

Cooperative Game-Playing in the EFL Classroom

The use of games in language classrooms is popular among many English-language teachers and educators. Engagement in game-based activities gives learners a chance not only to experiment with the language being learned in a natural and fun way but also to sharpen their English skills. Furthermore, a sense of trust and responsibility is promoted when students are in collaboration toward their team's goal.

However, during my years of teaching experience, some of my students ask to switch to another team because they cannot collaborate effectively with their teammates; they feel they are unable to share responsibilities effectively or make use of the strengths of individual members. Others complain that they are often on the losing team, owing to their lack of awareness of effective game strategies. Some advanced students want to be grouped with those at the same level rather than with those at a lower language proficiency. They sometimes protest that games do not help them hone their language skills, but rather are a waste of class time.

What successful strategies can teachers use to tackle these issues? How can teachers organize games in which students not only get beneficial language practice but also cooperate well with others? In what ways can lessons of teamwork, tolerance, and strategic planning be introduced to learners of English?

DESIGNING GAMES WITH STUDENTS IN MIND

It is true that game-based activities can bring numerous benefits to language learners. Wang

(2010) suggests that the employment of communicative language games can (1) enhance students' learning motivation in a convivial and exciting way, (2) provide learners with opportunities to decode the language in real-life scenarios, (3) encourage rich and meaningful language practice, (4) create a learning environment where a sense of security and support is perceived, and (5) promote collaborative partnership. However, this article does not concentrate exclusively on favorable aspects of language games. Instead, it aims to suggest practical strategies and effective approaches to designing games with the following characteristics:

- Students receive mutual support from their teammates, fostering positive group dynamics.
- Students become strategic planners willing to take risks and exchange their roles in different rounds of the game, alleviating possible anxiety for lower-level students.
- Students learn lessons of tolerance, sympathy, and teamwork, contributing to the development of successful learners beyond the classroom walls.

EXAMPLES OF POORLY PLANNED GAME-BASED ACTIVITIES

Activity 1:

Teacher's instruction: "I will divide our class into groups of four students. Then, I will show 12 questions on English tenses one by one. Raise your hand if you know the answer. The fastest student will have a chance to answer the question. Each correct answer brings your group one point."

Comment on Activity 1

The teacher put students in groups even though doing so does not lead to any teamwork; there is no time for strategy planning and no opportunity for students to share responsibilities. Moreover, when excitement runs high, students with advanced skills may seize every chance to raise their hands and answer the questions, impeding lower-proficiency students' engagement in the game.

A suggestion to make this activity a more team-building exercise, if there are four students in each group, is to prepare four question sets of relatively the same difficulty level—for example, the four sets could be based on tenses (e.g., past simple, past continuous, present perfect, and future). There could also be sets based on four different topics. Then, ask each team to give each member one question set. Four question sets mean that there will be four rounds, with each team member getting involved in one round. The idea is to ensure that lower-ability students get involved in the game and have just as much to contribute as other members because the questions are equally challenging. The teacher might want to allow team members to change their question sets or ask for their teammates' support. This would promote collaboration within the team.

Activity 2:

Teacher's instruction: "I will divide you into groups of three. Each group will do a word-search activity. There are 15 vocabulary items that you have studied already. Work in your teams to finish the word search. The fastest group is the winner."

Comment on Activity 2

Because of insufficient discussion time within the team, students may work individually to search for 15 words. In order to handle this issue, you can give students one or two minutes to seek the most effective way to do the word search. You might give explicit advice: "If there are 15 words, why doesn't each of you look for five words?" Then, have the three team members work at one table so that they can search for their designated words but simultaneously keep track of the team's progress.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL TEAM-BONDING GAMES

The two examples in the previous section show that designing a language game to engage all team members is not a straightforward task. However, the Before-During-After strategies below can help teachers plan games in which students not only have fun but also learn to collaborate effectively.

Before the Game-Based Activity

1. Take the task difficulty into consideration.

Team games are usually played by groups of three or more students. Therefore, if the task is too easy, it might result in member domination where one or two players assume responsibility for the entire activity. This has a detrimental impact on learners' motivation, especially in the case of less-advanced students because they might perceive that they do not have a clear role or are unable to make a meaningful contribution within their own group. At the other end of the spectrum, the winning team members may not feel any satisfaction, as the task was not worth their effort. Thus, the right level of challenge is of paramount importance to deepening students' engagement in team games.

2. Break up a single game-based activity into different tasks.

As demonstrated in Activity 1 above, teachers can turn an activity into multiple smaller tasks by designing question sets so that students can select tasks based on their strengths or

interests, increasing the chance that they will have a share of responsibility within the group. In brief, the success of a team game depends on a clear division of the team burden.

