Using Games in the Language Classroom

Copyright©2015ADAMSIMPSON

Published by Adam Simpson at Smashwords

Cover image 'Playing a card game (Dixit)' courtesy of @sandymillin from the ELTPics collection. Used with permission.

Access more freely useable images: https://www.flickr.com/photos/eltpics/

Chapter 1: Ten good reasons why we should use games in the language classroom

Those of you who visit my blog regularly will know that I'm quite a fan of games and use them a lot in my classes. While I would never suggest turning all of your classes into one long '*gamesfest*', I do always argue that a good game can be not only justified, but should be regarded as an important part of your teaching repertoire.

It therefore seems fitting to start this book with a chapter listing all the reasons why you should use games. In case you're still in doubt, here are ten of the best reasons to use games in your language classroom:

1. Games create a context for meaningful communication

Certain games do this more obviously than others, but all games do this to a certain extent. Even when the game revolves around discrete language items, such as we would see in a spelling game, meaningful communication occurs because learners need to process how to play the game, as well communicating about the game before, during, and after.

2. This meaningful communication serves as a basis for comprehensible input

The comprehensible input is, basically, what learners understand as they listen and read; it is interaction to enhance comprehensibility, such as asking for repetition or giving examples. It also leads to and comprehensible output, as learners are speaking and/or writing so that their peers can understand.

3. Games add interest to what learners find boring

Learning a language involves long-term effort and, as we all know from experience, maintaining interest can mean sustaining effort. This is difficult even for the most committed learner. Shaping a learning task in the form of a game often piques the interest of learners who see it as something different to what they normally do in class.

4. Games can be used with all the language skills

Games can be tailored so that there is a focus on listening, speaking, reading, or writing. Moreover, you will often find that a combination of skills is involved in the same game. They are therefore a great tool for appealing to different types of learners at the same time.

5. Games offer a fun experience

When we play games, we get excited; it's as simple as that. The emotions aroused when learners play games add variety to what is often a sterile, serious process of language learning. Sometimes the need to lighten the mood is justification enough to use a game.

6. Games encourage participation from all learners

The game format, due to the variety and intensity that it may offer, can do wonders in lowering anxiety and encouraging quieter learners to participate, especially when games are played in small groups (see point nine).

7. Games are learner-centered activities

Games are truly learner-centered in that learners are not only highly active when playing games, but also in that we can organize the working of games so that our learners adopt the role of leaders, with teachers as mere facilitators.

8. Games work outside of class

We see game formats used everywhere. Therefore, it should be no surprise that many games can also be played outside of class. Therefore, they present a means for learners to use the language outside of class time.

9. Games promote cooperative learning

Most game formats work well with small groups, thereby creating a setting for learners to develop their skills in working with others. Other benefits of group games include:

- The need for cooperation encourages the building of team spirit and can have a positive knock-on effect in classroom dynamics.

- Many games involve a degree of competition, although this is not always the case. Furthermore, this can be a healthy thing, as long as the stakes aren't too high.

- Many game formats encourage everyone to take a turn, rather than letting some learners do all the talking. Games therefore encourage egalitarian participation.

10. Games fit into multiple intelligence theory

Game activities relate really well to a variety of intelligences. Here are a few examples: Game activities which contain a hands-on element, such as cards, spinners, or pieces engage with bodily / kinesthetic intelligence; group games always require discussion and therefore involve interpersonal intelligence; game tasks with visual input engage with visual/spatial intelligence.

Even though I've just laid out many good reasons for using games in your classes, we still need to be careful about when and how we use games. Guess what's coming up in the next chapter?

Chapter 2: Are we really sure about using games in the language classroom?

'Language learning is hard work... Effort is required at every moment and must be maintained over a long period of time. Games help and encourage many learners to sustain their interest and work.'

