

Why use games in the English as a Second or Foreign Language classroom?

There are many valid reasons for using games in the language classroom, not least among them the sheer enjoyment of a moment of relaxation after some arduous drilling, or as a short respite after prolonged deskwork.

When one considers the importance of communicative competence in the target language, a major goal of all language acquisition, and the need for spontaneous and creative use of that language, one recognizes the significant role of word games in achieving these objectives. Students, in the informal atmosphere of game play, are less self-conscious and therefore more apt to experiment and freely participate in using the foreign language. In addition, games automatically stimulate student interest; a properly introduced game can be one of the highest motivating techniques.

Other reasons for including games in the language class are:

- 1) They focus student attention on specific structures, grammatical patterns, and vocabulary items.
- 2) They can function as reinforcement, review and enrichment.
- 3) They involve equal participation from both slow and fast learners.
- 4) They can be adjusted to suit the individual ages and language levels of the students in the class.
- 5) They contribute to an atmosphere of healthy competition, providing an outlet for the creative use of natural language in a non-stressful situation.
- 6) They can be used in any language teaching situation and with any skill area whether reading, writing, speaking or listening.
- 7) They provide immediate feedback for the teacher.
- 8) They ensure maximum student participation for a minimum of teacher preparation.

Having justified the use of word games in the language class, accepting the fact that they provide not only a learning experience but an enjoyable one as well, we may then ask, when should a game be introduced? The logical time is toward the end of the hour – the “dessert” after the main course. However, there is no hidebound rule about this and whenever an instructor feels it is the appropriate moment for a more relaxing activity, that is the time for a game. All this is relative, of course, and it will be the good judgment of the instructor that determines the appropriate time.

Choosing the Right Game

Which game should be played, once we have decided it is time for such an activity? Many factors enter into deciding the answer to this question:

- 1) the size of the class
- 2) whether it is a class of adults or one of the children
- 3) the class level- elementary, intermediate, advanced
- 4) the structures being studied at the moment
- 5) the physical space you have to work with
- 6) the noise factor – will you disturb the classes around you
- 7) the students' interests, in and out of the class
- 8) the equipment and materials available
- 9) cultural considerations
- 10) the time available for a game

Teacher Preparation

A game should be planned into the day's lesson right along with exercises, dialogs and reading practice. It should not be an afterthought.

Some games require the use of additional equipment or materials, such as flash cards, small, easily identifiable objects, a bean bag, stopwatch, blindfolds, or pencil and paper. These are noted at the top of each game. In most cases the equipment will already be available in the classroom. Where advance preparation is required for successful game play, it is recommended that the teacher assemble these materials prior to introducing the game.

Certainly the teacher should understand the game and how it is to be played before explaining the rules to the class. With certain games it might be wise to have 2 or 3 students give a short demonstration first, before the entire class participates. This will avoid confusion and cause the game to move along as smoothly as possible from the very beginning.

Once the rules are made clear, the teacher should see to it that they are adhered to. Changing rules in mid-game is bad strategy. If the rules as presented here seem too rigid for a particular group they can always be adjusted to suit the needs of that group, but this should be done before the games begins, not once it has started. No game has to be played exactly as presented; the teacher should always feel to adapt it to the class. This is especially true when working with children.

Teacher as Facilitator

No matter how much the teacher actually participates in the game, he or she always remains in charge and keeps the situation under control. This is especially true when playing some of the physically active games and certainly when working with younger people. Certain games, by their very nature, require the teacher or someone in authority, such as a teacher's aid or even one of the students, to control the playing of the game once the rules are made clear. This can be done, and a relaxed atmosphere maintained, if the person in charge assumes the role of one more player who is guiding the game in the direction it should go, rather than dictating what the others should do. In other words, this person's positive attitude will be an important factor in deciding the success or failure of the game.

Student Involvement

All of the class should be involved in one way or another. Choice of games will help here, of course, but it may be that for a specific reason – perhaps practice on a structure point – a teacher may want to use a game which is more effectively played by half a dozen students than by double or triple that number. Space permitting (not to mention noise level), there could be several groups around the room playing the same game at the same time. With other games, in which a few students only are required, the rest of the class could be judges, score-keepers or audience. Everyone should be made to feel he has some part in the game, even though the moment it is a passive role. If space does not permit more than one small group to play at a time, then groups could take turns playing for a designated period of time. A panel of judges could, at the end of the hour, decide which group has played best.

