# The nine golden rules of using games in the language classroom

## ADAM JOHN SIMPSON

I've long been an admirer of the use of games in teaching. Indeed, the most popular posts on my *Teach them 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 their curriculum 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 *which*
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 materials. 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 is 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 I recommend 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 learner involvement by guaranteeing that everyone in the class has a turn. In speaking games, for instance, this is 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 losing 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 fall 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 round off your day in a motivating way.

### 9. There can be too much of a good thing
While games can be an inspiring activity, don't overestimate their power. However much time you've set aside in class for your game, remember to look for signs of boredom and don't be afraid to cut the game short before learners start to lose interest.

*Editor's Note: This article originally appeared as a post on Adam Simpson's blog* Teach them English *(http://www.teachthemenglish.com/2013/08/the-nine-golden-rules-of-using-games-in-the-language-classroom/). Reprinted here with the kind permission of the author.*

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