3. Allocate one or two minutes for students to discuss their responsibilities.

This step is often overlooked by foreign-language teachers because of time constraints. But group discussion gives learners time to evaluate their strengths, weaknesses, and interests so that they perform tasks that match their ability. Moreover, brief group discussions create a sense of direction within a team and a better understanding of each student's roles and duties prior to the game. It also gives students a chance to work together to develop strategies for playing the game.

4. Provide a table of student roles (see Table 1 for a sample).

Having students write down their specific roles fosters a sense of equality and of belonging to the team. Individual members will see that they are working together toward the team's goal and contributing to the team's success. Additionally, students may swap roles in later rounds of the game in order to get experience in different aspects of the game or simply to change the group's strategies.

During the Game-Based Activity

1. Organize more than one round of the game.

As mentioned in the discussion of Activity 1 above, multiple question sets enable learners to play the game several times. It is a good idea to plan a short interval to let students revise strategy. Think about why most sports have a break during games. Players need time to assess their performance and adopt different tactics. Team games in foreign-language classrooms are similar. Intervals of one or two minutes help student teams execute their next game plan. The process of self-reflection and strategic planning through game-based activities plays a role in the development of critical thinking. Finally, noise concerns arising from group games are managed by means of game intervals, as students hold quiet group discussions rather than shouting or jumping around the classroom.

2. Continually remind students of their roles.

For activities where students take time to work on a challenging task or puzzle, high-proficiency learners might take over all parts of the task. It is advisable for teachers to circulate around the classroom and ask to see each group's Student Roles Table to make sure students are doing their assigned tasks. If there is a sign of confusion or disorder, the teacher can also ask each group member to explain his or her role. This can serve as

ROLES		
	Round 1	Round 2
Student 1	Walk around the room and remember sentences A and B.	
Student 2	Walk around the room and remember sentences C and D.	
Student 3	Listen and write sentences A and B.	
Student 4	Listen and write sentences C and D.	
Note:	All four members check grammar and spelling when all the sentences have been written down.	

Table 1. Student Roles Table (sample)

a reminder to students and keep the group members on task.

3. Encourage students to exchange roles.

When the first round ends, have students revisit their Student Roles Table. Tell them to exchange roles in the next round of the game. This opens up opportunities for learners to step out of their comfort zone by trying things they might feel less confident about. A role change also helps students think strategically, as they have to decide which members are better fit for which new roles. Furthermore, lower-level students may feel that they are a key part of the team when they take on different roles as the game proceeds.

After the Game-Based Activity

1. Praise the winning team while encouraging the losing teams.

When the game ends, winners are usually the center of attention. The class is filled with exclamatory phrases such as “Good job!” and “Well done!” However, we teachers may not recognize that such comments could be perceived as showing favoritism of one team over another. To prevent this, genuine care and encouragement should be shown to other teams as well. Comments like “All teams did a good job. I was delighted to see how well you collaborated in your groups,” and “Everyone, give yourself a big round of applause for your achievements. You should all feel proud of your work” help cultivate self-esteem among all learners. After all, the point of classroom games is not to declare winners and losers; the purposes are to practice language skills, collaborate, think critically and creatively, and have fun.

2. Give students one or two minutes to reflect on their overall team performance.

A sense of frustration and disappointment is harmful to students’ motivation and should not be a part of their involvement in language-based games; this is another reason not to emphasize winning and losing. Instead, concentrate on a positive side of the activity

(e.g., students’ language-skills development and their teamwork) and give students time to reflect. Below are sample questions that students might answer:

“What do you like about this game?”

“What have you learned from the competition?”

“What language skills have you developed?”

“If you played the game again, what would you do differently?”

Reflection time proves vital to the growth of language learners on both social and professional levels. They can discuss with their own teammates, resulting in heightened awareness of one another’s personalities and perspectives. As a result, group dynamics can be enhanced in future classes and the next game or activity. At the same time, students can listen to other teams explaining their strategies, which they may find useful to apply in subsequent games and projects. Typically, such moments right after the game are set aside for error correction, but reflection time could be just as valuable. Also, if time permits, this could be a good time to solicit students’ feedback for necessary alterations in the game. Below are two sample questions:

“How can this game be improved?”

“Do you know any other team games?”

One of the reasons I support using team-bonding games in the classroom is that groups of students with lower language proficiency are able to beat groups with more-advanced language skills if responsibility is shared properly. When the game ends, a lesson of teamwork could be put forward for class discussion.

