

Conversation Games

(for classes that would rather play than study)

Teachers are always faced with the dilemma of how to respond to students' requests for more games. On the one hand, we feel we need to give our students their money's worth of teaching, and on the other hand we understand that they are still children who need a certain amount of "play" in their growing years. The solution: Disguise learning through the use of games. And in this issue, we will concentrate on making review of short conversations more fun. Also, look for the new mini-column, "Co-operative Corner", which features ideas on how to reduce the amount of competition when playing games.

Sharon Abe shares two games: While reviewing a lesson on school and school activities, I have my students write the names of the school rooms on pieces of paper, and then arrange them on the table like a school diagram. Then each student chooses a stuffed animal from the basket I keep in my classroom, and they take charge of that animal, placing it in one of the rooms and answering about it. I write the names of the animals on the board so the students can remember them (Ducky, Flower, Roshinante, etc).

Starting with any student, the review conversation goes like this:

S1: Where is Roshinante?

S2: He is in the library.

S1: What is he doing?

S2: He is reading a book.

Then the person in charge of Roshinante picks another friend. The conversation might get interesting if someone chooses to be in the bathroom, but possible activities there could include washing hands, combing hair, etc.

Sharon continues: Have you ever played the board game, "Battleships"? In the original game, you place four or five plastic ships of varying sizes on a pegged game board, and then you and your opponent try to guess where each other's ships are by using a grid pattern. For example, you would call out

"A (going across) 4 (going down)" and your opponent would either say, "Hit" or "Miss." You mark your own board with different colors or markings to indicate what you guessed on the other player's board, such as O's and X's. The first person to sink all the other's ships is the winner.

I got my game off <http://www.edochan.com/teaching/monkeys.htm>.

You can make the grid as large or small as you want, and use as many ships of any length as you want. Most importantly, you can use whatever target language you want across and down. For example, it could be as simple as letters and/or numbers, or involve more language, like questions. Printing the responses at the top of the page is optional (although the game requires that questions be answered). In the example shown here, there are several points of grammar to be noted: proper question and answer sequences; have/has; do/does in Q&A; he/she differences; countable/non-countable; and colors. Students are sure to love this game!

Jeff Romonko tells of a "Hot Potato" style game he uses for children aged 10-13 that doesn't require a lot of complicated English: Begin the lesson by focusing on some very simple two-line conversations like "How are you?" "Fine, thanks" or a simple question-answer scheme like "How old are you?" "I'm eleven." These mini-conversations can be adapted to the level of the students you are teaching or to what you have been working on in class.

Then take your students and have

them sit in a circle in the middle of the classroom. (If you have more than eight students, it's good to break them into two or more groups.) The teacher puts (or keeps) the conversation on the board and blows up a balloon in front of the class. Pick up a pin and show your class that the balloon and pin are fine when they are apart but that it becomes dangerous when they are put close together. Hand the balloon to one student in the circle, and the pin to a student sitting on the opposite side of the circle. These are then passed in the same direction round the circle. Students must perform the language function before they can hand the balloon or pin to the student next to them. If the balloon and pin come together, the student holding them has to pop the balloon. I play some music, and the game should continue until the music stops. At that time, the student holding the pin must pop the balloon.

The game works like "hot potato" in that students don't want to hold the pin or balloon, and will speak as quickly as possible to pass it on to the next student. The main point is just that: to get them speaking quickly and not worrying about being absolutely correct, or thinking too long. I've found this game to be a good motivator for this aim.

Kathleen Wada recommends a game she has used for children aged four to 12: All the children but one sit on chairs in a circle. The one without a chair stands in the middle of the circle. That child goes up to another and says the first line of a conversation (previously practiced). The seated student answers, and then stands up. Now two students are standing, and they ask two more students the same question, and so it continues. To add a little excitement, after a few children are moving around, blow a whistle or say a special word (in the summer I use "mosquito" and "shark"), and they all have to

scramble to their seats. The student left standing starts the process again. The conversations used can vary depending on the children's ages and abilities.

