



**Article Title:** Methodology for choosing and implementing learning oriented games in the ESL classroom

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**Abstract:** As ESL teachers it is our responsibility to help our students learn their target language in as best a method as possible. Unfortunately for many ESL teachers, games are either underemployed or non-existent in the classroom, or are relegated to the sidelines, thrown into the lesson plans as an afterthought and more as a time filler than an actual teaching tool. This paper serves to discuss the reasoning behind using games in the ESL classroom and provides ESL teachers with some methodology in choosing an appropriate game to employ in their lessons.

## **Content**

Before we even begin the discussion about choosing a game to employ in the ESL classroom the decision has to be made to use games in the first place. Many ESL teachers are hesitant to use games in their lessons because they may seem too immature for their target audience, they feel that games may detract from the educational environment they are providing, or they feel that games are mainly a waste of precious teaching time. In the current day and age, where lessons are relegated to a 40 minute session in between bell drones, the decision to implement games in an already packed ESL lesson is a difficult one to face. However, upon reviewing pertinent research material, the ESL teacher should find no problem justifying their use in the classroom.

## **Deciding to use games in the ESL classroom**

As ESL teachers it is our responsibility to create not only safe and conducive learning environments for our students, but it is placed on our shoulders the burden of also creating meaningful and student oriented lesson plans. Wright (1984 et. al.) says that:

Language learning is hard work ... Effort is required at every moment and must be maintained over a long period of time. Games help and encourage many learners to sustain their interest and work.

This is doubly reinforced by the same sentiment in Ersoz (2000):

Language learning is a hard task which can sometimes be frustrating. Constant effort is required to understand, produce and manipulate the target language. Well-chosen games are invaluable as they give students a break and at the same time allow students to practice language skills.

The sentiment across the board can be best summarized by a quote from Kim (1995): There is a common perception that all learning should be serious and solemn in nature, and that if one is having fun and there is hilarity and laughter, then it is not really learning. This is a misconception. It is possible to learn a language as well as enjoy oneself at the same time. One of the best ways of doing this is through games.

In all the research material examined for this paper, in fact, in almost all ESL material available, no where does it provide any evidence that implementing games in the ESL classroom has a negative effect. In fact, the research points to quite the contrary (Uberman 1998 and Huyen 2003 et. al.) and supports the presupposition presented here that games are indeed beneficial for the students and helps to “promote communicative competence.” (Langeling 1997 et. al.)

With all the positive research on the subject, why then should ESL teachers implement games in their classroom? The answer is multifaceted. One of the effects, that having games in the classroom do for ESL learners, is help to break up the tedium of learning the language. Learning a foreign language is a tough process, full of triumphs and struggles along the way. A day in and day out litany of the same routine starts students building filtering mechanisms where they will only start absorbing and retaining material that they feel is pertinent to them, to the detriment of the rest of their language acquisition. By providing games in the classroom for the student, ESL

teachers are able to break up this monotony and help to bypass students natural filtering mechanisms and allow them to assimilate the language on their own terms.

Secondly providing games in the classroom transforms the mostly material centric pedagogy into a more student centric lesson. This helps to not only reinforce the material (either vocabulary, grammar, or other linguistic skills) through active practice, but it serves to make the material meaningful for the student which helps them to retain and regurgitate the language better. This process helps them by practicing their encoding and decoding skills in an environment where they feel less threatened by failure.

Thirdly, games help to break down student's reliance on textbook formulation, and in turn, allow them to incorporate the language into their own language patterns. Many ESL students come from cultures where correct answers, perfection, and intelligence are prized above much. The mindset of the typical ESL learner is one where there is a deep seated aversion to failure and thus will avoid tasks and processes which could expose them to potential failure. By setting the learning context within the bounds of a non-threatening game, the ESL teacher can break the student of this fear and slowly allow the student to make larger and larger mistakes before stepping in or guiding the student through their own self-correction mechanisms. In addition, the random, and sometimes fast paced nature of some games allows the student to experience in simulacrum, what some native situations will provide. Again, by allowing for this open ended extension of their language learning to take place in a controlled environment, students doubly benefit from the game.

