

Livening Up College English Classes with Games

In the Philippines, students start learning English as a Second Language (ESL) as early as kindergarten. By the time they enter college, they have had wide exposure to traditional grammar-based approaches to language instruction. At the University of the Philippines Los Baños, English 1 is a prescribed general education course for freshmen. Classes of 25 to 38 students meet for three hours per week to study, among other things, sentence structure and sentence transformations, paraphrasing and summarizing, and paragraph and composition writing; grammar and vocabulary enrichment are integrated in the course. In general, the students find the lessons boring, perhaps because they have been studying the same material for so many years. The lessons are mechanical and quite predictable—the teacher presents rules, gives exercises for students to work on, and administers tests to assess learning. As a result, the English teachers do most of the talking while the students listen, take notes, or give one-word or

one-sentence responses. This should not be the case. According to Martin (2000), English-language instructors should be careful about monopolizing a class with too much teacher-talk—for speaking and writing activities, more than 15 percent of the time is probably excessive. Teacher-centered lessons featuring lectures on sentence structure and how to write effective paragraphs are bound to create passive students who do not take an active role in class.

Clearly, English classes need to be more interactive to keep students interested in the lessons. After ten years of teaching I have learned that English need not be a boring subject; on the contrary, it can be fun if teachers supplement the formal lessons with alternative methods and techniques. For example, I regularly use games to review and practice the language skills that the class is currently studying. In this article I will show how teachers can easily adapt available games and develop new ones to add some fun and excitement to the learning process. In addition, I will

report on feedback from my students regarding how they feel about the use of games in the ESL classroom.

The usefulness of games

Games are effective teaching tools and have many positive aspects, including the creation of opportunities for students to communicate in a relaxed, friendly, and cooperative environment. Games reduce tension by adding fun and humor to lessons, and they add an element of competitiveness that motivates students to participate (Cross 1992; Martin 2000). When students are absorbed by games, they internalize and acquire the essential vocabulary, grammar, and other aspects of English in an unconscious manner because they are focused on the message and not the language itself (Cross 1992). Importantly, games provide a perfect opportunity for the teacher to take the backseat and let the students do the talking.

When I first set about looking for games that would add life to English classes, I found that many of those described in books were too elementary for my learners, so I decided to develop some of my own. Except for Taboo, which is a commercially available language game that I modified, all of the games discussed are my creations.

Game 1: Taboo

Apart from being an enjoyable game, Taboo provides excellent opportunities for speaking and listening. The object of Taboo is for one person, the clue-giver, to give descriptive clues to his or her or partner or group about a *keyword* printed on a card so that the partner or group can correctly guess the keyword; however, the clue-giver must describe the keyword without using (1) the word itself or (2) any of the five taboo words listed on the card. The Taboo box contains a few hundred cards with words on both sides, a tray for holding the cards, a one-minute hourglass, a buzzer, and a pencil for writing down the scores.

Playing the game

The basic rules for playing Taboo are as follows:

- The members of two opposing teams sit alternating around in a circle. The teams can be composed of two pairs (4

students total) or two groups of 3, 4, or 5 (6, 8, or 10 students total).

- The clue-giver of the first team tries to get teammates to guess as many keywords as possible in one minute without using (1) the word itself or (2) any of the five taboo words listed on the card. Words that rhyme with or are an abbreviation of a taboo word also are not allowed.
- If the clue-giver uses the keyword, a taboo word, or a part of a taboo word, a “censor” from the other team hits the buzzer. The clue-giver must then move on to the next word.
- Only speech is allowed to prompt one’s teammates; sounds, gestures, or drawings are prohibited.
- Teammates may shout as many guesses as possible, and there is no penalty for wrong guesses.
- Once a team member guesses the correct word, the clue-giver goes to the next word. The object is to get as many keywords as possible within one minute. The playing team receives 1 point for every correct guess but loses 1 point for every taboo word that is spoken. The opposing team gets 1 point each time the clue-giver of the opposing team decides to skip a keyword and go on to the next keyword.
- When one minute expires, it is the other team’s turn to play.

Modified Taboo

To make the game conform more to the specific language needs of my classroom, I made modifications to the official Taboo rules as described below.

- The keyword must be described in complete sentences. For example, if the keyword is “ring” the clue-giver can say “It is a noun,” or “It is what a man gives to the woman he loves on the day he marries her.” One-word descriptions such as “gold” or phrases like “the sound of the telephone” are not acceptable.
- Descriptions that begin with “It sounds like___,” or “It has ___ syllables,” or “It has ___ letters” are also not acceptable.
- Descriptions that point to an object possessed by a team member are not

allowed, e.g., “You have this in your bag and it is a gift from your boyfriend.”

