

LEARNING WITH GAMES

by Rosita Ah Ching

One of the great problems faced by the modern day TESL teacher is how to keep students actively involved and interested in learning another language without impeding the progress of the brighter students or drowning the slower students in a mass of words which they don't understand. A teacher may gear the lesson at a speed for the top half of the class and force the students who are having a harder time to struggle along at a rate too fast for them or teach at a speed comfortable for the class mean and let the faster students suffer through the drills which are no longer a challenge to them.

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This question is not a new one but has been relevant to teachers throughout history. It reaches even greater significance to the TESL teacher, however, since he or she is faced with the task of teaching students to speak and think in a foreign language.

One method of successfully meeting the challenge is to use various language games dispersed between class drills and lectures to keep the students interested in their studies as well as achieving on their own level. Language games provide several different advantages over regular classroom activities. As Julia Doleson points out in her essay from *Readings on English as a Second Language* (p. 361), language games (1) provide an intellectual challenge (2) require no time consuming correction of written responses but provides immediate feedback on any mistake the student may make and (3) are fun and relaxing as well as competitive. Probably the greatest advantage of playing

games is that the class can be broken up into smaller groups of students and each group given games which meet its intellectual needs and keep students challenged on their various level.

At this time, a second question should arise — "Are games successful in practice as well as in theory?" To answer this question, it is necessary to go directly to the classroom and examine two separate teaching situations.

Thelma Lonemori, a graduate from the Church College of Hawaii has found language pronunciation games to be very successful in her teaching situation at Hilo High School on the big island. A great majority of her students are from Filipino extraction and have a difficult time pronouncing labiodental fricatives such as [f] and [v].

"I tried different drills with my students to try to get the right pronunciation of [f] and [v] but as my students left the classroom and began talking to each other, they fell back into their old incorrect speech habits. Finally in frustration, I began looking into language pronunciation games. One game in particular was very successful. I divided the class into boys against girls and kept score. The losers had to take home a short exercise as homework while the winning team had none. I would direct a question containing difficult words which a student would have to ask.

Example:

Emily: Not me Miss Lonemori, Joseph did you take her favorite violin?

Joseph: Not me, Phyllis, did you take her favorite violin?

I would keep the pace very fast so that the students were rapidly questioning one another. As the sentence got old I would rotate it with others. The students enjoyed

the game and I believe their pronunciation was successfully improved."

Another teaching situation where games were found to be successful was in my own class for the Samoans of Laie who wanted to improve their English. After several class periods of drilling and lecturing on prepositions, I noticed that my students weren't understanding the correct usage of several prepositions. In the Samoan language, the word "ile" as in "kaele ile sami" is used for both "in" and "to." Since the one word is used for both English words, my students were confused as to when to use which preposition. I began using Alice Pack's preposition exercises stressing the problem prepositions. These have a hand-out with a blank space where prepositions should go. One student has the sheet with the missing words while the other holds the

answer key; students drill each other. I kept score over how many words each student missed so the exercise became a competitive game which was both entertaining as well as informative.

The two teaching situations cite how language games have been found to be effective in practice as well as in theory. In the introduction to *Language Games and Songs for Core English*, the author states: "Language games and songs have an important part in any elementary ESL program. Both provide an opportunity for the controlled repetition which must precede fluency; and they offer to the young child especially, a natural incentive to master a skill by practicing it at play." Language games are indeed a successful tool in accomplishing the difficult task of teaching students to speak and think in a foreign language."