


# Using Games In The Foreign Language Classroom

George H. Sawa

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## ABSTRACT

This report explores the methodology used by this writer to help students reinforce lessons that have been learned in the English conversation classroom. One such methodology is the use of language games. Students can practice various expressions learned in the classroom with the help of various games. These games also allow the students to use whatever language they already know in ways that can help them achieve the specific objectives in a particular game. The use of games also allows the students to be fairly free from the usual restraints inherent in most teacher-centered classroom environments. Language games are very popular with most students at all levels of fluency.

## INTRODUCTION

Foreign and second language teachers have always given serious thought and energy to presenting lessons in ways that would enhance their students learning and retention of the target language, e.g. English. Teachers also strive to give all of their students ample speaking time in the FL (foreign language) and SL (second language) classrooms.

No doubt students would have maximum opportunities to learn and remember the target language (TL) if they could hear it everyday and

converse with others in a one-to-one or small group setting. Non-native speakers of English for example, who live in an English-speaking country, would be surrounded by English and in theory would gain fluency in due time. Such non-native speakers would be gaining fluency in the language learning environment of English as a second language (ESL). (The first language of the non-native speaker would be their native or home language.)

Obviously, not all other-language learners can have the opportunity to go and live in the target language (TL) country. Some or most other-language learners must remain in their home countries and study the TL there. Such learners are studying the TL, for example English, in an EFL environment. This writer teaches EFL in Japan at a university. EFL teachers in Japan and other non-English speaking countries must find ways to maximize students' English speaking time in the classroom because the students have little opportunity to use it outside of school. Since there is usually just one native speaker teacher in a class with twenty or more students, there will be few chances for the students to converse with the teacher for more than a minute or two during class. That means that students will have to talk to their classmates in English. How can English speaking time be maximized and made more meaningful?

One way to do this is with games, specifically language-oriented games. FL and SL teachers throughout the world have created games to help students gain fluency in the TL, e.g. English. Games are always popular with students and provide a welcome break from book lessons and teacher-centered presentations. Games allow students to interact with each other in English in a fairly relaxed atmosphere, where they are free

to “experiment” with English and make mistakes without embarrassing themselves. Students get even more involved when there are prizes to win. This writer uses several games each semester with nearly all levels of students.

## GAMES

One of this writer's most popular games is the general knowledge quiz game called Brain Buster Bowl (BBB). Students ask their partners a question. The one who answers the question correctly gains a point. Of course, the object of the game is to get the most points among the players. The game can also be an inter-team competition activity, with several teams of two, three or four players competing against the other teams.

The questions require little more than the knowledge that one has acquired in high school and perhaps the first year of college. In other words, no specialized knowledge of advanced physics or ancient history is necessary. Even if a quiz question should require detailed knowledge to get the right answer, the players can always “pass” on that question and move quickly to another question. The strategy for a winning team to accumulate the most points includes going through the questions as quickly as possible, passing on the difficult ones and “scoring” with the easier questions.

In BBB, one student randomly selects a card and reads aloud the question. Another player says the answer. The correct answer is also written on the card in case the reader is not sure of the answer. If the players do not know the answer or do not understand the question, that question card is simply set aside and a new question card is selected by

either the same reader or the next player. Cards that have been answered correctly are placed in a central location on the desk. Each player gets to be a reader as well as an answer giver. After fifteen or twenty minutes, the teacher calls out to end the game. The students count the number of correctly answered cards. In an inter-team competition format, all the correctly answered cards by all players on one team are added together to get the team total. The team with the most cards is declared the champion. Prizes (to be described later) are given out.

This writer began presenting BBB about seventeen years ago in a junior college in Gifu City, Japan. The original questions and answers were made by the students. The assumption was that whatever quiz questions they made, would be answerable by the general population of high school graduates and college students. In addition, the questions would be on topics that were of interest to students in general, such as sports, entertainment, Japanese history and general science. This writer edited the questions and answers as needed and typed them onto masters. The masters were then photocopied onto thick paper and cut into cards. For classes of about 20 to 30 students, six to eight sets of cards would suffice. About 400 questions were eventually made and used.

