The Noisy Way: Teaching English with Games

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Abstract

Games are playing an increasingly important role in language teaching with the recent emphasis on communicative competence. This paper discusses definitions of games and their use in language classes, then describes several useful games in the following categories: traditional Japanese games, Japanese TV games, bingo games, description games, word salad games, value games, and simulation games.

Games have always had an important place in language teaching, because they help students move from pseudo-communication to real communication, permit them to display linguistic competence in natural communicative use, allow them to engage in autonomous interaction, and (let's face it) give them a bit of a break from a boring class.

I. Introduction

Definition: Shirts (1975) distinguishes games from contests and simulations. A game is "an activity in which people agree to abide by a set of conditions (not necessarily rules) in order to create a desired state or end" (pp. 76-78); much of what we usually call "play" falls into this category. A contest is essentially a competition, such as an election. A simulation is "anything which models reality," including role-playing. Most of the "games" discussed in this paper are what Shirts calls "contest games," where there is competition based on arbitrary and absolute rules, resulting in behavior which is inefficient and (therefore?) fun. (For another view of what a "game" is, see Dunathan, 1978).

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This paper is based on a presentation given at the October 1978 meeting of the JALT Osaka chapter, and incorporates a number of suggestions made by the audience at that meeting.

Function: Games can be used simply as a diversion to break the routine of the class. They are often used to sugarcoat activities students find unpleasant, such as tests. Perhaps the bulk of the "games" described in such books as Dorry (1964), Lee (1965), and Hill & Fielden (1974) are tests or drills in the form of contests. But games can provide a genuine learning experience. In her discussion of the problem of moving students from pseudo-communication (as in textbook drills) to genuine communication, Rivers (1976) gives a list of several "natural uses of language" (p. 21), including seeking and giving information, learning to do or make something, and problem solving; all of these can be elicited in one way or another by games. (See also Rivers & Temperley, 1978, p. 46)

This point emerges clearly from a comparison of two sets of criteria for "good" language games. For Dobson (1972), a good language game is one that "(a) requires little or no advance preparation, (b) is easy to play and yet provides the student with an intellectual challenge, (c) is short enough to occupy a convenient space during the class period, (d) entertains the students but does not cause the class to get out of control, and (e) requires no time-consuming correction of written responses afterward" (p. 361). The implication is clear: for Dobson the game is functioning as relief, both for the students and for the teacher, and is separate from the main business of the lesson. But Savignon (1975), whose work on developing communicative competence is based on the cognitive approach, suggests that games should "constitute the very core of the foreign language program" (pp. 95-96). Her criteria for a good language game are these:

> First of all, it provides the fullest amount of emotional involvement possible. Each player has something clearly at stake.
>
> Second, it offers a format that is simple enough to be understood by all players, yet supple enough to allow for adaptations as needed to suit the needs of the players in terms of age, number, degree of communicative competence, etc.
>
> Third, success in playing the game does not depend on any arbitrary criteria of linguistic accuracy (spelling, pronunciation, word placement, etc.). This is important. It depends, rather, on the ability to use the language to discuss, to explore, to deceive, to explain, to reveal, and in sum to engage in the whole range of interpersonal transactions in which we are involved daily in our native language. Herein lies the authenticity of the exchanges. (pp. 95-96)

These are high standards which, sad to say, most of the games described below do not meet. But I believe that this is the direction in which classroom games are moving.

Use: Most of the games described below can be modified for use with students at any level and for all ages. Also, these games can be used to teach any language, not just English.

II. Traditional Japanese Games

The advantages of using these games are that (a) your students will be familiar with the rules, and (b) they are very positively associated with play and fun.

(1) Hyakunin Isshu (100 poems by 100 poets). This is a card game usually played at New Year's; the original game is played as follows: "Each of 100 famous poems is divided into two parts and the cards on which are written the latter halves of the poems are spread out, face up, on the *tatami* before the participants. These cards are called *torifuda,* meaning literally "taking cards," or cards to be picked up. The participants in the game scramble to pick up the *torifuda* as the *yomite* (reader) recites one by one the first parts of the poems which are written on *yomifuda* (literally, reading cards)" (Japanese National, 1964, p. 830). This has been adapted as an English game for children ("Listen and Win," Goken, 2-7-17 Sarugaku-cho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 101), but can also be used at more advanced levels. The game can be played with commercial picture cards (e.g., those produced by ABC, Kyobundo, 2-8-16 Sarugaku-cho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 101) or with homemade cards. Depending on the number of players, 20 to 50 cards are spread out face up on a flat surface and the players group themselves around it. Each player takes a turn acting as the leader. The leader describes one of the cards. As soon as one of the other players thinks he sees the card being described, he grabs it. The winner is the one holding the most cards when all the cards are gone. If someone takes the wrong card, he must replace not only that card but also one previously taken; this penalty is called *otetsuki.* This game can be played on several levels. Suppose, for example, that one card shows a girl sitting at a desk drawing a picture. This could be described by the nouns *girl* or *desk,* or with the verb *draw.* Beginning students might make sentences like, "I see a girl," or "She is drawing a picture." As the students' language ability increases they will try to describe the card more subtly, even intentionally misleading other players to pick the wrong card. An advanced student might describe the same card with something approximating, "When I was a little girl, I wanted to be an artist, so I practiced drawing every day at my desk."

