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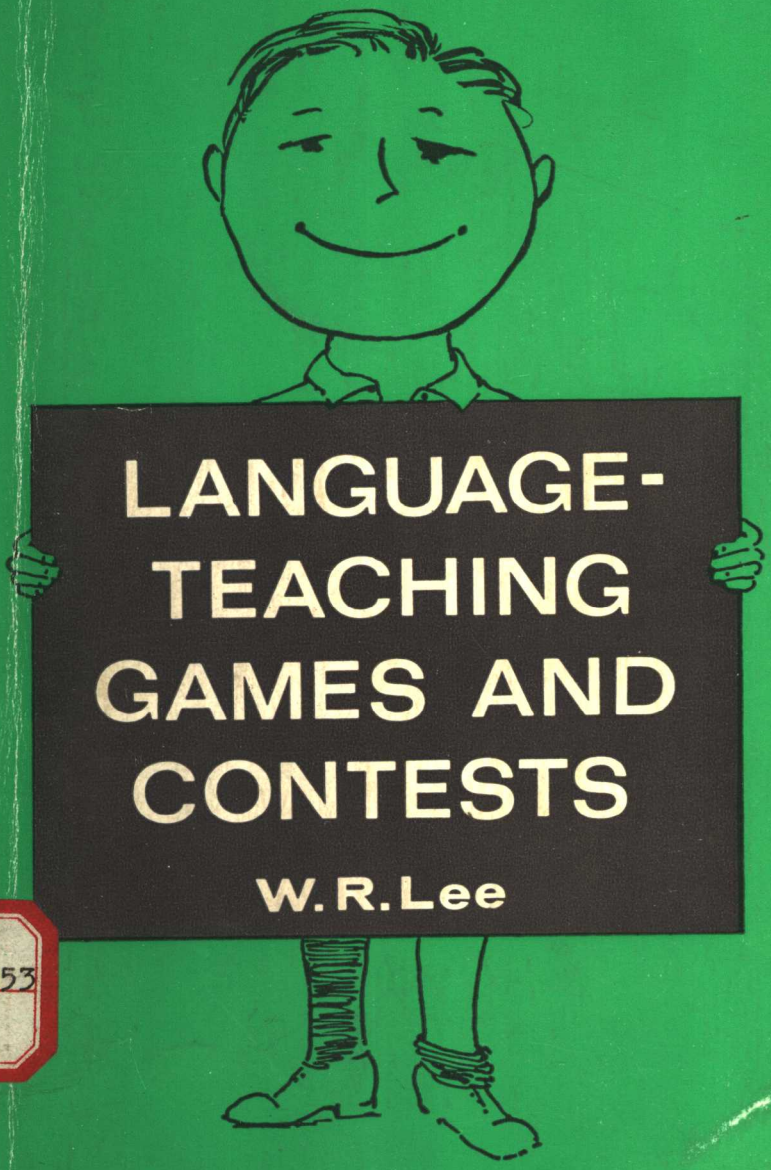

LANGUAGE-TEACHING GAMES AND CONTESTS

W. R. Lee

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Contents

1 Introduction

NOW THAT THE VERY IDEA OF CLASSROOM GAMES NO longer meets with disapproval, a book about language-teaching games and game-like activities for the classroom seems hardly to need justification. Indeed, that disapproval always did have a dreary and unenterprising air about it and arose in part from lack of observation and knowledge of how pupils learn—as thoroughly on occasion by means of what is called play as by means of what is called work. And, indeed, what great difference is there between 'work' and 'play' when concentration is sharply focused and the learner's energies stretched to the full?

The essence of many games lies in outstripping, in friendly fashion, someone else's performance, or in bettering one's own. There is a zest in trying to do this. The goal is visible and stimulating: we are usually delighted to put our best foot forward. Outdoing others, and improving on oneself, are by and large enjoyable pursuits. Enjoyable also is the active co-operation with one's fellows. In group or team games rivalry and co-operation go hand in hand. There are the other groups or teams to conquer, and friends to help conquer them. One's own work takes on importance in the latter's eyes.

If, as appears beyond doubt, a language can be learnt only by using it, this means copious repetition, bringing with it the danger of weariness. Language-teachers in particular have constantly to search for means of securing variety, and can ill afford to neglect whatever language-teaching possibilities games offer. The following chapters will show that these are considerable. It is not meritorious for the language-class to wear spiritless and solemn looks, or for the classroom to resemble a morgue. Fun and excitement, in language-learning

as in most adventures, can be profitable and very much in place.