From time to time, the teacher would need to go through the cards and toss out outdated questions and answers. For example, questions and answers about the current prime minister of Japan or president of the United States would become outdated after four to eight years due to elections of new office holders. This writer usually asks students to submit questions and answers periodically in order to keep the questions and answers up-to-date.

For lower level students, the more difficult grammar forms may either be simplified or omitted from the game cards. In addition, questions that are culture-based may also be omitted when the class consists of students from different cultural backgrounds or countries. For example, the quiz question “when did the Hei-sei Era begin?” would be appropriate in Japan but not in Saudi Arabia, since the name of a time period is peculiar to Japan but not to Saudi Arabia.

The academic focus and goals of this quiz game are to practice the wh-questions, improve listening abilities and to make brief statements, i.e. give answers. The educational goals are to bring students together in a group and have them interact with each other in English.

Another game that can be used is the guess-the-word game. The object of the game is to correctly guess the word that is written on a card. Each player randomly selects a card from a stack or envelope and gives hints or clues to the other players to help them guess the word. For example, if the mystery word is “sky” , the card holder can say: it's big and blue; if you look up, you can see it; etc. The game can be played as an inter-team competition, i.e. a team competing against other teams, or as an individual-based (intra-team) competitive game, with each player in a group vying for the most correctly guessed word cards. When played as an inter-team competition, there may be as few as two players per team, since each team is competing with other teams. Individual-based (intra-team) competition would require at least three players with one set of cards, and four or five players per set would be ideal. Playing time can vary, depending on the number of cards per set, the fluency level of the students and the amount of time the teacher wishes to spend on this

game. This writer usually allots fifteen to twenty minutes. Small prizes can be awarded to the top two or three teams or to the top one or two players in each group, depending on the number of players or teams.

The words used are nouns rather than verbs or adjectives. The nouns are mostly if not exclusively concrete nouns, e.g. bicycle, telephone, pencil, etc. rather than abstract nouns, e.g. pollution, honesty, mathematics, etc.

A simplified variation of this game would be to present it as a spelling game. The card holder would say: how do you spell "sky" . The spelling game variation/version is very popular with low level learners.

For high level classes, words could include abstract nouns or even phrases or titles, turning the guess-the-word game into the popular game called Charades.

The words used in the game can be thematic, for example, food or job/occupational words. Food words are used in conjunction with lessons on restaurants and eating out, nutrition and shopping. A word such as "lemon" could be presented with hints that include: it's a fruit; it's yellow and sour; and so forth.

For word games with job or occupation as the theme, the card holder may give verbal hints or pantomime the job. Prior to the game or even during the game, this writer distributes B-4 size pictorial handouts of the various jobs with the names of the jobs written out. Players may refer to the handouts since they may know the occupation that the card holder is describing but do not know the English name. Lower level students like this game because they can use gestures when words fail them. Of course, this game is used in conjunction with lessons on part-time jobs and

occupations.

Yet another version of the guess-the-word game involves gadgets and tools. This game is played in conjunction with lessons on technology or household chores. The grammatical focus is on the infinitive and gerund. For example, a lesson from the English Odyssey textbook asks the students to practice expressions such as: satellites are used for photographing agricultural crops; or satellites are used to photograph agricultural crops. The player who selects the card with satellite(s) can say to the other player(s): it's used to photograph crops; or it's man-made and is in outer space.

The cards have a simple, hand-drawn (by this writer) picture of the gadget, tool or machine on one side, the side that is shown to the other players. The name of the gadget, tool or machine is written on the opposite side (seen only by the card holder). The card holder simply says "what's this" and shows the picture. Of course, the other players call out the name of the item. In an individual-based competitive game, the player who guesses the correct name is given the card. In inter-team competition, the correctly guessed cards are placed in a central pile, to be counted when the game ends.

In a more challenging variation, the cards are all placed picture-side-up on two or three desks and the players sit around the desks. Each player is given a list of statements in the form of infinitives and gerunds with the answer, i.e. gadget name, typed in capitals below the statement. Each player in turn reads a statement and the other players quickly scan the picture cards and touch or grab the corresponding card. Students always enjoy slamming their hands on the cards before their friends can do so.