Fourthly, as ESL teachers, especially with either very low level students, or very high level students, the material for lessons may be hard to generate, thus making it a daunting task to fill an entire period with meaningful instruction. For the low level student the problem comes with not lack of material, but rather rate of assimilation and delivery to students. Games allow the material previously studied to be reviewed, and not overwhelm the student with more material then they can currently handle. On the opposite end of the spectrum are the high level students who already have a solid understanding of the language and are refining and refracting their current language level. For these students finding enough new and compelling material to present in the course of a single focused lesson may be hard to

come by, thus augmenting the learning process with games allows the ESL teacher to reinforce the aim of the lesson with the students.

Finally, games provide a completely student centric activity where the teacher serves only as facilitator and provides opportunities for all students in the class to participate. Additionally, depending on the class make up, games are infinitely adaptable to any skill level, students' interests, and age considerations. Many times in a class there will be a few students who are willing to participate in the lesson, and a few students who are adamant about abstaining. Games help to bridge this gap, forcing more outspoken students to take their turn, while at the same time, forcing the more reserved students to play an active role in the class. These games allow for exploration and practice in all four linguistic competency categories – reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In addition, through allowing the activity to be wholly student centric, the teacher can more closely approach the high student talk time ratio that is desired in ESL classrooms (Deckert 2004).

### **Choosing which games to implement in the ESL classroom**

With access to the internet widespread across the globe, the availability of free or limited cost access to game ideas for the ESL classroom is almost as limitless as the games themselves. Since the decision to implement games in the classroom is relatively easy based on the preceding discussion, the hard choice for the ESL teacher comes when deciding on what games to employ and when to employ them in the classroom. Not all games are appropriate for all students, and conversely not all students are receptive to all games. It becomes a delicate balance between providing the benefits of games in the ESL classroom, and turning the student off by a game that is either too easy or too hard for their level. Luckily enough, most games are level adjustable and can be readily adapted for the different levels of the students.

The first criteria when choosing a game to implement in the ESL classroom is it's relationship to the current aims and goals of the lesson. Choosing a grammatically strong game for a vocabulary heavy lesson is unwise, so to is choosing a game which heavily works on vocabulary when the lesson is mainly about grammar. Albeit, there are times, as ESL teachers we are happy just to have the student speaking regardless of the aims or the outcome, however, this pattern of thinking is detrimental to both the lesson and student's overall progress.

Games can serve as great ice breakers. When used properly in a lesson introduction they can successfully accomplish any pre-lesson assessments, as well as help the students feel more relaxed and comfortable with the lesson. This helps to generate some level of camaraderie between the student and teacher, as well as gets the student speaking in the class early (and hopefully often).

The second criteria when choosing a game is the student's age, level, and participation willingness. These three factors are only secondary to the first goal of using a game to help meet the aims of an ESL lesson. A game which heavily involves moving and singing might not be so appropriate for an older audience (but then again sometimes as ESL teachers we have to help shake the foundations a bit to encourage more creativity and spontaneity in their language delivery skills), just as a game where tactics are involved or complicated rules or themes might not be appropriate for a younger class.

With these basic criteria in mind, choosing a game should be relatively easy, and once chosen, should be easily adapted for the students level in the current aim. For stronger students, one should provide more challenging games, even games which elicit some minimal form of competition. For weaker students, the games should be task centered so that success or failure does not lead to disappointment.

In addition to the above criteria there are several characteristics of the games that need to be taken into account when deciding on which one to implement. First, the game should have simple, easy to explain instructions and should be able to be set up and started playing in a relatively short amount of time. Longer, more complex games can be employed. When using these games, the game can serve as a reward for completing certain in lesson tasks, and can serve as a penultimate review for the previous weeks material. For example, the game's complex instructions could be delivered to the class during the week, and then on Friday, the class could be spent playing the game – reviewing not only their comprehension abilities (how well they used and recalled the instructions) but their overall language skills taught during the week.

Secondly, the games should be geared towards smaller number of participants. While larger, whole classroom games can and should be employed, their place should be mainly as a classroom building activity,

rather than intensive learning tool. By allowing the students to work in smaller groups, the more reserved students will be more inclined to participate, rather than take a passive role as is often the case in larger group games. In addition, any larger game should be based around a turn based system where all students have an equal opportunity to participate.

Finally, remember that games serve the purpose of enhancing the learning experience of the classroom, not simply fill time. They should be employed in the classroom in the same manner and same amount as role plays are employed in the ESL classroom. In this way, by combining both open ended language exploration drills, the students can feel both good about their language skills as well as enabling them to practice their language in more free form environments than normal rote learning implies.

