The Benefits of English Language Games for Reluctant Adult Learners

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Language games and activities are a key component of the EFL classroom, allowing students to practice what they have learned in a fun and interesting way. They provide a change of pace from the usual lesson structure and give students a chance to express themselves spontaneously. The importance of games is noted by Donmus (2010), who states that "educational games enrich [the] learning process [and] make students' learning more enjoyable and retentive" (p. 1502).

However, among groups of adult learners, the games introduced by instructors can sometimes fall flat, for a variety of reasons. This can be disheartening for instructors who put time and effort into planning them and can ultimately result in this useful tool being abandoned.

While an unsuccessful game or activity may put a damper on the instructor's enthusiasm for trying to use it again, the idea should not be given up on. With a little understanding and tweaking, games can become an important and enjoyable part of every class - even among groups of stoic adult learners. In this article. I would like to examine some ways to incorporate games into the warm-up stage of the lesson and suggest some suitable activities that work well with adult learners in particular.

Before attempting to introduce games as a key feature of the lesson warm-up, instructors should be aware of some of the obstacles they may face in their implementation. Adult learners may be indifferent at best and may downright refuse to engage at worst. Let's examine some of the causes behind this rejection.

Some students may regard themselves as 'serious' learners; that is to say, they have a strict focus for learning English and strong opinions on what does or doesn't contribute to that goal. Some may be used to a lecture-style English lesson, where the teacher speaks and they take notes. This is noted by Lassche (2006), who says "a warm-up stage may be an unfamiliar approach to learning in some classrooms, especially in ones that would usually be more traditional (i.e., not communicative)" (p. 89). This is

especially true of many Japanese students' experiences of learning English at high school. Actively engaging in speaking activities may still feel unnatural to them at this stage.

Others still may view warm-up activities as a waste of time and not relevant to the topic of the lesson. I have seen this in an unspoken way in lessons with students who like to record their classes to listen back to later as a study tool. Many will not even bother to turn on their recording device until it has been made clear that the main topic of the lesson is under way. In this way, students miss out on the chance to review mistakes that were made during their greeting/small talk, or to remember errors pointed out during homework correction, or hear how they performed when reviewing the previous lesson's topics. Instructors should point out how these, too, are important learning opportunities during class time.

In order to overcome these types of barriers, instructors must ensure that the warm-up activities in question meet a number of key requirements. First of all, the activity should be relevant to the material being taught in the course. A game that uses topics or vocabulary that students are unfamiliar with will be confusing and frustrating, and will undoubtedly result in even the most enthusiastic students becoming disengaged from the activity. Using warm-up activities as a way to review vocabulary and grammatical structures taught in previous lessons, however, will ensure that students are able to take part and see the benefit of doing the activity.

Secondly, keep it short and simple. Any activity that requires complicated instructions to set up, or eats up too much core class time, will cause students to lose interest before it even gets under way. Keep the games simple, keep the instructions brief and easy to understand, and know when to move things along to ensure the class flows smoothly.

Finally, make sure the activity is intellectually challenging. Many EFL warm-up games are targeted at younger learners and can seem childish and too simple when presented to adult learners. An activity that focuses on previously learned language in a communicative way works well. "Games also help the teacher to create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful … games provide one way of helping the learners to experience language rather than merely study it" (Wright et al., 2006, p 2). Choosing the right type of activities - which are both meaningful and

challenging - will be the instructor's best chance for getting full and enthusiastic engagement from all participants.

So, what type of warm-up activities tick all of those required boxes? Here are some of my favourites for groups of adult learners.

Countdown This activity offers a variation on the popular TV game show. Instructors should prepare a stack of letters on pieces of paper, divided into vowels and consonants. Students can take turns to choose which type of letter they want, until a total of nine letters are on the board. Students then have one minute to make the longest word they can from the letters - noting that each letter can only be used once. When the time is up, students should tell the longest word they were able to create, with points being given based on the number of letters used. For example, on a board with the letters A I B T E P E H R, student A makes the word 'bear' and scores four points, while student B scores five points for 'there'. By giving points rather than having an outright winner for each round, all students will feel involved regardless of their ability level.

Taboo / Reverse Taboo Most of us will be familiar with the popular party game Taboo, in which players have to prompt teammates to guess the keyword on a card, without using a list of forbidden words to describe it. Reverse taboo also employs a guessing aspect, but this time students are told only the forbidden words, and must guess what the keyword is based on that list. This is a great way to encourage word association among students and to help them build up their vocabulary. I like to use this activity to review key vocabulary from the previous lesson. For example, if students learned the phrase "public transportation" in the previous class, I might make a Reverse Taboo card with the words "car", "bus", "train", etc, from which to guess the keyword. Higher-ability students could set the game up by making the cards themselves as an extra challenge.

Chain Story This activity has endless possibilities for fun as it allows students' imaginations to run wild. The instructor starts with an 'if' sentence, and asks the first student to finish the sentence. The second student takes the ending of the first student's sentence,

and builds on it. I like to use this as a way to review following a grammar lesson on conditionals, and often start the chain story with "If i won a million dollars, I would…" For lower ability students, this can be turned into a vocabulary game where they must repeat an ever-growing list of words. Student A: "I went shopping and I bought apples." Student B: "I went shopping and I bought apples and bread". Student C: "I went shopping and I bought apples, bread and carrots", and so on through the letters of the alphabet. Students are eliminated when they can't recite the full list or think of a word to add, until the final student remaining is the winner.

In conclusion, by introducing students to the benefits of warm-up games and activities, instructors can add a fun element to their lessons that is both educational and entertaining. The change of pace from the usual lesson structure will keep students engaged, and the chance to be "winners" of the games will help with their motivation. In no time, they will be using English in an active and lively way, which will then carry over into the core lesson as well.

References

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