



## Ploys to play

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Play appeals to everyone. It is inborn in the human being. It is pleasurable, enjoyable and it is this feature that makes the player value it as a source of relaxing output. Although play may appear to be unproductive, it in fact affords unlimited possibilities. It is spontaneous and voluntary and it involves active engagement on the part of the player. For all these factors, play has historically been linked with creativity, problem-solving and language learning. It is this need that has motivated us to reflect on the potential of game-like resources in the FLT field.

### Why games for language learning?

No doubt, learning a language is a huge dynamic challenge. When learning a language we are plunged into the pool of the unknown; and this causes anxiety. To undergo this process successfully we need to find some spices that work. Games are handy resources that comply with all what we need: engagement, spontaneity and enjoyment- three essential requirements to make language learning a bit easier. Thus, playing opens a crucial pathway to language learning not only because it grants the opportunity to use the language in a flexible and meaningful way but also and above all because it nourishes both the intellect and the soul. Learners engaged in a motivating game want to participate and in so doing they need to understand what others are saying and they need to communicate their own viewpoint or bridge some information gap to put the message across.

Moreover, following any game procedure guarantees the development of cooperative behaviour. Teachers who resort to games in their classes have to set basic ground rules that little by little help to build the learners' kingdom of values. Game rules have to be interpreted, accepted and finally respected by all the participants. In a word, by using games teachers are fulfilling their ultimate aim: instruct and educate.

If we still add to this the fact that it is widely accepted that games provide intense and

meaningful practice, we firmly believe that they should be a must in all teachers' repertoire.

### Are games suitable for all age groups and levels?

Playing should not be restricted by age, least by levels. Play is inherent to man, it is in his nature; so both young learners and adults are always eager to play games. Adolescents, however, may be more reluctant to participate when they are presented with a game, since they may feel ridiculous and find no purpose in the game itself. The key factors in this matter lie in the appropriateness of the game and the ability of the teacher to present it. The more enthusiasm she shows, the better response she will get. Group and pair work help overcome this situation.

### In what moment of the class should we use games?

Games can be used in all stages of the learning process. Though they are mainly effective during the practice and consolidation period, skillful teachers can also profit from them to present new material. Some games are particularly useful for the presentation stage since they cater for systematic repetition of models in natural contexts.

### Which skills can we practise?

All four skills. It is a misconception to believe that games are only suitable as oral activities; they can provide intense practice in the four skills. Most games, even the most traditional ones, can be easily adapted to encourage students' practice in both receptive and productive skills alike.

### Do all games provide communicative practice?

No, not all of them. Though some games may present appealing dynamics, not all of them focus on communication.

The traditional Tic Tac Toe, a popular choice among teachers, can be easily spoilt if meaning is



neglected. If the challenge to draw the winning straight line just involves making sentences in isolation or recognizing words at random, we will be probably ruining a handy tool. Yet, if each frame suggests a task – in order to mark a square students have to solve a riddle, produce a piece of discourse such as a poem or lecture, narrate a past event or even invent a song- we will be then succeeding in enlarging the students' communicative scope of action.

Another example may be a Memotest. If this memory procedure is just used to elicit decontextualized words, we will be limiting its potential. Instead, if the visual stimuli provided by a memotest were used to encourage students to perform a task, to solve a problem or to overcome an obstacle, then the game would turn out to be communicatively profitable. (e.g Pictures of

professionals could be matched to incomplete CVs, lyrics of songs to unfinished letters or landscapes to incomplete brochures)

In conclusion, play is a crucial ingredient in the life of man since it helps him develop and foster his creativity, his imagination and even his self-esteem. Play allows him to train himself for life skills and among these life skills, communication is primary. We then invite teachers to supplement and reinforce their basic language programmes with games that will not only help students practise the language meaningfully but also and above all grow as human beings.

Many questions are still unanswered, yet the words below will surely lead you into the first move in this direction.

*I tried to teach my child from books,  
He gave me only puzzled looks,  
I tried to teach my child with words,  
They passed by him often unheard,  
Despairingly, I turned aside,  
How shall I teach this child I cried,  
Into my hand he put the key,  
Come he said and play with me!*

Anon