

Do you think you need to include more fun activities in your lessons? Or do you think you use too many? This lesson outlines the aims of using games in English language learning and examines the strengths and weaknesses of these kinds of activities.

Task 1 – Andrew’s unhappy student

Andrew is a popular teacher in his school. He has a great repertoire of games and his lessons are always a lot of fun. He was quite surprised when a couple of his students asked to move out of his class. They said they didn’t feel like they were making progress.



Why do you think this is the case?

Jot down your answers on a note pad, then check the answer key below.



Task 1 Feedback



It seems that Andrew uses games a lot. They can often have a beneficial effect on lessons in terms of upping the enjoyment factor. However, if games are used too often, they can make the lesson appear like a collection of practice activities without clear aims.

Key Skill

Language games offer students interesting and motivating ways of practising grammar and vocabulary. It is important for teachers to use these games judiciously and have a clear idea of their aims for using these kinds of activities.

Task 2 – When and why to use language games



Numbers 1 to 5 in the box below are planning decisions. Letters a to e are activity types and numbers i to v are aims. Match the planning decisions with the correct game and aim using the grid below.

Planning decisions <i>The game is placed at...</i>	Activity types <i>The game is used as...</i>	Aim <i>The game aims to...</i>
1. ... the beginning of a new course.		
2. ... the beginning of a lesson.		
3. ... the beginning of a lesson.		
4. ... a midway point in the lesson.		
5. ... the end of a lesson.		

Activity types
a. a language practice activity.
b. revision of previously taught language.
c. a winding down, “cooler” activity.
d. “getting to know you” activity.
e. as a warm up activity.

Aims
i. provide motivation for the next lesson.
ii. foster a good class dynamic.
iii. add variety to the lesson.
iv. consolidate prior learning.
v. motivate students for the lesson.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

Sometimes aims for using language games are linguistic, but at other times they are more motivational. It is a good idea to stagger the use of these games over a period of time. It would probably not be a good idea to do the following in one lesson: begin with a game to warm students up, then do another game as a revision activity, then do a third game as a language practice activity, then finish with a fourth cooling down game. In order for games to appear special to learners, they need to be used occasionally rather than all the time.

Task 3 – Student perceptions and what you can do



Numbers 1 to 6 below describe negative perceptions that students can have of language games. Letters a to f are actions teachers can take to help change the perceptions. Match the actions to the negative perceptions.

Negative student perceptions	Actions
1. Students can feel foolish or ridiculous as a result of playing the game.	
2. Students can feel that the game is too competitive and creates a bad atmosphere in the classroom.	
3. Students can feel lost because the rules of the game seem more complicated than the language it aims to practise.	
4. Students might feel that the teacher’s reliance on games means he or she is unprepared or lazy.	
5. Students might get bored midway through a game because it goes on for too long.	
6. Students feel that they don’t learn anything from playing language games.	

Teacher actions

- a. Make sure you set up the game clearly by giving clear instructions and perhaps doing an example with a strong student.
- b. If you give feedback on the language that students used while playing the game, they are more likely to see games as being of value.
- c. If this is the case, it is probably better to abandon the game all together.
- d. Make sure that you monitor learners carefully during the game and manage the activity efficiently so that it keeps moving forward.
- e. In this case, it pays to clearly outline the linguistic aims of the game so that students can see it is of value.
- f. Look for games that are played in groups and involve students co-operating with each other.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

The kinds of games you can play and the frequency with which you can play them will differ from one group of students to another. Some groups respond to them well, while others are less motivated by them. It is always a good idea to briefly outline what linguistic benefit students get from the game, for example, skills practice or practice of some target language.

Task 4 – Planning a game

A popular ELT game is “backs to the board”. The teacher divides the class into two or more teams. One team member sits with his or her back to the white board. The teacher writes up a word. The rest of the team (who can see the word) give definitions. The first student with his or her back to the board who says the correct word wins a point. Each team member takes a turn at sitting with their back to the board. The team with the most points wins.



Question 1-4 below can help teachers to analyse games. Fill in the missing words in the answers to the questions. Use one word from the box for each gap.

meaning	organiser	make	vocabulary	two
time	provider	same	communication	teams
students	monitor	sure	taught	competitive
	winning	cannot	different	

Analysing a game

1. What are the aims?
 To revise _____ that students have been recently _____ ;
 to practise _____ strategies of conveying _____.

2. What makes this game motivating?
 Having _____ provides a _____
 element that students enjoy.

3. What is important about the management of the game?
 It is important that the _____ with their backs
 to the board _____ see the word.
 The teacher also needs to _____ that the word is
 revealed at the _____ to all teams.

4. What roles does the teacher take during the game?

She is the _____ of vocabulary. She is the _____ of both teams and she is the _____ who observes both teams closely to make sure she spots the _____ team.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Thinking about your teaching ...

Have you ever used the questions like the ones in task 4 to analyse a game? Try doing this with some games that you already play or with some new language games. Does this help you to manage the game in the classroom more effectively?

Note your observations in your Teaching log.

Taking it to the classroom ...

When you use a game, make a point of getting feedback on it from students. Ask them if they enjoyed it and see if they have any suggestions for improving the game. You can also get feedback from students about how often they would like to play language games.

Want to find out more ... ?

The following book has many ideas for games: *Games for Language Learning* (3rd edition) by Andrew Wright, David Betteridge and Michael Buckby (Cambridge University Press 2006).

On pages 223 & 224 of *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (4th edition) by Jeremy Harmer (Pearson 2007), there are some examples of grammar games and on pages 349 and 350 there is some discussion of communication games, with examples on pages 353-4, 355 and 356.

Answer Key



Task 2 – Feedback

Planning <i>The game is placed at ...</i>	Activity <i>The games is used as ...</i>	Aim <i>The games aims to ...</i>
1. ... the beginning of a new course.	d. ... “getting to know you” activity.	ii. ... foster a good class dynamic.
2. ... the beginning of a lesson.	e. ... as a warm up activity.	v. ... motivate students for the lesson.
3. ... the beginning of a lesson.	b. ... revision of previously taught language.	iv. ... consolidate prior learning.
4. ... a midway point in the lesson.	a. ... a language practice activity.	iii. ... add variety to the lesson.
5. ... the end of a lesson.	c. ... a winding down, “cooler” activity.	i. ... provide motivation for the next lesson.

Task 3 – Feedback

1. c 2. f 3. a 4. e 5. d 6. b.

Task 4 – Feedback

Analysing a game
<p>1. What are the aims?</p> <p>To revise vocabulary that students have been recently taught; to practise communication strategies of conveying meaning.</p>
<p>2. What makes this game motivating?</p> <p>Having different teams provides a competitive element that students enjoy.</p>
<p>3. What is important about the management of the game?</p> <p>It is important that the two students with their backs to the board cannot see the word. The teacher also needs to make sure that the word is revealed at the same time to all teams.</p>
<p>4. What roles does the teacher take during the game?</p> <p>She is the provider of vocabulary. She is the organiser of both teams and she is the monitor who observes both teams closely to make sure she spots the winning team.</p>