In the most challenging version of the game, the picture is not shown at all. The card holder says “it is used to/for XXX” and the other players guess the gadget, tool or machine. The game can also be played with the card holders showing the picture and the other players having to say the infinitive or gerund forms of the answers. This writer has not attempted this with his students.

To help students with yes-no questions, the always popular Twenty Questions (also sometimes called Hangman) is used. This writer uses it in conjunction with Unit 5, Appearances, in the Continuing English Odyssey textbook. One student thinks of a famous person and the other players must ask yes-or-no questions in order to identify the person. The “thinker” answers “yes” , “no” , “maybe” or “I don t know”. In the simplest form of the game, the famous person is restricted to a real and living person, i.e. not a deceased person or an imaginary character such as Sherlock Holmes and Mickey Mouse. With a real and living person, the grammar form will be the simple present tense. Questions can be asked based upon a person s physical characteristics, for example, is he young and, does she have blonde hair. Also, questions about occupations can be easily asked, thereby narrowing the possible answers to the point where a correct guess can be made. The students will have already learned vocabulary related to physical traits and commonly known jobs such as baseball player, doctor, actor and so on.

To practice the past tense, the famous person will be deceased. Of course, in its most challenging form, the famous “person” can be an imaginary character. The thinker would start the game with “I am thinking of a famous person or character.” Naturally, the first questioner would ask



“is it a person.”

Card games are always popular with teenagers and adults of all ages. Hadfield (1984) created a card game entitled “Do Me A Favor”. There are any number of “request” cards and corresponding “reply” cards. The cards have pictures of everyday activities but no words. In this game, a player selects a request card and makes a request based on the picture. Another player will either agree to comply with the request, if he/she has the corresponding reply card, or decline if he/she does not have the reply card. The object of the game is to be the first to dispose of all of one's cards. This game is an individual-based competitive game rather than an inter-team competition game.

From the original forty picture cards in Hadfield's game book, this writer expanded the card deck to eighty cards in order to make the game more challenging by increasing the variety of favors. Among the picture cards are favors such as a basket of clothes and its matching card showing the clothes being dried on a clothes line; an empty refrigerator and its matching card showing someone shopping for groceries; and a ringing telephone and its matching card showing someone answering the telephone.

The mechanics of the game are as follows: (1) groups of four players are formed (three players in a group is OK); (2) each player receives five or six request cards and five or six reply cards and the remaining cards are placed in separate decks on the desk or table; (3) players discard any matching pairs (i.e. corresponding request and matching reply cards) that were dealt by chance, and pick up replacement cards from the decks; (4) player one looks at a request card in his/her hand and turns to one of the

other players and says “could you do me a favor; could you XXX” ; (5) that player looks at his/her reply cards and says “sure” or “OK” if he/she has the corresponding reply card, and both requester and complier discard the matching pair; (6) if that player does not have the corresponding reply card, he/she must decline to do the favor, and the requester must take a new card from each deck; (7) if another player has the corresponding reply card, that player will say “I ll do it” and discard the reply card (but the requester must still pick up new cards as a penalty for asking the wrong player a favor); and (8) the next player in the group then continues the game with a request/favor.

This game requires at least fifty minutes from explanation to finish. This writer also distributes a pictorial instruction sheet to players. The game is best played with high beginner level students and above.

This game allows students to practice making requests using informal language (as opposed to formal language such as “could I ask a favor of you; would you be kind enough to XXX” ).

To practice the simple past tense verbs, this writer has created another picture card game with pictures of weekend or free time activities. Appropriate answers are on the back of the cards. One student pulls a card out of the envelope, shows the picture to his/her partner(s) and asks “what did you do last weekend.” The other student(s) study the picture and reply “I played tennis” or “I took an English test” and so forth. The next student takes out a picture card and continues the game. Prizes may be awarded to the pair or trio that either correctly answers the most cards or finishes the game first.

Using the same picture cards, the future tenses can be practiced.

“What are you going to do this/next weekend” and “I m going to attend a wedding” and so on are the TL phrases to be practiced. Besides the verbs, students can also practice the objects, e.g. “a wedding.”