- Instead of a member of the opposing team being the censor, the teacher takes on this role.
- *Stealing*, or the guessing of a keyword by the opposing team, is allowed. If, at the end of one minute a team cannot guess the right word, the opposing team can take a guess and receive a point if they are correct. Allowing the opposing group to “steal” encourages listening. Each group gets only one chance to steal and is allowed to make only one guess.

Game 2: Slay the Demons

A spelling and vocabulary activity at the university level is usually a predictable exercise. The teacher dictates the word, gives the meaning, and uses the word in a sentence. I therefore felt the need to create a fun activity that would combine the review of learned words with the discovery of new words in context. With this as my objective, I used the fact that I was a fan of the “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” television series to create a game I call “Slay the Demons,” in which students read a text and detect incorrect homophones and spelling errors. Students receive 1 point for correctly identifying errors in the text, which are called *demons*, and are penalized 5 points if they mistakenly identify a correct word, which are called *angels*, as an error. Slay the Demons can be played as an individual or pair activity.

What to prepare

1. Clip an article from a newspaper, or write a 125- to 150-word text yourself. Alter the text to introduce errors in spelling and make sure that the text contains homophones (e.g., “cite,” “sight,” and “site”).
2. Make as many copies as you need for your class (e.g., if you have 30 students and you intend to have students work in pairs, you must have 15 copies of the text).

Playing the game

1. Give each pair or group a copy of the altered article with several *demons*, the words that are purposely misspelled. All words that are not misspelled are called *angels*.

2. Tell the students that their task is (a) to “slay the demons” by putting an X over each one and (b) to write down the correct forms of the words. For each “slain demon” they earn 1 point. However, if they slay an “angel,” they lose 5 points. The group that gets the highest score wins.
3. Do not tell the students how many demons there are in the text. If they insist on a clue, just tell them there are “about 10” or “about 20” demons.
4. Three minutes should be the maximum time for a 125- to 150-word text.
5. After the game, make the activity a learning experience by explaining words that were not familiar to your students.

Here is an example of a text I wrote for Slay the Demons. In addition to the misspellings, I made sure that the text contained some incorrect homophones.

Yesterday was our first meeting in one of my Science subjects. Our professor made us *seat* in alphabetical order and then collected our class cards. Then she set the rules on classroom behavior, e.g., the use of mobile phones, tardyness, absences, and submission of requirements. She said that in her class there should not be any expectators; every one must actively participate in the discussions.

After one hour of listening to her, we were all ready feeling boring. Finally, during the last fifteen minutes of the class, she gave our first reading topic—parasites: ugly, slimey, and wierd organisms that leave and fist on there hosts. Quiet unfortunately, the professor, perhaps because she noticed how I allowed myself to be destructed by other things throughout the period, assigned me to report on leaches and tics.

How many “demons” did you spot in the text? Did you find 15? (See answers at the end of the article.)

Game 3: Find My Children

I created this game after going over the course syllabus to see which lessons required

the most practice. I noticed the topic *collocations*, which are words that typically appear with each other, for example, to *do a favor*, or to *look down on*. Instead of just assigning students to find out what words or phrases are used with a certain verb, I thought it would be better to create a fun and challenging game. Thus, the game “Find My Family” was born.

What to prepare

1. Make a list of the collocations that you want to test. I chose some expressions that begin with the verbs *go*, *make*, *do*, *put*, and *take*.
2. Separate the verbs from the words or phrases that are typically used with them. For the verb *put* I listed *one over on somebody* and *your foot down*, among others. Do the same for the other verbs.
3. Write each of the verbs (identified as *Mother*) on a strip of paper (about 2 inches by 8 inches). If you are testing five verbs, you will need five strips—one for each verb. Each group playing the game will need a set of these five strips.
4. Write down all of the words or phrases that go with these five verbs (identified as *Children*) on strips of paper. If each of the five verbs has three matching words or phrases, you will end up with a bundle of 15 strips of paper. Each group playing the game will need a bundle of these strips of paper.
5. Give each group a set of the five Mother strips and a bundle of the 15 Children strips. Be sure to shuffle the Children strips so they are mixed up.

