

Engaging Students with Dynamic Games. Sample games and activities that can suit almost any EFL topic

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Keywords: engaging, games, motivation, dynamic classes, skills

Abstract: *A game is considered a valuable technique, which includes three main elements: competition, rule(s), and enjoyment, which should be well established through a teaching-learning objective. Any teacher would be able to use games in order to increase their students' motivation towards the English language and at the same time students can better develop or improve their own learning skills. The reason why we have chosen to focus on dynamic games in particular is that due to the students' short attention span, they are often likely to lose interest in the lesson. By having them move around, collaborate, play or compete against each other, we are actually putting them back on track, while also further building on their skills and knowledge of language in a fun, playful, non-threatening manner.*

Advantages of using games in class

The use of games in the classroom has many advantages. Carrier (1980: 6) mentions some of them:

- “Games give a variety of tools to facilitate the teaching-learning process;” in other words, teachers can make use of games as they are one of the complementary tasks of a syllabus and with which students can better develop their learning strategies.

- “Games are flexible,” it means that they introduced to teach or assess any aspect of the language. It is just a matter of adaptation considering the students’ level and the objective of the class.
- “Games make the lesson less monotonous,” as they provide a great variety of class activities which help to maintain students’ attention and interest in the language without getting bored.
- “Games raise the students’ motivation” in such a way that students enjoy their learning so much that they might not realize they are doing so.
- “Games make students produce language subconsciously.” This means that students learn and/or review any aspect or ability of the language at the same time they focus their attention on whether they succeed in playing. In other words, they concentrate on the excitement of winning. Students produce the language without worrying if they are doing right or wrong; they just produce it and achieve it.
- “Games stimulate students’ participation and give them confidence.” This is when students free themselves in order to participate to get the best score or even to be the best in the class. They usually feel much more confident with their performance and this indeed makes them learn and practise new structures, learn from their mistakes, and fulfil the goals of the class.

Games are very useful in a class because they “provide an opportunity for students to use their language in a less formal situation” (Carrier, 1980: 6), without the pressure of doing it flawlessly, but with the enthusiasm for winning the game, as well as practising the language. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the competitive activity should be taken as a mere amusing activity just to make use of the class time and it shouldn't be regarded as a marginal activity, either, just filling in odd moments when the teacher and class have nothing better to do.

The prime purpose of classroom games is for the students to learn using non-traditional education methods. By putting dry knowledge into something enjoyable, students will sprout positive memories of the learning process.

A class that includes games will contribute to students’ attentiveness, as classroom games are often dynamic and challenging and require a great amount of attention in order to win. Also, students will increase their motivation. They often look forward to a lesson that

includes a fun game. And if they feel motivated, they can even overcome the hardest learning obstacles.

In addition, games foster collaboration. Despite being marked by competitiveness, games will eventually teach students to cooperate with others and work in harmony. Last but not least, a game is also a way for teachers to bond with their students and create a relationship of trust and confidence.

How should we use games in class?

Although games may sound a bit more relaxing, the risk is that without careful planning, the activity might turn out to be disruptive, chaotic and lose students' interest in it. This is why whenever we plan a game, we should bear in mind a series of simple steps and rules:

1. The teacher should give clear instructions and an example of the game. A time limit is also required, so that students know the pace of playing the game.
2. Then, students play the game. They should never be interrupted to be given feedback because it may reduce their motivation and they might lose their confidence in the language. The teacher should be present only to assist students if they ask for help while the game is played.
3. The winner(s) is decided according to the rule(s) of the game.
4. At the end, there is always feedback. It is up to the teacher whether it is given individually or in general to the whole class. When making this decision, the teacher will take into account students' age, the relationship between them and other particular aspects related to the specific classroom environment.

When and how often should we play games in class?

As already stated, games can be a great energiser for an otherwise monotonous pace of the lesson, so they should be used whenever we want our students to regain interest in whatever we are teaching. However, games can be used as warm-up activities at the beginning of the class, after teaching new content in order to reinforce the new material or even at the end of the lesson for assessment purposes. It all depends on the purpose we have in mind, but technically, there is no right or wrong moment for playing a fun game. However,

it is important not to overlook the classroom management challenges that might come along with it, so a good deal of preparation needs to be done beforehand and instructions and rules have to be clarified from the start.

Sample dynamic games

We shall now present some of the most fun, engaging and versatile games that can be used to improve a specific skill or sub-skill, to reinforce specific content or simply to make the lesson more entertaining for the learners.

