

Workshop: Using “Typhoon!” – The ultimate whole class interactive learning activity for EL lessons which is suitable for all ages and adaptable to an endless range of lesson types

Abstract

Your lesson is about to die a natural death, but there is still an hour of class time left...

Or you are about to face a class which last week were unmotivated and difficult to control...

Or your PowerPoint presentation just went south because the projector died, your computer malfunctioned, the electric power went off...

Or you simply need a fun way to revise and practise vocabulary or a newly-learned grammar concept.

Think of all the horror stories that teachers can tell, times when a magic wand would be so very useful, and then make sure that you have “Typhoon!” in your grab-bag to pull out at a moment’s notice. Not that you have to wait until disaster all but overtakes you, it’s much better to plan it into your day ahead of time.

There are a great many reasons to use this activity, and occasions where it can save your sanity as a busy teacher. The only materials needed are a white (or black) board, a piece of paper, some questions you could ask, and a class that is looking for something to motivate and engage them. With those ingredients your students will leave the room at the end of the lesson with smiles on their faces and learning reinforced in their heads.

Summary

This game, or “interactive learning activity”, first attracted my attention when I was instructing a class of disgruntled and reluctant Chinese teenaged students who were supposed to be learning Australian Social Studies as well as English comprehension. The game as I discovered it (on the Internet) originally involved cards with scores on them which were to be stuck to the blackboard in a grid pattern. When the students selected a particular card it was turned over to reveal the score. There were so many practical problems with the cards themselves (bending, falling apart, and dropping off the board), and then there was the time needed to set the game up while the class became increasingly disruptive. Nevertheless, they loved the game and I realised it was worth making some adjustments to make it more practical.

After modifying the game, and while teaching English in factories I found that even Chinese men in middle management were enthralled with the game as it was used to practise business English expressions.

Then, when I was working in Turkey, each lesson was four hours long, and by the fourth hour serious teaching was clearly out of the question. After playing “Typhoon” a couple of times, my students started expecting and even demanding it. So I let small groups take it in turns to organise it, and soon they were trying out modifications – some of which were useful while some were less so.

Several countries later, Typhoon still saves my sanity and improves my students' learning at least once a week. Even without planning ahead, when a lesson starts to flag, or the students are reluctant to be involved in hard slog practice, I start by drawing a grid on the board. I then get the students organising themselves into teams – this can be done in a variety of ways depending on the class. While they are doing that, I draw up the grid on a piece of paper and add in scores (and special points such as 'T' for 'Typhoon') – or a student or group can be set this task. Finally I decide on the topic or style of the questions – which will also depend on the particular lesson – or again a student or group can be responsible for this.

I vary the size of the grid according to the time allowable in the lesson. Usually a 6x6 grid will fill a 45 minute lesson – depending on the class and the question styles. If it gets close to the end of the lesson with too many grid-squares still unused, then I make sure the game is finished by going into "no question, just choose" mode allowing each team in turn to make a choice.

As well as the number scores in most of the squares on the paper grid, some squares have special points such as 'T' for 'Typhoon' and any other custom scores the teacher chooses. A favourite is 'S' for 'Steal'.

Once the game is set up, the teacher or questioner student/group asks a question of each team in turn. If they give a correct answer within a reasonable time (the class may choose to have a timekeeper), then they have the option to 'choose a box' within the grid. The score on the paper grid is then written in the box on the board as well as next to the team name on the tally board. If 'T' is the score, the team chooses which other team will have their score 'blown away' to 0. Of course 'S' means they can 'steal' another team's score.

For the purpose of the workshop, participants will be asked to contribute a possible question, and then join a team for a practice of the game. Participants will be encouraged to share any modification ideas or previous experiences of the game or similar they may have.

Conclusion

The above summary describes only the simplest forms of this activity. There are endless possibilities for variations.