

Devising Language Games

The Purpose of Language Games

- **Increase Motivation** – keep students interested and happy, competition motivates any students to try harder (and maybe there is a ‘prize’ at the end).
- **Make Language Learning Authentic** – they are practicing language for a particular situation, not just doing an exercise.
- **Thinking in English** rather than translating. In the middle of the game they need to come up with a fairly automatic response, there isn’t time for translating.

Some Types of Language Games

There are many types of language games, all of which are adaptable to many situations. Some games can fit into several of these categories.) These include:

1. **Board games:** There are so many different board games available, you can easily make your own, and there are even templates available for making your own. A board game can be played with a partner, or in a group, or as a class with the ‘board’ drawn on the white/black-board.
 - Students need counters – they can draw their own characters on paper/card, or use buttons/shells/rocks/whatever – or you can use magnetic buttons or ‘tack’ a piece of cardboard on the board, or just draw the counters as they move.
 - There can be traps along the way – like the ‘snakes’ in ‘Snakes and Ladders’ – and rewards – like the ‘ladders’ – along the way.
 - It’s good if there is a language task each time they move along – they have to say something when they land on a square – with possibly a penalty (don’t move/move back) if they fail.
 - You need some kind of randomizer – a dice, or one/two coins, or some other clever method.
2. **Card games:** This can involve using
 - Playing Cards as a randomizer (each number has a meaning, requires a particular response),
 - specially designed Language Cards (a word or sentence or letter on each) for games designed like ‘Snap’ (turn over cards one at a time and say ‘snap’ when you see two the same, or two that match in some way), or ‘Happy Families’ (players try to collect sets of cards).
 - Regular classroom Flash Cards with a word / sentence / letter on each. As a whole class activity – besides holding them up and asking the class to call out the answer – it can become a competitive or cooperative game. Individual/pairs/groups/teams of students can be asked to match the card(s), put them in a particular order, find the correct card from a display or heap, throw the card into a hoop or bin, guess what is

on the card, draw or describe a picture for another to draw ... the list is endless. (The cards may need to be laminated to make them durable, or just accept that you need to keep making more – especially as once the game is played many of the words will be ‘known’ and new ones will be needed anyway.)

3. **Dice games:** Obviously dice can be used for randomizing movements of counters in board games and the like, but they can be used for other specific language ideas as well.
 - Create a largish dice out of card, and write a question word (who, what, why, where, when, how) - or other prompt for a different aspect of learning - on each face. Students / pairs / groups / teams have to use the appropriate prompt after throwing the dice.
 - More than one dice can be used – maybe with a different letter on each, or a noun on one and adjective on another, or a word on one and an instruction on another.
 - You can get dice with a lot more than 6 sides, for instance one for each letter of the alphabet – if you get one of these, there are obvious games you can play.

4. **Word-Making Games:** Commercial games such as ‘Scrabble’ and ‘Boggle’ can be played in the classroom in pairs/groups if you have enough sets. You could have several different games and groups rotate in different sessions. This type of game can also be played using cards with letters on (instead of the little tiles in something like Scrabble) and words can be formed on the floor or a desktop.
 - Whole class games at the black/white-board can also be devised along these lines with a pool of letters that they need to make into words, or making little words out of a big word.

5. **Circle games** are especially relevant for young children but can also be used with good results with older children (and even adults!) In the circle it is easier for the teacher to maintain control of the game, and develops cooperation and community feel among the participants. If the class is too big, or the space not suitable, the game can be played in 2 or more smaller groups, although this is harder to maintain control of, and loses some of the community feel.
 - The game can involve a song/chant which everyone joins in and then each participant in turn has to sing/say something.
 - The game can involve changing seat/position in response to certain prompts – this can be for part of the reward/penalty. There can be one less seat than the number of participants.
 - There are many possibilities for cumulative circle games where one person makes a statement mentioning one object (such as “I went shopping and I bought ... an egg”) and subsequent participants have to repeat all previous items and then add one of their own. The game is cooperative, and keeps going as long as the group can manage it.

- Some examples of good circle games are “I like People Who ...” (where participants who fit the description have to quickly change places, and the slowest one ends up standing and making the next statement) and “What are you doing?” (where participants each mime the action from the previous participant while naming a different action for the following participant to mime).
 - Games like “who stole the cookie” – where participants pat knees/clap/click a rhythm and pass turns by calling someone’s name – can be adapted to use other parts of language. Students can even each wear a word on a flashcard to be referred to and respond to.
6. **Role play games** are an obvious extension to conversational/speaking topics. These can be easily set up as a ‘line-up role-play’ where each student is part of a group which plays a particular role.
- For example: In a shopping role-play some students are sellers and some are buyers. Sellers need to have a list/pictures/objects to sell, and buyers have money and shopping lists. It can become competitive as individuals/pairs/groups endeavor to buy/sell a certain amount first.
 - Other simple role-plays could include various community places/events such as doctor’s rooms, post office, travel agent, hotel lobby, library, marketplace, student services.
7. **Discussion games** can be another type of role-play.
- For example: “Alibi”. In this game a student/pair/group are accused of a crime and have to get together to clarify their ‘story’ of exactly where they were and what they were doing at the time of the ‘crime’ including as many details as possible. Other class members in pairs/groups are the police who will separate and question each of the suspects who rotate around the groups, and see if their stories match.
 - Another discussion game can involve reading two texts (fiction or non-fiction). Half of the class reads one text and the other half reads the other. Then the papers are removed, and the students pair up with someone who read the other text. Each carefully tells their partner everything they can remember about their text. Then they swap to another partner who read the other text, and they are given a list of questions with which to test their new partner on what they have been told.
8. **‘Game Show’ and Quiz games** can be a great whole class learning activity. Examples are
- ‘Typhoon’ (where each team has to answer a question and can then choose a box from the grid. The box may contain points, or an opportunity to ‘blow away’ someone else’s points),
 - ‘Jeopardy’ (modelled on the TV show of the same name),
 - ‘Wheel of Fortune’ (from the TV show), or a similar ‘Hangman’.