The above quote is taken from Andrew Wright's, David Betteridge's and Michael Buckby's seminal 1984 work, 'Games for Language Learning.' For many years I wholeheartedly agreed with the first sentence while considering the second to be something of an exercise in indulgence, both for the teacher and the language learner. Rightly or wrongly, it took me many years to even consider actively employing games in my teaching. Indeed, in the formative years of my teaching career, the following statements, at least in terms of how they relate to the use of games in the classroom, while not entirely anathema to me, didn't exactly represent my teaching ethos:

'Games… help the teacher to create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful. The learners want to take part and in order to do so must understand what others are saying or have written, and they must speak or write in order to express their own point of view or give information. The need for meaningfulness in language learning has been accepted for some years. A useful interpretation of 'meaningfulness' is that the learners respond to the content in a definite way. If they are amused, angered, intrigued or surprised the content is clearly meaningful to them. Thus the meaning of the language they listen to, read, speak and write will be more vividly experienced and, therefore, better remembered. If it is accepted that games can provide intense and meaningful practice of language, then they must be regarded as central to a teacher's repertoire. They are thus not for use solely on wet days and at the end of term!'

(Wright et al, from their Introduction, p. 1)

Despite my many years of initial trepidation, there has always been clear pedagogic evidence out there to endorse the use of games in the language classroom. Aydan Ersöz, writing in the Internet TESL Journal in 2000, reiterated Wright, Betteridge and Buckby when noting how games may provide a well-needed and wholly justifiable respite from the otherwise arduous task of learning a language:

'Language learning is a hard task which can sometimes be frustrating. Constant effort is required to understand, produce and manipulate the target language. Well-chosen games are invaluable as they give students a break and at the same time allow students to practice language skills. Games are highly motivating since they are amusing and at the same time challenging. Furthermore, they employ meaningful and useful language in real contexts. They also encourage and increase cooperation. Games are highly motivating because they are amusing and interesting. They can be used to give practice in all language skills and be used to practice many types of communication.'

This was written only a couple of months before I first became a language teacher, yet it took me a long time to come to terms with the ideas contained therein. Reading up further on the subject of using games, I see that my notion of the classroom as a game-free zone was not unique. Indeed, Lee Su Kim, writing in Forum journal in 1995, summed up the perception that I - and quite obviously many other teachers - held in the early part of my career.

'There is a common perception that all learning should be serious and solemn in nature, and that if one is having fun and there is hilarity and laughter, then it is not really learning. This is a misconception. It is possible to learn a language as well as enjoy oneself at the same time. One of the best ways of doing this is through games.'

Hang on a minute… a misconception? Were my fears really misplaced? Could games ever become a meaningful and effective weapon in my teaching artillery? What possible use could I put a game to? Lee Su Kim went on to ram the point home to us unbelievers: '*There are many advantages of using games in the classroom*':

- Games are a welcome break from the usual routine of the language class.

- They are motivating and challenging.

- Learning a language requires a great deal of effort. Games help students to make and sustain the effort of learning.

- Games provide language practice in the various skills - speaking, writing, listening and reading.

- They encourage students to interact and communicate.

- They create a meaningful context for language use.

All these factors are well and good, but could they not also be achieved by more traditional, less 'gamey' methods? Yes, in my formative teaching years I really took a lot of convincing that using games could have any value in my classes. Sure, a lot of teacher's books had one or two ostensibly 'fun' activities hidden away in the resources section, but the fact that they were there rather than smack bang in the middle of the unit proper surely served to prove the hypothesis that such activities were a luxury, an add-on if you found yourself with half an hour of class time to kill, rather than something that should ever be a fundamental part of my teaching. It was, suffice to say, good to know that I had the coursebook writers on my side… or did I?

