

Games - An A-Z of Classroom Activities for Children

For ease of reference, the games are listed here in alphabetical order. The games indicated are only suggestions and the teacher is free to adapt them. This could mean substituting one game for another below, or using a game from your own repertoire. The 'teacher' referred to in each game may not be the teacher him or herself, but could be a student chosen to lead the activity. Such student-centred activities are, of course, desirable wherever possible.

Air drawing - The teacher draws something in the air. The students have to guess what it is.

Anagrams - The teacher writes anagrams of target language on the board or pieces of paper. The students have to unscramble them and say what the word is or write out the correct word.

Back drawing - One student draws a picture on another student's back. The student has to guess the picture. This can also be used for letters, numbers and words.

Back-to-back - Two students sit back to back so they cannot see each other. They then practise the target language (eg questions-and-answers, picture dictation). Alternative - Students can sit at opposite ends of the classroom or table in order to generate more natural conversation.

Bingo - Use homemade bingo board cards or get the students to create their own in their notebooks. They should draw ten items from a list of twenty, for example. Call out the target vocabulary an item at a time, while the students cross off or cover items on their board. The first student to cross off/cover all the items on their card is the winner.

Blockbusters - Draw a diamond or hexagon grid on the board and write target words or letters in the spaces. Teams take turns to choose a space on the left hand side of the grid and are asked a question about the item therein. If the answer is correct the team can choose an adjacent space, if not the other team has a turn. The aim of the game is for teams to travel across the grid until they reach the right hand side. Set a time limit for this. If there is no winner within the time limit, the team that has travelled furthest is the winner.

Card race - A number of flashcards are placed face down on the table. The students take it in turn to turn over the cards one-by-one, as quickly as possible, practising the target language for each card (eg "It's a dog" or "It has got four legs"). The fastest student is the winner.

Categories relay - Write categories (eg food, drink, countries, sport) on pieces of paper and put one in each corner of the room. Divide the class into two teams, and place a large pile of flashcards or word cards face down in front of each team. The first team member picks up the first card and runs to put it in the correct corner. And then runs back to their team. When the second member picks up the next card, and so on. The first team to place all their cards in the correct corners is the winner. Alternatives - 1. Students sit in a circle and take turns in naming items within a chosen category. If a student cannot name anything or makes a mistake s/he stands, but continues playing and chooses a new category. If they are correct on their next turn they sit again, if not, they stand on one leg, close an eye, etc. 2. Name a colour and students take turns to name anything of that colour. The student who fails to name anything loses a "life" 3. Choose categories that have a specific sequence, eg numbers, days, months, etc.

Chair game - This is a good way to practice sequences such as days of the week, seasons or months. Line up a number of chairs (you'll need four chairs for seasons, seven chairs for days of the week etc) and assign a chair for each item in the sequence (for example; chair 1 will be spring, chair 2 will be summer). Arrange two teams. To the first two students from each line, you call out one of the words and they run to be first to sit in the relevant chair. Warning-can get boisterous!

Challenge - This activity will take some preparation and help with language. With a number of Flashcards, at least one for each student (eg Jump and touch the ceiling. Draw a rabbit, throw the ball into the basket, etc). Give each student a card and have them try to do the task. If they can they say, "I can..." and if not, say, "I can't..." Points for completing the task and saying the sentence.

Charades (see also Mime game) - This activity is good for practicing actions. A student comes to the front of the class and is shown a prompt card (for example: watching television). The student then mimes the action to the rest of the class who try to guess the performance. You can build this into Simple dialogues: Student 1 : Are you reading a book? Performer: No. I'm not. Student 3: Are you.....?

Coin race - The teacher spins a coin on the table. The students count or recite the alphabet "in the round" - ie one student says 'a' the next 'b' the next 'c' and so on. They continue, counting or reciting as quickly as possible. When the coin stops spinning. The student who is in the process of saying a letter or number at that moment gets a point. The aim of the game is to finish with no points. This can also be played with categories. The teacher spins a coin while the students throw the ball to each other. Each student must say a word within the category as they catch the ball e.g. carrots, potatoes etc. in the Vegetable category. The student left with the ball when the coin stops has to sit down or gets a point.

Countdown - In pairs or teams students take nine letters from two piles of vowels and consonants (making sure they take at least three vowels). They then make as many words as they can from their selection within a given time, writing each word in their notebooks as they go.

Cut up sentences - Write target sentences or structures on pieces of paper and cut them up into individual words. In pairs or teams, the students race to rebuild the sentences correctly. Alternatively, the teacher can ask a target question and students race to "build" the answer.

Descriptions - Divide the students into teams and place a range of realia or flashcards at the front of the class. Describe one of the items a little at a time. The first team to guess correctly wins a point. Alternatively, write one of the items on the board or show a word card, and the students have to describe the object to you. You can also sit two students from two teams with their backs to the board and get their team members to shout out descriptions of a word that you write on the board. The first student to shout out the word being described wins a point for their team.

