



TELL2

Games and Activities

Keeping Children Engaged in the Primary ESL Classroom

Ruth Wickham
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Games and Activities

Keeping Children Engaged in the Primary ESL Classroom

Introduction

Even capable, experienced teachers can run out of ideas to keep their lessons fresh and engaging. And of course younger teachers are always keen to hear about new ideas to motivate their students. This workshop is a sharing of ideas. It is hoped participants will apply these ideas to their own personality and style of teaching.

Materials Required

These activities are all designed to use minimal resources. Of course general teaching resources – black/white board and chalk/pens, general stationary materials, paper etc. should be available. Some of these activities will require a few more materials.

Procedure

The process for this workshop is as follows:

- Firstly participants will be presented with some very important **basic principles** which they need to pay careful attention to and remember.
- Secondly some **specific examples** will be given, and participants will have a chance to use and experience these from the perspective of students in the classroom.
- Thirdly participants will be asked to apply these principles to **designing an activity** that will suit their particular situation. Participants need to visualise themselves actually using the activity in their own classroom in their own way.
- Finally participants are encouraged to **discuss** their ideas with others teaching in similar situations and ask questions or give each other ideas and suggestions.

A: PRINCIPLES - What are the elements of a good game or activity?

Your personality will shine through in everything you do. If you try to be someone other than who you are you may well come across as dishonest and you will quickly exhaust yourself with the effort.

Nevertheless there are principles and factors which you can become aware of and make use of, adapting them to suit your own personality and developing them with your own creativity. A teacher who is aware of the elements listed here can create or adapt any situation to design an engaging activity or game.

1. Surprise!

Children enjoy a surprise. They love the *anticipation* of something special. In the classroom we add the element of surprise by incorporating something:

- Random
- or unexpected

Some situations or places where this element can be applied well are:

- Groupings
- Taking Turns
- Selection of Questions
- Points Scored

If the game is suitably random, clearly it is possible for anyone to win – but it is still worth trying hard and they can still feel proud of winning.

2. A challenge

Children are often amazed by their own growth and development and the changes in their own bodies. They love to discover how much bigger and cleverer they are becoming. They enjoy challenges – as long as they are not too far out of reach. (However, there are some children who don't seem to notice that a challenge may be too steep!)

Children like to compete:

- against themselves
- against each other
- as part of a team against other teams
- cooperatively – where we all win if we succeed together.

However, there should really be no possibility of real or total failure. If they lose this time, they need to believe that it is possible to win next time. Seeing signs of progress, getting closer to the goal should be encouraged too.

3. A Reward

In many cases and for many children, simply completing the challenge is reward enough. But it is fun to also receive rewards such as:

- encouraging words
- 'high five' or 'fist bump'
- applause from classmates
- sweets, stickers, stationary or toys
- points or marks on a chart – which can add up to a different reward
- privileges such as choosing the next participant

IMPORTANT:

1. Giving rewards needs to be **sustainable** – don't start something that becomes too difficult (or expensive!) to continue. Once you start giving out physical rewards they will come to expect it and be disappointed with anything less.

2. Rewards must be *seen* as '**fair**' and genuinely earned. (E.g. rewarding a naughty child for behaving well for once can be effective, but other children who behave well all the time may feel cheated. In this situation words are the best reward.) However children enjoy the 'surprise' aspect when a reward that is given randomly (such as a lottery) and is not seen as unfair unless the same child keeps on 'winning'.

3. Different children have **different** 'love languages' and are motivated by different rewards. According to research the five love languages are:

- Words of affirmation
- Acts of Service
- Receiving Gifts
- Quality Time
- Physical Touch

We can be surprised to find that a child seems totally unmotivated by the reward that we offer, but there is always something that would mean more to them. The 'receiving gifts' one is the only one that costs money – but that doesn't mean it has to be expensive, and we need to make sure not to allow this kind of reward to escalate!

Teachers should consider how each of these can be appropriately applied in the classroom situation.

