

Teaching English to very young learners: Using games

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Why games?

Games are a valuable activity for language learning, especially for very young learners. Children enjoy games and thus participate without anxiety. Games can motivate children greatly and they are activities which are usually familiar to children as regards structure, rules etc. Due to this familiarity they link back to the children's home background.

Games are mostly inclusive activities in that they involve all the children and they can cater to different learning styles and different personalities. They are also activities which are naturally repetitive, thus maximising input, frequency of target items without boring the students. A simple guessing game can be played numerous times with children despite possibly limited language (e.g. "Is it a ...?"). The students will happily repeat the structure without getting bored as it is part of a game and has a real communicative function.

Games are simple structured activities which may involve little language but are meaningful to students and involve the whole self (cognitively and emotionally), thus creating strong associations with the language used (Fleta, 2009).

Games are particularly valuable for a child beginning to learn a foreign language. Children just beginning to learn a new language need some time to adapt to the language, its sounds and rhythms. They need exposure to input before they experiment with producing language. Some children will gladly experiment with production but some can be shy and require more time. This 'silent' time/period should be offered to the children and they should never be pressured into producing language. Games, therefore, offer an important tool which allows children to listen to and comprehend language without requiring production. They can participate fully in all the activities without being pressured to produce language.

Finally games are social activities which enable the development of social skills such as co-existence and collaboration.

When should games be used? What games?

Games can be used to enhance any part of the lesson. They can be used to present, practice, recycle/revise or assess any language. They can be used to develop listening, speaking, reading

and even writing skills. What is important is that YOU decide what your focus is. What is your particular aim for using the specific game in class? This is important in that a clear learning goal distinguishes games as learning activities from games as enjoyable past-times. Games should be seen as learning activities which can enhance students' language development if used systematically with clear goal-setting.

When do you play a game? The time you decide to implement a game, will also affect what kind of game you play. Games can stir or settle a class so you should choose according to the time of day, your particular students and their mood on that day!

There is a wide variety of games which can be used with young language learners. Here we will focus on three categories to get you going:

Flashcard games: these games are played with a set of flashcards which may be purchased from bookshops or prepared by you and your students

Ball games: ball games require a soft ball which you can use in class without worrying about breaking windows or hurting students!

Action games: action games require movement. They might excite a class so you should perhaps choose carefully when to use them.

A. Write down a description of each game after we played it:

Flashcard games	
Listen and Find (pics or words)	
Disappearing pictures/words	
Kim's game (pics or words)	
Pelmanism (pics or words)	

Running game (pics or words)	
Swat! (pics or words)	
Noughts and crosses (pics or words)	
Pass the card (pics or words)	
Bingo (pics or words)	

Action games	
Simon says	
Robots	
In/out – hot/cold	
Step on the card!	

Hit the card!	
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Ball games	
I'm	
I like	
Say a different colour/animal ...	

Other games which can be used when learners are starting to read and write:

Hangman

Word searches

Crazy matching words with pictures

Read and draw

Finger writing

Jumbled sentences

Anagrams

Word snakes

Word puzzles

Board games

Tools which can help you create flashcards, bingo cards, board games and more:

<http://www.toolsforeducators.com/>

<http://www.mes-english.com/flashcards.php>

<http://www.esl-kids.com/flashcards/flashcards.html>

<http://www.esl-kids.com/flashcards/flashcards.html>

<http://www.eslflashcards.com/>

<http://www.eslhq.com/>

Create online games:

<http://classtools.net>

<http://www.quia.com/>

<http://www.funbrain.com/>

More ideas for games:

<http://www.esl4kids.net/games.html>

<http://iteslj.org/c/games.html>

http://www.esljunction.com/esl_games/

<http://www.teachenglishinasia.net/tefl-tesl-games-and-activities-directory>

Task until our next session:

- B. Choose a few of the websites to experiment with.
- C. Prepare a set of flashcards for one of the thematic Units of Stage 1
- D. Use some of the above games to create a mini lesson plan introducing and/or revising a particular thematic unit from Stage 1