# How to use games in language teaching

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# Acknowledgements

# Preface

This book is written for teachers by a teacher – one who has used language games herself and found them to be not only useful but popular as well. Many teachers will have already tried games successfully, but there must also be some who have not found the experience pleasant for themselves or instructive for their classes. Still others may be quite new to the idea and unsure whether it would be useful or practically possible with their students. I hope that the book will contain something for all three groups: new games for teachers who are already convinced, reassurance for those who have tried games and are doubtful of their success, and encouragement for those who have yet to try them.

This is not primarily a recipe book of classroom games, although more than thirty are described in the text, which I hope teachers will try. It is a book *about* games – how to choose suitable ones and how to organise them and use them so that students get the most language practice from them. Further games may be gleaned from the sources given at the end of the book.

# Contents

# 1 Games and language teaching

There are hundreds of games that can be used in some connection with language teaching. In this book we shall be looking at ways in which they can be integrated with teaching so that they become a positive part of it rather than a time-filler or, worse, a time-waster.

An effective user of games in the language classroom is not necessarily the teacher who has a long list of them in his head, but someone who has really thought about them and knows their ingredients and how they can be varied to call forth different activities and skills from the players. A teacher who understands games in this way is much more likely to be able to find or create games that will help his students to learn something as they play.

The most obvious way of classifying games from a language teacher's point of view is according to the language they practise: listening games, spelling games, games to help students build vocabulary, games that bring in a structure or a function, and so on. Figure 1 groups some of the games mentioned in this book under headings like this.

Looking at the language skills involved is a good start when considering whether a particular game will be suitable for a particular purpose, but other features may be just as important. Does the game need the teacher or someone else to act as leader or master of ceremonies, for example, or can it be played by groups of students on their own? Are the players competing, and, if so, in teams or individually, or is it a game in which players can co-operate? Is it an active noisy game or one which can be played

### i  Main language skill involved

*Spelling* Hangman, How Many Words Can You Make?, Spelling Bee
*Vocabulary* The Minister's Cat, Vocabulary Bingo, Vocabulary
   Pelmanism, Vocabulary Snap, What's the Word?
*Listening Comprehension* If, O'Grady Says, Which One Is It?
*Sound Discrimination* Pronunciation Bingo, Ship or Sheep?
*Reading Comprehension* Do As You Are Told
*Pronunciation* Pronunciation Find Your Partner

### ii  Language functions needed

*Giving and following instructions* Describe and Arrange, Describe
   and Draw, Furnish the Room
*Justification* Gifts for the Family, If, Picture Dominoes
*Expressing intention* Picture Dominoes, Gifts for the Family
*Agreement and disagreement* If, Gifts for the Family, Picture
   Dominoes
*Description* Describe and Draw, Find the Difference, The Lego Game
*Giving definitions* What's the Word?

### iii  Structures and grammatical points practised

*Question forms and short answers* Botticelli, I Spy, What's in the
   Bag?, What's My Line?
*'Is There?', 'There is', etc* Find the Difference
*'Have you got . . .?'* Find Your Partner, Happy Families
*'A . . . with . . .'* Describe and Arrange, Find Your Partner, Which
   One Is It?
*'What's the time . . .?', 'It's . . . o'clock'* What's the Time, Mr Wolf?
*Imperatives* Describe and Arrange, Describe and Draw, Do As You
   Are Told, Furnish the Room, If, O'Grady Says
*Second conditional* If He Were a Flower
*First and second conditional: 'Unless . . .', etc* If
*Prepositions* Describe and Arrange, Furnish the Room
*Past tenses* Past Tense Bingo, Past Tense Knockout

*Figure 1   Ways of categorising language games in this book*

quietly sitting at desks? These and other factors make different
games practically as well as pedagogically suitable for different
circumstances.

But, first of all, what is a game? How do games and learning fit
together? Looking at games in general, with examples from the
everyday world as well as from games specially designed with
teaching in mind, may help us to pick out features that will be

useful in language teaching and to see what other features will be less useful or even a waste of time.

A game consists of play governed by rules. Kicking a ball around in the park is play: adding rules about how and where you can kick the ball and giving your efforts an objective (like getting it between two goalposts) turn this play into a game. This is summed up very well in Gibbs' definition (1978: p. 60) of a game as 'an activity carried out by cooperating or competing decision-makers, seeking to achieve, within a set of rules, their objectives'. Applying this to teaching, one can see how students playing a game are encouraged to use language to some purpose. The purpose may be an artificial one determined by the game, but the skills exercised to achieve that purpose may be applied in every day life just like the skills used in 'ordinary' games. These are many and varied: coordination of hand and eye in games like netball and tennis, memory in a game like pelmanism, tactics in draughts or chess. Whatever the game, the skills employed in it are developed and improved through the repeated use they get, and, most important, the players want to improve the skills necessary for a game they enjoy. Both these principles apply to language games too.

