

I. Parameters for games used in the classroom (Some “Dos”):

1) **The content of the game must be learner driven** – that is, content must be highly relevant to learners’ needs; if it is not, learners will not engage with it to the degree where they will learn from it. For example, a Go-Fish game that reviews vocabulary from a unit on every day items we buy at the drugstore which learners have chosen among many possible would be highly relevant; a game that has words chosen simply because they fit categories to make a Go-Fish game or a commercial game with a generic set of words or ideas would not be as relevant.

2) **The game must be NEEDED for practice or mastery.** If learners do not need to master the content of the game, then having them use it is just filling time. For example, if a game was created that has names of trees, flowers, birds, animals, etc, it may be fun but really probably serves no immediate need the learners have (unless of course they are studying natural history or biology or work at the zoo!).

If learners are learning the sounds of short vowels, any game that provides practice in this skill will be important to them provided they do not play the same game everyday with the same words/sound/pictures AND provided they understand the purpose of the game.

3) **The game must be focused enough so that it provides the practice intended.** This means there should be only one outcome expected from the game.

For example, if learners need to master past tenses of irregular verbs they use in their conversation, a concentration game on just those verbs would be great (matching the present to the past). However, if this game also includes regular past tense, then the practice of the needed verbs becomes very diluted.

4) **Games can--and should-- be used to measure progress and learning.**

For example, when the learner can match all pairs readily in a sorting activity, you and the learner will both know that the verbs are nearly mastered. Then the learner should be challenged to match the verbs in some other way—a game where one player picks the present form and the other player must say the past form—and when s/he does so correctly, then s/he can roll dice or spin a spinner to move around a game board. Finally, the learner can add the correct past tense form to sentences placed in wall pockets (The words are on one card each with the verb space left blank. The learner has the past tense cards and places them in the pocket that is blank.)

Now the learner has practiced these verbs three ways and can choose one or more of the games to show mastery of the past tense form. He or she can check off on his or her

personal learning plan that s/he recognizes and can use the verb forms. The next goal would be to use them in writing correctly.

5) After an introductory lesson, vocabulary words should be practiced in a wide variety of other activities, including games:

- a. Questions—use questions as part of a board game (e.g. practicing words having to do with voting)
- b. As part of a review of phonological skills (syllable counting, rhyming etc.) Game: Bingo: say another known word; players match to vocabulary words on play card by vowel sound, or number of syllables or some other phonological feature (E.g. reader says "hope"-- player covers "vote")
- c. Word order practice—students can compete to put a pack of three sentences in correct word order as fast as possible. (I vote at the town hall. // We vote on questions that affect our taxes. // It is easy to register to vote in my town.)

These games will meet the requirements of 1 and 2 above. —relevant and needed for practice of critical information.

6) Be sure you TEACH learners how to do the games before they are asked to use them for practice. If learners do not know how to play a game WELL, the practice factor is completely lost as brain energy goes into trying to figure out what is going on. It may be necessary for learners to play less familiar games several times with very easy content until they have mastered the method of play. Bingo is generally known by EVERYONE, but indirect bingo, where players must process information to know what to cover, will be unfamiliar. Go Fish is not a game many will know and board games are often an unfamiliar type of game, too, but matching (i.e. concentration) is more familiar and more likely easily accepted as a game.

7) Be sure students can check their correctness in games: Games such as Go Fish are pretty much self correcting (it SHOULD BE fairly obvious what the four elements of the categories are—and all categories are mutually exclusive—cards cannot go into multiple categories). Others, such as board games with questions that are answered to be able to move around the board, need to have a check list or a list of answers or some other mechanism for self-checking (See pictures). It is CRITICAL that students NOT have to wait for YOU the teacher to know if they are correct or not. You must PLAN the self-correcting feature of each activity.

8) Students must constantly be aware of what they are practicing and learning in the games. For the first few times, you will guide them in understanding what they are practicing, but very quickly, you should be able to ask them what they are practicing in a game, and they will begin to name it. This is extremely important in developing metacognitive skills-- thinking about learning and learning how to learn. If learners understand that it is not GAMES they are doing, but learning critical content, they will engage and re-engage more readily and whole heartedly.

9) Do be flexible, and not dogmatic in how learners participate. Your learners may NOT want to *compete* in certain games where knowledge or skill makes a difference

in winning. They may only play in a straightforward fashion with no strategy used. For example, it gives a huge advantage in Go Fish to pay attention to what other players are asking for. If you have what another player is asking someone else for, you can ask that player on your turn. But many students are slow to catch on to this. If this is the case, just let them play however they want to. They will gradually learn why certain players win all the time! They will more likely compete hotly in bingo because it does not require ANY skill or special knowledge to actually win it. But it DOES require lots of repetition so they are learning!

II. The flip side of Dos is Don'ts:

1. **DON'T use games for busy work or learners will distrust them.** Learners want to know their time is being usefully filled. Do not kid yourself by saying that “exposure to English is good for them.” If they already know the content, are not interested, or cannot understand the game, NO BENEFIT comes from it!! Students' boredom with the games or failure to understand why they are asked to play games is the greatest cause of failure of learning centers in the classroom!!