B: PRINCIPLES - Designing and creating games and activities

Teachers are busy people, with an overloaded nook in the teacher's room, and a head full of stuff they are putting off for when they have a 'free' moment. So *no one* has time for creating magnificent teaching aids and activities.

So, firstly, the **materials** you use need to be:

- Readily available – you don't want to drive all over town looking for something
- Economical – you can't afford to keep putting your hand in your pocket to buy this stuff
- Adaptable – you want to be able to use it more than once in different situations
- Cheap and disposable or durable and reusable – either cheap enough that it doesn't matter when it gets used up and thrown away, or durable so even kids won't instantly destroy it.

And the **time** you take to prepare it:

- The game must be quick to prepare – if possible: instant!

(Is this possible? We will look at some specific ideas!)

1. Designing a game to play in the classroom

The first rule to remember is:

KEEP IT SIMPLE!

Avoid:

- Complicated sets of rules
- Complicated equipment
- Complicated skills required

Make sure everybody can play

Allow for pairs, groups or teams in large classes, and make sure everyone gets a turn. Remember that most of the time your main purpose (as well as motivation) is to get the children talking to each other (in English!) and being in a game really encourages this.

Work yourself out of a job

Design a game that is simple enough that the children will want to play it over and over and eventually they will be able to run it themselves. That's right – work yourself out of a job. The children are learning all by themselves.

(We will look at some specific ideas for games in the classroom.)

2. Try something a little bit different

There is a standard style of teaching in primary school classrooms:

Teacher speaks loudly (shouts) – children respond (shout) ... repeat

Quite apart from the possible damage to vocal chords and ear drums, it is monotonous and boring. Why not add some variety, improve learning and save everyone's sanity?

Sing, don't shout!

Why? Well, briefly:

- When you shout, the essential language stress and intonation is lost. However, it can be hard to make yourself heard in a noisy classroom.
- Singing preserves the language stress, and carries the sound better.
- Recent brain research tells us that when children sing and move to music, their developing brains are entirely engaged and stimulated. Both the left and right sides of the brain are activated when we sing.
- Singing is also naturally rhythmical, and rhythm is a vital aspect of children's development and especially language learning.
- AND it's more fun!

Add variety to drilling

As well as singing, when you are drilling, find other ways to say it – different voice quality, different body position, aimed in different directions. For example:

- whisper it
- say it to your partner
- say it to the ceiling, the floor, the window, your desk (all good vocab practice)
- close your eyes and imagine saying it to parents
- bend over and say it
- put your hands up high and say it
- clap hands with your partner while saying it
- click your fingers, tap your toes ...

Use rhythm and movement

This can make all the difference to drilling, and to any other part of the lesson – make it fun instead of drudgery, and cement it better in their minds. (Remember what we said above about “when children sing and move to music, their developing brains are entirely engaged and stimulated”?)

Give them something to do with their hands

Children need to keep their hands busy.

Think of a movement or activity, or something to hold/use in their hands. (Otherwise they *will* find their own activity ...!)

SPECIFIC IDEAS – Surprise!

Everybody loves a lottery

It is often hard to choose specific children to have a turn or attempt a task by themselves. We can ask for volunteers but they are 'shy', or they don't want to show off in front of their classmates. We can choose someone but it's hard to be 'fair' and not pick on children we suspect don't know it, or children we are sure do know it ... or whatever reason we may have.

There are many ways of performing a lottery to choose participants.

