

Motivation Through Play in Second Language Learning: It's All Fun and Games and Nobody Gets Hurt!

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of fun and games in enhancing student motivation and engagement in the ESL classroom. It begins by examining the theoretical and practical significance of play and explains how the incorporation of games into English language lessons can help stimulate engagement, increase participation, and promote deeper learning. Drawing inspiration from parlour games, competitive challenges, collaborative puzzles, and timed challenges, this paper makes recommendations on how to make lessons fun, memorable, and educational. The paper then explores how the use of fun and games can create a positive classroom atmosphere that supports learner confidence and encourages risk-taking. It also provides examples of how different types of games can be used to target the four skills; speaking, listening, reading, and writing, emphasising the connection between playful learning and the development of key language skills. Finally, the paper concludes by highlighting the importance of play in learning and how fun can be a driving force for sustained student motivation within the ESL Classroom.

Keywords: *Fun, Games, Motivation, TESOL, Language learning*

Introduction

If twenty-two people were asked to run around a field all day, they would most likely complain, drag their feet, or refuse the task entirely. However, if those same people were given a football, split into two teams, and told it was a game, then they would probably keep playing for hours. It is within this interstitial space that we discover how fun fuels motivation, entices engagement, and determines not only how a task is approached, but also experienced and remembered.

Games create enjoyment, and enjoyment motivates individuals to engage in activities that they would otherwise avoid. In much the same way, academic activities are not always devoid of enjoyment. Students can, and often do, derive pleasure from their studies. Yet, there are times when even the most studious student may feel tired, frustrated, or unwilling to continue. Therefore, it is essential for language teachers to consider how to make their lessons

enjoyable and engaging for their students.

If a teacher can make studying fun, then the students will feel like they want to learn, rather than as though they have to study as part of some other greater goal. One way of accomplishing this is by integrating games into study activities in order to create a marriage between fun and learning. Fun should not merely be a reward for learning, but rather a catalyst for making learning possible. When enjoyment is embedded within the process, students are more likely to participate, persist through challenges, and achieve deeper learning outcomes through active engagement. It's all fun and games and nobody gets hurt!

Games are highly motivating because they are amusing and interesting. They can be used to give practice in all language skills and be used to practise many types of communication (Ersoz, 2000).

There are many types of games that can be beneficial for English language students. These games can involve students challenging themselves, challenging others, or interacting with their surrounding environment. Each with their own benefits and drawbacks.

Individual challenge games encourage students to focus on their own personal growth, building confidence as they track their progress over time. These types of games allow learners to measure their own success without pressure or competition from others. Allowing them to work at their own pace. The sense of accomplishment that comes from completing a task independently helps to boost motivation and encourage self-study outside of the classroom. However, as with all games, students will still need some form of positive feedback for their motivation to be sustained.

Competitive games are activities in which students challenge others, either alone or as part of a team. When presented appropriately, these games can make students quite voluble as they eagerly exchange ideas, debate problems, and strategize their next move. In practice, these types of games made the students the most exuberant and excited as they battled for supremacy over their opponents. It has also been observed that competitive team games help to spread the pressure each member may feel to win as they work together and play upon their own individual strengths. In any case, these types of games work best when they are designed in such a way that the use of the target language functions as a game mechanic (Lo et al., 2021) in order to defeat the other team.

Environmental games, by contrast, involve students interacting with the setting around them rather than focusing on themselves or others. In these types of games, a sense of accomplishment comes from completing the task, rather than enhancing their skills or vanquishing a foe. Examples include sorting words, finding answers, or solving problems either alone or as part of a team.

All of these types of games can be adapted for different levels or thinking skills, including low-order thinking skills; in which students regurgitate and share knowledge that

they already know, or high-order thinking skills; in which they have to analyse, evaluate, or be creative with what they are given in the classroom (Bloom, 1956).

The reader is perhaps already familiar with many of these types of games, but it is useful to think of games within the theoretical scope of these three categories. However, for the purposes of this paper, the games will be organised according to the four skills; speaking, listening, reading, and writing so that the reader may draw inspiration from the examples stated and possibly try them out for themselves.

Speaking Games

Speaking games give students the opportunity to practise oral communication, build fluency, and gain confidence expressing their own ideas. These games allow students to engage with the target language in meaningful contexts, turning routine speaking tasks into enjoyable challenges. For example, an activity that would normally involve simply discussing answers to questions as part of a group could be reframed as a game. For example, a game where students are split into teams and the content presented as a competitive classroom quiz. One that transforms the task into a competitive and collaborative experience in which all members must unanimously agree in order to succeed. The target language becoming a necessary tool required to defeat the opposing team, win the game, and be burnished in glory.

By contrast, the same activity presented in a traditional format may lead some students to take a back seat and let others dominate; which highlights the importance of designing activities that require collective participation and collaboration from all participants. Ensuring that each student has a role to play and contributes to the group's success. For instance, tasks that require low-order thinking skills (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), such as; applying, understanding, and remembering, can be incorporated into games that engage students and reinforce their foundational knowledge.