Date game - Write six or twelve words on the board and allocate each a number. Students take turns to roll the dice and attempt to read the word. This can be extended to include sentences, questions that the students must answer, tasks leg mimes, Do it Dan, etc) or other activities.

Dictations (see also Numbers dictation) - Dictate simple words or sentences for the students to write, or describe a scene for the students to draw.

Double line-up - Divide the class into two teams and have them stand facing each other in two lines. Put a flashcard or word card on the floor between each pair. Designate one line A and the other B. On the word, 'Go' line A asks the target question, and line B gives the answer from the card at their feet. When the exchange is complete, everyone moves one place to the right (the students at the end of the line swap lines), so each student has a new partner. Repeat the Q/A exchange and move again, until each student is back in her/his original place. Students enjoy it more if you time them. so they can try to go faster the next time this game is played.

Fizz Buzz - The students count in a chain, substituting 'fizz' for multiples of five and 'buzz' for multiples of ten. When students are familiar with the game the multiples can be changed, though this should not become a maths test.

Flashcard reveal - The teacher hides a flashcard behind a book or a piece of card. Slowly reveal the card. The students shout out when they think they know what it is.

Fruit basketball - Put the empty fruit basket at one end of the table. The students stand at the other end and take it in turn to try and throw the plastic fruit into the basket. After each turn the student should say where the fruit has landed (e.g. "It's [preposition] the [noun]") Extend by designating a student to ask the question, "Where's the [fruit]?" For more advanced groups, place a number of objects around the basket to practise such language as, near, next to, between, etc.

Fruit salad - The students sit on chairs, which are placed in a circle. Each student is given a flashcard a name or a word. The teacher stands in the middle of the circle and says a sentence which includes two of the objects, names or words e.g. "I like bananas and apples" The two students holding the flashcards have to stand up and swap places before the teacher can sit down on one of the chairs. If the students are successful, the teacher says another sentence and tries again. If the teacher is successful, the student who didn't sit down is now the teacher.

Grab - Place a piece of paper and a pencil on the table. The students put their hands on their heads. The teacher says one of the target sentences (eg it's a lion."), and the students try to grab the pencil. The first student to grab the pencil draws the object or tries to write the sentence. Guess the drawing - The teacher draws a picture on the whiteboard one line at a time. After each line ask, "What is it?" (or, "what are they?"). The students try to guess the picture. Encourage students to use this technique as well.

Guess the object - Divide the students into pairs. Place a number of objects around the room and give a clue using a preposition. If one of the teams guess correctly they earn three points. If not, give another clue (eg leg size or shape) for two points, and a final clue (eg colour) for one point.

Guess the word - Similar to 'guess the drawing'. Write a word on the board pausing after each letter until the students guess what it is. Then try to elicit the rest of the spelling.

Heidi's game - Students need to know how to play 'Scissors, Paper, Stone'. Put a line of flashcards or word cards face-up on the table. Divide the class into two teams. Teams start from opposite ends of the line. Taking it in turns, one student from each team progresses along the cards reading the word or making a statement about the card. When the two students meet on the same card, they play 'Scissors, Paper, Stone'. The losing team goes back to their beginning card and changes students; the winning team continues along the line having also substituted their old student for a new one. When a team reaches the final card in the line, they get one point and the game is started again. It is usually best to set a time-limit.

Hunt the Flashcard - flashcards are scattered or hidden around the classroom. The teacher can use a variety of prompts (eg "bring me the dog" or, "The tomato is under the chair.") and the students race to find the flashcard mentioned. Also good for phonic/ letter/ word recognition.

Hide and Seek - Students take it in turns to hide items (or themselves!) around the classroom as opposed to flashcards. Play in the same way as the above game Hunt the flashcard

I-spy - Students take turns to name the initial letter of an object and the others have to guess what it is. Instead of the classic rhyme, the students should say, "I can see a [letter]" An alternative version is for a student to write the letter on the board or a piece of paper, adding a letter after each incorrect guess to build the word.

Kim's game - a series of flashcards or objects are placed on the table. The students have a set time to study the objects and try to remember them all. When the time is up, the objects are removed out of sight, or it may be easier for the students to turn away from the table and face the wall! The students then have to name the objects (or answer questions about the objects - eg "How many red things are there?"). This game also works very well for preposition questions and answers (Where is the pencil? / Is there a pencil on the box?).

Lap game - Place a series of known flashcards on the table to make a circuit. Designate a start and finish line. Students place counters on the start line and take it in turn to throw a die. They move their counter that many spaces (ie cards), counting aloud as they do so. Then they have to answer a question about the card they land on. This game can also be used with letters, numbers or word cards.