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- All of these simply create a framework for winning points so that the students work together with their team and are motivated.
 - ‘Celebrity Heads’ can also be played by the whole class with 2/3/4 ... students at the front facing the class with a famous name worn (as a crown, maybe) around their heads so that they can’t see it (or it can be written carefully on the board behind them as long as they don’t turn round to look ...) They take it in turns to ask questions of the class in order to discover who they are. (They must be yes/no questions, and a ‘yes’ response means they can then ask another before their turn ends).
9. **Drawing games:** One well-known game is ‘Pictionary’ where one student/pair/team is shown a word/phrase/sentence and they have to draw something until the other student/pair/team guesses what it is. There are lots of ways to adapt this to learning objectives.
- To give practice in describing, a simple picture or drawing can be pinned to the back of a chair so that a person at the white/black-board cannot see it but the class can. They then have to explain to the draw-er what to draw. There can be rules about who explains, or they can just call out. There can be two draw-ers, and it can be made into a competition.
10. **Vocabulary games:**
- In the game of “Scattergories” players have to come up with vocabulary words which start with a particular letter. First of all select your categories (eg an animal, a fruit, a vegetable, a form of transport, a country, a body part, ...etc). Then devise a method for choosing the letter – you can ask a student to say the alphabet silently in their head and someone says “Stop!” and the letter they are on is the one you use – or any method that works. Players/pairs/groups then rush to choose a word for each, and when the first one shouts to say they have finished then everyone must stop (or use some other time limit). Players get (for example) 5 points for any correct word no one else has, and only one point if someone else has the same word. Maybe swap papers to let someone else mark so less cheating!
 - In the game “taboo” you need to prepare papers/cards with a target word (or phrase) and a number (usually 3) of ‘taboo’ words. The team/player has to explain the target word so that the other team/player can guess it, but is not allowed to mention the taboo words (all of which are the most obvious important words to the explanation.) Students/groups can be set the task of creating taboo cards for a future game.
 - Bingo (below) is an excellent way to learn a body of vocabulary.
11. **Competitions:** Not all ‘games’ are competitions; sometimes the students must endeavour to cooperate rather than compete. Even in a competition, however, if the students are working

in pairs/groups, they are still learning cooperation within their team. Anything can be made into a competition. “Let’s see who can the _____est” makes any simple activity into a game or competition. It is good to make sure that you don’t do this all of the time, or maybe sometimes surprise them by going for the ‘slowest’ or ‘smallest’ so that they work carefully, and so that anyone has the possibility of being a winner.

- 12. Racing / Running / Jumping Games:** Where children are the students, sometimes they just have too much spare energy. With care and planning, it is possible to play educational language games that allow them to run off a little of that energy, without doing damage to themselves, other students, or school property!
- 13. Singing / Chanting Games:** Many of these are ‘circle games’, but singing and chanting games do not always have to be done in a circle. As a listening/speaking activity students can ‘fill in the gaps’ in a song once they have learnt it. The teacher/another student/a group can sing the song and stop and various students/groups have to carry on or fill in the words.
- 14. Games of Chance:** Everybody loves ‘Bingo’, and this game can be adapted so many ways. There are programmes available on the Internet where you can enter (9/16/) 25 words, and the programme will randomise the words so that every card contains the same words in a different order. Or you can add more than the required number, and then the students won’t be sure if the word is on their card or not. There are other ways to play, too, where the caller does not read the words that are on the cards, but a clue or question for which the answers are in the grid on the cards. Students will need some form of counters to use as bingo markers (sunflower seeds work well – but you have to decide whether the students are allowed to eat them), rather than marking the cards, so that they can play the game several times over.
- 15. Story Games:** Games can be created around well-known / traditional / recently studied stories, especially if there is a repetitive action or character to be named. Listeners must wait for a particular cue, and then perform a specific action. An example could be: the teacher tells the story of the 3 little pigs. Participants/groups are assigned particular characters (mother pig, 1st little pig, big bad wolf etc.) The group sits in a circle around the storyteller, and as the story is told, if their character is mentioned they must stand, turn around, and sit down again. The storyteller holds a (flimsy, harmless) roll of paper and attempts to swipe the backside of students as they turn. The story as it is told can be varied to have (for example) Mother Pig popping up repeatedly and unexpectedly. Alternatively, (for example) a student could tell the story, several students are assigned each character, and must swap places and risk losing their seat ... the one left standing must continue the story.

Rewards and Penalties

In most cases, the chance to play the game is reward enough for young students (and even older ones)!

Within the game there must be a structure for some kind of reward to encourage both competition and cooperation, and the sense of penalty, some impending doom, adds to the excitement and urgency of the game. It is important that the penalty does not lead to embarrassment and belittling, that 'winners' and 'losers' both walk away happy, and that all students learn something whether they realise it or not.

The element of chance, along with the need to perform in some way, increases the fun and reduces the embarrassment of losing – after all it could happen to anyone.

If the class seems to be becoming jaded, even with games to play, sometimes an actual reward can be added – something insubstantial like being allowed to leave the room first at the end, or being clapped by the other team, or a small treat. If the same game is played again, make sure that the teams are mixed around.