PRACTICAL TEAM-BONDING GAMES

Game 1: Running Dictation

This type of game-based activity is probably known to many language teachers. However,

I am including my own version because it demonstrates how group work can be shared equally among members of the team. More importantly, students have opportunities to change roles during the game. Finally, the activity can be used to practice a wide range of language skills and is easily modified to accommodate diverse student levels.

Level: Elementary to Advanced

Time: 15–20 minutes

Language/Skill Practice: Reviewing grammar

Procedure for Round 1:

- 1.** Organize groups of four students.
- 2.** Explain the rules of the game. Two members of the team will walk around the classroom and read four sentences that are written on separate pieces of paper, marked A, B, C, and D, and posted on the walls. These two team members have to remember the sentences (no writing is allowed), then report back to the other two team members, who will write the sentences down.
- 3.** Put up a Student Roles Table (see Table 1) and allow a few minutes for team discussion.
- 4.** Have each team fill out a Student Roles Table or simply decide on each group member's role.
- 5.** Tell students to close their eyes. Put the sentences on the wall, then ask students to open their eyes. (Note that with large classes, you might have to place several copies of each sentence around the room.)
- 6.** Tell the class that the winning team is the group that finishes first, with no mistakes. Then start the game.

ROLES	
Student 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Complete a task to earn an advantage or find a hidden advantage.• Keep track of the time.• Check to make sure the writing meets the conditions.
Student 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Write the first two sentences. (Students try to write their own sentences. However, if they get stuck with vocabulary or grammar, they can ask their teammates for assistance. Also, if any other team uses an advantage and sends a member to help, students will write with the support from other groups as well.)
Student 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Write the next two sentences.
Student 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Write the last two sentences.
Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work together to form a story plot first.• Decide who writes sentences with required conditions.• Decide whether you want to write the whole story first and then edit, or whether you want to edit carefully as you go.• Save the advantages you have to help other groups.• Gather to check grammar and spelling together.

Table 2. Student Roles Table for We're Against the Clock!

- 7.** As students play, circulate and check students' sentences. If there are mistakes, tell students to recheck and revise their work. The team members who walked around and read the sentences must go back and reread the sentence(s), report back, and help teammates who are writing the sentences.
- 8.** Prepare short, funny English video clips and have the winning team pick one to watch. In this way, the class will share enjoyable moments together after the game. You could also let the winning team choose a song for the class to sing or listen to.

Another idea is to tell all the teams to politely express congratulations. They can use phrases such as "Congratulations," "Good job," and "Well done." Students receiving these words and phrases of praise can smile back and say, "Thank you."

Note: During the game, make sure that Students 1 and 2 will not write the sentences; they are allowed only to report back to Students 3 and 4. If time permits at the end of the game, read out loud the extra sentences produced by various groups to finish the story and applaud their creativity.

Sample Sentences for Round 1

These sentences focus on students' knowledge of the past tense in English.

- A.** While she was cooking her meal, the lights went out.
- B.** Mary was studying at 7 o'clock last night.
- C.** Suddenly, she heard a strange noise in the living room.
- D.** Then she stopped doing her homework to cook something.
- E.**

(The most logical order of the sentences is B, D, A, C. Student groups collaborate to write the fifth sentence of the story.)

Procedure for Round 2:

The procedures in Round 2 are the same as the procedures in Round 1, except that students must swap roles. Students 1 and 2 write the sentences, while Students 3 and 4 read and remember them.

Sample Sentences for Round 2

- A.** She even asked for my telephone number and address.
- B.** I asked myself, "What should I do?"
- C.** Yesterday, a beautiful girl said "hello" to me.
- D.** But I had never seen her before in my life.
- E.**

(The most logical order of the sentences is C, A, D, B. Student groups collaborate to write the fifth sentence of the story.)

Benefits of Game 1

This activity provides practice with English tenses (past tense in these examples, but the activity can be adjusted to review other tenses), reading comprehension, and logical thinking. In addition, students need to focus on spelling, and teachers can create sentences with recently learned vocabulary for review. The role changes in Round 2 contribute to equality of opportunities among team members.

Game 2: We're Against the Clock!

This is one of my favorite games because student groups are not against each other, but they unite to compete against the clock (a certain amount of time allotted by the teacher). The participants should work in their own teams to complete the tasks but simultaneously support other teams. Otherwise, the class will lose the game to the clock. When the game ends, the class can discuss lessons of teamwork, generosity, and strategy.