Agnieszka Uberman, writing in Forum journal in 1998, put forward the case for the defence:

'Many experienced textbook and methodology manuals writers have argued that games are not just time-filling activities but have a great educational value. W. R. Lee holds that most language games make learners use the language instead of thinking about learning the correct forms (1979:2). He also says that games should be treated as central not peripheral to the foreign language teaching programme. A similar opinion is expressed by Richard-Amato, who believes

games to be fun but warns against overlooking their pedagogical value, particularly in foreign language teaching. There are many advantages of using games. "Games can lower anxiety, thus making the acquisition of input more likely" (Richard-Amato 1988:147). They are highly motivating and entertaining, and they can give shy students more opportunity to express their opinions and feelings (Hansen 1994:118). They also enable learners to acquire new experiences within a foreign language which are not always possible during a typical lesson. Furthermore, to quote Richard-Amato, they, "add diversion to the regular classroom activities," break the ice, "[but also] they are used to introduce new ideas" (1988:147). In the easy, relaxed atmosphere which is created by using games, students remember things faster and better (Wierus and Wierus 1994:218). S. M. Silvers says many teachers are enthusiastic about using games as "a teaching device," yet they often perceive games as mere time-fillers, "a break from the monotony of drilling" or frivolous activities. He also claims that many teachers often overlook the fact that in a relaxed atmosphere, real learning takes place, and students use the language they have been exposed to and have practised earlier (1982:29). Further support comes from Zdybiewska, who believes games to be a good way of practising language, for they provide a model of what learners will use the language for in real life in the future (1994:6).'

So, although it seems that coursebook writers did not necessarily espouse the all out rejection of games in the classroom, the above quote does raise some important caveats, which I'll be discussing later on. With all this evidence working against me, was it - several years into my teaching career - time to take the plunge? If I were to do so, surely I would need to think long and hard about when I would do it. Agnieszka Uberman continues:

'Games are often used as short warm-up activities or when there is some time left at the end of a lesson. Yet, as Lee observes, a game "should not be regarded as a marginal activity filling in odd moments when the teacher and class have nothing better to do" (1979:3). Games ought to be at the heart of teaching foreign languages. Rixon suggests that games be used at all stages of the lesson, provided that they are suitable and carefully chosen. Games also lend themselves well to revision exercises helping learners recall material in a pleasant, entertaining way. All authors referred to in this article agree that even if games resulted only in noise and entertained students, they are still worth paying attention to and implementing in the classroom since they motivate learners, promote communicative competence, and generate fluency.'

A couple of things leaped out at me from this particular quote and were fundamental considerations when I finally made the plunge to introduce games into my classes. Any game should be suitable for the classroom context and should be carefully chosen. Suitability can of course refer to many things, such as level of difficulty, complexity or the amount of class time they consume. Carefully choosing a game incorporates the notion that the game should be better for the particular purpose that you'll employ it for than any alternative method. When I started exploring the use of games, I came to the decision that the way they require participants to recall information from their knowledge pool would be a useful method in enabling students to assess their vocabulary recall abilities and thus started using them in classes primarily for vocabulary

revision. It seems that I was not alone in this conviction. Nguyen Thi Thanh Huyen and Khuat Thi Thu Nga, writing in the Asian EFL Journal in 2003, explain the rationale behind exploiting the game format in this way:

'Games have been shown to have advantages and effectiveness in learning vocabulary in various ways. First, games bring in relaxation and fun for students, thus help them learn and retain new words more easily. Second, games usually involve friendly competition and they keep learners interested. These create the motivation for learners of English to get involved and participate actively in the learning activities. Third, vocabulary games bring real world context into the classroom, and enhance students' use of English in a flexible, communicative way.

Therefore, the role of games in teaching and learning vocabulary cannot be denied. However, in order to achieve the most from vocabulary games, it is essential that suitable games are chosen. Whenever a game is to be conducted, the number of students, proficiency level, cultural context, timing, learning topic, and the classroom settings are factors that should be taken into account.

In conclusion, learning vocabulary through games is one effective and interesting way that can be applied in any classrooms. The results of [our] research suggest that games are used not only for mere fun, but more importantly, for the useful practice and review of language lessons, thus leading toward the goal of improving learners' communicative competence.'

There it is again, that notion of suitability. M. Martha Lengeling and Casey Malarcher, writing in Forum journal in 1997, further explored the ways in which students may benefit:

'In an effort to supplement lesson plans in the ESL classroom, teachers often turn to games. The justification for using games in the classroom has been well demonstrated as benefiting students in a variety of ways. These benefits range from cognitive aspects of language learning to more co-operative group dynamics.'