- You can give out slips of paper/card with pictures/numbers/words/symbols which are related to something they have learnt or are learning. There can be several of each symbol, and the teacher keeps a complete set of cards to 'pull out of a hat' and choose.
 - In a phonics lesson the slips could each have a sound that has been recently learnt. If there are two of each, then two children will come forward at a time to try exercise.
 - In a speaking and listening lesson the slips could have pictures that represent vocab items, to avoid forcing children to read during this lesson.
 - For children practising expressing numbers in English – especially bigger numbers – put these on the slips – or dates, or times, or anything else number related.
- You can ask the children to choose their own picture or word to put on the card. It may be surprising to find out how many children choose each of the vocabulary items!
- Use children's names – write their names (or get them to) on pieces of paper, put them into a container and pull them out with a flourish.
- Using LCD projector – projecting the pictures/words/numbers/names adds a special element of excitement as the children stare at the screen and wait for their turn. (Prepare in advance a sequence of the pictures in a PowerPoint – you don't know at this stage which children will have which cards.)

You can also create a random/lottery effect with a dice (make your own out of card if you don't have one) – children have a 2-digit number (maybe their choice which they have written down, or designated simply counting along the rows of desks) and the throw of the dice twice gives the number.

Playing cards can also be used this way – maybe one set given out, and select from a second deck.

Fun with Pairs and Groups

Finding a partner or group before playing a game is a great opportunity for some informal language practice.

NOTE: the first time they do this, children will naturally be a little uneasy/shy/reticent. You - the teacher - be strong and determined, kind and firm, and help them get going! Maybe even make it into a race or competition so that they feel a little bit pressured to hurry up and find their group first. (Don't give up and say they can't!)

- Starting with a card (as above) children can walk around and find others with the same symbol, or a related one. (e.g. find the other person or all of the others who have a food / transport / animal / building / weather / money ... picture/word)
- Ask children to line up according to height – this usually takes some discussion, scaffold first for expressions like ‘taller than me’, ‘shorter than me’, ‘the same as me’ – and then count off down the line dividing into pairs or groups.
- Ask children to find other children who have their birthday in the same month.
- Ask the children to think of their favourite colour / food / animal ... draw it, and then find others who are the same.
- Get them to each write their name on a scrap of paper, then crumple it up and throw it into a container divided into several parts, or a row of containers ... take out the papers and announce who is in each group.

Question Surprise

When you are playing a quiz-type game, especially as a practice exercise, the children wait nervously to find out which question will be theirs.

Have a list of questions – e.g. a list of words you are going to ask them to spell/sound out – and pick them randomly.

When you reach the stage that the children are running the game, they can pull the questions out randomly and read them.

BINGO!

A good example of Question Surprise is the game of BINGO! Here is one way to play:

Go to the website: <http://www.eslactivities.com/bingo.php> where there is a ‘Bingo Card Generator’. (Other websites have Bingo card generators too, but I find this one particularly useful).

The website will ask you how big a grid you want – 5 X 5 is the biggest.

BINGO Card Generator

Welcome to the BINGO Card Generator. This program will allow you to create sets of BINGO cards using text. If you would like to create BINGO cards using pictures instead of text, please visit our [Picture BINGO Card Generator](#).

To begin, choose how many words will fit on one card by changing the number of rows or columns below. Then click "Continue".

Rows: Columns: Total Words on Card:

At the end of your lesson, the children will all be very familiar with 25 words / phrases.

NOTE: There is also a version using pictures. The trick here is that the total size of ALL of the pictures you use must not exceed 100kb. (i.e. very small).

When you click 'continue' you will be asked to enter your words one by one.



The screenshot shows a web form titled "BINGO Card Generator". Below the title is the heading "Enter Word List" and the text "Words per Card: 25". There are two text input fields: "Text:" and "Clue:". Below these fields are three buttons: "ADD WORD" with a green plus icon, "SAVE WORD LIST" with a floppy disk icon, and "OPEN WORD LIST" with a folder icon. At the bottom center is a "HELP" button with a question mark icon.

The '**text**' is what will appear in the squares on the Bingo card.

The '**clue**' is for if you want the caller (you or one of the students) to call out a clue rather than the word given on the card. For example the word might be 'big' but the clue says 'opposite of small'; or the word might be 'pennies' and the clue 'plural of penny'.

Click 'add word' each time.

