team(s). Get learners to congratulate each other and appreciate the efforts of others, while at the same time focusing on what the learning outcomes have been.

8. It's all in the timing

Play a game at the wrong time of day or wrong day of the week and it might well fail flat. I, for example, never schedule a game for 8.40 in the morning, when my lessons begin, as it would kill my teenage learners at that time of day. Try to play games in the last half hour of your final lesson to give learners something to look forward to and end off your day in a motivating way.