These are the five Mothers and the associated Children that I prepared for the game:

MOTHER	CHILDREN
Go	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • against her father’s will • into politics • for it
Make	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • do with what you have • good on your promise • the most of the situation

Do	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • away with frills • without water for a day • the right thing
Put	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one over on somebody • your foot down • out to sea
Take	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • my work seriously • to task • back what he said in anger

Playing the game

1. Give each group of students a set of five Mothers, a bundle of 15 Children, and a piece of heavy paper on which they will lay out the Mother and her Children.
2. Explain to the students that their task is to group the Children with their Mother. Do not tell the students how many Children a particular Mother has.
3. Announce that after three minutes you will check their work and tell them how many correct answers they got. Stress that you will not tell them where their errors are but that they will then have another two minutes to change whatever they want in their answers, after which their answers will be final. The group that gets the most correct answers wins.
4. After the game, use each collocation in a sentence, and have the students explain the meaning from the context. If there is only a little time left, focus on the collocations that the students missed.

Game 4: Insert Me

As with other games, I created “Insert Me” based upon the language issues that required attention in my class, in this case the placement of modifiers. The following description is for five groups of students.

What to prepare

1. Make a list of six to seven sentences, each one containing an independent clause. Also decide on a modifier that can be inserted into the sentence. Following are three examples.

Example A: Today all professionals use computers in their offices and homes.

Modifier for insertion: “practically”

Example B: The American College of Physicians recommends a blood test for thyroid disorders for women 50 or older.

Modifier for insertion: “at least once every five years”

Example C: In the village we visited, pork and chicken are served on special occasions such as birthdays and Christmas.

Modifier for insertion: “only”

2. Write the complete sentence in large print on one long strip of heavy paper or cardboard. On a smaller piece of paper, write the modifier (a word or a phrase) for insertion. Do the same for all the sentences.
3. On five index cards make a caret (the ^ insertion mark) that is large enough to be seen by students in the back row.

Playing the game

1. Divide the class into five groups and assign a number to each group.
2. Give each group an index card with the caret (^) and some pieces of masking tape measuring about 1.5 inches long.
3. Tape up a sentence at the front of the class and show the students a modifier for insertion. When you call out a group number, that group must decide where the modifier belongs in the sentence. When the group has made a decision, a representative must come to the front and tape the index card in the place where the modifier should be. If that group’s answer is wrong, call out another group number. If the second group gives the right answer, that group gets a point; if their answer is wrong, give the correct answer. Then go on to the next sentence.
4. The group that has the most points wins.

For further practice, divide the class into groups and ask each one to prepare a similar exercise consisting of three sentences and

modifiers. During the next class students can play the game using their own exercises. The teacher simply watches out for errors and makes corrections only when necessary.

Do language games always require a lot of paraphernalia?

If the thought of all the work involved in preparing material prevents you from using games in your English classes, rest assured that some games require no material development—only a generous amount of listening and speaking practice. One example is the game “Discover Me,” in which students practice formulating “Yes/No” and “Wh” questions. The teacher’s role is to make sure the rules are followed, to take note of student errors in the “Yes/No” and “Wh” questions, and to discuss those errors after the game. The teacher should make no language corrections during the game.

Game 5: Discover Me

This is a simple game in which groups of students ask questions to discover the identity of a famous personality.

Playing the game

Divide the class into four or more groups, depending on the class size, and assign a number to each group.

1. Tell the class that each group must think of two famous personalities, past or present, and write those names on a quarter sheet of paper, together with their group number, and submit the papers to the teacher. (The teacher must know the personalities being “discovered” in order to prevent any group from making a change in the middle of the game.)
2. To begin the game, a group answers the “Yes/No” and or “Wh” questions posed by each of the other groups who try to guess the identity of a personality. Each group is allowed three questions, after which they can ask, “Can I make a guess?” If the guess is correct, the group gets 1 point. If the guess is incorrect, no point is awarded and the turn passes to the next group. The group that gets the most points wins. It is possible for more than one group to win the game.

Getting students to participate actively in games

An obvious technique to keep games exciting is to change group members every now and then. This ensures that there is some variety and that the better students are not always together in the same group.

Games add fun to learning, but students do not always join games for fun—they want a prize. The incentive of a prize is good for motivation. For example, my students are always interested in receiving extra points for Quizzes, Exercises, and Assignments (QEA), which count for 25 percent of their total grade. For each game I typically award 5 extra points to the winners, 3 points to the next highest, and 1 point to the rest of the class. When a game requires more analysis, I increase the points to 7, 5, and 3, respectively. At the end of the semester I add each student's total extra points to his or her total QEA score, which allows students to improve their final grades. Thus students have nothing to lose, and much to gain, from participating in the games.