When you have entered your 25 words you click 'continue'. You now need to choose **how many cards** you want – maybe one for each student and one spare – as each card will have the same words in a different configuration. Click 'continue'.

Print your cards directly from the website – I usually print 2 per page, I find A5 size is big enough. (If you are keen you can print onto card and laminate them.)

Playing the game – so that the game can be played multiple times, I use markers rather than letting the children write on the cards. I give each child a little pile of sunflower seeds (but anything smallish will do) – they love this, especially if I let them eat them *later*.

Tell them to place a seed on a word (or picture) when it is called.

When they get 5 in a row (if you are using 5 X 5) – horizontally, vertically, or diagonally – they call out Bingo!

Winners can be asked to be the next caller. Children take the seeds off the cards ready to start again. If two children 'win' they could share the task of calling.

Children could swap cards after each game or periodically to make them search for the answers again.

Using Bingo, for instance, for a **phonics** lesson where words with two (or three) different sounds are represented, children could focus by colouring in the bingo boxes according to the sounds represented before playing the game.

Points Surprise

'Typhoon' is a favourite game where teams of children answer a question and are rewarded with some points – but they have to 'choose' their points, and it could be any number or even something else. They are still being rewarded for a right answer (and no reward for a wrong answer) but it is so random that any team can win.

"Typhoon"

This game can be prepared and played at a moment's notice:

1. On the board draw a grid – in this case I drew a 5 x 7 grid with 35 squares, and each column and row is given a reference (letter / number / word)

e.g.

5						
4						
3						
2						
1						
	A	B	C	D	E	F

In some situations it is worth using vocabulary words for the grid references (e.g. an adjective / number for horizontal and a noun for vertical) because it gives the students practice at reading and saying these words when they choose their box.

The size of the grid can be varied for longer / shorter game sessions, depending on how quickly the class moves through the questions.

2. On a piece of paper quickly draw the same grid. Put a score into each box.

- Most boxes will contain a number score - such as 10, 100 50, 1, 1000000 ... it doesn't really matter.
- Some boxes will contain a 'T' for "Typhoon".

Optionally – when playing the game subsequent times - some boxes could contain:

- 'S' for "Steal"
- 'D' for "Double"
- 'Swap' for "Swap"!

or anything else you make up.

3. Put the students into teams – it doesn't matter how many, as long as there are at least 3 teams. Write/draw a place on the board where each team score will be (progressively) recorded.

4. Have some questions ready to ask about the set topic. You can make them up as you go, if doing the game at a moment's notice, but if you have them ready a child can read them.

Playing the Game

Each team in turn is asked a question – they can confer and come up with the answer.

If the answer is given in reasonable time and is correct, then they get to “choose a box”. (If not, then the next team can be given their question.) If someone blurts out an incorrect answer, that is taken as their answer.

(Whatever is in the chosen box is then written recorded in the corresponding box on the board, and also on the team’s score board.)

- If the box has a numerical score, this is recorded (added to previous score) next to the team name on the board.
- If the box has a ‘T’, they are asked to decide which team’s score they would like to ‘blow away’ – but they get no score themselves.
- If the box has an ‘S’, they are asked to choose whose score they would like to ‘steal’, gaining that score and leaving the other team with zero.
- If the box has a ‘D’, they can double their present score (but 0 + 0 is still 0!)
- If the box has ‘Swap’, they must choose which team they wish to swap scores with – although this may in fact give them a lower score.

If the game is progressing more slowly than expected, and there will not be time to complete all the questions before the end of the lesson, then the grid could still be completed by simply allowing each team in turn to choose a box without first answering a question.

Subsequent games

Not all games have to include all of the score options, and more can be added if desired.

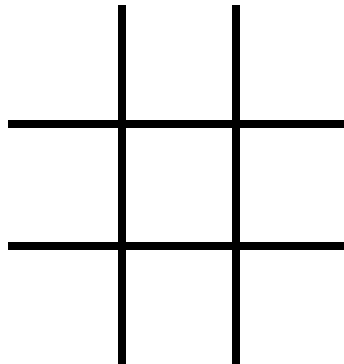
It has been found that using massive numbers (millions) can increase excitement without really affecting the way the game progresses.