2. **DON'T use games for teaching**—they should be for practice and mastery. It is too hard to learn new material AND manage a game at the same time. Remember the cardinal rule: it is the repetition and unconscious use of English in negotiating the game that makes it work.

3. **DON'T let purpose drive content**—that is, don't create a game just to have a game in your plan. The game should--MUST-- serve a need. Content should drive purpose—students need to learn the steps in registering a car: What games can be used to give them practice??? Students need to learn the parts of a plant for biology: How can they do this through activities and games and NOT worksheets??

4. **DON'T continue using a game or activity that learners do not like or will not play.** This makes the whole purpose of the game or activity counterproductive. Try to figure out why they won't engage with it and fix that factor, or remove the game and try something else.

5. **DON'T forget that some learners will BALK at playing games:** Many older learners will be highly distrustful of and uncomfortable with games. For those, use games cautiously until they begin to buy into it. In my experience, watching others participate and helping the ones who are hesitating understand they are practicing and learning usually cancels out reluctance. For example, you may want to use bingo to show how they can practice hard ideas easily (just add -ing to words on a bingo sheet. You say the root word (“look”); they find “looking” on their bingo sheet — this is an easy game for them to do themselves. Then have a student or students who are enthusiastic about another game include the reluctant ones in their play, explaining as they go along and helping the reluctant ones to do well in the game.

You may also have students who object to games on religious grounds. Some conservative Muslims, for example, will not engage in activities where they think they

are gambling, which is forbidden to them. You can try to demonstrate that the game in question does NOT involve gambling of any kind, and you can stress what skills or knowledge the game or activity is intended to build. Or, you can give that student or students something else to do. Do NOT allow that student to derail the activity or game for the entire class. This is very unfair to the other students.

7. Be sensitive to whether students are being sufficiently challenged and are moving ahead rapidly enough to be interested. More advanced students are quickly discouraged by learning centers if the content is too easy for them. Even if they make errors, if they have largely mastered the content or skills, they will be discouraged. You will need to beef up content, re-group students to more compatible, challenging groups, or even resort to more traditional activities to meet the needs of the more advanced students. Better yet, you could challenge them to create an activity or game that will help them learn or master something they need.

Here are games that are great for teaching:

1. **Go-Fish** (sometimes called “Authors”)—players collect sets, or “books” of three or four cards that are related in idea (not usually identical in content). The deck, therefore, is made up of 6 or more sets of three or four cards per set or “book”. For example, four signs that control traffic, four signs that indicate recreational features, four signs that guide drivers, etc. To have a meaningful game, however, a deck of at least 32 cards (8 sets) is necessary. Sets must be completely exclusive—cards can only belong to ONE set (so for example, if doing furniture categories, you cannot have just “table”—since a table could go in any room in the house. The table should be delimited: bedside table, end table, coffee table, kitchen table, etc- according to the room they normally are in.)

Playing directions:

- a. Have 2-4 players **only**. Students might want to add a 5th or 6th, but it makes the game too slow--players wait too long to get a turn and practice of the content is diminished.
- b. Each player is dealt 5 cards; the rest of the cards go in the “Go Fish” pile.
- c. One player asks another specific player (not a general question to the whole group) for a card that matches something in his/her hand (“ Anna, do you have /ch/ as in chair?” (Anna: Yes. I have chin “) (“Arun, do you have something that goes in the living room, like sofa?”) (Arun: Yes, I have armchair.) NOTE the cards can have the category indicated in some way-- either in writing or a picture or a symbol. It is OK for students to use these secondary ways of knowing if something goes into a specific category. That is a higher level thinking skill.
- d. If the player gets what he asks for, he goes again, asking another specific player, not the whole group. If the player asking does NOT get what he asked for, the other player tells him or her, “Go Fish! and the person asking picks a card from the pile. Usually, only TWO repeats of turns are permitted. Otherwise the game will finish too quickly.
- e. When a player has all the cards of a set, he must put them down. The first player to put down all his cards wins. **Or**, you, or you and the players can decide

how many sets will win so the game is not too long if you have lots of cards and categories.

f. Note that Go Fish can and should require some thinking and strategy. Players should listen to what other players are asking for (and therefore collecting) so they can ask for those cards themselves. Because of this, Go Fish should NOT be played by asking the players the same way each time. If it is played that way, either no one wins or one player will win too soon. You will need to guide and prod students to ask different students for cards and not the person next to them.

g. Go Fish is NOT A MATCHING GAME!!! Many teachers use it as a matching activity, but it is NOT. It is a **thinking** game where players must categorize specific items (apple) in categories (fruit). The ONLY time it might be a matching activity is when persons not literate in the English script are learning to recognize upper and lower-case letters and letters in different fonts. (So players collect versions of A for example, or other letters that are different in upper or lower cases or in different fonts.)