### **Games for the classroom**

The following games are of my own interpretation, but are far from being my own design. Many of the games are derivatives of other games, and are most definitely not my own creations. They have, however, found their place in my ESL lessons where they have constantly been successfully employed at many different levels and aim fulfillments. After many years teaching and filling my toolbox with these games, I have forgotten the better majority of their sources and origins. All apologies to any offended game creators.

### **Vocabulary games**

#### **Songs**

The tune of ten little Indians can easily be adapted to contain current, related vocabulary. For younger students, actions can also accompany the vocabulary singing as the Total Body Response learning seems to be popular in many ESL circles these days. This helpful mnemonic is great for relational vocabulary as well as synonym/antonym pairs.

The song that never ends is a classic song that allows for endless possibilities in both vocabulary acquisition and grammatical constructions. A good way to implement this song in the lesson is to allow students to create their own lyrics to the song using the current vocabulary and/or grammatical structures. Once they have created their song, they can present it to the class, with the class voting on the best, silliest, etc...

### Simple games

Mine sweeper, tic tack toe, Othello, and connect four. These games are not only easy to set up, but most students are familiar with the games in their own language so that explanation of the rules and objectives can be extremely simplified. This can be adapted in many different ways – by having the grid pre-labeled with different vocabulary, they can work on their reading comprehension skills. In addition this game could be used as a synonym/antonym review or sentence construction drill. In order for the student to catch a square they must answer the question correctly, create a good sentence, or match pictures with vocabulary.

### Crosswords

Prepare a blank crossword grid for the students before the class. Break the students into teams and have them complete the puzzle as fast as possible. The winning team is either the first one completed or the team with the most correct answers by the end of the time limit.

### Complicated games

Battleship, monopoly, life (any other board game). Using the same principles as above, the students can face each other off using the grid based vocabulary. Using board games which require movement could have the squares pre-labeled with vocabulary, or using flashcards that the students designed during the previous week as game tokens.

Pictionary and charades. Have a designated student look at a vocabulary term, then have them draw it out or act it out in front of the class while the other students try and guess what is being done. An alternative method for this presentation is lining the students up into teams. The first student has 30 seconds (or fair amount of time) for the second student. After the time elapses, their drawing is hidden, and the second student draws his interpretation of the first student's drawing for the third student. This continues until the end of the line is reached. Then, working backwards, the students all have one guess as to what the object is (higher level students can try and explain their drawings). The winning team is the one who has the most members answer correctly.

## **Grammar games**

In addition to the above mentioned games which can easily be implemented to incorporate grammatical aims, the following games are designed to be grammatically intensive.

### **Simple**

The telephone game. Whisper a phrase into the ear of one student who in turn whispers it in the ear of the person next to them. This pattern is repeated until the end of the team is reached. The winning team is the one who's end phrase most closely matches the initial phrase.

### **Complicated**

Mother may I. Prepare before the lesson a series of flash cards or phrases related to the grammar in questions. These can be in the form of a command or other point that meets the aims of the lesson. Prepare at least 20 questions in several different categories, with a mix of about 60% correct and 40% incorrect. Have the students line up on one end of the classroom, if the answer is correct, have the students take a certain number of steps or perform the command on the card. If the answer is incorrect the students should remain still. A student is eliminated when the answer incorrectly (acting on an incorrect or not acting on a correct). Give the students a limited amount of time to act or not act. The winning student (or students) is either the last one standing or the first to reach the other side of the classroom.

Scavenger hunt. Prepare a paragraph, a report, or another piece of literary work. Divide the students into teams and give them a certain period of time to discover the grammatical errors in the work. At the end of the time period, have the teams rock paper scissors to see who goes first, having them alternate pointing out errors, each error has to be one not previously discovered. The winning team is the one who finds the most errors, or in the case of a tie, the last team to answer. A variation of this theme is to give the students a time period and a set number of errors they have to find. The winning team is one who finishes first or who has found the most at the end of the time period.

## Conclusion

Games in the ESL classroom are an indispensable tool that should be employed by every and all ESL teachers. Games lead to better motivation of the students to learn the language, they promote better retention of the material, they help the students overcome any shyness or limitations hindering their filtering paradigms, and they help to foster a more enjoyable learning experience. As an ESL teacher, the games should be chosen not on their basis to fill time, but rather as a tool to help reinforce the lesson aims. There are innumerable sources for games available for ESL teachers, however, care should be taken to ensure appropriate games are chosen.

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