They classify the benefits as follows:

Affective:

- games lower the affective filter

- they encourage creative and spontaneous use of language

- they also promote communicative competence

- games are both motivating and fun

Cognitive:

- games reinforce learning

- they both review and extend learning

- games focus on grammar in a communicative manner

Class Dynamics:

- games are extremely student centered

- the teacher acts only as facilitator

- games build class cohesion

- they can foster whole class participation

- games promote healthy competition

Adaptability:

- games can be easily adjusted for age, level, and interests

- they utilize all four skills

- games require minimum preparation after the initial development stage

So, why am I suggesting we should be careful in our use of games in the classroom?

Well, it's my feeling that teachers should be encouraged to use games to help practice new language in the classroom. Games can indeed teach, they offer a way to practice new structures and add genuine enjoyment to a lesson. Nevertheless, working your way through the syllabus and completing stipulated material remain quintessential to ensuring that students are covering the material set out for any particular course, semester or even a specific lesson. Games should not hinder this. It's important that they are used as a means to an end, rather than existing in their own right. Once the core content of any given lesson has been explained and understood, and exercises that practice and utilize the new language have been completed, games can then be introduced as yet another means for enabling greater comprehension.

When would I suggest games be used effectively in the language classroom?

Well, despite the slightly provocative title of the chapter, which might have led you to think I consider games to be a bad idea, you can successfully use games in many ways, such as for a quick review, after material has been covered or as a cool-down activity at the end of a lesson to practice what has been covered (as well as to inject an element of fun). You could also use a game to practice specific new language in groups or pairs for a limited time, as a short introduction to new vocabulary or a concept, as a prompt for writing work, even as a link into a new part of the lesson. Games may even be used merely to change the pace of a lesson.

So, getting back to the title of this chapter… am I actually against gaming?

Well, I'm not, but beware of the caveats that I mentioned previously. Firstly the fact is that many students might not actually enjoy long, time consuming games, especially if they are already having difficulties with their new language. I'm basing this first point directly on feedback I've received recently. Such activities, even if not exploited regularly (in my case, incorporating a game into classes twice during an eight-week period was deemed excessive by some of my students), may not be universally enjoyed. Consider it from their perspective: learners with difficulties fear that not only will they fail in the task of learning the language, but may also find themselves underperforming in a game. The consequences of such an outcome may be deflating, even humiliating to some. This does not mean that the teacher should not encourage participation, as there are positive social implications in sharing, winning and losing too. Nevertheless, a game that takes up a considerable chunk of a lesson may be quite stress-inducing for some students. If you can work through the activity in a different way, would that not be kinder to such students?

Secondly, and this is at least as important as the first point, if games are played too often (and you have to be careful here, as certain – not all, remember - students may frequently prompt the teacher to play a game whenever possible), a large number of students may feel that they are not learning at all, faulting the teacher as being a little frivolous or not taking care to prepare a real lesson (we know this almost certainly isn't the case, as games often take more pre-planning than more 'conventional' lessons). Many students feel embittered if they perceive the classroom as being a place where they are playing too much; they feel that there is time wasted, and it concerns them. Remember: they may not realize how much time and effort it takes to prepare a game nor that it has genuine pedagogical value, which leads me on to a mistake I've been making which has, thankfully, been brought to my attention: explain the rationale behind the game.

If a teacher plans a game, it is critical to explain the rationale of the game to the students in the class, no matter what. For example, if you were to employ a short, simple hangman or hotseat game, the teacher should swiftly - but very clearly - inform the students that this game will help them with spelling, get their brains focused on recognizing the shape and structure of new words, and will facilitate their learning of new vocabulary. In addition to making sure the students are aware of the learning benefits of the activity, preparing such an explanation will also help teachers to make sure that they know precisely why they are spending time on the game in the lesson in the first place. Such explanations are absolutely vital, as I've learned through experience, because they satisfy the more serious student who can feel pressured by game time, they make sure the weaker student understand that this isn't a waste of time and also enable all of the students to comprehend that the teacher is playing for an explicit reason, has planned the game to enhance their learning, and is not just wasting time by adding a fun element to the lesson. Failure to take this fundamental step, or even merely to make the point clearly enough for all to understand, can lead to all kinds of repercussions, trust me.