Another point about language-learning has to be noticed: a language is learnt through using it—yes, but through using it *in situations*. Words and sentences on their own—disembodied words and sentences—these get the pupils nowhere. Parallel with the danger of monotony and boredom runs the danger of mechanical drills, the danger of blind parroting and of meaninglessness. The situations which bring a foreign language to life in the classroom are provided by gestures, by handling and touching things, by actions and incidents, by pictures, by dramatization, by interesting stories spoken or in print—and not least by certain contests and games.

Language-learning is many-sided, which need not discourage us from seeing it crudely as a matter of four skills: those of successful listening, speaking, reading, and writing. There are games here to develop all these abilities, a preoccupation with which is reflected in the division of the material and the arrangement of chapters. Chapters 2 and 3 are concerned mainly with the listening and speaking skills, chapters 4 and 5 largely with those of reading and writing. Pronunciation games and spelling games were distinct and numerous enough to deserve separate treatment, and those in chapter 7 had no obvious placing. There is not, and cannot be, any very rigid segregation of games along these lines, because some of the games which bring in reading or writing have an oral aspect as well.

A grouping into games for young children, for older children, and for adults was rejected because, although the book includes games for all three, it is often very much a matter of opinion and circumstance to which of these categories a particular game belongs. The author's experience is that there are many children's games which adults like playing, particularly if they see the language-learning point. Children are less interested in the language-learning point than in the game, but do not like to feel that the game is over-childish.

There are games here, too, for various stages of achievement, from very elementary to quite advanced.

Furthermore, a broad range of teaching circumstances has been borne in mind, and there are games for large and small classes, games requiring simple or no apparatus, and outdoor and indoor games.

Finally, there are games to give practice in the use of particular language patterns, such as short answers, or a tense, or *may*, or a comparison.

If full use is to be made of the book, the Index (p. 161) is an essential tool.

A game may, of course, be excellent as a game and yet of no use as an aid to language teaching. Such games have not been described here, and if they are needed for an end-of-term party or some other special occasion—well, they can be found in other books.[1] Also absent are a number of familiar language-games so-called which are more of a hindrance than a help. Among them are games in which disordered letters and jumbled words have to be put straight (why present the pupils needlessly with incorrect patterns?), games in which words are absurdly split up (*Iti sno thelp fult od ot his*), games in which only a few can take part while the rest have to look on, games calling for a very large vocabulary such as only a native speaker will possess, games which depend on geographical or historical knowledge, and mere puzzles.

In spite of such exclusions, *the word 'game' has been taken in a very broad sense.* Games proper, which have a definite beginning and end and are governed by rules, however simple, shade off into game-like activities which have a much less formal design, and many such have been included. There is no clear-cut line of division in language teaching between games and not-games. We could even go so far as to say that there is little necessary language-learning work which cannot, with the

[1] For instance, *The Pan Book of Party Games.*

exercise of a modest amount of ingenuity, be profitably converted, as far as school classes are concerned, into a game or something rather like a game. And why, oh why, should language learning not be combined with enjoyment?

Many of these games and game-like activities depend for their success, like other teaching, on good class organization. Forethought is indispensable.

Division into groups or teams, for instance, should not have to be done afresh every time: it can easily be a confused and time-wasting operation. On the whole it is best for a pupil to belong to the same team or group throughout the year, for it is disturbing, and a slight to one's feelings of loyalty, to be arbitrarily switched from one to another. If for some reason, perhaps because of absences, a team or group should fall below strength, allowances can be made in the point-scoring.

If teams or groups are to be named, the names should be suitable. *Sparrows*, *Robins*, and *Skylarks* may please young children (in countries where these birds are known), while older children will look upon such childish labels with scorn. *Lions* and *Tigers* and *Leopards* have a broader appeal, and colours (*Reds*, *Blues*, *Greens*, *Yellows*, etc.), though less interesting, are still more widely acceptable. *Roses*, *Bluebells*, *Daisies*, *Primroses*, etc., might suit little girls. Much depends on the country you are teaching in and what sort of pupils you have. In some schools there are teams or 'houses' which run through all the forms, and where this is so it will be most appropriate to use the names of these 'houses' or teams rather than to invent new ones. As it is impossible to find team-names which are universally suitable, 'A', 'B', 'C', etc., have been used in this book. It is up to the teacher to breathe life into these letters in his or her own way.