1. Treasure hunt

Level: Intermediate, advanced.

Age: young learners, teens.

Group size: Teams.

Use: Reading to practise directions.

Procedure:

In order to find the 'treasure', the players must be able to read the clues, and these are hidden around the room or in various places outdoors. There is a different set of numbered clues, marked by a different colour or perhaps in envelopes bearing a group's name or number.

Each group is given an initial clue, and these clues should bring them to another **one**, for example: Look under the window and find a box. The group does so and discovers the second clue inside. They read it and do what is told, and so on until the treasure is found. The team that finds the treasure first wins.

2. Digital Camera Scavenger Hunt

Level: Intermediate, advanced

Age: teens

Group size: teams

Use: entertainment, ice breaker

Procedure:

1. Make a list of things students must take photos of. Depending on the age of the students, the items they need to photograph may be in the classroom, in the schoolyard or even outside the school, if the rules allow it.
2. Then put your students into teams, each with their own camera and have them go out and take the photos.
3. The team that comes back first with all the photos is the winner.

3. Picture dictation

Age: young learners and teens

Group size: Pairs

Use: Listening and speaking

Procedure:

The pair of students should be seated back-to-back, so they cannot see each other. One student is given a picture, which they need to describe in detail to the partner. The partner needs to draw it on a blank sheet of paper, according to the description. At the end of the round, the students compare their pictures. Then they change roles. It can be used to practise prepositions of place, present continuous, adjectives (order of adjectives) etc.

4. Concentric circle sharing

Age: teens

Group size: 2 equal groups

Use: listening and speaking

Procedure:

Students stand face-to-face while in one of two concentric circles so that they can rotate around the circle, changing partners every few minutes. This is a fun way for students to share homework responses, to quiz each other as exam prep (for example Part 1 of the Cambridge Speaking Paper) or just to discuss any issues they might have regarding a certain topic.

1. Divide your students into two groups.
2. Have one group stand in a circle. They should be shoulder-to-shoulder and facing outward so you can see their faces.
3. Tell each person from the other group to stand in front of a person from the inner circle so they are face-to-face with their partner. Together the two groups form two concentric circles. Since you will stand outside the circles, you will see the backs of everyone in the outer circle because they are facing inward to their partners.
4. Once they all have a partner, stand on a chair to fully observe students.
5. As the facilitator, you decide when the inner or outer circle rotates two people to the left, one person to the right or however you want to do it.

Benefits: This activity keeps students moving and interacting with classmates they might not otherwise get to work with because of your seating arrangements. It also encourages immediate engagement since it's a series of peer-to-peer interactions that are brief but meaningful. You can listen and watch students to see how well they understand the material, how well they're working together and if there are key concepts that multiple students haven't quite grasped.

5. Find Someone Who...

Age: 8+

Group size: whole class

Use: listening, speaking, asking questions, practising grammar and vocabulary structures.

Procedure:

1. You will need to display a list of suitable criteria on the board, according to your target language. Between ten and twenty is usually about right, depending on how long you want the activity to last.
2. Write Find Someone Who... at the top, then a list of numbered criteria. For example for the present simple; 1) has a pet 2) plays tennis 3) doesn't like fish. Try and make it so there will be a small number of students who will pick each one!
3. In class, each student will need a notebook or a piece of paper.
4. Display the list of criteria on the board. Each student writes a numbered list according to how many criteria you have.

5. Then they stand up and mingle. They ask each other about the criteria by forming questions in the target language, e.g. Do you have a pet? If the criterion is true for a student, then they can write down that student's name on their list.
6. Importantly, the students can only write down each classmate's name once – so they have to find a different person for each number. With small classes (if there are fewer students than criteria), you could let students write the same name for two or three criteria.
7. Optionally, you can also require students to add supplementary information for each criterion, by asking follow-up questions. This should normally be included for intermediate students.
8. Continue the activity until a number of the students have completed their list. Students sit down then share their answers for each number, using the target language. For example, Who has a pet? Marcus has a pet. He has two cats.