Games can be a very worthwhile teaching element. A successful game is successful for the reason that it is based on specific time allocation, it has clear relevance to the material, there is appropriateness to all members of the class, and ultimately, the enjoyment of the learners is increased through their actively engaging with the language. With this in mind, our next chapter looks at what I call 'the golden rules' of using games in the language classroom.

Chapter 3: The nine golden rules of using games in the language classroom

As you can probably gather by now, I've long been an admirer of the use of games in teaching. Indeed, a lot of the most popular posts ever on my Teach them English blog are the ones I write about using games. 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 practice new language skills.

The importance of games cannot be understated in the role they play in providing alternative ways of learning or 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 and 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, 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: 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. 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.

Ok, we've now reached the end of what I'd consider the 'pure theory' behind the use of games. In the next chapter we'll move on to look at the types of games we can use, with particular focus on lower level learners.

Chapter 4: Three strategies for incorporating games into beginner level classes

As we all know – or can quickly learn - from experience, even our best lessons can become overwhelming for beginner students in language classes. Learning any new language is a huge challenge, and English is particularly hard for many people, given their first language. Consequently, we should always be looking to create practical lessons and give lots of encouragement.

I'm a firm believer that games are an important part of such lessons, as they provide learners with the opportunity to practice language and gain confidence in their new skills, while also having a little fun. In this chapter I'm going to make some very broad suggestions for you based on the language areas of vocabulary, listening and grammatical structures.

1. Games that focus on vocabulary

One vital thing for beginning learners trying to acquire English is to get their hands on as much vocabulary as possible and to transition these words to their long-term memory. Fortunately, classic vocabulary games such as 'pictionary', 'charades' and 'hangman' can be easily adapted to facilitate the development of vocabulary knowledge at beginner level.

Pictionary works particularly well with concrete nouns, as it creates a need for learners to draw and then remember them. The visual aspect of this game is especially useful in enabling learners to retain vocab.

This video gives you an idea of how to play the game in class.

Charades is another great format that works really well when dealing with action verbs. Play as a class, allowing each learner to take a turn, until everyone understands the game. You can play this as a nice way of rounding off class at the end of the day.

Here's a short clip demonstrating how to play charades.

An additional means of reviewing vocabulary is to play a version of **hangman**. When starting out with this game, use single words so learners get used to which letters and patterns frequently appear in English. Later, you can move on to using phrases and sentences that incorporate vocabulary in a realistic way.

The Many Things website has a version you can use in class.

2. Games that focus on listening

Playing the classic '**Simon says**' - or '**Teacher says**', if you prefer – works fantastically as a beginner game that gets your whole class involved with the words they are learning. After the

learners have adjusted to the 'Teacher says' prompt, start combining action words with nouns in a meaningful way. You can then allow individual learners to come to the front of the class to give the commands.

Here's a video of the game being played in a Korean class.

One great way of utilizing this activity, especially with young learners, is to give them building blocks to assemble. When learners know about colors, numbers and prepositions of place, for instance, you can give out clear, simple oral instructions for them to listen to carefully and create a certain arrangement with their blocks. After giving the directions, show them a model so they can see if theirs match yours.

3. Games that focus on sentence structure

Learners need a lot of practice using sentence structures in a new language, so you'll need games that allow you to incorporate new sentences. Fortunately, there are a couple of old standards that are great formats for doing this; '**tic-tac-toe**' and '**20 Questions**.'

You can play tic-tac-toe as a motivating team game. Firstly, write the start of nine different sentences on a large tic-tac-toe board (you can get buy board specifically for this, or draw the outline on your class white board). Secondly, group the learners into two teams. Each team must then use your half-sentence to make a full new sentence in order to earn an X or O in their chosen square. When the learners are comfortable with this format, they can play the game in pairs so as to get more individual practice.