An example of this was practised by the author of this paper in a review lesson of Rikkyo University's English Discussion Course. For this lesson, students were required to practise asking for opinions, giving opinions, and agreeing/disagreeing in groups. This was normally done by merely asking and answering discussion questions from the textbook. However, in order to gamify this lesson, the class was split into two groups which competed against each other in the style of a British pub quiz. Each question becoming more playful and having no clear answer that could be searched or googled.

For instance, for one question, the students had to discuss the topic of fame. Normally they would just sit and answer discussion questions on the topic. However, this activity was gamified so that instead they looked at poorly drawn sketches of famous people on the projector and tried to determine who each celebrity was. This led to a lot of uncertainty and laughter among the students as they shared ideas on who each crude drawing was supposed to represent. In the end, the answers were shown, points were given, and everyone put on their game face

for the next activity.

This gamification (Altarriba, 2014) of lesson activities introduces the idea of fun into non-game contexts, enhances the learning experience, and encourages students to work as a team for the success of the task. Fostering a collaborative mindset that depends on the contribution of all members. Those teams that fail to work together will inevitably find the activities more challenging. But with good game design, direction, and feedback they will have the necessary tools to give them a fighting chance.

Listening Games

Listening games are important because they encourage students to move beyond inactive listening and actively engage with the meaning, detail, and context of what they hear. They help students to sharpen their attention, notice patterns in speech, and move beyond passive listening so that they can focus on accuracy. By framing these activities as games, they become less about right and wrong answers and more an exercise in active discovery. They also allow students to gain confidence as they begin to see listening as a skill that can be improved, rather than something that just happens gradually through repeated exposure. Games give listening clear purpose which helps keep attention high and prevents students from tuning out during long stretches of spoken material.

For example, for Rikkyo University's Reading and Writing Course, the author of this paper prepared a video clip for students with partially completed subtitles where key words were replaced with underscored blanks. Students then had to listen closely in order to fill in the missing words.

In one such activity, a clip from *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Jackson, 2001) was used in which Bilbo Baggins says, "I am old Gandalf. I know I don't look it, but I'm beginning to feel it in my heart. I feel thin. Sort of stretched. Like [X] scraped over too much [Y]." The words that were removed and replaced with blanks were "butter" and "bread" as they are easy to hear in the clip, but also draw attention to the subject of the lesson: similes.

A similar activity was repeated later in the lesson after students had written their own similes to describe people and places. For this, they watched a clip from *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* (Jackson, 2013) where he compares his teeth to swords, his claws to spears, and his wings to a hurricane. In this case, the vocabulary was pre-taught in an earlier matching game in which the students took turns in teams playing Pelmanism, using images projected onto the whiteboard. For this game, the students needed to take turns matching words to pictures (e.g., sword, spear, hurricane, etc.), which served as a way for the teacher to surreptitiously teach the meaning of new words and jargon that would appear in later activities and future lessons.

Reading Games

Reading games are activities designed to engage students with texts while encouraging comprehension, critical thinking, and interactive participation. By gamifying comprehension tasks, teachers can encourage students to pay closer attention to the lesson material, think critically about texts, and interact with the lesson content in deeper ways. Gamifying these activities not only enhances student understanding, but also stimulates motivation as students interact with reading materials in playful and imaginative ways. Moreover, reading games can help bridge the gap between reading and communication, where students read and share answers, or compete against their peers. An example of this occurred in Rikkyo University's Reading and Writing Course where students are required to develop key reading skills throughout the semester. Notably, in one lesson on the key skills of skimming and scanning, the author of this paper prepared a few games to help his students improve these skills.

To practise skimming, the students were shown a simple text projected onto the screen. The text had been prewritten by their teacher to ensure that it was simple to read and level-appropriate. The students were then shown a multiple-choice question and told to read the text as the sentences slowly disappeared from the screen. This forced the students to skim read the text before it was gone and focus on key words and vocabulary in order to glean a general gist of what the text was about. They then held up a card (A, B, or C) for what they believed to be the correct answer to the multiple-choice question.

Specifically, for one text, the students read a simplified version of Chapter 9, "Shelob's Lair," from *The Two Towers* of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Tolkien, 1954b), in which the Hobbits encounter a repulsive spider-like creature that stalks them through pitch-black tunnels as they try to navigate their escape. In this instance, the students only had a brief time to read the text and then decide on what type of emotion the hobbits were likely experiencing at that moment (A: Worried, B: Hungry, or C: Excited) based on the text. To succeed at this activity, the students had to look for key words and clues that could best help them determine the answer. For example, actively scanning and noticing words like "food" and "potatoes" when reading about the hobbits preparing a rabbit stew helped them to determine that the hobbits were probably hungry.