The groups and teams ought to be as evenly matched in ability as possible. If the more advanced pupils are unevenly distributed, certain teams or groups will usually win contests, and this is bound to be very discouraging to the others. But it is

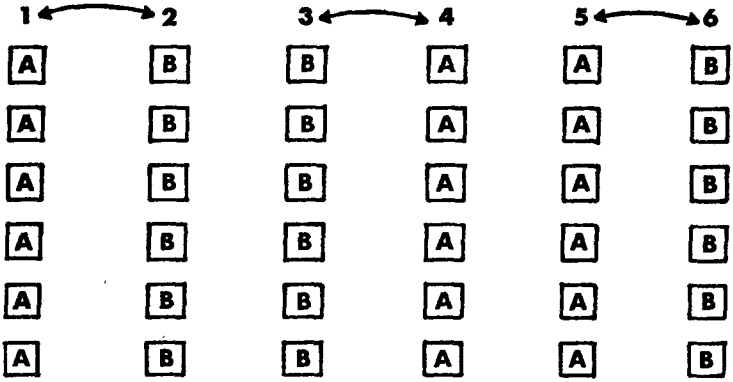
doubtful whether each child should have his or her 'opposite' —a pupil of similar achievement or ability—in the other teams, though some teachers may like to try this arrangement.

In a large class groups may be different from teams. If group-work can be undertaken at all—and there are some circumstances in which it cannot—there ought to be as many groups as possible. Organization into groups, all of which are active at the same time, is one way of multiplying language practice. A membership of five or six pupils is enough, though productive work can be done with fewer or more. There should be breathing-space and elbow-room between the groups when group-work is in progress, and the teacher should be able to get from one group to another quickly. This may mean that furniture has to be pushed back, but after all that is usually not difficult. And if the classroom is unbearably crowded, why not go outside? At some schools the writer has seen very good lessons taking place under the trees outside. All the possibilities need to be used to the utmost.

For group activities children should as a rule be seated, or stand, in a circle or semicircle. A group leader is essential, but need not always be the same girl or boy. For competitive purposes it is best to form groups out of the teams: that is to say, no group should contain pupils from more than one team.

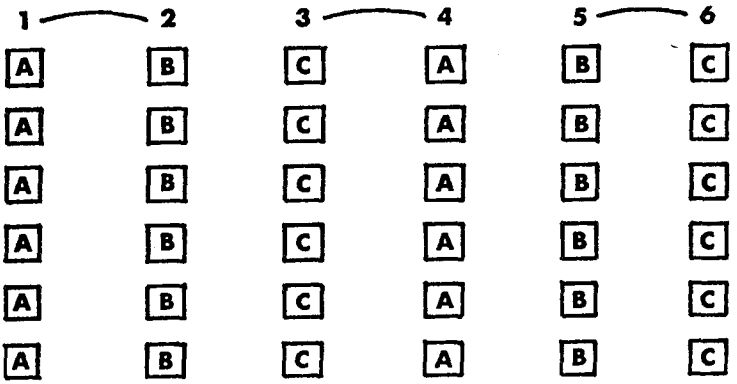
Useful though group activity is, however, we must face the fact that where the classroom is very full and there is nowhere else to go we have to content ourselves with teams. Except in a small class, teams are larger than groups.

How many teams should there be? This again depends partly on such matters as the size of the class and the kind of furniture. Two may be enough and is certainly a very manageable number —perhaps the left-hand and the right-hand sides of the class. Three is a reasonable number too—the middle and the two sides. Or the teams may be split. Thus in a class of 36 pupils sitting in six rows of single desks, there could be the following arrangement for two teams (A and B):



For work in two's pupils have only to face their opposite number across the gangway, and desks can be pushed towards or against each other if necessary. This arrangement also makes it easy to exchange books for mutual correction. If for some reason the members of the teams need to be all together, only the two outside lines (1 and 6) need change seats.

A class of the same size could have three teams (A, B, and C) seated thus:

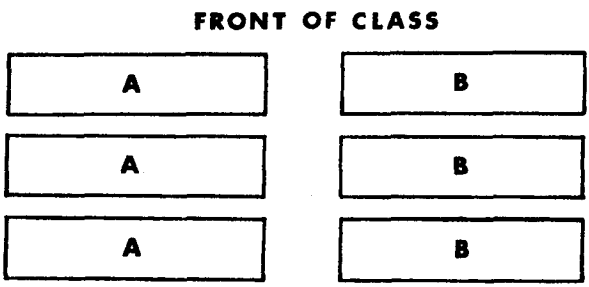


For each of the three teams to form a block, lines 2 and 4 and also 3 and 5 would have to change places.

