Tools for the ESOL Classroom

Bonnie Goonen – bv73008@aol.com

Susan Pittman – skptvs@aol.com

**ESOL Speaking and Listening Games and Activities**



**Institute for the Professional Development of Adult Educators**

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Rod Duckworth, Chancellor

Career and Adult Education, Department of Education

Zelda Rogers, Senior Educational Program Director

Adult Education, Career and Adult Education

Philip Anderson, ESOL Program Specialist

Adult Education, Career and Adult Education

June Rall, Director of IPDAE

Tamara Serrano, Project Support Specialist for IPDAE

**Resources Developed and Designed By**

Bonnie Goonen

Susan Pittman

Institute for the Professional Development of Adult Educators



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# ESOL Speaking and Listening Games

Classroom games and activities are an excellent way to develop speaking and listening skills in a fun and non-threatening way. Many of our students may not feel comfortable speaking English or they may be unable to understand what others are saying to them.

Ten of the very best reasons for using classroom games as part of the curriculum are:

**Reason #1: Games are Fun with a Purpose**Games create a cognitive engagement between the learner and the topic in a flowing, smiling environment. Games celebrate your topic and reward individual and group achievement. Games bring fun and energy into a buoyant learning zone, but with the focus on learning.

**Reason #2: Games Provide Feedback to the Learner**Learners want and need feedback on their performance. Games give them immediate feedback on the quality of their input — their successes and their errors. With the appropriate corrective feedback, this can become an invaluable learning opportunity.

**Reason #3: Games Provide Feedback to the Teacher**Games provide a practice field where learners interact with the topic, demonstrating their knowledge and ability to apply the information. By observing this real-time demonstration, the teacher can adjust the subsequent level of lecture, readings, and interventions accordingly.

**Reason #4: Games are Experiential**Today’s learner needs to do and to try things on his/her own. Games provide an environment that transforms the passive student into an active part of the learning process where he/she can connect his/her own dots and experience his/her own ideas. Games also remind both player and teacher that energy in the classroom is a good thing.

**Reason #5: Games Motivate Learners**Games engage players and then motivate them to interact with the topic. This interaction drives players to demonstrate their understanding of the topic in a friendly contest where successes are memorable moments of shared triumph and celebration and where mistakes mean only that the learner is being stretched to his or her own limits.

**Reason #6: Games Improve Team Work**Games are real-time activities that bring players into teams, demonstrate the rules and roles of working together as a team, and underscore the value of team collaboration. Games give your learners a chance to know their peers as they share the same real-time experiences, allowing for strong networking and bonding.

**Reason #7: Games Provide a Less Threatening Learning Environment**Because the game format is playful, the inherent challenge of the material, even new or difficult material, is less threatening. During game play, seemingly difficult questions and scenarios are “just part of the game.” And, teachers can use the window following responses to build a bridge between the topic and the learner.

**Reason #8: Games Bring Real-World Relevance**Games allow you to present real-world information in the form of questions, scenarios, role-plays, and so forth. In this way, players learn not only the “what,” but the “why,” of the topic from a real-world perspective. Players also observe their own behavior and that of others during game play. Post-game debriefings give insights into those behaviors in thoughtful examples observed during game play.

**Reason #9: Games Accelerate Learning**Games allow you to compress your topic and demonstrated learning into shorter periods of time, accelerating the speed of learning. The visual presentation, oral interactions, and active participation of game play appeal to all of the learning styles (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic), involve both the rational and experiential mind, and help players remember what they have learned.

**Reason #10: Games Give You Choices for Your Classroom**Games allow you to add variety and flexibility to your teaching menus. Games can allow you to do any or all of the following:

* Increase the level of learner involvement
* Vary the level of skill and knowledge
* Customize to any size of audience, even one-on-one
* Vary the type and level of activity
* Vary the level of classroom control
* Introduce or review topics, or both
* Vary the mix of theoretical and practical information

Sugar, S. The Game Group. Retrieved from the World Wide Web at: http://www.thegamegroup.com/article1.htm.

