

The Mystery Bag: Listening and Speaking Skills for Young Learners

LEVEL: Beginner through Intermediate

TIME REQUIRED: About 20 minutes the first time; each time after that, 10–15 minutes

MATERIALS: A bag to serve as the “Mystery Bag” (see details below); an object or objects to place in the bag

BACKGROUND: Show and Tell is a classic activity in U.S. kindergarten and early-elementary classrooms. Children can show a special object they bring from home and tell their classmates about it. Children usually explain who gave the object to them or where they got it, why it is special, how it works, and so on.

In my experience, when the “special object” is put in a bag, the activity becomes a game with much more to offer in terms of whole-class participation and durability. And if the object is in a beautiful, “magical” bag, that creates anticipation and motivation for listening, speaking, and vocabulary building, and the activity becomes ... The Mystery Bag!

For young learners, ample listening and speaking practice through games, songs, rhymes, and stories is the foundation for conversation and extended talk and later reading and writing. A highly motivating guessing game like The Mystery Bag, which gives young learners practice asking and answering questions in an authentic context, can help build this knowledge.

I used The Mystery Bag with beginning and intermediate children in first-grade through fourth-grade (ages 6–11) English as a foreign language (EFL) classes in Mexico, and it has been a staple of my teacher-training workshops in Mexico, Jordan, and Colombia for both private- and public-school EFL teachers and teacher trainers. You can use this activity for introducing vocabulary and basic questions to beginners or for reviewing and practicing vocabulary and grammar.

I will begin by laying out the basic procedure for The Mystery Bag for high beginners who already have basic vocabulary across a variety of topics as well as basic grammar. I will then explain how to make the game simpler for beginning learners and more complex for intermediate young learners.

PROCEDURE—HIGH BEGINNERS:

Before you begin, it is a good idea to review yes/no questions with the verbs *be* and *do*. For this game, relevant questions and answers with *be* include “Is it yellow?” ... “Yes, it is” or “No, it isn’t,” and for *do* (*does*), “Does it fly?” ... “Yes, it does” or “No, it doesn’t.” Write the patterns for these questions and answers on the board while students are learning the game, which takes place as follows:

1. Choose a vocabulary word from one of your units. For example, if the class is studying animals, you might choose *frog*.



Sample Mystery Bags—but any bag can work.

Photo by Jorge Catalan

2. Put a representation of a frog in the Mystery Bag before the children come to class. It could be a stuffed toy or a frog made out of wood, yarn, glass, etc., or it could be a picture of a frog.
3. Tell the children the rules.
 - a. Figure out what is inside the bag (in this case, an animal) by asking yes/no questions.
 - b. Do not guess the name of the object until after ten questions have been asked. (Some teachers may want to set the limit at five questions rather than ten.)
 - c. If the class has no idea what the object is after ten questions, students may ask for a hint from the teacher or a student holding the bag, depending on the language level of the students, by saying, “Can you please give us a hint?”
 - d. Everyone must participate by raising hands quietly.
 - e. Students who shout out will not be called on.
4. Assign student roles. You can say, “I need someone to come to the front of the room and someone to count the questions.”
5. Have the students you call on say, “May I come to the front?” or “May I count the questions?”
6. The student who comes to the front of the room will answer the questions. Have him or her look into the bag without saying what the object is.

7. Have this student call on someone who is quietly raising his or her hand to ask a question. The teacher supports the students by referring to the written examples on the board and having the students support one another by helping. However, make sure that the student who needs help repeats the question correctly.
8. The volunteer will answer the question with a chunk: Yes, it is. /No, it isn't. /Yes, it does. /No, it doesn't.
9. When nine questions have been asked, the student who is counting the questions will say, "One more question."
10. After ten questions, ask students to raise their hands if they think they know the answer. If most children know, have them say the answer in unison: "It's a frog!" If no one knows, teach the children to ask, "Can you please give us a hint?" Then give them a big hint: "It is green and jumps."

VARIATIONS

- After the children get used to the format, have them bring in an object (in this case, a representation of an animal) from home—one student per class session. (Make sure you have extra objects on hand in case the student forgets.) Have the child put an object from home in his or her school bag and bring the object to you before class. There is a big payoff for doing the activity this way, as children are excited to bring something from home.
- Build up the kinds of questions your students can ask about animals. Start with vocabulary about appearance, food, and habitats, and then add movements. Questions might include "Does it have four legs? ... Does it eat meat? ... Does it live in the desert? ... Does it swim?"

ABOUT THE BAG

Any bag will work. The more special and magical-looking the bag is, though, the more you will pique the children's curiosity. I have

asked a parent volunteer to make a bag out of burgundy satin or velvet with a gold question mark sewn on the front and sparkly gold rope to close it. However, it's fine to start with an ordinary bag. Find or make an attractive bag, and the interest you create around the activity will do the trick. Nice pillowcases make great Mystery Bags and are just the right size for all kinds of objects.