With a big class it may be livelier to have four teams or even more. Here is a possible seating-plan for teams A, B, C, and D in a class of forty-eight pupils seated in two's (i.e. at double desks). The plan allows of easy work in pairs between members of the same team, and the lines are easily switched over to eliminate this if necessary (2 with 3, 6 with 7, 8 with 9, or in other ways to bring members of various teams next to each other).

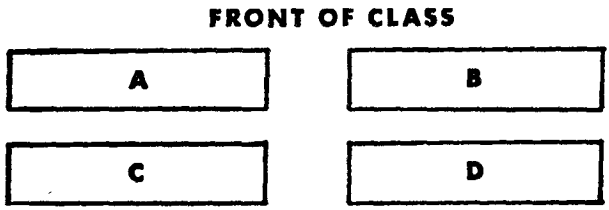
	1 2	3 4	5 6	7 8	9 10
1	A A	B B	B B	C C	D D
2	A A	B B	B B	C C	D D
3	A A	B B	B B	C C	D D
4	A A	C C	C C	C C	D D
5	A A	A A	- -	D D	D D

Children cannot learn a language really well and enjoyably unless they move about and do things while speaking it, and it is therefore a great advantage if they can get out readily from their seats. Single and double desks allow of easy movement, but long benches are inconvenient, pinning in all the pupils except those at the ends. Even so, there are types of bench from which it is relatively easy to escape. With benches it is probably best to have teams grouped together, thus:



In mixed classes boys and girls can belong to different teams if the teams are evenly matched, but usually it is preferable to have both girls and boys in every team.

Unless the classroom is small, it is unwise to have any team (or, for that matter, pupils) permanently at the back, where it is harder to hear. Thus the following arrangement is not a good one:



Here is a plan, for two teams (A—13, B—12) in a class of 25, by which activity with a pupil belonging to the other team can be obtained both in front (or behind) and at the side, members of different teams being seated alternately.

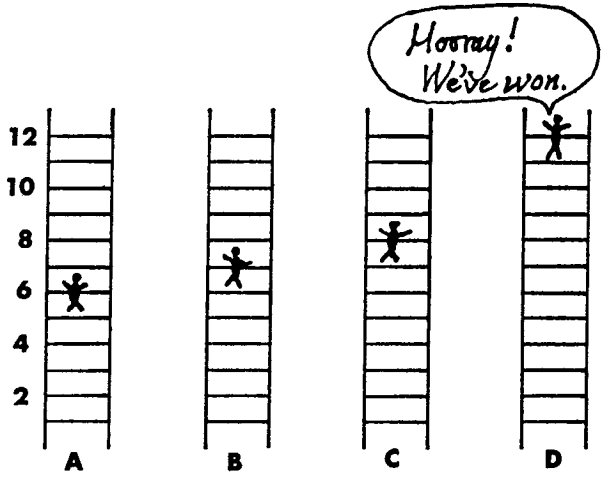
1	2	3	4	5
A	B	A	B	A
B	A	B	A	B
A	B	A	B	A
B	A	B	A	B
A	B	A	B	A

Teams may be distinguished by team badges, colours, etc.

For most inter-team games or contests points will be scored. As a stimulus to interest it is advisable to vary the *method of scoring*, though as a general rule it is not a good thing to have points deducted. To lose points rather than gain them is depressing and should certainly not be the normal procedure.

Psychologically it is much sounder to award points for success, even if this method keeps the scorer busy. Sometimes the teacher may find it advisable to keep the score, but pupils can also do this, taking it in turns.

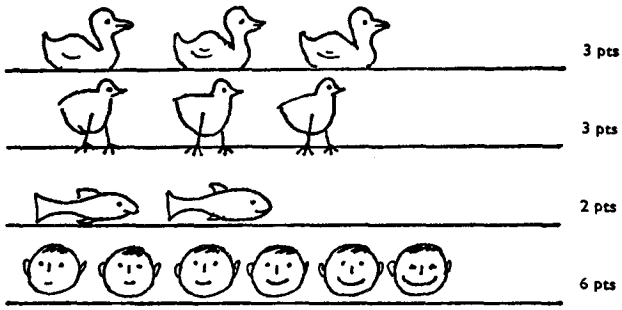
Bear in mind when considering how to represent the score visually that images of things which climb or expand are useful. Thus if the number of points likely to be scored is fairly small, they can be marked as they are won by a gradual progress up blackboard ladders. The scores of four different teams might then look something like this:



