

Let's Enjoy English Games!

by Katy Prillaman

In America, I taught French for three years. Before I began teaching, I tried to reflect upon my own foreign language education. What I enjoyed most in my high school French classes were lessons involving games and cultural activities. What sent shivers down my spine (besides memories of my teacher's coffee/cigarette breath) were recollections of worksheets and daily rote questions, such as "what is the weather?" Armed with these memories, I vowed to use as many games and cultural activities as possible in my classes. I also vowed never to have bad breath.

Over the years, I learned that worksheets and basic memorization activities are inevitable when teaching a foreign language. However, I stuck with my decision to incorporate games and cultural activities whenever possible. I used them as review before tests and quizzes, or whenever there was an odd day with no structured lesson. Students loved those days... they considered them "free days". I loved them because I knew I wouldn't hear many complaints, and that students who normally tuned out would generally participate and benefit from the activity.

If you are a foreign language teacher, please don't be afraid to experiment with your ideas. Chances are your students will be forgiving if the occasional idea doesn't work, especially if you tell them ahead of time that this is a new idea. When you admit this, you are not giving control to the students, but rather you are allowing them to be a part of creating their own educational experience. Unless you've got a classroom full of rebellious students, they will probably be willing participants and will most likely be honest about the effectiveness and enjoyability of the activity.

I'll admit, none of my ideas are especially ingenious, but through trial and error, I discovered many that were effective almost every time. Following is a list and explanation of activities that worked for me. I think that a lot of these activities could be incorporated into English classes in Japan, especially if you are willing to try something new.

Group oral quizzes. Have students form small groups (groups of four are good). Assign one leader who holds up flashcards for the other members, one at a time. Switch leaders every two minutes.

Magazine flashcards !! For almost anything you are teaching, magazine flashcards are amazingly effective, especially if you choose unusual or comical pictures, or you use pictures of famous people. Magazine flashcards are much more interesting than the drawings that accompany the textbook.

Last person standing .Have all students stand up. Using new and old vocabulary, give each student, one at a time, a word to translate. If it's correct, the student remains standing. If it's incorrect, he/she sits down. As the competition increases,

words can become sentences. The last person standing is the winner. Play this game as a quick vocabulary review.

Charades. Divide the class into two or three groups, and have one student from a group (one group at a time) act out a word. His/her group should guess the word within a certain time limit (one minute or less). No talking or writing! This game works really well as a verb review.

Pictionary. This game is similar to charades, but instead of acting and gesturing, the student must draw the picture. No words or numbers can be written. This is really fun for a quiet/shy class, because they don't have to perform or speak. It's also a great general review of all vocabulary !! .

Fortune telling. Have all students write their names on small pieces of paper. Put the pieces in a basket, and have everyone draw out a name. Include your own name. Give everyone ten or fifteen minutes to tell the fortune of the student whose name they drew. This is a useful activity for teaching the future tense of verbs.

Songs sheets, with the majority of the words whited out. Play the song a few times, allowing students to fill in the blanks. Please choose interesting songs!

Anything involving food. If possible, make something very simple in class that relates to any English-speaking culture, or reward students with candy or food from a county where English is spoken.

Culture quizzes. Start the lesson with five to ten minutes (no more) of cultural questions. First year, use Japanese. Second and above, use English!

Any kind of field trip relating to English. Again, students think they are having a free day, but they may have experiences that they'll remember for the rest of the their lives.

Any kind of guest speaker of the native language, particularly one who will interact with the students. Also, anyone who has traveled in a country where the language is used can provide cultural information and spark interest in some students.

Person anecdotes about your own experiences with the language and/or foreign countries. The best stories involve language blunders or miscommunication. They are usually funny, and they make you seem human (capable of making mistakes). If your stories get a good reaction, incorporate them whenever you see an opportunity. If you see people yawning, don't tell your stories. They are probably boring.

This is neither a game nor an activity, but a general suggestion for foreign language teachers. Give extra credit or a reward to any student who catches your mistakes (but only if they do it nicely). It takes the negativity out of making mistakes, which all teachers do from time to time.

Again, this is a suggestion. **Speak English as much as possible in class,** even if you feel like your English isn't perfect! I realized that I didn't use French

enough in class when a group of Belgian students and teachers spent the day at my school, and I was responsible for translation. After that experience, my first year students told me that they were surprised I could really speak French. I realized how important it is to actually use the language you are teaching.

Games are great because they take the stiffness out of lessons. Everyone can be involved, and if you are careful not to humiliate anyone, you don't have to worry about students' fear of failure.