Do's or Don'ts

What do you do if you have chosen the perfect game for the perfect occasion and, lo and behold, it turns out to be a dud? You simply face up to the fact that today is not the day for that particular game (another day very likely will be) and as soon as possible change activities. It may be, too, that an individual student does not feel like playing games that day, although the others do. Don't force him; he will neither enjoy nor benefit from the experience and will probably dampen the enjoyment of the others. Let him be an observer that day. No one should be forced to play games. Looking on the brighter side, those times when you have great success with a game, and this is more usual, it is always wise to stop playing while the

students are enjoying it and would prefer to continue. As far as repeating a popular game is concerned, discretion should be used. There is nothing wrong with playing a successful game on a later occasion but it is preferable to allow a decent interval of time before re-introducing it. Still better is the use of a different game the next time, though it could be a variation of one that students have especially enjoyed. *Buzz-Bizz* is a variation of *Buzz* that class would undoubtedly enjoy even more than the original game, as it offers more of a challenge.

Teamwork

A number of games require the dividing of the class into 2 teams. The teacher may want to do this differently each time – the boys against the girls, the right side of the room against the left side, row A versus row B, etc. However, there are some advantages to having the same teams for a month or even a full semester, especially in respect to the time it takes to divide the class each time a team game is played. Also, a certain team spirit develops which aids greatly in competitive games and promotes a free exchange of ideas both in- and outside of class. It is suggested that the teacher establish the teams, thus assuring that there will be an appropriate balance of faster students with slower ones in each group.

Categories of games

The games have been categorized as follows:

- 1) Vocabulary Games
- 2) Number Games
- 3) Structure Games
- 4) Spelling Games
- 5) Conversation Games
- 6) Writing Games
- 7) Role Play and Dramatics

Of course, certain games, such as *Hidden Words*, is also a vocabulary game and a spelling game at the same time.

Certainly the teacher should feel free to take the raw material as presented here and make all the changes necessary for maximum effectiveness and fun with his or her class. It is also possible that a game cannot be played with a certain class because of the size of the group, their command of English, or the age of the students, but it will suggest a variation that will be

successful. Teachers should feel free to experiment and use those games best suited to the individual needs of their students.

In her article, “Try One of My Games”, Julia Dobson sums up the subject of games nicely: “ I myself have found that a good language game is a wonderful way to break the routine of classroom drill, because it provides fun and relaxation while remaining very much within the framework of language learning – and may even reinforce that learning”.

Vocabulary Game

The A to Z Banquet

This is an excellent game for practicing for the vocabulary of food items. The students may remain at their desks for this game or be arranged in a circle or semi-circle. Instruct the students to imagine that they have just been to a big banquet at which a variety of international foods were served. Going around the classroom, each student, in turn, is to tell what he or she ate at the banquet.

Begin by modeling the example sentence, “ At the banquet I ate apple pie.” The only rule is that each student must repeat all the previously mentioned food items and add a new dish beginning with the next letter of the alphabet.

The game proceeds as follows:

Student 1: At the banquet, I ate apple pie.

Student 2: At the banquet, I ate apple and bacon.

Student 3: At the banquet, I ate apple, bacon and carrots.

Student 4: At the banquet, I ate apple, bacon, carrots and doughnuts.

And so on.

Eliminate such letters as X and Z and, according to the level of the class, any other letters for which it might be difficult to name a type of food.

For beginning level students, you may wish to hand out a prepared list of different foods and dishes. The first time the game is played, it is a good

idea to write the food items on the blackboard, as they are aid, to simplify the repetition.

Structure Game

This is a good game to play when the students are first learning the conditional tense.

One player starts the game by saying, " If I found a thousand dollars, I would buy ..." and then describes, without naming it, an object he would buy. The other students have to guess what it is, asking in turn, "Would you buy ...?" The first player to guess the object correctly becomes *It*.

Example:

It: If I found a thousand dollars, I would buy something that moves along the road and has wheels.

Player 1: Would you buy a car?

It: No, I wouldn't.

Player 2: Would you buy a motorbike?

It: No, I wouldn't.

Player 3: Would you buy a bike?

It: Yes, I would.

Spelling Game

Initial Sentences

Each student makes up a sentence, the initial letters of each word, when joined, spelling a four or five letter word.

The teacher should allow a certain amount of time for the students to write down their words and sentences. When they have finished, each student should read aloud what he or she has written.

Example:

Pat ought to swim. POTS

Rabbits eat a lot. REAL

Tom eats apples. TEA