Creating, Choosing, and Playing Games to Motivate Adult English Language Students, Beginner to Advanced

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Purpose
Here are tips and strategies for playing English language learning games. Included is a sample phonics game using a set of reproducible letter cards (see companion .pdf file).

Intended Student Population or Grade Level
The focus is on the adult level, from beginner to advanced.

TEACHING TIPS

Why play games?

Games aren’t just “kid’s stuff.” They’re motivational tools for adults and kids alike. People who are having fun and paying attention learn better. My students work all day or have family responsibilities; they’re often tired, and games help energize them in a way that fill-in-the-blank worksheets and rote exercises simply can’t.

There’s a difference between educational games and games that are educational. Many learning games teach important skills and are useful classroom tools, but they aren’t fun to play. I first seek out games that play well, including commercial products that I enjoy with my family at holiday time, and then adapt them to beef up or incorporate solid educational content and language skills.

Keep score! Some teachers are reluctant to do this to avoid having “losers” or putting pressure on students, but scoring is a key component in game play. It’s what makes players want to win, want to follow the rules, want to succeed, want to do better the next time. Remember: These are adults, not kids; no one’s going to cry if they lose. In my opinion, if you don’t keep score or have a decisive resolution (a “finish line” or “pay-off” of some sort), it’s not a game—it’s an exercise—and you lose the motivational push that games provide. I would also argue that the pressure and tension that a competitive situation creates is a positive; it mimics the pressure and tension that every language learner feels when faced with communicating in a foreign tongue.

Good educational games teach the very same skills that workbooks do. It’s important to point this out to students at the beginning of the lesson, especially for those who don’t play a lot of games. You might encounter a little skepticism from students who are used to formal lessons and homework, but this quickly fades. Also, I follow up every game with a solid review of vocabulary and concepts.

Games of skill document progress as players get better with each session—an informal assessment tool! In fact, the first game session is often the shakiest, as students get used to the rules and learn strategies. After introducing a game, I play it several more times in consecutive sessions at higher skill levels or with varied content and point out to students the progression of improvement and the levels of mastery. Adults catch on faster than kids, so you can “up” the level of play quickly.
**Competition and cooperation** are not “bad” or “good.” They’re vital tools for game inventors and educators alike. Most good games are a mixture of the two dynamics.

**Checklist for selecting and playing games**

When creating a game or choosing one, ask yourself these questions:

- **Fun Factor:** Is the game designed for fun first and learning second or vice versa? What makes it fun? How can the “fun factor” be enhanced?

- **Interaction:** Are players interacting with each other (talking, listening, exchanging things, acting and reacting, giving and taking)?

- **Cooperative goal:** How are students working together? Is there a common goal? Are there opportunities for them to help each other?

- **Competitive goal:** What is the competitive mechanism that drives players to want to win, to play better, to succeed (answer questions correctly, collect cards, race around a board, etc.)?

- **Skill:** What is the main educational objective? What specific English skills will students learn? (Outline these for students before playing and review them afterward.)

- **Luck:** Is there an element of luck, such as cards are drawn at random or dice thrown, to help level the playing field and avoid a “runaway winner” situation?

- **Progress:** How can you use the game to informally track progress? How can you increase the level of skill over repeated game sessions or to accommodate multilevel situations?

- **The pay-off:** Is there a pay-off—a winner, a finish line, a sense of accomplishment and achievement (either individual or collective)?

**Tips for Creating and Playing Games**

1. **Keep it simple.** I’ve played some good but complicated board games with lots of pieces and rules and papers to keep track of, but I end up returning to the simple games—often just a deck of cards or a set of letter tiles and a dry-erase board.

2. **Show, don’t tell.** I don’t give my learners written rules. It takes too much time to go through them. It’s easier to play a pretend round until everyone catches on, and then announce that the “real game” is about to begin.

3. **Watch the time.** Keep games short (15-30 minutes) to maintain interest. If you’re having a game day or long session, start with a calm game (like Hangman) and save an energetic one (like Taboo) for the end—the last 15-20 minutes of the session.

4. **Close the notebooks.** Some students will be tempted write down vocabulary words and notes. I discourage this during “game time” to avoid slowing down momentum. Nothing kills a game faster than someone who’s distracted during his or her turn. Set aside time after the game ends to review vocabulary and other material and answer questions.

5. **Limit group sizes.** A typical board game is for two to four players with good reason: No one wants to sit around waiting for a turn. Six is the maximum for most games, with the exception of team games like Taboo, which lend themselves to larger groups.
6. **The more interactive, the better.** Players should be talking to each other, exchanging things, asking and answering questions, competing and/or cooperating directly, and so on. You're there to facilitate and monitor and move things along, but, ideally, the students should be playing the game with each other, not through you. A lack of interaction is one reason I rarely play Bingo learning games.

7. **Repeat, repeat.** Students sometimes have trouble understanding each other because of accents or different English ability levels. Repeat, rephrase, correct (if necessary) what they say to each other.

8. **Again, keep score!** The important reasons are stated above (“Why play games?”). Scoring mechanisms can be very simple: awarding cards as students win them, using play money, or keeping a simple tally.