ESL Games Box has a nice demonstration of how to play this.

Another game that works really well with beginners is '20 Questions'. You can get this game started by either writing a word on a piece of card or paper, or by hiding an object somewhere in the classroom. The fun part comes when learners ask 20 'yes' or 'no' questions to figure out the object or word. You can adapt this to a number of structures, such as 'Has it got…', 'Is it in…', or 'Does it look like…', for example. You can also turn this game around with great effect, by giving objects or words for particular learners to describe in 10 sentences or less, while the rest of the class tries to guess each one from the learners' clues.

The Jennifer Teacher blog calls this the ESL conversation classic with good reason.

Now that we've spent some time focusing on using games in beginner classes, we're going to move on to look at another important group of learners with whom games can work fantastically well: adults.

Chapter 5: Great kids games to use with adult language learners

Sometimes your students come to class tired and not in the mood for hard study. When this happens, don't be afraid to lighten the mood and make things fun. Some games you played as a child can be surprisingly enjoyable and motivating for adult learners, too. Here are some games you can adapt into language learning activities.

1. What would your super power be?

If you could have one super power, which would you choose? What would this power enable you to do?

Possible language to uncover:

Unreal conditional: 'If I could have a super power, I would like to be able to fly.'

Modals of possibility: 'I could / might save the world!'

Relative clauses: 'A person who could fly…'

2. The movie of your life

If Hollywood made a movie of your life, what kind of movie would it be and who would star in it? Is your life an adventure, drama, romance, or horror?

Possible language to uncover:

Descriptive adjectives: 'tall / handsome / confident'

Movie vocabulary: 'to star in a film / horror movie'

3. If you won the lottery…

We think money would solve our problems, but evidence suggests otherwise. If you won the lottery, what would you do with all the cash?

Possible language to uncover:

Unreal conditional: 'If I won the lottery, I would...'

Relative clauses: 'People who win the lottery…'

Modals of possibility: 'I could / might / buy a boat!'

4. Would You Rather...

Would you rather be bald or go grey? Would you rather be stranded on an island with cheese or chocolate? Setting up a situation in which learners have to make decisions and justify them is fun and stimulates critical thinking.

Possible language to uncover:

Expressing preference: 'I'd rather…'

Comparing situations: 'Situation X is better / more enjoyable / funnier…'

Justifying a position: I'd rather… because / due to the fact that…'

5. Play-Doh Animals

Adults love playing just as much with play-doh as young kids. If you have a text about elephants, tell the learners to create elephants. Use what they make to elicit vocab or to draw comparisons (see who made an African elephant, who made an Indian one).

Possible language to uncover:

Comparatives: 'mine is different from yours / mine has bigger ears'

Great for eliciting topic-related vocabulary

6. Beach Ball Frenzy

For Beach Ball Frenzy, you simply write a series of questions on your ball. Learners pass the ball around… and answer questions. Use this if you need to review a topic or merely to energize your learners.

Possible language to uncover:

Great for reviewing topic-related vocabulary

7. These are a Few of My Favorite Things

You know the song, now play the game! This ice breaker can be used for a change of pace or you can customize it to your topic. Ask your students for the favorite aspects of whatever it is you're studying. This has the additional bonus of giving you insights into what your students like.

Possible language to uncover:

Quantifiers: 'a few of / some of'

Topic specific vocabulary: 'What do you like most about topic X?'

8. The Girl with the ____ tattoo?

Many people have wanted a tattoo since childhood. A natural first question is, 'What kind of tattoo would you like?' and then, 'Where would you like it?' Those students in class with tattoos can help you model whatever language point

Possible language to uncover:

Wh- questions: 'where is it / what is it'

Body vocabulary: 'on my arm / leg / back'

Noun phrases: 'a picture of a…'

Causatives: 'to get / have a tattoo done'

So, in this chapter and the one that preceded it we've looked at how to make games work with low level classes and adult learners. I think it's about time that we focus on language itself. With that in mind, the next chapter will look at strategies for using games to review verb tenses.