Some problems, solutions, and suggestions for using games in class

My experience has taught me that the use of games is not without problems. One of the issues I encounter is related to the enthusiasm games create—they can be very exciting, and there is a tendency for students to shout or scream. Some rooms are suitable for this type of noise, but often the loudness may annoy teachers in the other rooms, especially those who are doing quiet activities or administering tests. Often, in the middle of a game, there will be a sharp knock on the door and an irritated teacher asks, “Will you please keep quiet? There is a class in the next room.” To prevent this scenario, emphasize to your students before playing a game that they must refrain from shouting or screaming.

Another problem has to do with the preparation of the material for your games. If it is a group game, you have to prepare a set of materials for each group, and this can be time-consuming and expensive. I have learned to cut down on costs by recycling old calendars or folders from student papers.

It is easy to make games the sole activity for the period, but if you do that the students

may get the impression that you are not ready for the day's lesson. To avoid this perception, do not allow games to take up the whole period. Allocate just the right amount of time for the game. In a 1.5-hour class, a game should take no more than 30 minutes. Use games as warm-up activities, as fillers, or as practice exercises.

Although games do add life to an English class, it is not necessarily good to have the class play games every day. Even when we have planned some games for a lesson, we should watch for signals that tell us that our students are not in the mood for playing or are tired of playing the same game every time. Brandt (2002) says that teachers need to respect the idea that a game should be free and voluntary and realize that games are “often most effective as student-centered activities, where students can make their own choices about what game to play, or indeed to play at all.”

Games should not be a waste of time and must be an essential part of the learner's development. It is therefore wise for the English teacher to consider the following suggestions related to the use of games as a teaching tool:

1. Choose games that are suitable for the class and that further the linguistic aims of the lesson.
2. Select games that will keep the interest of the students and will allow many students to be active or working simultaneously.
3. Consider the size and location of the room when deciding whether a game should be a pair work game or a group game. Group games require more space and are likely to create more noise.
4. Determine how much time to allot for the game, keeping in mind that the game shouldn't be the sole activity for the class period.
5. Note students' responses to each game played in the class, e.g., whether they enjoyed it, found it challenging, found it appropriate, and would like to play it again. (My students, puzzled when they didn't see the “demons” hiding in the Slay the Demons material, were so challenged that they begged for another, and still another, round.)

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6. Determine if language games can replace some routine activities, what the language games are expected to achieve, and how often language games can be effectively used.

I'd like to add that games for English classes should be related to the language topics currently being studied. All my students are familiar with the game "Charades," but we do not play it in class if it has no relevance to any of our lessons. Playing a game just for fun might have adverse effects on learning and discipline.

What do students think of games in their English class?

It is helpful to get feedback from students in order to gauge the effect and adjust the type and frequency of games. At the end of one semester I asked my students to fill out a questionnaire to evaluate the use of games in class. The results were encouraging because all students reported that games had a positive effect on them. Some survey conclusions relating to the effects that games have on students are listed below.

Effect on student participation

- More participation in class
- Increased courage to speak in front of the class
- Improved teamwork, cooperation, and group bonding
- Preference for group games over individual or pair work because of the large amount of sharing of ideas that occurs in groups

Effect on student attitudes

- The class is more relaxed.
- Games are exciting and enjoyable.
- Every day is a happy day when there are games.
- Games reduce boredom.

Effect on student learning

- Learning happens in an interactive and intellectual way.
- Games help students apply what they have learned.

- Games boost self-confidence and help students correct wrong answers and laugh at mistakes.
- Games increase vocabulary.
- Games make English enjoyable and easier to understand.

This positive feedback explains why tardiness and absences are minor problems in my classes and also why my student evaluations are very high. Probably the best comment I received about the use of games in my English classes was, "Now I look forward to every English class because I am excited about what the next game will be."

Conclusion

I use language games in my English classes and also in the training courses that I give to professionals, and the response is always very positive. University ESL need not be boring, and games are not just for children. Teachers should explore them as a means of livening up their classes so that their students look forward to their next English class with enthusiasm!

Note: The "demons" in the example text for Slay the Demons are: *seat, tardyness, expectators, every one, all ready, boring, slimey, wierd, leave, fist, there, Quiet, destructed, leaches, tics.*

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