9. **Incorporate an element of luck**—drawing or choosing cards at random, bonus cards, rolling the dice to move ahead or take an extra turn, for example. While the point of these games is to learn and improve English skills, luck levels the playing field to give everyone a chance at winning. It's one way that game inventors avoid a “runaway winner” situation.

10. **Be enthusiastic!** Cheer people on! Clap your hands! And relax. Games are about having fun, and your attitude will be reflected in your learners. I don't use prizes because I find that adults don’t need them. They genuinely want to succeed and improve, and that's motivation enough.

**What’s in My Basic Game Kit?**

I coordinate a weekly game group for adult learners and have prepared a basic game kit for myself and my tutors. All these materials fit inside a plastic pencil box.

**A Deck of Picture Cards:** I use a hand-made deck of categorized picture cards every time I teach English. The advantage to having a deck of pictures (in addition to a picture dictionary or full-size, cut-out pictures from magazines and calendars) is that you can shuffle them and pass them out at random and easily store them with a rubber band in a box. They also serve as handy scoring mechanisms—the one who earns the most cards wins. Use the picture cards in place of word cards when playing commercial games such as Taboo (most of the word lists are too hard for nonnative speakers), Apples to Apples (use pictures in place of nouns; pair them with adjective cards from the game), Password, and so on. Simple pictures allow you to play those games at high beginner through advanced English levels. I also use picture cards when playing my version of Hangman with beginners. I introduce vocabulary words, using the cards, and then form a fill-in-the-blanks sentence using a couple of those words. There are more games to play with picture cards, in a free downloadable .pdf format, on my website: [www.hoppingfun.com](http://www.hoppingfun.com). Click on “Letter Perfect English.”

**Pack of Standard Playing Cards:** A numeric playing card deck is an excellent tool for teaching the numbers 1-10 (use the ace as 1) and beyond—randomly deal 2-3, set them next to each other, and the answer is “23.” I've had learners count up to the billions, by adding one card at a time in a row (2,365,187,119!). The cards also double as “money” (2 = $2) for practice buying things at a store (using the picture cards as items for sale).
Letter Cards (or Letter Tiles): I made two sets of letter cards, one with common letter combinations (bl, br, bb, etc.) and the other with the rank of the letters as used in the English language. I also color-coded mine—vowels in red, the six rarest letters in blue (Z, X, Q, V, J, K), the rest in black.

2-4 Dice: These are also really useful for random number practice. (Roll them and then line them up to make a number to name.) You can also use them to choose who goes first (highest roll) in any game or for choosing sides for team play (odd or even).

Sand Timer: I almost never use a time limit for the first time students play a game, but as they get used to the rules and content, I find that setting a limit per turn helps move things along.
Beat-the-Teacher Phonics

The goal is for players (2 to 6) to outscore the teacher by correctly choosing letters that make a word.

1. Write on a board any short- or long-vowel word ending:

   ____ AT

2. Lay out a selection of consonant letter cards in the center of the table, avoiding any beginning consonants that form problematic words with your chosen ending, including legitimate words that are very rare (like “nat”) or inappropriate words. It’s up to you whether to allow proper names (I do). Here are the letter cards I use for “____ AT”:

   B  C  D  F  G  H
   J  K  L  M  P  Q
   R  S  T  V  W  X
   Y  Z

   STUDENTS          TEACHER

   SCORE:                  SCORE:

3. Each student, in turn, picks a letter. If the letter makes a word (bat, cat, fat, hat, mat, pat, rat, sat, tat, vat), and he or she can pronounce it properly, the students score one point and win the card. If it’s not a word, the teacher scores a point and wins the card.

4. For dramatic effect, announce when there’s only one letter left that forms a word. When that letter has been picked, end the game (setting aside leftover consonants) and tally the final score by counting the cards won by the students and by the teacher. Review the pronunciation of the words (I don’t get into the vocabulary just yet), collect the letters, and play again, immediately. The goal is for the teacher’s score to be zero. You might need a third or fourth round of play to accomplish this.
**Game Checklist**

**Fun Factor:** For each correct word, make a sound effect (meow—cat), do a gesture (pat on the shoulder, swing of a bat), or draw a simple picture (rectangle—mat) that hints at the meaning of the word.

**Skill:** Short “a” practice. Simple vocabulary. I introduce or review the meanings of some words afterward and use them to make up practice sentences for reading.

**Luck:** Rotate who goes first with each round, since it gets harder to choose correct letters as the round progresses. Players don’t have to know the words ahead of time (they learn as the play), and so the luck factor also includes choosing letters at random and hoping that they form words.

**Interaction:** Players can coach each other. They’re a “team” in this game.

**Cooperative goal:** Work together to “beat the teacher.” Over repeated play, reduce the teacher’s cards to zero.

**Competitive goal:** Individuals want to win the most cards. They quickly learn words so that they can choose wisely.

**Progress:** Who’s paying attention and remembering? You’ll know by the second round. Each round, students make wiser letter choices.

**Multilevel:** Very soon, they’re ready to move onto another word ending.