Level: Intermediate to Advanced

Time: 20–25 minutes

Language/Skill Practice: Creative writing

Procedure:

- 1.** Prepare a list of six numbers—for example, 6, 9, 10, 7, 11, and 5 (for classes of advanced students, you can select more numbers and/or larger numbers).
- 2.** Organize groups of four students. Tell each group to write a short story on any topic, using any tense—with the condition that the number of words in each sentence must be the same as the designated number. For instance, with the numbers listed in Step 1, the first sentence must have six words, the second must have nine words, and so on.
- 3.** Allow groups 12 minutes to write their story. (Time can be adjusted depending on students' level.)
- 4.** If you want, you can introduce extra conditions to make the game more challenging. Conditions should be appropriate for your students' level and needs; an example of a condition I have used is, "There must be at least two phrasal verbs in the story." I added this condition to draw my students' attention to phrasal verbs, which we had covered in previous lessons. The game might be used to practice a range of grammar points, with conditions such as, "There must be at least three different modal verbs." However, teachers can create other conditions fitting the objectives of the lesson or challenging the students in some way, such as, "There must be no letter *h* in the first sentence" or "The last word of your story must be *happy*."
- 5.** Tell students that the class beats the clock when (1) all the teams have finished their writing before the allotted time, and

(2) there are no more than three spelling and grammar errors in each story.

- 6.** As an optional step, announce that besides the writing task, you have hidden four types of "advantages" in the classroom. (Note that you must prepare and hide the advantages before class begins.) Advantages I have used include the following:
 - Your group has two extra minutes to write.
 - Your group can back up other teams (send one member to other groups to help them with their writing).
 - Your group needs to write only five sentences instead of six.
 - You may call for teacher assistance with vocabulary and grammar.

Note that instead of hiding the advantages, you could also have teams earn them by answering questions, doing well on a quiz, or completing some other task of your choice.

- 7.** Tell students that they can give the advantages to other teams—and that the clock will "win" if all groups cannot finish their writing on time. Tell them, "If you complete your writing but still have an advantage, you should help other teams. On the other hand, if your team is in trouble, you can shout, 'We need help!' and see whether other groups have advantages they can use to support your team."

What is the reward for the winning team, which in this case is the whole class? If you feel confident, you can sing an English song to your students or ask them to perform a chicken dance with you. This will definitely build rapport between you and the students. Otherwise, have students pick a story for you to read out loud in the next class,

or you can ask them to suggest a short movie they want to see.

8. Once the rules are explained and understood, give teams a Student Roles Table (see Table 2) so that they can strategize and make sure everyone contributes.
9. When time is up, groups exchange their stories with other groups to check the required conditions. Each sentence length must match the designated number, and (for example) the story must include at least two phrasal verbs. During that time, the teacher can walk around to check for spelling and grammatical errors.

Reflections on Game 2

1. Tell the receiving groups to express sincere thanks to the giving groups.
2. Invite the giving groups to explain how they helped the class reach the goal.
3. Invite the class to comment on related questions:

“Why should we help people who need it?”

“When we receive help from others, what should we do?”

The reflection for this activity gives students extra speaking practice, improves class rapport, and helps students realize the importance of giving and taking.

Benefits of Game 2

With regard to skills development, one of the purposes of this game is to review phrasal verbs (or another grammar point of the teacher’s choosing). However, the conditions

must be given with care because they can make the game challenging.

This team-bonding game encourages students to collaborate as a team and to support other teams, too. Student groups should make decisions on who will fulfill each role. If they have an advantage, how will they use it? Will they use the advantage themselves or save it for another team? The goal is not only to complete their writing task but also to move other teams forward. In this way, a sense of collaboration and support is established within the team itself and within the entire class.

Game 3: We've Got It!

Level: Elementary to Advanced

Time: 10–15 minutes

Language/Skill Practice: Reviewing vocabulary

Material: A list of categories

Procedure for Round 1:

Put students into groups of three. Write six categories on the board. Then, write any letter. Next, require students to come up with a word in each category that begins with this letter. When the team has written a word for each category, all three members shout, “We’ve got it!” Have one member write the words on the board. If the words fit the categories and are spelled correctly, the group gets a point. Table 3 gives an example.

You can have groups work on one letter at a time, or you can pick three or four letters for the first round.

Note that in order to ensure that the team members are working toward the same

Letter	Job	Place	Food/Drink	Animal	Celebrity	Transportation
t	teacher	town	tea	tiger	Taylor Swift	train

Table 3. Sample categories, with entries for the letter t

goal together, not separately, you can give each team a large piece of paper with all the categories so that they have to write their words on it. In this way, they can (1) work independently to find words in the categories they take responsibility for and at the same time (2) support the team in finding words for other categories if they happen to know words that fit their teammates' categories.