**The Find Someone Who ESL activity is a popular warmer that students can do relatively independently. For a warm-up activity you could just use random criteria, but there is also the option to focus on a specific grammar. It's particularly good for practising questions.*

**With beginners, the present simple (e.g. has a pet, plays tennis), present continuous (is reading a book at the moment, is learning another language, is working at a restaurant), or past simple (walked to school today, ate rice yesterday) all work well.*

**For intermediate students, try any of the above tenses, the present perfect simple for experiences (e.g. has been to Asia, has played hockey), or the present perfect continuous for recent habits (has been watching a lot of TV, has been exercising a lot).*

**You can also practise likes and dislikes (e.g. loves rap music, can't stand broccoli, doesn't mind shopping) or used to (used to have a pet, didn't use to like mushrooms, used to have different hair).*

Variation: Instead of writing the criteria on the board, you can create a simple grid which contains them and give a copy of the grid to every students, so that they can write the name of the student who meets the criterion right next to it.

6. Four corners

Age: all ages

Group size: whole class

Use: Listening and speaking, reviewing material, assessment

Procedure:

Four corners is a dynamic alternative to the multiple-choice quizzes that enables students to move around the class, but also to talk to one another about why they chose a certain answer/corner, thus justifying their opinion. Although it can be easy for students to follow their friends vs. think their answers through, they will quickly see that that doesn't always work. Asking students to explain their answer provides time for discussion and gives students recognition.

Don't be afraid to get creative with this activity, which uses the corners in your classroom. You ask a question such as "Which modal verb expresses possibility?" and then students have to walk silently to whichever corner represents the correct answer. (e.g. NEED, CAN, MUST, SHOULD). Alternatively, you can label the corners A-B-C-D and project the question on the board or read it out loud. This allows for more flexibility in the content being tested.

1. Make sure each corner of your classroom has plenty of space for students to cluster in it, and there are no hazards like loose cords or things they could knock over.
2. If you have more than four answers for them to choose from, get creative and put an empty space in the middle of the room with a sign on the floor for them to sit around, or put another one against a wall halfway between two corners.
3. Tell your students they must be silent when you ask the question to the class and when they're moving to and from the corners. Consider including a participation grade if you're worried they won't stay silent.
4. Call on students standing in the correct-answer corner to explain why they think it's the correct answer.
5. Congratulate them on being correct and go on to the next question.

7. Review ball

Age: all ages

Group size: 5-6 students per group

Use: vocabulary, grammar, speaking

Procedure:

1. Divide the class into groups
2. Make as many balls (paper balls or similar) as there are groups in the class.
3. Write down or project a list of words (phrasal verbs, adjectives, verbs, adverbs etc.) on the board.
4. Demonstrate the activity by calling out a term and tossing the ball to one student. As soon as he/she catches the ball, they need to quickly make up a sentence using the term. Then they toss the ball to another group member.
5. The members of the group are in competition, so whenever they consider the sentence inappropriate, they can call the teacher for support. If the sentence is incorrect, the player is out.
6. The game ends when each group has only one person left in the game.

8. Sentence relay

Age: young learners or teens

Group size: 5 students per group

Use: grammar, writing

Procedure:

Students take turns writing one word on the board at a time to collectively create a complete sentence. This fun relay gets students thinking creatively about sentence structure.

1. Divide the board in as many parts as there are groups.
2. Call up five students to form a single-file line on one side, five more students to form a line on the other side etc.
3. Dictate the first word of a sentence. The player closest to the board will write it down.
4. The goal is for all teams of five to create a sentence together as fast as possible, but it must make sense and be grammatically correct.
4. Each person can write only one word and then must pass the marker off to the next person.

5. They can include punctuation marks when appropriate, but if any are incorrect, the team must start over.
6. Consider doubling this if possible and having two games going at once on either side of the room. That'll get even more students involved.
7. This game works only if students stay completely quiet during the relay. One way to ensure this is to award points to the left side of the class vs. the right side for each relay.
8. When it's done, you can discuss each team's sentence as a class. If one sentence is incorrect, you can talk about what makes it a fragment or what could be changed to correct it.
9. For more advanced teams, their sentences might be longer, meaning each student might take two turns to get to a complete sentence. By doing so, they have to think about compound and complex sentences, the proper use of commas and how to avoid creating a run-on sentence.

9. Running Dictation

Age: all ages

Group size: pairs

Use: writing, reading, speaking, and listening

Procedure:

If carefully planned and controlled by the teacher, this EFL classroom game can produce great results and create an atmosphere of exciting learning.