For language-teaching purposes we need to make sure that the skills needed in any game are heavily enough weighted on the language side. For example, chess is an excellent game in itself, but it is almost useless from the language-teaching point of view. The obvious reason is that players need not communicate with one another during the game – at least not with words. The skills used in chess are intellectual and tactical and not linguistic. This is an extreme example, but many other promising-looking and well-known games depend too little on the use of language to be at all useful to language learners without considerable adaptation.

Another thing that needs to be taken into consideration is the proportion of luck to skill in any game. A lot of the fun of many games comes from the unpredictable outcome of a throw or move

or from the random dealing of cards, but the best games also allow players to use their skill to improve upon what chance brings them. Card games like bridge and whist are good everyday examples of this type of game. For the language classroom, a dash of luck in a game can make it more exciting and give the less able students a chance to catch up with their fellows for once, but a game that depends too much on luck and too little on use of language will waste students' time. The ideal combination is a game in which students have to react, by using language, to some challenge which may be decided by the luck of drawing a card or throwing a die, for example.

Games are closed activities. In other words they have a very clearly marked beginning and end. There is a definite point at which the game is over or has been 'won', and it is usually easy to see how near to that point the players are. One team is near the target score, for example, or someone has nearly finished all his cards or is close to the end of the board.

This closure is a very useful feature from the teacher's point of view. Because students know exactly when a game will be over or how close they are to finishing it, it helps to give some structure to what they are doing. It means that some games can run themselves with little organisational supervision from the teacher. This leaves him free to monitor students' performance and give them appropriate help on the language side. A well-designed game has its own momentum and is far less likely to 'run out of steam' than many other classroom activities. For pairs and small groups of students, games are often easier to keep going than even the best organised open-ended language-practice exercises.

The fact that all games have players may seem too obvious to mention, but if we compare the way in which players can be moved about and put into different relationships in different games with the ways in which a teacher may want to change the patterns within his class, the interesting possibilities offered by some games will become clear.

One of the main concerns of current methodology is how to vary what happens between students and teacher so that it goes beyond the classic teacher-to-whole-class pattern of interaction. The aim is often to get students talking to one another rather than always addressing their remarks to the teacher or having him mediate what they say to one another. All teachers must have had the experience of the student who refuses to look at anyone other than the teacher even when he is asked to say something to one of his classmates! Games that organise players into different patterns of interaction can help to break down such habits and inhibitions. Players can become so engrossed in a game that they forget to act in the classic classroom patterns and start to react directly to what their fellows are saying or doing. There is also, of course, a place for games in which the teacher leads the activity. Figure 2 shows some of the possibilities, and in Chapter 5 we shall be looking more closely at interaction patterns that suit different stages in a lesson.

The first thing that many people think of in connection with games is competition among players. This is a feature of many games, but there are some in which cooperation is the main thing. In other games there is both cooperation and competition – cooperation within a team and competition against another team, for example. The type of language use you wish to encourage may make you choose between cooperation or competition as the basis of players' relationships within a game (see Figure 3).

The actual language that is called for varies from game to game, but there is a basic division in what the students must do with it in order to achieve success. In some games the rules demand that a player should be formally correct in his handling of the language. For example, he must produce a structure correctly, pronounce or spell something correctly or recognise the difference between two sounds. Success in these things is judged, and marks or points are given accordingly. In other games success comes from conveying a message well enough for
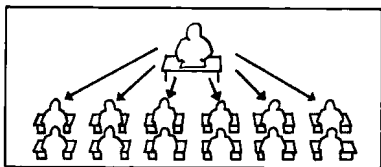
O'Grady Says
(leader challenging whole group)
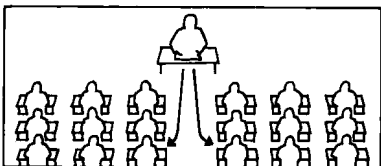
Ship or Sheep?
(leader challenging members of two teams)
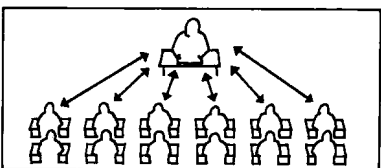
I Spy, What's My Line?
(leader challenging whole group, who can ask him questions)
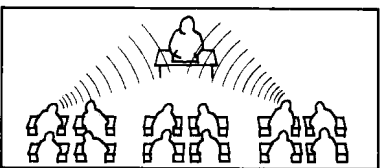
Describe and Draw
(pairs working together; teacher monitoring)
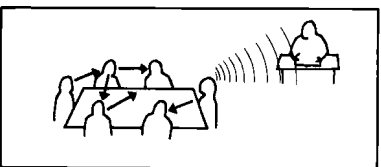
If, Gifts for the Family, Picture Dominoes
(small groups working together; teacher monitoring)

Find Your Partner
(everyone in class free to talk to everyone else)