Bingo is a well-known and popular game. In its simplest form for beginner level ESL/EFL learners, numbers can be practiced. A slightly more challenging form uses the times of the clock, e.g. one o clock, 1:25 PM and so forth. Bingo of course is a teacher-centered classroom activity, with the teacher calling out the numbers and times.

This writer also uses bingo with the theme of vacation activities, in conjunction with textbook units on weekends, free time and vacations. In this version, students are provided with about thirty yes-no questions that focus on what they may have done or not done during the summer or winter vacation. Examples include “did you go to Tokyo Disneyland”, “were you sick” and “was it hot in your hometown.” Each question is numbered. Students draw a 25-square grid on paper and randomly assign each square a number. Students may also make their own questions if they wish. They go around the classroom and ask each other the questions. They write either yes or no in the squares, depending upon the partner s answer. They attempt to get either five yes or no in a row and call out “bingo.” The teacher awards a small prize to bingo winners and they are free to continue playing. Students may ask the same question to a different student in order to get five yes or no in a row.

With higher level students, grids of 36 squares may be used to extend conversational practice time. The educational focus is on asking questions and getting listening practice.

Another quiz game involves illnesses, injuries and medical advice.

This game is used in conjunction with lessons on health and illnesses. The game can be played in two ways. One version has illnesses and injuries written on the sides of cards that will be shown to the partner. The card holder will ask “What should I do?” The partner or advice giver will give an appropriate answer that can be compared with possible answers written on the back of the card. For example, a card with “headache” written on it could elicit the responses “you should take some aspirin” or “you should go to bed.”

This writer uses the second version. The advice or solution is written on the side of the card that is shown to the partner. (The answer is written on the other side.) For example, the advice is “you should eat pineapples.” The partner has to provide the correct answer (“stomachache”). Prior to this game, the class will have already covered the textbook lessons on health, illnesses, injuries and medical solutions.

The most challenging version (for the partner) requires the card holder to read out the advice or solution (or the ailment) without showing the card, thus requiring the partner to listen closely and provide the answer. Complex health problems such as Alzheimer’s Disease or heart trouble could elicit only the most obvious advice (see a doctor or go to the hospital) and thus are not used in this game. This game takes no more than fifteen minutes to complete since there are only about twenty or twenty-five ailments and corresponding advice or solutions that are usually taught in ESL/EFL classes.

Nearly every beginner level conversation and listening textbook contains a unit or lesson on shopping. The vocabulary practiced would include clothing names, colors, fabric names, e.g. wool, cotton and

polyester, and names of sundry items, e.g. backpacks, sunglasses, caps and earrings. Expressions such as “how much is it” and “they cost \$5.00” would be taught. This writer’s shopping game is a variation of a Richards et al (1997) activity entitled Swap Meet. This activity or game is a whole-class activity and an individual-based competitive game (rather than an inter-team competition).

The mechanics of the game are as follows. Each student receives picture cards with drawings of household items such as chairs, tables, stereo equipment, bicycles and washing machines. All items are used (not new) and the ages, sizes and conditions of the items are written on the card. Also written is the true value of the item, which is not revealed to the potential buyer. The students are told to imagine that they have just moved to a new city to start their first job, and consequently have little money to spend for personal and household items. They must shop for used items and be prepared to haggle over price.

The teacher writes a sample conversation on the blackboard for the students to use as a guide.

A: Would you like to buy a bicycle?

B: Yes. What kind is it?

A: It’s a regular model with three speeds.

B: How old is it?

A: Two years old.

B: How much are you asking?

A: Twenty thousand yen.

B: Too much. I’ll give you ten thousand yen.

A: How about fifteen thousand?

B: \_\_\_\_\_

A: \_\_\_\_\_

Half of the class begins the game as buyers and the other half are the sellers. After about twenty minutes, they switch roles. Sellers and buyers are encouraged to sell and buy at least five items so that the champion “Smart Shopper” and “Shrewd Businessman” can be determined. The objects of the game are for sellers to sell their items for top dollar and for buyers to buy items at bargain prices. The true value is used as the “benchmark” . Shrewd businessmen are the ones who get the highest percentage of sales to true value. For example, if Keiko sells her items for ¥30,000 and the true values totaled ¥40,000, her percentage is 75%. If the sales were ¥50,000, her percentage is 125%. Smart shoppers are the ones who get the lowest percentage of purchase prices to true value. If Hiroshi buys items for ¥30,000 and the true values totaled ¥40,000, his percentage is 75%. If he bought the items for ¥50,000, his percentage is 125%. This 125% “score” would be regrettable because it means that he had overpaid.

