

# Too Much Work and No Play Make Chris a Dull Boy

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Children and young adults like having fun. They often engage in games and game-like activities just for the sheer pleasure of participating. Elementary and younger secondary school students often experience a transitional period in which more traditional learning activities are substituted for play and game-like activities. The ideal at this juncture is to combine working and playing through games with teaching objectives so that our young learners are engaging in useful and enjoyable language experiences.

This is, of course, not that easy. Second language learning, whatever the approach, involves using language repetitively, which is potentially a tedious, boring, off-putting process. If it is possible to turn this process into games and other activities which the target group of students find amusing and exciting, then, whatever their ages, learning will be more exciting and enjoyable.

## Some Characteristics of Games

Games should be fun, enjoyable, intrinsically motivating, and worth playing for their own sake. The latter criterion is paramount for effective language games.

Games all contain a competitive element. Sometimes participants compete with opponents by answering questions or by racing against time, or they may pit their wits against a particular problem as in crossword puzzles, or try to improve their own performance or score on computer or video games. With fun as the critical element, games should have clearly defined objectives and rules which, together with competitiveness, contribute to the intrinsic pleasure of such activities.

## Criteria for Selecting Games in TESOL

1. APPEAL. The game should appeal to most students in the class. There are many games with a proven track record of popularity which can be successfully used as vehicles for TESOL instruction if they are appropriate to the age level and background of the students.

2. **TARGET LANGUAGE USE.** The game has to be designed or modified so that students are obliged to use the target language in order to participate. If the game can be played in the classroom context without recourse to the language being studied, then it has no educational value from an ESL point of view.

3. **SIMPLICITY.** The game should be simple enough to be understood after a brief explanation. Ideally, its structure should be based on a game with which the students are already familiar. It should be remembered that the overriding intention is to inject some fun into the lesson without compromising educational objectives. Grappling with vague instructions can readily defeat the educational objectives of most games.

4. **MONITORING STUDENTS' USE OF THE TARGET LANGUAGE.** The teacher must be able to control the correct use of language or reliably delegate that responsibility. The ease with which games can be monitored linguistically should be a significant factor in the selection process. Games like "Scrabble" and "Boggle", in which students form words outside meaningful contexts, preclude effective monitoring since the teacher has no way of knowing if students understand the words they've chosen.

5. **TIME-EFFECTIVENESS.** The game should be time-efficient in terms of the amount of time devoted to language use. Many activities involving cutting, pasting, and colouring-in are undoubtedly enjoyable but hardly justifiable when one considers that little or no language is required.

6. **CONTROL.** The game should be easy to organize and control, given the type of students in the group. Excessive physical activities are best avoided with high-spirited students who climb the walls at the slightest pretext. By the same token, it might be advisable to avoid such games with shy, sensitive, introverted students who would experience a degree of embarrassment.

7. **GROUP PARTICIPATION.** It is important that the whole class be engaged as players or spectators. If only two students at a time can play a particular game and the linguistic or logical motivation for audience interest is low, then such a game would be an unsatisfactory choice to use with a class of thirty students.

8. **LANGUAGE LEVEL.** The language level must be appropriate for the students if the game is to be a success. Normally, the more advanced the students are, the easier it becomes to select games for them. Beginners are limited to the basic vocabulary and structures they have learned, and many games like "Twenty Questions" would be beyond the linguistic capabilities of beginners.

9. **MATERIALS.** Materials can be expensive or difficult to produce. Financial considerations might put computer games on the "Reconsider Only If..." list. On the

other hand, if materials can be obtained without putting too much strain on the teacher's time or budget, then they should be considered a worthwhile investment.

10. **VERSATILITY.** The same game can often be applied to more than one aspect of language learning and teachers should be aware of this so that a popular game is exploited to its full potential. "Noughts and Crosses" ("Tic-tac-toe") can be used to practice vocabulary, grammar, reading and culture—as well as just numbers.