Chapter 6: 3 great games for verb tense review

I'm sure we can all relate to this on a certain level; when grappling with the English language, particularly at lower levels, many learners struggle to use appropriate verb tenses. With so many functions, forms, rules and exceptions, selecting the proper verb tense can be challenging.

Fortunately, as teachers we can use games to help our learners internalize verb tense '*appropriacy*' and identify when they need to use each tense. The three games I outline in this chapter make learning entertaining, increasing learners' motivation to focus on the task at hand and enable them to commit '*verb grammar*' to memory.

Game 1: Tense Relay

Learners create a tense chart while running an exciting relay race

Pre-class preparation

OK, there's a little bit of prep work to this one! Before class, you need to create tense cards. Write verb sets on cards, listing the past, present and future tenses of each verb on separate sheets. Create these sets of three with 10 different verbs (10 should suffice).

Create another identical set on cards of a different color, allowing each of two teams to have an identical set of verb cards. Divide the board in half. On each side write past, present and future across the top of the board.

Playing the game

When learners come to class, divide them into two teams. Tell them they are going to run a tense relay race. Line learners up in single file in front of the board. Provide the first person in each line with a roll of masking tape. Stand at the middle of the board, holding both sets of cards.

Tell learners that when you shout go, one person from each team must run up to you and get a set of three cards. Then, using the masking tape, they need to place the three cards in the appropriate verb tense category. Once they have placed their verbs, they run to their line, pass off the masking tape and move to the back of the line. Then the next learner in the group comes up and gets the next set of three cards.

After explaining the rules, get your learners to complete the relay race. Once a team has finished their card placements, check them. If they have errors, get the team to correct the errors while the other team continue to work on their placements. The team that is first to correctly place all of its verbs wins.

Game 2: Verb Tense Elimination

Learners practice identifying the correct tense in this competitive elimination game

Pre-class preparation

This one's a bit simpler to prep for. Before class, create three sheets of paper that say past, present and future. Create enough copies for each learner to have a complete set of three.

Playing the game

As learners arrive at class, pass the pages out, giving one set of three to each learner. Ask learners to stand next to their desks with their three sheets of paper. Then tell the learners that you will read the sentences aloud and they need to hold up the card that identifies the tense in which that sentence is written. If a learner holds up an incorrect tense card, he is eliminated and has to sit down. The last learner standing wins the battle of the tenses.

Game 3: Tense Change-up

Teams of learners race to change the tense of a written passage in this rapid-fire game

Pre-class preparation

Before class, look through whatever novels you have lying around. Photocopy several paragraphs that feature various tenses. Try to select some paragraphs that are in past, some in present and some in future tense. On top of the sheet containing the paragraph, write the tense in which the paragraph is written.

Playing the game

Start by dividing the class into groups of three or four learners each. Then give each group a copy of one of the selected paragraphs. Place the paragraph copies face down, telling learners not to peek before the game starts. Provide each group with a large sheet of white paper on which they can write their responses. Tell learners that when you say "go," they need to switch the paragraph from the current tense to the tense you're about to provide them. Tell learners to rewrite the entire paragraph, changing any words necessary to conform to the tense.

Tell learners to flip their paragraphs over, and then yell out tenses that are different from the ones in the paragraphs already written. The groups will race to alter their paragraphs. Once they are done, ask them to raise their hands. Tell all of the other groups to stop as you check the work of the finished group. Read the paragraph aloud, and ask the other learners to vote with a thumbs-up or thumbs-down, indicating whether the tense changes are all correct. If the paragraph contains errors, allow the other groups to try until one group has successfully made the changes first.

So, those are a few ideas for dealing with grammar review through games. Let's round off this book with a look at how carefully we need to plan vocabulary games.