Human or animal shapes (e.g. pin-men) interest children more than mere dots or abstract symbols do and each can be different if coloured chalks are used. Where blackboard space is limited, one ladder can be enough to show the several scores. If you want to show long-term scores (say, weekly or monthly totals), more or less permanent ladders on to the rungs of which cardboard figures will hook may be worth making. When there is a maximum possible score the ladders can have an appropriate number of rungs leading up to a definite goal, such as the roof

of a house or the top of a tower ('Let's see who will get there first'). Balloons, aeroplanes, rockets (with the moon or Mars as a target) can be used in a similar way.

Another way of showing scores as they increase is to sketch one symbol for each point along a horizontal line. Anything drawable might do: trees of a familiar kind, fish, fruit, windmills, tents, ducks, faces (the expressions getting more and more cheerful as the line lengthens)—whatever seems suitable and appeals to the children of the place and age concerned. The objects may, of course, have some connexion with the names of the teams, especially if these are animal, bird, or flower names. Each team's score may be shown by different objects, or all by the same object. This kind of symbolization appeals chiefly to younger children. Here are some examples:



There are plenty of visual possibilities of this sort: adding wagons to a train, sleepers to a railway track, stars to a sky, branches to a tree, shading to the squares within a square, etc. The teacher must set his imagination and ingenuity to work, starting always from knowledge of his pupils. Children enjoy this sort of thing, and so do some of us adults: and anything that makes the learning go with an extra swing is worth while.

Scoring need not, of course, be shown visually. Stones or marbles or peas can be dropped into bags, nuts or beads or

beans placed in bowls, sticks laid in bundles. These are countable things, like the less interesting ticks or crosses or numbers on the blackboard. At a given moment, nevertheless, the score is unknown: it has to be reckoned up subsequently. Visual representation, on the other hand, runs along side by side with the game.

One cannot deny that it is easy to overdo competition and the winning of points. Not all language-learning activity, not all games and contests, need have a numerical aspect. We do not need point-scoring every day, and often it is out of place. Scoring in games or contests which merely have winners and losers can be shown in the way described above, or more simply. A house or tower can be built up on the blackboard stone by stone, one stone for every point, and the winner has the biggest or tallest building. Small boats may cross a river or sea inch by inch, the winner being the first to reach the other side. If you have two teams and a pair of scales, you may put a marble or small stone for each point in one scale or the other until the balance is tipped and the game won.

These are merely illustrations, and the inventive teacher (for whom this book has been written) will no doubt be able to improve on them. It is worth while giving some thought to class organization and scoring for language-games and varying the procedure fairly often, so that time is not wasted and boredom has no chance of rearing its head. It is essential, also, that lessons should be well prepared and pleasantly and briskly conducted so that all the pupils are active in using the language most of the time.

One cannot always start playing a language-game in such a manner that the pupils will pick it up without an explanation of how it is played. Sometimes a preliminary explanation of procedure is necessary. Should this ever be given in the mother tongue? If the explanation would be laborious in the foreign language, the mother tongue should be used. A very great deal at all stages, however, can be conveyed with the help of gestures

and prompting, and the more advanced the pupils are, regardless of age, the less they will need the mother tongue on any such occasions. It is a pity to use the precious minutes of our language-lessons for anything but the foreign language. And, of course, in many places there is not *one* mother tongue but several, even a number: and this situation obliges the teacher to keep to the foreign language all the time.

Few games in this book call for preliminary explanation which cannot be given, with the aid of prompting and gesture, in the foreign language itself. Many of them, however, require not explanation so much as an example of how they are played, and the teacher has first to join in the game, acting as leader. Then pupils should in turn take the teacher's or leader's part. The more actively all the pupils take part in a game the better.

Some of the games contained in this book are familiar, for many sources have been combed through.[1] Others the author has invented. Nearly all the games have been tried out at one time or another with classes, by the author or his students, or by other teachers. Nevertheless in some circumstances they will need adaptation: not all are suitable everywhere, regardless of the kind of classroom or class. This is meant to be a practical book, but it should not therefore be used blindly. A good teacher's thought and imagination are required.

A final introductory point—games bring teacher and pupils closer together in an agreeable way, and that too helps to ease the process of learning and teaching.

[1] If a game is very familiar to the pupils in their mother tongue it is better not to try to play it in the foreign language, for the tendency to use the mother tongue is bound to be distracting.