After a few sessions, the students should very soon be able to ‘run’ the game themselves. Ask a team / group to work on the questions, the grid, presenting the game etc. – it can prove a very worthwhile learning activity in itself.

Tic Tac Toe

There are many other Game Show style games that can be played in the classroom. A simple one is 'Tic Tac Toe' or 'Noughts and Crosses':

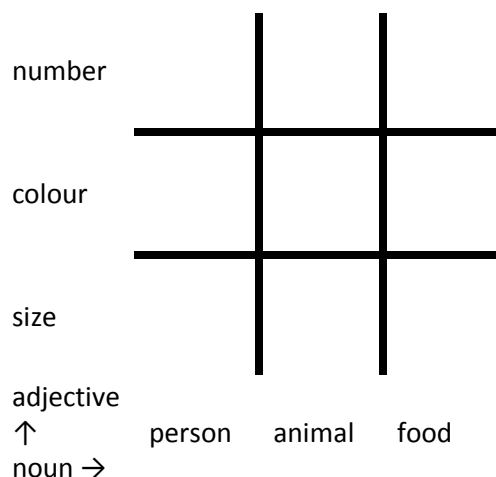
Divide the class into 2 teams – one is 'X' and the other is 'O'. Draw a grid on the board.



Teams take it in turns to answer a question and then (if it is correct) place their mark in the box of their choice.

Variations:

- Change the 'X' and the 'O'. They could actually be required to put a word into the box. A number, an adjective, a pronoun, something relevant to what they are learning about.
- Increase the size of the grid – e.g. 4 X 4 – and they need to get 4-in-a-row.
- Have more than two teams and an even bigger grid.
- The questions can be built into the (bigger?) grid, so that they have to say the right thing in order to put their mark into a particular square:



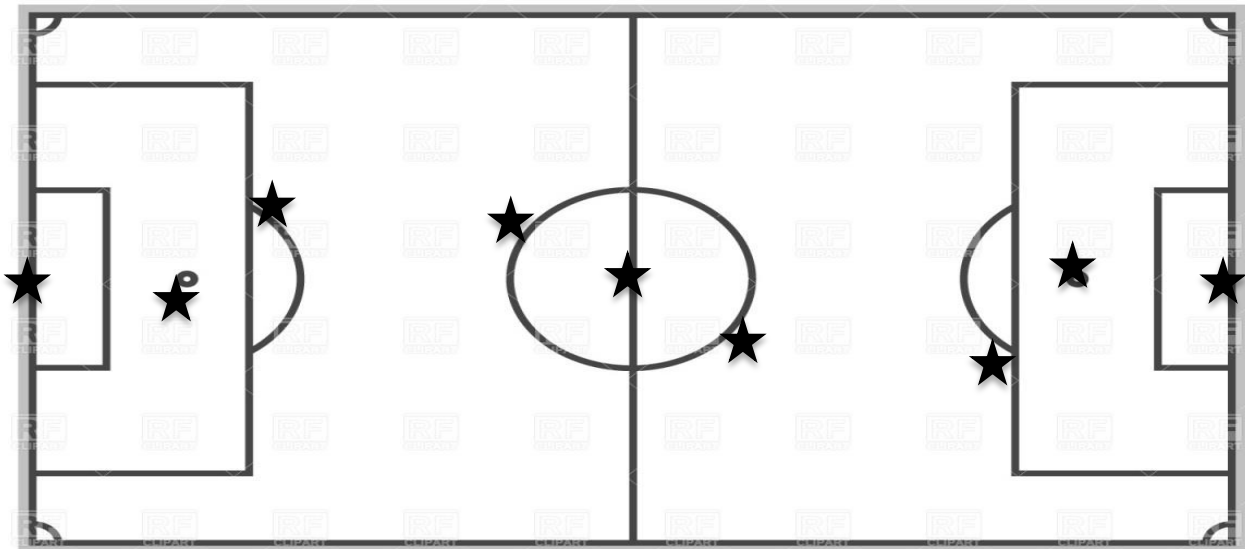
So, for example to put their mark into the centre square they would need to think of a colour and an animal (the teacher should say if it can be imaginary, or must be realistic): 'blue rabbit'.