## Throw a Question

**Type of Activity:** speaking and listening

**Purpose:** You can use this game for lower-level students as practice or with higher-level students as a review. For lower-level students, you might want to cover the questions and answers before you play the game. For more advanced students, this game can be used as a review of what they have studied in past lessons.

**Materials:** soft ball

**Procedure:**

Sit the students in a circle. Tell the students that they are going to practice some questions and answers they have been studying in class. Start by throwing the ball to a student. When the student catches the ball, ask him or her a question.

The person who catches the ball must answer the question appropriately. Then, that student throws the ball and you ask another question to someone else, and so on.

This game helps students with their listening skills, because they are always in suspense not knowing who will go next. Therefore, they have to pay attention and listen to each question.

## What's the Question?

**Type of Activity:** speaking and listening

**Purpose:** Review question forms previously studied in class.

**Materials:** bells or buzzers and questions

**Procedure:**

Form two teams. Explain the game, with a few examples of answers in search of questions. Ask, 'What's the question?' and get students to correctly say the corresponding questions for your answer.

Have two players--one from each team--come to the front. Style it like a game show if you like, with the students standing side-by-side. If you have access to bells or buzzers, it's even more fun.

Next, read an answer to a question and say, 'What's the question?' The fastest player to respond wins a point for her/his team. New contestants come to the front for a new round. This game forces the students to think backwards a little, so they must provide a grammatically perfect question. All too often, they are used to answering rather than asking questions, so this is challenging and useful as review.

## Toilet Paper Icebreaker

**Type of Activity:** speaking

**Materials:** roll of toilet paper

**Purpose:** This activity is used as a "getting to know you", icebreaker on the first day of class or when new students are enrolled.

**Procedure:**

Teacher takes the toilet paper roll and takes several squares of toilet paper, then hands the roll of toilet paper to a student. The teacher tells the student to take as many squares as he/she likes.

After everybody in the class has some paper, have the students count the number of squares that they have. Next, share with students that they will introduce themselves to the class and share as many things about themselves that they have sheets of paper. Reinforce that they should use English.

## Tongue Twister Race

**Type of Activity:** speaking and listening

**Materials:** stop watch and a few tongue twisters

**Purpose:** Provides students with a fun way to practice and improve pronunciation and fluency.

**Procedure:**

Write a tongue twister on the blackboard and practice it a few times. Next, give students 2-3 minutes to practice it themselves. Divide the class into two teams. Have the teams determine who goes first.

Have the first team stand up. Start the stop watch and have them one by one say the tongue twister. Have each person sit down after they have finished. After the last student has said the tongue twister, write the group time on the board. Repeat with the second team. The fastest team wins.

Sample tongue twisters:

* Peter Piper picks pickled peppers.
* Lovely Laura loves lucky Larry.
* A big black bear sat on a big black rug.
* Four fine fresh fish for you.
* We surely shall see the sun shine soon.
* He threw three free throws.
* I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream.
* I saw a kitten eating chicken in the kitchen.

## Sentence Race

**Type of Activity:** speaking and listening

**Purpose:** This activity is a good game for reviewing vocabulary lessons.

**Procedure:**

Prepare a list of review vocabulary words. Write each word on two small pieces of paper. That means writing the word twice, once on each piece of paper. Organize the pieces like bundles, 2 bundles, 2 sets of identical words.

Divide the class into 2 teams. Have each team create a team name. Distribute each list of words to both teams. Every student on each team should have a paper.  Both teams have the same words.

When you call a word, two students should stand up, one from each team. The students must then run to the blackboard and race to write a sentence using their word. Have the students read their written sentences aloud. The winner is the one with a correct and clearly written sentence.

