

# Vocabulary practice Games

GAMES ARE AN IMPORTANT PART OF A TEACHER'S REPERTOIRE. ALTHOUGH THEY ARE recreational activities by nature whose main purpose is enjoyment, in the language learning process their purpose is to reinforce what has already been taught. In the course of a game, learners are engaged in an enjoyable and challenging activity with a clear goal. Often, students are so involved in playing the games that they do not realize they are practising language.

In addition to spelling and grammar, games can provide practise in another key language area: vocabulary. Such games facilitate initial practice and periodic revision of vocabulary in an enjoyable context, thus making classroom vocabulary study an amusing and satisfying experience for teacher and student alike. Some games are played with the whole class, often with the students divided into two teams, while others can be played in pairs or small groups. Now let us look at what games the teacher may exploit while working with words.

1. *Memory game* begins with one student saying a sentence and the next student in turn adds another word or phrase to the sentence, repeating what has gone before in the same order, for example,

- Student 1: *I went shopping.*
- Student 2: *I went shopping and bought a jacket.*
- Student 3: *I went shopping and bought a jacket and a cap.*

and so on. Anyone who cannot add to the list or makes a mistake in ordering the words must drop out of the game. The last player remaining is the winner. This game may be exploited while working with words related to any topic.

2. *Word association* requires students to name all the words they know associated with any lexical category. One student says a word from the category, then the next student must immediately say another word from the category. The next student continues with another word and so on around the class. For the category *classroom*, for example, the game might begin this way:

- Student 1: *chalk*
- Student 2: *book bag*
- Student 3: *tape recorder*
- Student 4: *ruler*

Anyone who can't think of a word immediately has to drop out of the game.

3. *Miming* can be used as a guessing game. This wordless activity leads the learners to talk quite naturally. Someone mimes an action and the others try to guess what it is. This kind of guessing game can provide further practice of a wider variety of lexical and grammatical units, such as those related to occupations. One student chooses a job and mimes a typical activity that it involves. The others try to guess the job by asking either about the activity or the job, for example, *Do you work outside (in an office)?*, *Do you wear a uniform (use a tool)?*. The student miming provides only nonverbal clues to help the rest of the class guess what the job is.

4. *Guess the tool* provides a good opportunity to develop students' skills in defining words and paraphrasing. For this game the teacher puts the students in pairs, facing each other, and gives a card with two words written on it to each student and asks them not to show

each other their cards. The two words written on the cards are a tool and a related occupation, for example, saw and carpenter, chalkboard and teacher. One at a time, each student describes the tool without saying its name. The other student has to guess the tool and name an occupation that uses the tool, for example,

- Student 1: *It is used for painting walls and doors.*
- Student 2: *It is a paintbrush. A decorator uses a paintbrush.*

5. *Human sounds* can be used after students have learned the vocabulary of some of the sounds that humans make, for example, cheer, cough, cry, hum, scream, shout, sing, whisper, whistle, and mumble, and have grouped them according to the following categories: happiness, pain, sadness, disapproval, annoyance, fear, and excitement. The teacher gives the class situations in which people make noises and asks students to make the sound corresponding to each situation as well as say what it is, for example:

- Teacher: *you are in a choir*  
Student: sings and says *I am singing*
- Teacher: *you don't want the others to hear what you are telling someone*  
Student: whispers something and says *I am whispering*
- Teacher: *you are in great pain*  
Student: screams and says *I am screaming*

At the end of the game, the teacher may get students to suggest new sentences and contexts in which to use these verbs.

6. *Suggestion chain* involves reviewing both leisure activities vocabulary and ways to make suggestions. For this game students first make an individual list of leisure activities. Then using their lists, one student begins by suggesting something to do in the evening or next weekend, for example, *Let's go to the concert*. The next student has to disagree and, using another way of making a suggestion, suggest a different activity, for example:

- Student 1: *Let's go to the concert!*  
Student 2: *No, not the concert.*  
*What about going to the cinema?*
- Student 3: *We could go to the football match.*  
Student 4: *No, not football. Why don't we visit Alec?*

Students continue the game until they have used all of their leisure activities. Another way to end this game and have a winner is to eliminate anyone who can't think of anything to do, repeats a leisure activity that was suggested before, does not use another way of making a suggestion, or uses the wrong verb form in the suggestion.

7. *Notices and warnings* practises the phrases and short sentences people come across in an English-speaking environment. For this game the teacher needs to prepare two sets of cards. The cards in the first set (notices) contain phrases and sentences of different kinds that give information or warnings. The cards in the second set (settings) contain the names of places where people would see or hear each notice. The teacher divides the class into two teams, distributing the notice cards among the students of one team and the setting cards among the students of the other team. One member of the notices team begins by reading aloud the notice on his or her card. The members of the other team quickly decide which settings from those on their cards is where the notice would be made. For example:

- Student from team 1: *sorry, tickets are sold out*  
Student from team 2: *outside a cinema*
- Student from team 1: *queue for currency exchange*  
Student from team 2: *inside a bank*

The order can be reversed, for example:

- Student from team two: *beware of pickpockets*  
Student from team one: *on a crowded bus or subway*

Afterwards, the teacher assigns students to think of some other possible notices and warnings that they would find in one of these places: a hospital, an airport, a library, a school, a hotel, or a park.

8. *Exaggerate* gives students the opportunity to practise strong adjectives, such as *enormous, delicious, fascinating, horrible, marvelous, astonished, furious, and terrified*, along with intensifying adverbs, such as *extremely, quite, rather, really, and absolutely* by answering questions. Beforehand the teacher must prepare cards, each with a question, which may be tag (He is funny, isn't he?), negative (Wasn't she surprised when she heard the news?), or yes/no

(Did you have a bad day?). The game begins with the cards face down on the table. The teacher calls on someone to pick a card and read out the question. Then that person calls out the name of another student, who has to answer the question using an appropriate strong adjective, for example,

- Student 1: *They serve nice dishes in that restaurant, don't they? Bob!*
- Student 2 (Bob): *Nice? The food is absolutely delicious there!*

The second student now picks a different card, reads out the question, and names another student to answer it, and the game continues. Any student who does not use a strong adjective and/or intensifying adverb while answering is eliminated. It is best to play this game after the students have matched common, weak adjectives with their stronger synonyms.

9. *Expand the sentence* should be played after students have learned about ordering a series of adjectives in English, because this game provides practise in placing adjectives in the correct order. The teacher starts by giving a short sentence. Students, in turn, have to expand the sentence with an adjective by putting it in the right place and then saying the sentence aloud. A player who cannot think of an appropriate adjective or puts it in an unacceptable position must drop out. For example:

- Teacher: *She bought a jacket.*
- Student 1: *She bought a black jacket.*
- Student 2: *She bought a long-sleeved black jacket.*
- Student 3: *She bought a long-sleeved black wool jacket.*

The game continues until the sentence would sound unusual in natural speech. The teacher can then start a new sentence with the students remaining in the game.

## Conclusion

The games included here are by no means an exhaustive selection. I have only tried to present some nuggets from my teaching for others to try out in their classes. These games are intended to be integrated into the general language syllabus of any course book and can be an important and enjoyable way of practising vocabulary for learners. If the examples I've provided do not allow teachers to exploit

a particular game in other teaching situations, they may need to adapt it to the proficiency level of their classes by changing the target lexis. A teacher may also modify any game to suit different teaching environments. I hope these suggestions will act as a catalyst to trigger

further ideas for teachers to create games of their own.

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