Let's do it - Basically 'Simon says', but instead of the usual instruction, students only perform the action on a sentence beginning with, "Let's " (eg "Let's stand up"). Alternatively use, "Please"

Line game - Place a number of flashcards, item or words in a line on the table. One student walks along the line, making a statement about each item. Students enjoy being timed doing this activity, to see who is the fastest. An alternative version is for two students to come to the table - one on one side and one on the other. One student asks a question about each card which the other student has to answer.

Line-up - The students stand in a line at the front of the class. Each student is given a flashcard an item or a word card. The first student moves along the line, making a statement or answering a question about each item. When they reach the end, the second student moves along the line, making statements or answering questions. Continue until all of the students have moved along the line. The students like to be timed doing this activity to see how fast they can complete the whole activity. With smaller classes, write or draw the items on the board rather than have the students hold them.

Match up - Give students flashcards of vocabulary that is written on the board. They stand at the opposite end of the room from the board. On the command, "Go" they have to race and put their card on the whiteboard shelf under the correct word. The first one back to their chair and seated is the winner. This can also be played with students matching their word card with a picture flashcard or picture in their books.

Memory game - The teacher writes or draws a number of letters, numbers, words or objects on the whiteboard. The students close their eyes and the teacher erases one of the items. The students open their eyes and say which item has been removed.

Mime game (see also Charades) - Divide the class into two teams. Show one member of each team a flashcard or word card, which s/he should mime to the members of her or his team. The first team to guess the word correctly wins a point.

Musical statues - The students move around the room to any piece of music. When the music stops, call out a verb and the students all freeze in the TPR manner. Can also be used for adjectives and professions.

Mystery bag - This game is good for practicing possessives. Take one or two personal possessions from each student (such as toys, pencil cases, bicycle keys etc) and along with some of your own possessions place them in a bag. You withdraw one object and ask: Whose [key] is this? The first student to answer gets to take the next turn.

Noughts-and-crosses - (Also known as tic-tac-toe.) Draw the traditional 3x3 noughts-and-crosses grid on the board. Write one target language item in each square (eg words. letters, numbers). Divide the class into two teams: one team is '0' and the other is 'x'. The first team chooses one of the squares and has to answer a question about, or make a statement using that language item. If they do so correctly, they have won that square and their team symbol (ie a 'o' or a 'x' is put in the square. The aim of the game is to get three squares in a row - either horizontally, vertically or diagonally - in order to Win. (NB It is Often useful to number the squares 1-9, so that students select a square by number.)

Numbers dictation (see also Dictations) - This is a good way to check minimal pairs of similar sounding words such as 13/30. The teacher simply reads out a list of numbers and students copy them onto the board or into their notebooks.

Number the word - Divide the whiteboard in two and the Ss into two teams. Write a jumbled up sentence in each half of the whiteboard Write the numbers 1 - ? under the words, so that the first word is 1, the second is 2, the third is 3 etc. Then get the first member of each team to run and reorder the sentence by writing the correct number sequence in their half of the board. Allow the team to help. The fastest team wins when they have shouted out the correct number sequence and said the unjumbled sentence.

Pelmanism - Spread a set of flashcards face down on the table (making sure there are two of each card). The students take it in turns to turn over two cards, saying what each card is as they do so. If the two cards match, the student wins those cards. If the cards do not match, the cards are turned over and the next student has their go. An alternative version is Lightning Pelmanism, wherein the cards are not turned back over if they do not match. This, of course, is a much faster game.

Place race - Divide the class into two teams. Give each team flashcards or objects that they must place around the classroom according to the teacher's (or other team' s) instructions. One student from each team then asks and answers a preposition question (eg "Where's your homework?" "It's in the bin" etc).

Pogo - Write a maximum of six words or phonemes across the top of the whiteboard. The students stand in a line under one of the words. The teacher calls out the words in rapid and random order. The students have to jump sideways and stand under each word as the teacher calls them out. Any student who jumps to the wrong word, who doesn't jump when they should or jumps when they shouldn't becomes the 'teacher'

Rub and write - the teacher writes a word or short phrase on the board. The students look and memorize it. You will find it useful for word memorization if they chant out the spelling while they are doing this. After about 15 seconds you rub out the word, and the students from memory write it in their notebooks

Run-and-circle/draw/erase/write - The teacher write several letters or words on the board. Divide the students into two teams. The teams line up at the back of the classroom. Give each team a marker pen. When the teacher says something about one of the items on the whiteboard one student from each team has to race to the board, circle or erase the item and then race back and touch the wall. The first student to do so wins a point for their team. For 'draw' or 'write' the board is obviously blank at the beginning of the game. (NB It is often useful to get the students to have to ask a question in order to elicit the word from the teacher, such as "Do you like (apples)?" or "What time is it?")