The teacher prints out a paper with the text or several numbered texts and sticks it outside the class (e.g. a corridor). Then, they pair students up and decide who will run and who will write. One student runs to the assigned text, reads it, remembers as many sentences as they can, and then turns back to dictate the text to their writing partner. The running students can't spell the words or tell the writing student when they're wrong. The pair of students that finish the text first and write it correctly wins.

10. The Whisper Game

Age: all ages

Group size: 2 large groups

Use: listening, ice-breaker

Procedure:

Divide the class into two teams. Line up the players. If there's an odd number of players, one can be the teacher's "helper". The teacher or his helper whispers a message to the first person of both group A and group B. The game only starts when both players know the message. Then each player whispers the message to the next player in his group successively until the last player gets the message. The team which can repeat the message first and correctly receives a point. Start the game over with the second student of each group becoming the first ones in line.

Variation: Instead of whispering the sentence, students can wear headphones and instead of listening to what the other whispers, they could lip-read the message.

11. Charades

Age: all ages

Group size: 2 large groups or several smaller groups

Use: practising vocabulary, grammar structures

Procedure:

1. Divide the class into two, three or four teams of at least two players. It is possible to play the Charades game with just one student and you as the teacher, but for a competitive game four players or more is ideal.
2. You will need a list of suitable words/sentences for the players to act, according to your target language. Write the words/sentences on small pieces of paper.
3. The teams take turns playing. One student from the team (the actor) stands at the front of class.
4. The actor tries to make the rest of their team guess what is on the paper using only gestures and no sounds (or drawing of letters in the air!).
5. The team has thirty seconds (or one minute) to guess as many words/sentences as they can. Each correct guess is worth one point. Depending on the level of your students, and how many cards you have available, you may want to allow zero, one or infinite 'passes' per round.

6. When each team has had one turn, repeat with different students as actors.
The team with the most points at the end of the game wins.

**The Charades game makes a really fun warmer or vocabulary review game. For beginner and intermediate students, it lends itself well to daily routines, sports and hobbies, jobs, animals, health problems, household objects, musical instruments, and emotions/feelings. For higher intermediate and advanced levels, try adverbs or phrasal verbs.*

12. Active Brainstorming

Age: all ages

Group size: first pairs, then groups

Use: speaking, writing, listening

Procedure:

This activity can be made to fit nearly any level, and works in class sizes of 6 to 40.

The aims are not only to generate lists of relevant vocabulary around a theme, but to invigorate the class with a rather noisy activity.

1. To begin with, the teacher must select three or four vocabulary subcategories within a theme, for example with a theme of housing/describing rooms, the subcategories might be things found in a bedroom, a living room, and a kitchen; in a sports theme, there might be team, individual, and non-competitive sports. Students are then paired up and asked to generate ideas together for each subcategory, preferably under a time limit to keep things pacey, much as in any brainstorming exercise.
2. Then pairs should be grouped into 2, 3, or 4 larger teams (depending on class size, logistics, etc.) to share/compare ideas and lengthen their lists if possible.
3. The board is divided into sections, one for each subcategory, and one student from each group is called up and handed a piece of chalk or a marker of a colour assigned to each team. There must be one colour per team, eg. the blue team, the yellow team, and so forth.
4. The designated writers for each team are not allowed to bring any paper up with them. Instead, their team members must shout out ideas which can be put under each/any subcategory. With all teams shouting at the same time, a seemingly out

of control, but quite enjoyable atmosphere pervades. The object is to be the team with the most words on the board at the end.

5. It is best to stop every minute or two and change designated writers so that all can get a chance. Also, depending on how strict the teacher wishes to be, groups which use L1 might have their entries erased. It is also a good idea in big classrooms to move the teams as far away from the board as possible, to increase the pandemonium. Finally, the teacher shouts "Stop!", and the scores for each team are tabulated.

**This activity will take between 30 and 50 minutes, has been used successfully with groups and would seem to suit younger learners as well. The only materials required are a rather large board and as many different colour markers or pieces of chalk as there are teams.*

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Biodata: I have been an EFL teacher for 17 years, 16 of which I have taught in the same school and I am currently working for the County School Inspectorate. I have been in charge of the Erasmus+ projects of my school ever since 2014. This material has been developed within our latest project, entitled "Mobile Tools, Dynamic Games and Collaborative Tasks to Increase Engagement in EFL Classes" (2019-1-RO01-KA229-024626) that finished at the end of June. We are eager to share the results of the project with teachers looking for little-prep ready-to-use materials to add dynamism to their lessons.