## Chain Spelling

**Type of Activity:** speaking and listening

**Materials:** Roll of toilet paper

**Procedure:**

The game begins by having the teacher give a word to student and having him/her spell it. Then have a second student say a word beginning with the last letter of the word given. The If a student makes a mistake, such as pronouncing the word incorrectly, misspelling it, or coming up with a word that has already been said, the student is out. The last one remaining in the game is the winner. The game can be made more difficult by limiting the words to a certain category, e.g., occupations, food, or nouns, verbs, etc.

## Tell Us About

**Type of Activity:** speaking

**Materials:** index cards with phrases written on them

**Procedure:**

This is great for small classes. Make a set of cards. On one side of each card is the phrase "Tell us about...." On the other side write various things the students can tell you about, e.g., a bad day, something dangerous they did, their favorite outfit, their favorite music, etc.

In class just have one student pick a card, and everybody has to tell the class about whatever is on that card. This activity is great for generating conversations. You may wish to ask additional questions of students in order to obtain additional details.

## Listen for It

**Type of Activity:** listening

**Materials**:

* Strips of paper with words from a song (and words not found in the song) written on each
* Audio recording of the song

**Procedure:**

Have students sit on the floor or have them sit on chairs in a circle. Distribute words from a song, at random, on the floor in a circle (or on a table in the middle of the chairs) so that all students can see them and reach them. 15-20 words are enough. You may also add some words that are not in the song. As you play the song, have students pick out the words as they listen. Tell students that for every wrong word that they select, a correct one will be cancelled. Person with the most points wins.

## It's Not Musical Chairs

**Type of Activity**: listening

**Materials:**

* Audio conversations
* Audio scripts
* Prepared questions about the conversation

**Purpose:** For this listening game, you will need some audio conversations, audio scripts and some prepared questions about the conversations. The conversations can come from the course book you use in class. You may wish to use one long conversation or several short ones. This game is similar to musical chairs.

**Procedure:**

Organize the chairs into a circle. There should be one less chair than there are students in the class.

To begin the game, ask the students a question. Then start playing the audio conversation. The students walk around the chairs listening to the conversation. When a student hears the answer to the question on the audio, he/she sits down. There may be one or several students who sit down. At this point, pause the audio. If it is just one student who sits down, ask the student for the answer to the question. If it is a few students who sit down, ask them to whisper the answer to you individually. If a student's answer is correct, they remain seated.

Next, ask another question that can be answered in the next part of the audio conversation. The students who have remained standing start walking around the chairs again until they hear the answer to your new question on the audio. Carry on like this until there is one student left standing. That student is out of the game.

Remove a chair from the circle. Everyone stands up and the game continues until there are only two students competing for one chair to become the ultimate winner.

## Acting Out Commands

**Type of Activity:** listening skills for beginning levels

**Procedure:**

Call on students to follow simple commands, such as: "Read the first word on page 34", "Zip up your jacket", or "Take off your left shoe." Vary the game by having students draw names or commands.

Dependent on your students, you may wish to have them also follow silly commands.

## Aural Discrimination

**Type of Activity:** listening

**Purpose:** This activity provides a quick exercise to assess aural discrimination of often-confused sounds.

**Procedure:**

Dictate pairs or triads of minimally different words (e.g., "seat / sit" or "sit / set / sat," "tag / tack."). Dictate at least five pairs / triads, each focusing on the same sounds. Vary what you dictate--sometimes using two or three different words, sometimes dictating the same word two or three times. ("peak / pick; seek / seek; stick / stick; lick / leak") Ask students to mark S or D (for "same" and "different") to describe what they have heard.

If you've dictated triads and the group was "D," you can also ask students to mark how many different (i. e., 2 or 3) sounds they heard. ("pet / pat / pet: D--2; bait / bait / bet: D--2; mat / mat / mat: S")

If students' listening skills are effective, the above could be expanded to minimally different sentences ("He bought a peck of tomatoes" / "He bought a pack of tomatoes"); use the same "S" / "D" technique.

This type of game or activity requires a different kind of focus from that of simply repeating minimal pairs or triads; it can be very revealing as to what sounds are being confused.