*Figure 2   The interactions set up by different games*

6   Games and language teaching

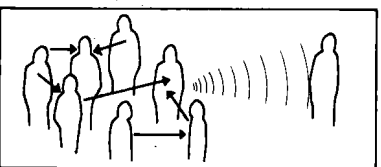| | Cooperative | Competitive |
|---|---|---|
| Grouping and interaction | Everyone together<br>Cooperating within a group, then with other groups<br>With a team against the rest<br>With a partner against the rest | One person against the rest<br>Each person individually |
| Aim | Completing something<br>Reproducing an unseen drawing, etc<br>Putting things in order, eg stages of a story<br>Grouping things, eg similar pictures<br>Finding a pair, eg one's partner<br><br>Finding something hidden, eg object in class<br>Solving a puzzle<br>Discovering a secret | Finishing first, eg using up cards, reaching end of board<br>Getting the most points, cards, etc<br>Surviving elimination<br>Avoiding penalties<br>Becoming challenger or 'he'<br>Avoiding becoming challenger or 'he' |
| Language functions required | Exchanging information<br>Giving and following instructions | Producing more formally correct language<br>Responding correctly to language more often<br>Questioning and extracting information more effectively<br>Drawing conclusions more quickly<br>Justifying a move successfully |
| Motivation | Information gap (see Index) between players to be bridged only by using language | Opinion gap (see Index) between players to be bridged by justifying moves<br>Challenge to get something right |

*Figure 3   Cooperative and competitive games compared*

another player to understand it. One player may, for example, be trying to describe a picture well enough for another to be able to draw it, or be trying to persuade other players that there is some link between the two pictures that he wishes to place together as part of a move in the game. It is obvious that the range of language in this sort of game will be much greater than that found in the 'correctness' games, and that the likelihood of making some mistakes whilst carrying out these demanding operations will be high. Players will nevertheless succeed in reaching the objective of the game provided that their overall message is clear. In other words, the emphasis in this type of game is more upon successful communication than absolute correctness. The different uses of games for formal correctness and games for communicative effectiveness will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter 2.

The rest of this chapter looks at the rules of a number of games in more detail, both as a way of showing how many different forms language games can take without deviating from the basic characteristics outlined in the beginning of the chapter, and to illustrate some of the ways of assessing success and failure in a game.

The first game, *What's My Line?* (or, in other words, What's My Job?), should be familiar to many teachers. It is included here as an example of a simple question-and-answer game where there is no reliance on non-linguistic skills and where pure chance has no part to play. Logical deduction is important, but the information upon which the logic can work can only be gathered through use of language.

Questions and answers make up the whole game. It is played entirely through language and can therefore be expected to help students improve their command of the language. *What's My Line?* has another virtue from the teacher's point of view since it is easy to predict fairly accurately the range of language that the students will need in order to play it. Questions and answers – listening and replying – will make up most of the game. Because

## WHAT'S MY LINE?

LEVEL Beginners, Intermediate     Oral/Aural

AGE 10 years to Adult

PLAYERS Challenger + Whole Class

or

Challenger + Competing Teams     **MAIN**

Challenger + Small Group     **LANGUAGE**

Pairs     Present Simple

TIMING 2-3 minutes per turn     Affirmative,

LOCATION Classroom     Negative

    VOCABULARY earn, work,     Question forms

etc. and names of jobs.     + Short Answers

DESCRIPTION The challenger thinks of a job or profession. The other players try to discover what it is by asking questions. They can only answer Yes/No questions like "Do you work indoors?" No WH- questions are allowed.

OPTIONS The number of questions can be limited to 20 after which the challenger has 'beaten the class.'

Teams can compete to see which can guess the job first. The person who guesses the job can take the place of the challenger, or players can take it in turn to challenge.

MATERIALS None essential, but pictures showing jobs and professions are useful as prompts to give challengers ideas.

of the topic of the game it is likely that the simple present will be the tense most often used, and verbs like 'work' and 'earn' will be obvious choices. It is easy to see where the game could fit into a course. In other words, the language points embedded in this game are clear and easy to define. Wherever possible, some indication of the language most likely to be elicited by each game described in this book is included. Another game in which language skills are exercised is *O'Grady Says,* but there is also a 'trick' element woven into the purely language-based part of the game to add to the fun without obscuring the main purpose.

*O'Grady Says* is a game in which players listen and react rather than producing any language of their own (except when acting as leader). They show their understanding by doing something. A student can be penalised for any mistake in his understanding, such as putting up his right hand when 'O'Grady' tells him to put up his left. The additional 'trick' element comes in the rule which says that he must only obey when 'O'Grady' tells him to do something. Even the best students are going to be caught out by this sometimes so that it has the effect of evening up everyone's chances. Devices like this or a judicious mixture of non-linguistic skills like fast running or catching a ball can help to keep up the interest, especially in classes where students are of different abilities. Language should, however, always be the basis of the game, as it is here.

Rewards and penalties within a game both keep the interest of the players high and give them some feedback on the success they are having in their use of language. The remaining games in this chapter illustrate different rewards and penalties that can be built into the play.

## CHANGING PLACES

A frequent reward or penalty is for one player to take the place of another. In the many games based on 'tag' or 'he', for example, one player tries to catch or touch any of the others. When a