Joe Alsheimer says that rows of pictures can be used to make a game board that children can use to practice various short conversations. Using a coin or a dice the children move around the "board", and make conversations relating to the picture they land on. For example, if the picture shows a boy playing baseball, the conversation might go like this, "Do you like baseball?" "Yes, I do./Yeah, I love it/Not too much./No, I don't./No, I hate baseball."

Joe also suggests using small cards with pictures on one side and the word describing the picture on the other side to play a two-line "dialogue" game. Divide two decks of cards among pairs of students, to allow for the possibility of mismatches. One child has their cards placed picture-side up and the other has theirs word-side up, and they play a kind of matching game. To begin play, one child slides a picture or word

card across the table and asks a question related to that card (e.g. "Do you like baseball?"). If the other child can make a correct match, then he/she answers in the affirmative; however, if there is no matching card he/she should answer in the negative. The game ends when questions have been asked about each card. This simple game can be made more interesting by timing the activity or making it into a relay. *(If you are preparing your own set of cards for this game, make one deck of just picture cards, and the other deck of the corresponding words—games ed.)*

Mark Dont reminds us that the popular "Go Fish" game can easily be played with a regular deck of cards. Deal out at least four cards to each player. Remaining cards are placed in the center of the table. Each player in turn then has to ask someone for a card, saying "Do you have a ... (from Ace to King)?" If the person asked has the card, he or she must surrender it to the person who asked for it. If not, the person answering should say, "No, I

don't. Go fish." The questioner takes a card from the deck, and the next person continues the process. The object of the game is to collect all four suits of one card and then display them. The winner is the first person to lose all their cards. *(This game can be played with multiple copies of picture cards as well, with the same rules—games ed.)*

For a ready-made game, Mark also suggests "Guess Who", a commercial board game that can be played by two people or groups of people. Children must ask questions about external features, such as hair color, eyes, ears, facial hair, etc. in order to guess their opponents' "mystery person" chosen from a deck of cards. Questions can include "Do you have blue eyes/blond hair?" "Do you wear a hat?" and so on. This game can be purchased from English material suppliers here in Japan, if you are willing to make the investment. Mark doesn't recommend it for very small children, but elementary students who have practiced the sentence patterns usually have a riot trying to be the first to guess the mystery person.

Co-operative Corner—Basketball Scoring

When two or more teams play games usually there is always some method to keep score. One of my favorite scoring methods in the classroom is David Paul's "Basketball". On scoring a point a team member gets the chance to throw a large dice at a box or basket held by the teacher. If the dice lands on the floor the team scores the number of points equal to the score on the dice. If the throw lands in the box the team receives 10 points.

This system has a number of advantages. First, it is flexible. It can be used with virtually any task. Indeed it can be used to keep the score for an entire lesson. Secondly, it uses chance very nicely. 10 points for scoring a basket is much better than rolling a 6, but rolling 6 points is much better than rolling a 1. Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, the system is fun in itself. Throwing the dice is physical and "shooting a basket" can be immensely satisfying,

especially if the shooter has determined the distance to the basket.

This may sound strange. Surely a shooter will want as short a throw as possible? Well, not necessarily, at least not if the game is tweaked to make it co-operative.

Usually team scores are kept separate, compared, and the team gaining the most points is recognized as the winner. Creating a class total is an interesting alternative. All points scored are added together and the final score compared with a chart written on the board at the beginning of the class. A typical chart might read:

0-20	terrible
21-50	so-so
51-75	fine
76-100	great
101+	fantastic

The chart can be tailored to specific classes. The points can be raised or lowered and the adjectives changed on a week by week basis. Once the

students are familiar with the system they can create their own categories (one class I had came up with "very, very, very dolphin" for the top score).

With all the students working together new dynamics spring into play. Students can determine the distance to shoot the basket individually. The teacher can become a robot basket that responds to instructions (up, down, left, right etc.). The whole process can become more playful, more engaging and use more English.

Not every class I work with likes scoring systems. Some do and some don't. For those that do, class scores rather than team scores offer an interesting alternative. Why not try them, and see?

Co-operative Corner features non-competitive and co-operative games. If you have a such a game or would like to see a co-operative version of a competitive game then please email Chris Hunt at hunt@wisehat.com.