Sellers write down the purchase prices and corresponding true values on separate cards or notepads and give the buyer the picture cards. That way, total sales and percentages can be determined at the end of the game.

This shopping/flea market/swap meet game takes about 40 to 50 minutes. Prizes are awarded to the first-, second- and third-place winners. Students enjoy this game because they love to “shop” and they can proceed at their own pace.

Jeopardy is a popular game in the US. It is also the name of a TV quiz

show. In Jeopardy, the players are given the answers. They must provide the question in order to gain points. There may be more than one question that could fit an answer but the players cannot win a point until they say the question that is called for on the quiz card. For a fairly straight-forward answer such as, "I m nineteen" , the question can only be "how old are you." An answer such as "Tokyo" could have two or more questions, e.g. "what s the largest city in Japan" or "what s the capital city of Japan" or even "where does the Emperor live."

Obviously, this game focuses on the making of questions by the EFL learner or student. This writer presented this game to students several years ago but they did not care too much for it. They rather quickly turned it around by asking the questions and their partners then guessed the answers.

Returning to the ever popular Brain Buster Bowl quiz game, this writer also created a Christmas quiz game, based on activities and events related to Christmas, including (Christian) religious events and persons. Quiz questions based on secular events or customs include "what does Santa Claus put under the Christmas tree" and "how many reindeer does Santa have." Religious questions include "where was Jesus born" and "what was Jesus mother s name."

For ESL and EFL learners who are nominally of the Christian faith, the above questions would probably not present too much difficulty in answering. For non-Christian learners, there would be much difficulty since they do not have the background knowledge. This writer created a large size picture sheet with clues and hints drawn everywhere to assist the students. Upon hearing a question, the players can scan the picture

sheet for the answer. Some answers are straightforward and others require some imagination to deduce the answer. One quiz question is “how many reindeer does Santa have.” On the picture sheet, there is a drawing of Santa’s sleigh being pulled by eight reindeer (plus Rudolph). The answer is “eight or nine.” Another quiz question is “what happens to bad boys and girls at Christmas time.” On the picture sheet, there is a drawing of a boy crying and saying that Santa didn’t bring him any presents. He is also wearing a tee-shirt that says “I am a bad boy.” The answer to the quiz question is “they get no presents” or “Santa doesn’t give bad boys and girls any presents.” The answer for that question requires some amount of searching and thinking on the part of the players.

The students love this game as much as they love Brain Buster Bowl. They seem to enjoy scanning the sheet for the answers, perhaps because the pictures provide some challenge to a game in which the answers are not generally known to them. This game is presented as an inter-team competition and prizes are awarded to the first-, second- and third-place winners. Other teams are also awarded prizes as Christmas presents. Christmas BBB can also be played as an intra-team competitive game if there are enough players per group.

This writer occasionally presents a game commonly known as word dominoes. The game can be played in any classroom that has a wide or long blackboard along one wall. The class is divided into at least four groups and each group is assigned one section of the blackboard. In this game, the first student in each group writes a word in a designated section of the blackboard. The next student in each group then writes a word whose first letter is the same as the last letter of the previous word.



The third student then continues the activity with another word whose first letter is the same as the last letter of the previous word. The fourth student (if any) continues and eventually the first student again gets to write a word. Students may shout out suggestions to their partner at the blackboard. After about fifteen minutes, time is called. The teacher (or students in the other groups) checks to see that there are no misspelled words or duplicate entries (for which points may be deducted). Of course, the winning group is the one with the most words.

There is no real conversational lesson in this game. Word dominoes is generally used as a “lesson break” activity and to get the students out of their seats and allow them to stretch their arms. Word dominoes generally requires a class of at least twelve students so that at least four groups can be formed. This writer's students do not feel any urge to compete when there are less than four or five pairs or groups to compete with.

