
Line-up Spelling Bee: A New Twist on a Classic Learning Activity

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Although the traditional spelling bee is something that many of us took part in during our younger days, it does not seem to be used very often in the ESL/EFL classroom. Perhaps the reason for this is the usually large size of these classes and the fact that students who are eliminated early naturally become bored and restless.

Following the simple modifications to this activity as outlined below, however, eliminates this problem. My experience with both children and adult language learners has shown that these modified "line-up spelling bee" procedures can make the "good old spelling bee" an enjoyable and effective teaching tool.

The activity itself is intended to be used as either a follow-up or review of the meaning and spelling of vocabulary items. In addition, it is a good diagnostic tool for pinpointing words that are giving students trouble. Finally, it is an excellent way to encourage clear, easy to read handwriting.

Traditional Spelling Bee Procedures

For those readers who are not familiar with the traditional spelling bee, it runs along the following, basic lines:

1. The teacher divides the class into two teams (or selects two team leaders who take turns naming people they want on their respective teams until all the members of the class have been selected).

2. The teams line up on opposite sides of the room.

3. The teacher says a word to the first player on one team who then spells it aloud.

4. If the player misspells it, he/she sits down and the same word is given to the first player on the opposite team.

5. If that player spells it correctly, he/she remains standing and the next player on the other team gets the next word.

6. Play continues in this way, the two team alternating turns, and any player who makes a mistake sits down. When the last player on a team has had a turn, play returns to the first player. If time allows, play continues until only one player is left standing.

Line-up Spelling Bee

A line-up spelling bee bears some similarities to the traditional type, but there are also some critical differences, as the procedural outline below indicates. It can be played with learners at any level although it seems to work best with younger learners. The time required is about ten to fifteen minutes.

The teacher will need a card file with one vocabulary item per card. (A card file offers the teacher the advantage of being able to quickly and easily add, remove, or rearrange the cards.) The vocabulary items, of course, are selected by the teacher on the basis of course objectives, student difficulties, etc.

Each card should have the selected English word on one side and the students' native-language equivalent on the other side. Chalk and a blackboard are also needed, but these are found in almost every classroom and require no special preparation. No student materials are called for.

Procedure:

1. The teacher divides the students into two to five teams depending on the size of the class.
2. The members of each team form a line perpendicular to the blackboard.
3. The teacher or one of the students acts as caller. (Note: Teachers who do not speak the students' native language can select a card, look at it, and then hand it to the caller, who then reads out the native-language equivalent on the back of the card.)
4. The caller reads the native-language equivalent of the word on the card, and the team members at the blackboard compete to be the first to write the target-language (i.e., English) equivalent of the word on the blackboard. Students are allowed to encourage each other, but they are not allowed to help each other.
5. The teacher erases all but the first, correctly spelled word.
6. The students at the front of each line now move to the end of their team's line, and the next team member moves up to be ready to write the next word. In this way, all students remain active players throughout the activity.

7. The caller gives the next word.

8. The activity continues until all the words have been called or the teacher says that time is up. This should be a fast review of material, so ten to fifteen minutes should be enough. The activity can be repeated later with new or frequently missed words.

9. The team (rather than any one individual as in the case of a traditional spelling bee) with the most words on the blackboard at the end is declared the winner.

Variation 1: The teacher says the word in the target language (i.e., English) rather than the native-language equivalent, and students then write it. The "illogical" English language sound-spelling correspondence comes home quickly.

Variation 2: The teacher says the word in the target language (i.e., English) rather than the native-language equivalent. Students must correctly spell it (as in variation one), and then, for an additional point, correctly pronounce it.

About the Author

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