Procedure for Round 2:

Tell students to suggest one letter to challenge the other groups. If there are seven groups, prepare seven pieces of paper numbered from 1 to 7. Then, have one student in each group randomly pick a number. The group with number 1 will challenge the group with number 2, who later challenges the group with number 3, and so on. If the challenged group comes up with all the words correctly within 45 seconds, that group can ask the group that sets the challenge to sing an English song or act out a certain instruction (e.g., walk like a robot or make a sound like a cat). If the challenged group cannot complete the task in 45 seconds, then the group that sets the challenge decides what the challenged group should do—but only if the group that sets the challenge is able to fill in the categories!

Note: Do not permit students to pick *j*, *x*, *q*, or *z* because it is difficult to form words that start with these letters.

Procedure for Round 3:

If time permits, teachers are encouraged to participate in this round with the class, as the benefits are significant. From my experience, when I get involved in a small competition with my students (usually with groups of five or six), the class atmosphere is great fun. To be fair, I tell my students to create their own favorite categories. Then, I select any student to pick a letter, and we play the game.

My students are excited to challenge me, and in all honesty, I have lost more than I have won. But this approach is a demonstration of the power of teamwork. My students are aware that one person with “advanced”

knowledge does not always beat an entire team, and that they still have a chance to win if they share responsibilities properly and work collaboratively toward the team’s goal.

Benefits of Game 3

One of the objectives of this activity is to review vocabulary. The selected categories should be based on topics the class has studied. On the other hand, the activity has the potential to enlarge students’ vocabulary range as well. Furthermore, when students share responsibility, they can learn the value of teamwork.

Note: For larger groups, challenge them with more categories (e.g., eight or ten). Moreover, make sure students shout, “We’ve got it!” instead of “I’ve got it!” when they complete the puzzle. The “We” rather than the “I” intensifies a sense of belonging to a team. Finally, providing an interval of a minute or two between rounds gives students time to strategize as a group and work as a cohesive and unified team.

PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS

A common problem in organizing game-based activities is some students’ belief that games are a waste of time lacking any valuable language practice. Giving a concise explanation of the game’s benefits bolsters students’ motivation. I usually start by saying, “This game will help you to _____” to help my students understand the purpose of the game. When the game ends, you can review the language points that students have practiced. This approach reinforces the idea that these games are not only for playing but also for learning.

Another issue is that high-proficiency students may not want to be grouped with those at a lower level. Meanwhile, less-advanced students may feel that their contributions are not appreciated. These attitudes are likely to have damaging effects on group dynamics in the long run; Oakley et al. (2004, 9) contend that “being part of an ineffective or dysfunctional team may well be inferior to independent study in promoting learning and can lead to extreme frustration and resentment.” One

effective solution is to provide a Student Roles Table and have students decide who best fits each role; then, in the second and third rounds of the game, have students exchange roles.

Students thus have to restructure their teams and collaborate while tapping one another's strengths. More importantly, all learners are given a chance to become key players on the team, consequently building their self-esteem. Another recommendation is to allocate reflection time for students to evaluate their teamwork and suggest ways to enhance their overall team performance next time. This can strengthen bonds within a team.

Friehs (2016) writes that some teachers oppose the use of games in the classroom because the competitive nature of games might contribute to an unfavorable learning environment. Clearly, the problem of having "winners" and "losers" is a concern, and language teachers should be prepared to handle the issues of disappointment from teams that "lose" and/or excessive pride from the team that "wins." During game play, a thorough observation of students' attitudes and the class atmosphere is necessary so that any issues are immediately remedied. If possible, collect students' opinions for modification of subsequent games. Overall, the teacher and the learners should fully understand that the objective of any team-bonding game in the classroom is to open up collaboration opportunities for students to bond with their peers while improving their English skills, not to promote competitive attitudes.

CONCLUSION

Games not only offer authentic language practice but, more importantly, have the potential to shape students into critical thinkers who are willing to take risks, show compassion for their teammates, and see the value of teamwork and tolerance. As in Game 1, a sense of equality is emphasized when all members perform different roles regardless of their language abilities. In Game 2, students become more strategic and compassionate game players when they collaborate within their own teams and exchange mutual support to move other groups forward. In Game 3,

students recognize the power of teamwork when groups stand a chance of defeating "stronger" players, even their teachers.

The suggested three-stage strategy is conducive to successful language games:

- 1.** Before the game, take into account the shared responsibility among team members, provide a Student Roles Table, and give time to strategize.
- 2.** During the game, allow time for brief intervals and encourage students to swap their roles.
- 3.** After the game, allot a few minutes for students' evaluation of their team performance and reflection on the game.

Following these crucial steps, language teachers should feel confident to incorporate games in their lesson plans and be ready to relish the enjoyable learning environment that language games can create.

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