Any students who gave a wrong answer during these activities were told that they would miss a turn in the next round. However, this threat never came to fruition, as the students became very good at playing the game and finding the correct answers. This is because the activity was intentionally designed so that the students were incapable of failing and instead just gained a lot of practice skimming for context in the form of a game.

In total, the students read ten stories that all followed this same simple structure despite the questions becoming increasingly difficult each round. Each time the students were given less time to read, they read faster, skimmed words more effectively, and seemed to enjoy the game and the lurking threat of failure.

Later that same lesson, the students were put into pairs and told they would be playing a scanning game. For this activity, the students were pitted against each other and told to scan the original, unedited text of a chapter from *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Tolkien, 1954a). The students were then shown a scanned page from the book projected onto a large screen at the front of the class. A random word appeared to the side (For example, “Gandalf x 3”) and the students had to race against each other to find all instances of the word on the page.

The page was overlaid with a grid (like the kind one might find on a map) with a row of letters along the top, and a row of numbers down the side. Once the student found a word, they would then yell out its position on the page before their partner could (For example, “C4!”). Once all the instances of the example word were found, new pairs were formed and the winners sent to “the winner circle” at the back of the class, and the losers moved closer to the front. The students were then paired with a new partner respective to their position, and by way of attrition, all had a chance of winning, or failing.

This game generated a lot of excitement among the students as the teacher carnival barked between each round to encourage the quick movement between chairs. The winners were praised and welcomed to the winner circle, while the losers were encouraged to try harder next time. Again, these activities themselves were not that difficult, and the real challenge for the students came from them trying to beat their opponents. By design, it was impossible to fail or win every time, and the real aim was for the students to practise the skill of scanning. Even if they were personally more focused on winning.

Writing Games

Writing games are activities that encourage students to produce written language in an interactive and engaging way. They can help students practise vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, or composition while also adding an element of play and challenge. By gamifying these writing tasks, teachers can turn potentially tedious exercises into stimulating experiences that develop both written accuracy and creativity.

For instance, in a similar activity to the listening activity mentioned earlier, the students watched a scene from *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993) in which John Hammond introduces the main characters, Dr. Alan Grant and Dr. Ellie Sattler to the park and their first dinosaur. While watching, the students practised writing quotes and had to summarise what each character had said, asked, or shouted. For instance, while watching the clip, the students either wrote; “Dr. Alan Grant asked ‘How fast are they?’” (direct speech) or “Dr. Alan Grant asked how fast they were” (reported speech) in order to practise writing both grammatical structures.

This activity was slightly gamified as it required the integration of both listening and writing skills and included the challenge of obtaining the most quotes from the scene. To make it easier, the students were able to watch the scene three times. Moreover, the scene had been edited so that the colour of the subtitles for each character were; white for John Hammond, blue

for Dr. Grant, and pink for Dr. Sattler. The same colours as their clothing.

Incidentally, this scene was shown again in a later lesson so that the students could discuss the metaphorical implications of Spielberg's colour choices. One theory being that the park owner John Hammond wears white to symbolise God, Dr. Malcolm wears black to symbolise chaos, and how these colour choices could tie into the overall theme of the movie; life, death, and giving birth (Hill, 2018). This not only encouraged the students to think beyond a simple two-dimensional interpretation of the story, but also its symbolic meaning so that they could apply the same thinking to their own writing.

Conclusion

Motivation is at the heart of ESL learning. Without it, students lose interest, stop studying, and ultimately give up. However, by using the right games and creating a positive classroom environment, teachers can make students feel confident, included, and excited to learn English.

When designing lessons, teachers should be aware that the gamification of activities helps to empower students so that they can take control of their own learning, motivate themselves to succeed, and enjoy the process as it happens. Even silly games or small victories can create strong feelings for students. The power of fun and games turns learning into play, and in turn restores motivation. Making the learning process fun, social, and exciting for all participants.

This is something that can be utilised by teachers to build a positive class identity and positive learning environment. It should therefore be every teacher's aim for their students to want to attend lessons, and have fun learning. Each lesson being a joyful experience, something fun, and something memorable to tell others about.

The examples provided throughout this paper show how speaking, listening, reading, and writing activities can be adapted into games in order to aid different levels and learner abilities. Each type offering its own unique benefits. While combining playful elements with pedagogical goals, teachers can ensure that their students' learning remains purposeful and enjoyable.

Moreover, the strategic use of games promotes active engagement and deeper cognitive processing from class participants. When students must think, recall information, solve problems, or collaborate as part of a game, they practise language in more meaningful and memorable contexts. This active participation strengthens retention, builds fluency, and reinforces both lower-order and higher-order thinking skills (Bloom, 1956). Games help to build a bridge between enjoyment and learning, demonstrating that fun is not an optional extra, but a vital educational tool.

By providing opportunities for choice, competition, and creative problem-solving, teachers can cultivate a cycle of engagement in which students want to attend lessons, want to

learn, and want to get better at the English language. It helps the lesson content to stick in their brains as a fond memory of when they attended classes, witnessed their own progress, and it was fun.

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