Blackboard Sports

For those who are keen on sports, the game on the board can be set up like a sports game, or a race.

You will need to draw a playing field on the board, and you will need to stick players and a ball using something like 'Blue Tack', or magnets if you are lucky enough to have a metal board.

For soccer, for example, you can set a number of places from the centre to the goals. For example:



Instead of the stars (above) you might like to draw or stick some players.

Start with the ball in the centre. Teams take turns to kick the ball by answering questions correctly. You can make your own rules that if they get one answer right they get a second kick, and then the other team has a turn – or whatever works for your class. The ball moves up and down the field as teams give correct answers, and of course after a 'goal' it goes back to the centre.

A 'Race' game could simply involve a series of spots along a straight (or curvy) line, their marker moves along as they get answers correct.

You could also do something similar with other games like Basketball – make up the rules (don't get too complicated, at least at first) to suit your situation.

SPECIFIC IDEAS – A Challenge

Think of those ‘superlative’ (‘---est’) adjectives. Challenge children to be or do the

- most
- fastest
- biggest
- smallest
- funniest
- most colourful
- longest
- cleverest
- quietest
- loudest
- most interesting
- with the least mistakes
- neatest ...

For example you could say:

“Let’s see who (which individual, pair, or group) can ...”

This can be applied to any activity, even drilling, and even a boring worksheet, but not necessarily in the same way ever time. Give them a little surprise by what you ask for! So now you say:

“*This* time I want to see

- who finishes first, or
- who has the neatest writing, or
- who draws a funny picture at the bottom, or
- who can come and say to me ‘Teacher I have done my very best work!’ when they bring me their exercise book ...”

Of course in the Malaysian English language classroom you need to build up to these concepts, and understanding the words.

For example: You could start by asking (all, or some of) the children to stand in a line displaying their work. Choose three that are neat/colourful/interesting and the others sit, and then from those choose the neatest/most colourful/most interesting.

- Get 3 children at the board drawing a big ... balloon (or something). Choose the biggest.
- Get three children at the board, ask them to quickly draw a car. Choose the fastest draw-er.
- Ask three children to line up at the back and sing a song. Choose the loudest.

Through these little activities they quickly catch on to how the competition works – not difficult really! The important thing is to use lots of variety so that every child/pair/group can win sometime.

SPECIFIC IDEAS – A Reward

The teacher's **smile** and **words** of encouragement, and **body language** (a 'high five' or a 'fist bump') are the cheapest, easiest, and often most effective rewards.

The **absence of criticism** is a reward for some children.

Even if their work is not as perfect as we (or they) would like to see, noticing the smallest improvement, or even an *attempt* to improve, can be like gold to a frustrated child.

Attention – especially for the child who may be feeling ignored and unloved – is worth more than any gift. A child who is unattractive to us because of being physically untidy or dirty (probably not their fault) can be desperate for some attention. Some children who are attention-starved respond by withdrawing into themselves. Others behave badly just to be noticed.

Responsibility

Children like to feel important; they like to feel that they are actually *helping* the teacher too. So giving them a task can be a reward too.

- Whoever wins a round of BINGO! can be the next caller.
- When a child is answering well, ask them to lead the drilling.
- When a child has finished quickly and neatly, they could write the answers on the board for everyone to check.
- A child who is sitting nicely could come up the front and hold the pictures or flash cards for the teacher.
- A child who keeps 'winning' could be asked to select the winner in the next task (so at least they don't take that opportunity away from everyone else again).