Prizes include small snack items that are securely wrapped and sealed by the manufacturer. Prizes that are wrapped only with a twisting motion of the hands are to be avoided since the wrapping will easily come apart and expose the contents to dirt and germs. Prizes include Kitkat chocolate biscuits, Nabisco crackers and bite-size cakes and pies. All the prizes are placed in a large opaque bag and the winners pull out single prizes. Winners may not look into the bag; therefore they cannot readily select a desired item. They must put their hand into the bag and grab something. Consequently, they tend to “feel” around the items and gauge the shape in an attempt to get a desired item. Thus, the prizes need to be securely wrapped because jostling by students' hands will inevitably loosen wrapping. Each prize costs between ten and thirty yen. This writer

usually has three or four different kinds of prizes in the bag, and rotates among a dozen different snack items in order to provide the students with something they may not have had before. The students enjoy being surprised with a prize that they had not intended to grab for.

## COMMENTS

Games are defined as an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun. (Hadfield:1984). The above described games meet these criteria. The above mentioned games are properly classified as competitive games, as opposed to co-operative games, where the players or teams work together to achieve a common goal. In competitive games, players or teams race to be first to accomplish a goal or accumulate the most points in a set amount of time. Their achievement is rewarded with a prize. It is somewhat more difficult to award a prize in a co-operative game, since the goal may not be easily and concretely measured.

This writer occasionally presents co-operative games, usually in the form of story-telling. One example is the picture order game. In Garfield, Odie and the Apple, the six-frame newspaper comic strip is separated into individual frames and pasted onto cards. Each card is given to a student in the group. Each student must describe what is in his/her frame. If necessary, the students may again repeat what is in their frame. Together they must decide who has the initial frame, succeeding frames and the final frame. By describing what each student has in his/her frame, the group can collectively determine the order and subsequently the story. The story starts with Garfield shaking a tree to dislodge an apple; Odie grabs the apple and runs off; Garfield jumps on Odie, and the apple pops

out of his mouth; Garfield runs into road traffic while chasing after the bouncing and rolling apple; Garfield collides with a stop sign; and finally a beat-up Garfield grabs the apple. Logic would dictate that a beat-up Garfield holding an apple could not be in the first frame if succeeding frames show an uninjured Garfield chasing after the apple. Students very quickly determine the order once they hear each member's description. Students don't expect to receive a prize for this kind of activity because the game ends rather quickly and it is not presented in conjunction with any particular lesson. Thus, they probably regard it as a lesson rather than a true game.

Co-operative games also include strip stories. There are usually about seven to nine sentences in each story and the story proceeds in a logical sequence to the final sentence, which is always the "punch line" or the joke. Usually, the longer the story, the more difficult it is. This writer's students do not enjoy strip stories because they cannot understand the joke or moral of the story, which is usually culture-based.

Another co-operative game involves the who-did-it murder mystery. One student plays the role of the police detective, e.g. Sherlock Holmes or Lieutenant Columbo. Other students play roles that have them stating where they were and what they were doing when the murder occurred. The object of the game is for everyone to reach a logical conclusion as to who the murderer was. These mystery games do not work well with this writer's beginner level students. Hadfield (1987) includes these games in her advanced level games textbook.

## CONCLUSION

Various writers such as Hadfield (*ibid*) and Lee (1979) also refer to language teaching games as communication games. Games can be a means by which second language and foreign language learners can put to use the language that they have learned in the classroom. Games allow the learners to be using the target language rather than just thinking about the linguistic aspects. (Lee: *ibid*).

This writer feels that games can complement textbook lessons by providing an enjoyable means of putting the lessons to practical use. This is especially so in an EFL classroom, where the students have very little outside opportunity to use the TL. In an ESL setting, e.g. the United States and Australia, students have ample opportunities to use English outside the classroom. In the ESL setting, games will be merely one of many tools or options for the ESL teacher and student to use in order to improve the student's English. In a few cases, such as in Christmas Brain Buster Bowl, games may also help teach the EFL student a little of the culture of the United States or Canada and prepare the student should he or she visit the US or Canada during the holiday season.

Finally, language or communication games provide a sense of joy to this writer (and probably to other teachers as well) when he sees and hears the students energetically moving about and laughing and smiling as they play these games. They are obviously having a good time using English in the classroom.

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