2. **Concentration** –players match two items. Any match can be used

a. 2—3 players (NO MORE)

b. Use 6 or more pairs that logically go together—they can be simple (capital A and small a) or complex, (long—lengthen (adjective to verb); they can be picture to picture, picture to word, or word to word. Be sure pairs are exclusive—no other match is possible.

c. Spread out cards **in rows** face down. The rows are important because Concentration--sometimes called "Memory"--is part what is on the cards and part where the physical location of a card is.

d. One player turns over two cards. If they match, she collects them, if not, she turns them over again.

e. If the player gets a match, she goes again until she does not get a match. If she does not get a match the next player goes.

f. The idea of concentration is to learn to remember where cards are so you can make matches more easily. Some learners never get this piece—REMEMBER!! TEACH THOSE METACOGNITIVE SKILLS!!

g. The player with the most matches wins.

h. More matches = more time-- be sure to give players enough time to finish the amount of matches in their deck.

i. Do not play with more than 3 players—it is really confusing and boring!!

3. **Bingo**—you KNOW the basic one!! Use your imagination. (Go to mes.English.com to find a template for bingo games or get a subscription to Quia.com ; visit Barebooks.com)

a. A 5 X 5-square template provides the traditional center free space. Remember that EVERY play sheet must differ from the others so there can be a winner.

b. Notice that in bingo for centers, the traditional B_I_N_G_O set up is not necessary. Players simply scan for the match.

c. There are two types of bingo for centers:

- "Direct" bingo: You cover what you hear, as in traditional bingo
- "Indirect bingo: You hear something, process it or change it, and cover up the resulting form:

- Hear: eat-- cover up ATE. (past tense—do NOT use REGULAR past tense...);
 - Hear: George Washington-- Cover up: First president.
 - Hear: It's the first Tuesday in November --Cover up: On what day is the presidential election held?
- d. Bingo doesn't always have to be played on playing sheets, which are time consuming to design and produce. Here are some ideas for “instant bingo” set ups, where cards are arranged in a grid.
- Use cards from matching games; Use one half of the match (e.g. the simple form of verbs) in rows face up in front of players. Each player should get 6-12 cards to look at. Use the other half of the match for the “calling” cards. One player picks up a card and says it (e.g. “ate”) and the players look for the match (“eat”) among their cards. The one who has “eat” takes “ate” and puts it on top of “eat”. In this form, the student who covers ALL of his cards first wins.
 - Give students blank bingo sheets and a list of words or items to go on them. Tell them to fill each blank on the bingo sheet by writing in a word from the list. Tell some to start from the top of the list and others to start from the bottom. This will result in a set of bingo sheets that are all different!

More thoughts on bingo:

- a. Don't make the scanning task too difficult for low literate learners. Start with 3 squares X 3 squares for those with limited reading skills. For intermediate literate students, 4 x 4 may be sufficient.
 - b. The game can be challenging enough for higher level learners (E.g. there are commercially available versions for grammar such as gerund and infinitive bingo!) Use it for verbs and particles (go out, go in, go over, go at it, etc.—show picture they find words or vice versa) for vowel practice, syllable practice, antonyms etc.
 - c. Many teachers heat up the game by offering little prizes for winners. This can be fun, but be sure it is not the only motivation for playing the game!!
 - d. Don't make the game too complicated by adding other layers!! Remember the rules above: keep it focused!!
 - e. DO NOT use bingo as your ONLY game. Students quickly tire of it.
4. **Board games**— to add a game component to any practice.
- a. Use any adaptation of the basic board game as a way to have learners practice something: There are several ways to add the game component:
 - i. Players throw dice or spin, pick up the number of cards their throw or spin indicates and do something (give past tense, antonyms, answer questions, change tense of a sentence). Then they move spaces equivalent to correct answers.
 - ii. Pick up a card, do what is needed, THEN spin a spinner or throw dice or move that many spaces. (Player must use word in a sentence or question, answer a question, identify some thing or some one, etc.)

iii. Pick cards from packs that have different levels of difficulty. The easiest earn 1 or 2 squares on the board; the most difficult may earn 5 or more. Or a throw with two dice instead of one.

iv. A player picks up a card and finds a match on the board (Cards have pictures of objects whose names have short vowels: shelf, box, leg, neck, hand, Board also has pictures of similar words for spaces to move to. Player picks up a card (neck) and must move to the next picture that has a short e (bed). (SEE BELOW about creating topic-specific board games, however).

b. It is best to create generic boards (that is, a board that can be used with a wide variety of content), or use boards from commercial games, and create games for them following guidelines above for games—ones that are relevant and useful. If you create a topic-specific board, it can only be used a few times (but of course can be used by subsequent classes). It is a LOT Of work for limited use.

A Monopoly-type board, covered with laminate so you can write on the spaces, is perfect for this. (See barebooks.com for an inexpensive blank, commercial quality, monopoly-type game board).

Games are PERFECT for learner-driven classrooms, where learners decide what they will practice and how. Have learners help create a wide variety of activities and games to practice what they need to know.