

It's All in the Game:

Making Language Practice Fun

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Drilling, oral pattern practice, controlled practice -- whatever you call it, it can be *boring*. Many teachers feel their students need the opportunity to practice grammar forms in a structured way, but are “turned off” by traditional repetition and substitution drills. Even contextualized practice using pictures and other cues can fail to hold interest because of its noncommunicative nature.

Practice activities can be made more challenging and fun if they have an element of mystery or guesswork to them. Students become immersed in playing the game and end up practicing the language almost without realizing it.

Ideal games for language practice are simple, require repetition of a target language pattern, and can be adapted to many different language forms. They fall into three main categories: memory games, guessing games, and card games.

Memory games. In these games students use the language they are learning to tell what they remember. There are lots of these activities. Some involve students looking at a picture or series of pictures for a specific length of time and then having to recall what they've seen. For example, they might look at a picture of a room for 30-45 seconds and then make statements like, “There is a cat on the sofa,” or answer questions about it (“How many flowers are there on the table?”) Or, students can be challenged to remember what other students say about themselves, for example, what they like to do. After all the students have given their information using the target form (“I like to play soccer,” etc.), they can make statements about each other (“Juan likes to play soccer,” etc.), reinforcing use of the third-person singular form (and incidentally encouraging students to get to know each other better). This works particularly well in a large class, especially if students give their initial information in random order.

In a similar memory game students are each given a different picture, which they show to the group and then immediately turn over or hide. The other students try to remember what each student has, using a specific language form. A fun variation is to have five or six students stand in front of the class in line. Give each one a picture (It works best if the pictures are on identical backing). The pictures should be big enough for the whole class to see. At your signal all the students in front quickly show their pictures and turn them back over again. Students try to remember what they saw in that fleeting second or two, using the target language form to give their answers.

There are a couple of good memory games which practice clothing vocabulary and “is/are wearing.” The simplest has one student leave the room or stand behind a door or other divider. The others try to remember everything the person is wearing, including jewelry and accessories. In another game called “Back to Back” students walk around the classroom looking at each other and trying to remember what everyone is wearing. At a signal from you they stop, stand back to back with the person next to them, and tell the other person what he or she is wearing.

Most memory games are non-competitive and allow for lots of repetition. Students should be encouraged to make responses in full sentences to reinforce the language you want them to practice.

Guessing games. Like memory games, guessing games allow students to use the language they are learning in an enjoyable way. There are endless numbers of these games, too, many of which reinforce vocabulary as well as specific language structures. For example, students are each given a picture of an object without letting anyone else see. The others must ask, “Do you have a/an _____?” or “Is it a/an _____?” This can also be played with objects hidden in paper

bags. Pictures of activities can be used to practice “Do you like to _____?” or “Did you _____ yesterday?” A variation of this game is to give one student a picture while another student answers the questions. This gives practice with third person form (“Does he/she have a/an _____?” “Yes, he/she does”/“No, he/she doesn’t,” etc.). It’s a good idea to go over the vocabulary ahead of time by showing all the cards or objects that will be used in the game and limit the number (around 20 at a time).

For practicing possessives, collect a personal object from each person (a pen, lipstick, etc.) without showing anyone. Hold up each object in turn, asking “Whose _____ is this?” Students make guesses (“It’s _____’s”) and verify their answers by asking, “Is it yours?” Students can also guess facts about each other (“Catalina likes to dance,” “Lon can play basketball,” etc.) and have them confirmed or denied by the person named.

Guessing games are good for repetition of language, especially question forms, and hold students’ interest because there is a challenge involved.

Card games. Many real card games have been adapted for language practice. One is “Concentration.” To play this game it is necessary to have matching pairs of cards with the same backing. They can be doubles of pictures, pictures which match with words or sentences, questions and answers, etc. Twenty cards (ten pairs) are usually enough for two people to play with together. After the students have matched the pairs (to make sure they know what goes together), they turn over all the cards and mix them up. The first player turns over a card and then tries to find its match by turning over another card. If they match, the player keeps the pair. If they do not match, the player turns both cards over again, leaving them in the same place (This is important, as this is really a memory game). The other player then takes a turn. Play continues until all the cards have been matched. The winner is the player with the most pairs.

Be sure to make it clear what language you wish students to use while playing the game, or you may find that students aren't talking and no real language practice is going on (This is especially necessary for pictures matches).

Another good card game is "Go Fish." Students play in groups of three to five. Each group has a deck of ordinary playing cards. The object of the game is to make as many pairs as possible (two kings, two aces, two 3's, etc.). Players are each dealt four cards, and the remainder of the deck is placed face down in the middle. Students take turns asking another player for a card he/she needs to make a pair, asking, for example, "Do you have a 10?" If the second player has the card, he/she must answer, "Yes, I do" and hand it over to the first player, who then lays the pair down. If the second player does not have the card, he/she answers, "No, I don't. Go fish." The first player must then take a card from the deck, and play passes to the next person. Play continues until one person is out of cards. The winner is the player with most pairs.

This is an excellent game for practicing question and answer forms with "have." It is popular with adult students because it's a real card game played with real playing cards (and not something contrived for the classroom). It's a good idea to go over the English names of the cards before beginning the game.

As with all games in the classroom, it is important to keep language practice games enjoyable. If students get "bogged down" in the language requirements of a game, it ceases to serve its purpose. If too much emphasis is put on winning or losing, the game loses its "playful" aspect, and students may become anxious or upset. The goal is always for students to have a good time while they are learning.

Making language practice fun – that's the name of the game.