Chapter 7: Using games to teach vocabulary? Four reasons to think again

Going through the process of acquiring new vocabulary is long, time consuming, and can therefore become boring for many learners, but developing knowledge through word games can make the task fun for both learners and teachers. Word and language games not only make class time go faster, they improve learners' rates of learning and retention. Nevertheless, effective vocabulary teaching isn't all fun and games. When considering language games as part of your lesson plan, we need to be careful and really think things through.

As a strong advocate of the considered use of games in language teaching, here are the four points I think you need to consider before using games.

1. Have you really thought about the planning and organization of your game?

A successful game never just happens. Indeed, choosing or designing the right game for the lesson you want to teach can often be more time-consuming than planning a traditional vocabulary lesson. Do the ends justify the means, or would it be easier to take on a more traditional teaching approach?

My advice

Obviously, when you find a game format that works, planning time is greatly reduced, but you need to take this extra workload into account when planning your lesson, especially when using a game format for the first time.

2. How complex are the rules of the game?

Another potential drawback of games in vocabulary teaching is that the game itself is too difficult to understand, therefore distracting learners from its intended pedagogical goal. If your game is structurally complex (for instance, the patterns of turn-taking aren't easy for learners to grasp), your players may become too distracted by the mechanics of it all to learn vocabulary effectively, even if vocabulary-related tasks are part of the game.

My advice

Keep the rules easy to understand, and keep the number of rules to a minimum. Try explaining it to another teacher before using it in class; if they can't understand it, it's certain your learners won't either.

3. Are you sure you're not just creating busywork?

As I mentioned in the introduction, a good game will see class time fly by in an instant. Since games are fun and game play involves a lot of relaxed and informal interaction between learners and teachers, some teachers and even learners may view them as unproductive busywork. This is especially the case if you start using games on too regular a basis.

My advice

When used strategically, teaching vocabulary through games can be more effective than teaching through traditional methods of drill and memorization. Explain to learners exactly why you are playing and how it will benefit them. Also, don't play games too often.

4. What resources do you need to invest in the game?

I'm lucky in that I have access to what I need, in terms of resources, in every room I teach in. For many teachers, however, availability of resources can be a factor in whether or not they use games in the classroom. Educational web-based games, for example, require computer access, and even technologically simple games such as custom-designed crossword puzzles might involve design, printing and photocopying costs.

My advice

Look for low-tech alternatives which can just as easily add to your learners' learning experience. Classic whiteboard games such as Hangman, for instance, require very few resources or prep time, yet can still be great fun and pedagogically useful. Even if you have all the tech equipment you need, consider how you might be able to adapt if/when these tools break down.

###

Details of the publications mentioned in this book:

'Games for Language Learning' (2nd. Ed.) by Andrew Wright, David Betteridge and Michael Buckby. Cambridge University Press, 1984.

To read the articles below in full, click on their titles…

'Six Games for the EFL/ESL Classroom' by Aydan Ersöz. The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. VI, No. 6, June 2000.

'Creative Games for the Language Class' by Lee Su Kim. 'Forum' Vol. 33 No 1, January - March 1995, Page 35.

'The Use of Games For Vocabulary Presentation and Revision' by Agnieszka Uberman. 'Forum' Vol. 36 No 1, January - March 1998, Page 20.

'Learning Vocabulary Through Games' by Nguyen Thi Thanh Huyen and Khuat Thi Thu Nga. 'Asian EFL Journal' - December 2003

'Index Cards: A Natural Resource for Teachers' by M. Martha Lengeling and Casey Malarcher. 'Forum' Vol. 35 No 4, October - December 1997, Page 42

About the author

Adam has been fortunate enough to spend the last fifteen years of his journey as a lifelong learner working with others in what some call the 'language classroom'. He is currently privileged to have the opportunity to help young adults meet their educational goals at Sabanci University in Istanbul. His professional interests include flexibility within the curriculum and the considered use of technology in the classroom. He occasionally finds time to blog about his life.

OFFICIAL WEBSITE: myweb.sabanciuniv.edu/adams

BLOG: www.teachthemenglish.com

FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/theadamsimpson

TWITTER: www.twitter.com/yearinthelifeof