Slap - Spread a series of flashcards face up on the table in front of the students. The students place their hands on their heads. The teacher calls out one of the items and the students slap that flashcard. The first student to slap the card wins that card. Continue until all of the cards have been won. Can be used with picture cards, word cards, letter cards or numbers.

Spelling race - Put four or five word cards at one end of the room so they are difficult to see from the table, or outside the room. Divide the class into pairs. One student from each team goes to the cards and tries to remember as much of a word as possible. S/he then goes back to her/his partner and dictates the spelling in a whisper. The partner writes the word in their notebook. When the word is completed, the Writer goes to the teacher and whispers the spelling and word (eg T.E.N.N.I.S tennis). If the word and spelling are both correct, the students swap roles for the second 'word. If not the first student has to recheck the spelling. The first team to spell and read all the words correctly is the winner.

Stations - Designate areas in the classroom as separate stations (eg 'yes' and 'no'; 'true' and 'false'; different phonemes). These can be pieces of paper with the word written on each and placed on different walls, or chairs placed apart. The students stand in a central, 'neutral' area. The teacher says something related to the target language and the students have to run to the appropriate station (eg if the teacher holds up a picture of a cat and says, "This is a dog" the students should run to the 'no' station). A variation is 'Catch', where the teacher tries to touch a student before they can reach the station. Any student caught has to answer a question or becomes the teacher for the next round.

Table /board game - Place six flashcards on the table and another six on the board and number each a card. Students take turns to throw two dice and make a sentence or question about that card. This is particularly good for practising this/that and these/those.

Tag - Stand the students in a circle. One student goes around the inside of the circle asking a target short closed question. If the answer is, "No," go onto THE NEXT student. If the answer is, "Yes", the students who answers has to run around the outside of the circle and get back to her or his place before the questioner catches or tags them. If the questioner is successful, s/he takes the place of the other student. if not s/he continues asking the question to the next student.

Target ball - Write several words, letters or numbers to be practised on the whiteboard. Divide the students into teams. One student from the first team throws the sticky-ball at the whiteboard and tries to make it stick to one of the words. If they are successful, the other team have to answer a question or make a statement about that word. If they succeed, they win a point. If they cannot do so, the other team wins the point.

Team spelling - Divide the class into two teams. Say a word to one of the teams who spell it out with each team member saying a letter. Any hesitations or mistakes and the word goes to the opposing team for bonus points. This game can be played by individual students in smaller classes.

Touch - The teacher calls out classroom items and/or flashcards/letters. The students run and touch the item/flashcard/letter and call out the word or sound.

Truth - Students respond to prompts from the teacher depending on whether the statements are true or false. If the statement is true, they stand up and repeat it; if the statement is false, they sit down.

Vocabulary card - Write key vocabulary on cards which are placed face down. Students take turns to pick up a card, read the word and say a sentence or ask a question containing that word.

Where is it? - A variation of Kim's Game. Place a range of objects, flashcards or word cards around the room. The students have to tell you where each is. Then have the students leave the room while you rearrange the objects. When they return, divide the students into two teams. Team 1 asks, "Where is the (noun)?" and Team B searches and answers. Teams swap roles after each turn.

Which card? - This is a good activity to generate questions. You need flashcards which have duplicates, it doesn't matter if they are picture cards or word cards. Place one set of the cards on the table face up, and keep the other set. Choose one card and don't reveal it to the students. Taking turns, individual students ask questions to identify the card. The language they use can be carefully chosen to reinforce target structures: Do you like (oranges)? /Do you have (an orange)? / Is it (an orange)? Do you want (an orange)? Whatever the question they use, you answer with a negative or positive answer. When you answer in the positive all the students race to slap the corresponding flashcard on the table.

Whispers - Divide the class into two teams. The teams stand in lines starting from the whiteboard. The teacher stands at the back of the classroom and the student at the back of the line from each team comes to the teacher. The teacher whispers a word or sentence to the two students, who run to the back of the line and whisper the word or sentence to the next student, who whispers it to the next, and so on down the line. When the student nearest the whiteboard hears the item, s/he runs to the board and draws the item or circles the word. They then run to the teacher to listen to the next item, and so on.

Who's swimming? - Like the game 'Which Card?' above, this is a good activity to generate questions. In this case it is the present continuous: Who's swimming? Junko is. Who's wearing red socks Kazuki is. This in some ways is similar to Kim's game as it is testing powers of recall in a fun way. You need three or four students to make a line. One or two students will have their memories tested. These students are given a limited amount of time to memorize the 'line-up'. It may be that they are memorizing clothes the students are wearing or actions they are performing. When the time is up, the students turn their backs on the line-up and are asked questions similar to the examples above by the teacher or students in the line-up. Award a point to the first student who correctly answers.

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