11. **TIME.** The game should be over before students' interest flags. In fact it's best to always leave your audience wanting more. Reasonably fast action should be a feature of team games where players also spend a lot of time as passive spectators. Thus, games such as "Chess" and "Monopoly" have very little if any value.

12. **VARIETY.** Teachers should have a wide variety of games in their repertoires. If the games are very similar, differing only in name and little else, the element of fun can erode rapidly.

### **Integrating Games Into Our Teaching**

A number of ways of integrating games into our teaching program is possible depending on our style and approach to teaching. Each system will have its merits and disadvantages. A sound basis for incorporating games into classroom practice is to categorize them under the following headings: vocabulary, grammar, miscellaneous (e.g. the alphabet and the numbers), and the more traditional categories of listening, speaking, reading and writing. We might point out that in our experience, very few games worth playing seem to focus on the writing skill.

There will obviously be some overlap between the divisions with some games and entries which fit under more than one heading. If we see TESOL in terms of vocabulary building, grammatical explanations, and practice in the macro skill areas, then these categories will be helpful in achieving a balance when integrating games into our teaching programs. There are functional and affective classifications as well.

### **Finding Interesting Non-TESOL Materials**

Millions of games, puzzle books, and comics are sold every year on the open market under competitive conditions and young people rush to buy them. No youngster would rush out to buy an audiolingual text book except under extreme duress.

As educators, we know that most educational materials are produced for the mythical average student. While we do need such texts, we also need to be constantly aware of other resources which we can use in our ESL classes even though this may not have been their creator's intention. We need to identify, imitate, modify, and adapt. The *Guinness Book of Records* is typical of such resources.

Other examples include the *Funny Monster Travel Pack* (Mitson 1987), published by Studio Publications, which offers a whole range of games and related activities which can be used in the ESL class with virtually no modification:

The MONSTER MARATHON—Board game; WHERE DID YOU GET THAT HAT? —Word game; COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD WORD SEARCH—Magic words; IT'S SO EASY—Word game; PICTURE POSTCARDS—Speaking game; TRAVEL MATCH—Word game; WHERE IN THE WORLD?—Reading game; CRACK THE CODE—Reading game; CONTINENTAL WORD SEARCH—Magic words; COLOURING PAGE—(Needs colour code) Reading game; GETTING THERE—Speaking game; AROUND THE GLOBE—Word game; MISSING LETTERS—Word game; TRANSPORT WORD SEARCH—Magic words; INITIAL LETTER PUZZLE—Word game; MISPLACED—Word game; NATIONAL COSTUMES—Speaking game; WHERE AM I?—Word game.

An entire class set of a magazine like *Games for Juniors* can be purchased for little more than the average cost of one hardback textbook. Listed below are the contents of the Spring 1990 issue and, as with the *Funny Monster Travel Pack*, most of the listed items may be used in ESL classes with little or no modification:

PICTURE PUZZLES—Picture crossword, Connect the dots, Secrets of the swamp, Who's hues, Triangle tangle, Trick and treats memory test, Out of order, Mixture pictures, Country paths, Lost in space, Match up, What's wrong with this picture? Hats off, Trick or treat maze. WORD PLAY—Riddle search, Crisscross puzzle, Riddle X-word, D is for dollhouse, Build-a-word, Puzzling fill-ins, Disabled vehicles, Opposites attract, Alphabetically speaking, Among the flowers, Crisscross puzzle No. 2. MYSTERY, LOGIC AND NUMBERS—Number crunch, Dinosaur quiz, Magic hex, Tough teasers. GAMES, TRIVIA AND CONTESTS—Dinosaur challenge, Just for Kids—Cooking, Games and Puzzles, The jungle game, Funny business competition, Mixture pictures.

As these examples illustrate, games and game-like activities can add a new dimension of pleasure and involvement to language learning in your classroom. While the section which follows lists some of the more formal games literature we are familiar with, we'd like to stress that the best ideas may come from watching what your students enjoy doing in their leisure and adapting that to your classroom.

### Notes

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2. Weed (1975) and Cortez (1975) also provide criteria for the use of games and some 1960s resources.

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