VARIATIONS FOR BEGINNING TO INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS

Figure 1 shows how you can adapt The Mystery Bag from beginner to intermediate levels of English.

Procedure for Beginners

Figure 1 shows that the procedure for beginners is teacher-led, with a fixed set of vocabulary known to the children. The children practice one type of question, most likely "Is it _____?" There is a lot of repetition and scaffolding. To make things even easier, you can have the learners ask questions in chorus.

The procedure might look like this:

1. Review a set of vocabulary that you are teaching (e.g., colors with colored pencils).
2. Put the pencils in the Mystery Bag one by one, with the children saying the name of each color as you do.
3. Ask for a volunteer to come to the front, look into the bag, and choose a pencil without taking his or her hand out of the bag.
4. Model the question for the students: "Is it a [red/green/blue/yellow/brown/black] pencil?"
5. Model how to raise hands quietly.
6. Choose one of the children to ask the question: "Is it a _____ pencil?"

7. The volunteer answers, with your help: “Yes, it is” or “No, it isn’t.”
8. Repeat until someone guesses the correct color.
4. Have the volunteer who chose the color answer the questions alone, or have two children come up to support each other.

You can repeat the game up to three times because it is quick. You can add a new color every day.

Variations for Beginners

1. Have the whole class chorally repeat the questions asked by the volunteer students.
2. For very young learners, asking, “Is it red?” will suffice. If the category is fruit, a question could be, “Is it a banana?”
3. Change the objects or have a variety. For example, you can have colored pencils and markers.

Procedure and Variations for Intermediate Students

For intermediate-level students, follow the same procedure for high beginners, with the following variations:

1. Increase and vary language use to achieve your objectives. For example, I had the entire class ask the student with the bag in chorus before they started to guess, “Could you show us the shape and the size?” The student then tightened the bag around the object to reveal the form.
2. To help students ask a variety of questions about animals, for example, I cued the class to say chorally: Ask about what it looks like, what it eats, where

Beginner	High Beginner	Intermediate
Teacher-led	Increased student roles with more complex dialogue	Student-led
Fixed-set vocabulary: 7 colors, numbers 1–10, 6 kinds of fruit	Fixed-theme vocabulary: animals, clothes, school supplies	No set vocabulary or topic; anything goes!
Review and remind students of vocabulary.	Review types of questions to ask (e.g., Is it bigger than my hand? ... Does it eat meat? ... Does it live in the forest? ... Does it run fast?).	Ask for precise comparisons and detail.
One type of question is practiced (e.g., Is it _____?).	More than one type of question is practiced (e.g., Is it/Are they _____? ... Do you/Does it _____?).	A variety of questions is encouraged and practiced (e.g., Could you use it to eat with? ... Would you bring it to school?).
Establish routine questions; let struggling students ask first.	Struggling students may ask friends for help and then repeat.	Students learn many ways to ask for help.
Students ask questions in chorus.	Students ask questions individually.	Students could ask others to ask a specific type of question and ask for clarification.

Figure 1. Comparison of elements of The Mystery Bag for students at different levels

it lives, and how it moves. This happens with time and practice through daily repetition and gesturing.

3. Make the activity even more interactive by having pairs of students think of a question before the game starts. If you wish to add writing practice, they can prepare by writing the question in their notebooks.

MAKE IT PART OF YOUR INSTRUCTIONAL ROUTINE

During classroom observations, I find that many teachers bring highly motivating activities into their classrooms, only to move to another one the next day, fearing student boredom. The Mystery Bag builds on several curricular objectives at the same time—it's an activity that keeps on giving and never gets boring. The novelty lies in a new object and a new student in front of the class every day.

Furthermore, making The Mystery Bag a part of your instructional routine will give it more mileage. As with Total Physical Response, a lot of vocabulary and grammar can be embedded into this activity, providing comprehensible input.

In my EFL classes, The Mystery Bag came after a 15-minute Circle Time and right before storytelling. Students knew that when I led them back into their seats to close the circle and reached for the Mystery Bag, they were to raise their hands to be chosen for a role and to ask the coveted first question.

Be warned: Once you start The Mystery Bag, you will not be able to stop! I first introduced it to an active group of second-graders. We continued to play throughout third grade, but I decided that they were too old in fourth grade, so I dropped it. After the first week, the children wanted to know what happened to The Mystery Bag! I decided I would use it occasionally to introduce a new topic or a text, or to practice asking questions, since it created great motivation to speak.

Neither children nor adults can resist the temptation of a guessing game. The Mystery Bag allows all children to shine by bringing in special objects from home and is a meaningful activity with built-in scaffolding to increase the listening and speaking skills of young learners.

This activity was written by **Wendy Coulson**, a 2017–2018 English Language Fellow in Medellín, Colombia, who has served as an English Language Specialist in Jordan. She is an education consultant who designs education programs for NGO development projects and creates EFL curriculum and teacher-training courses, specializing in teaching young learners, EFL methodology, and limited-resource classrooms.