## Clapping

**Type of Activity:** listening

**Purpose:** This activity is great for having students listen aurally to non-speech sounds.

**Procedure:** Start by clapping a simple pattern and have the students copy you. After they get the hang of the game, you can try trickier patterns. You may wish to have a student create a pattern and have the class imitate it. This is a simple activity that can be used to grab the attention of your class.

##

## Whispers

**Type of Activity:** speaking and listening

**Purpose:** To listen and repeat sentences accurately

**Procedure:**

Put the students into equal sized teams and have each team sit down in a row. The students sat at the back of each row are given a different conversation. The students at the back whisper the first sentence of their conversation to the student in front of them. That student then whispers the sentence to the next student, and so on down the line. When the sentence reaches the person at the front, they stand up and write the sentence on the board.

If the sentence is incorrect, the sentence is whispered down the line again. The game continues until one team has written all the sentences on the board correctly. The student at the back of each row chooses when to whisper the next sentence. He or she could say each sentence quickly or wait until the sentence has been written on the board. Try to make sure that the conversations are of equal length. Five to eight sentences are ideal.

*Note: Dependent on the level of students, you may wish to start with a single sentence or words rather than multiple sentences.*

## Back and Forth

**Type of Activity:** listening

**Purpose:** To listen and repeat sentences accurately

**Procedure:**

Ask students to come up with ten questions to ask you. When you answer the questions, you will want to add more details than a simple yes or no. When using your answers, test how well the students listened by making some comprehension questions.

## Asking and Giving Directions

**Type of Activity:** listening

**Materials:** large drawn map of a neighborhood and copies of the map for students

**Purpose:** To provide accurate directions

**Procedure:**

Draw a large simple map of two streets and avenues intersecting and label the streets and avenues with simple familiar names. Next, draw several squares along the streets and label them by indicating such locations as: post office, library, bank, shoe store, flower shop, restaurant, hospital, university, airport, etc.

Provide students with a demonstration on how to read the map, defining directions, blocks, intersections, etc.

Mark an X on the map as a beginning point and ask students to provide directions to a specific location: Can you tell me how to get to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_?

Have students use some of the learned targeted phrases to demonstrate how to give directions (turn left; turn right; go \_\_\_ blocks; next to; between; across from; etc.

Have students pair off and practice asking/giving directions from one place to another using the map. Once the students have had time to practice, ask each pair to come to the front of the class and take turns sharing how to get from one location to another.

## Conversational Tic Tac Toe

**Type of Activity:** speaking and listening

**Materials:** tic-tac-toe grid and nine conversation questions

**Procedure:**

Draw a tic-tac-toe grid on the board. Write the numbers 1 through 9 on the grid. Each square has one number in it. Then, on a piece of paper write nine easy conversation questions such as:

* What’s your hobby?
* What time is it?
* What is your native country?
* What is your favorite food?

Number the questions one through nine. Each question corresponds to one square on the tic tac toe grid. Divide the class into two teams, team x and team o. The students choose which square on the tic tac toe grid they want to try to get. When they choose a number, ask them the corresponding question. The team gets the x or o on that square if they answer the question with no pronunciation or grammar errors. See which team gets tic-tac-toe first.

## Telephone Game

**Type of Activity:** listening

**Procedure:**

With the telephone game, the teacher takes advantage of students’ cell phones to execute the game. Write down numbers from 0 to 9. Write words with confusing sounds alongside each number as shown in the example below:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1. **Sat**
 | **6. Think** |
| 1. **That**
 | **7. Sank** |
| 1. **Say**
 | **8. Thank** |
| 1. **They**
 | **9. Song** |
| 1. **Sink**
 | 1. **Throng**
 |

With these words and numbers on the board, the game can begin. One student tells the class his/her number by saying the words that correspond to the numbers on the board. For example if I am the student and my number is 254338, I will say the following words:  that, sink, they, say, say, thank. The other students have to punch in the number on their phone as the student says the words that match the numbers.