Other possible variations include having the leader ask questions, such as, "Is she drawing a picture?"

(2) Shinkei Suijaku (lit., nervous breakdown) is a kind of concentration game using playing cards. In the original version a pack of standard playing cards is scattered face down on a surface. The first player turns any two cards face up; if they match (i.e., if they are both 2's or 8's or jacks), he or she may pick them up; if not, he or she must turn them both face down, and the next player turns over one card. If that card matches one of the cards displayed on a previous turn, and the player can remember where that card is, he or she turns over the matching card and picks up the pair. By trying to remember where the cards are located and turning up one and then a second card each turn, the players try to collect as many pairs as they can; the winner is the one with the most when all cards have been taken up. For children this can be played with pairs of picture cards; the student is required to say in English what he or she thinks the card shows before turning it over, or to identify each card after turning it over. For more advanced students, pairs of cards can be made with one half of a standard sentence or proverb on each. Students must not only remember where each half-phrase is, but they must be careful to match the two halves of the sentence correctly. (Another variation of this game is described by Saunders, 1974, pp. 5-6.)

(3) Babanuki (Old Maid) in Japan is played with a regular deck of cards but two sets of any kind of picture card will do. The important thing is to establish a rule that the players must identify or say something in English about each card as they discard. A set should have 20-30 pairs of identical pictures and one single card (the "old maid"). The cards are shuffled and dealt. The first player draws a card from the player to his left; if he can make a pair, he lays down the pair in front of him, saying something about the pictures in English. Then the next player takes a card from the player on his left. When a player has laid down all his cards he drops out; play continues until all pairs are laid down and one player is left with the "old maid." Shields (1970, p. 63) suggests a variation using words written on cards: either words in the same category (e.g., desk, table, chair), or homonyms (cent, sent); he also suggests using three in a set rather than pairs. Another variant for beginners is to use it as aural comprehension practice. In this case each student is given the same set of cards (e.g., the numbers from 1 to 20, or vocabulary from last week's lesson). The teacher then reads off the words or descriptions from a master list in random order. When the student hears the word or description he lays down the appropriate card. Students who did not comprehend correctly will be left holding cards; the winner is the one with the fewest cards left.

III. Japanese TV Games

The advantages of using these games are that (a) your students are likely to be familiar with the rules, (b) TV games are positively associated with entertainment, and (c) TV games often allow extensive speaking/hearing activity. (See Rivers & Temperley, 1978, p. 53)

(4) Iwaseru Game (making-someone-say-it) was developed by Paul Rector of Baika Women's College from a now-defunct TV show. Prepare several strips of cardboard (15 cm x 3 cm) and write sentences on them; give each one a number of points (one point for each word and additional points for difficult items). Example: "My English teacher always wears the same necktie (8 points)." Students form groups of 4 to 6 and choose one person to be "it." The others take one card, study the sentence, and try to make "it" guess the sentence by taking turns giving clues. Clues can consist of words, phrases, or sentences; the only rule is that the clue cannot contain a word that appears in the sentence itself until after that word has been guessed. (Of course this applies only to the key content words, not to the service, or function, words.) Example: for the above sentence, the clues might be "first word... I... his... hers... pronoun... two letters...," etc., until "it" guesses *my*. As soon as "it" guesses and can say the whole sentence, the group makes a note of the number of points, returns the card to the teacher, and takes another card, choosing another student to be "it." At the end of the predetermined time limit, each team adds up the number of points it has made and the group with the highest score is the winner. Students soon learn the tricks by which they can make someone guess even quite complicated sentences. The sentences can be taken from the lessons, made up on subjects that might be of interest to the class, or solicited from the students themselves.

(5) Rensō Game (Imagination Game, NHK, Wed. 7:30 pm) is a word-association game which has enjoyed a very long run. The players are divided into two teams which compete against each other; each team has four members and a captain. The two captains are given a word or standard phrase by the moderator (teacher); they give clues, usually synonyms, so that their teams can guess the word. Example: the word to be guessed is *instruction*. The captain of Team A might say "teaching"; the first member of Team A might guess "school." Then the captain of Team B gives a clue to the first member of his team, and so on. If the word is guessed on the first clue, that team receives 10 points; on the second clue, 9 points; etc. If no one has guessed the word by the tenth trial (5 for each side), that round is ended. In this game the captain gives only one clue each turn and the team member whose turn it is is allowed only one guess.

A variant, called the "one-minute game," is played at the end of each show. A number of cards, each containing one word, are prepared in advance; all the words are related to a common theme. An assistant stands behind the first team member of Team A, holding the card so that the audience and the other team can see it but so that none of the four Team A members can. Then the captain of Team A gives a series of clues as rapidly as he or she can and the team member makes as many guesses as he or she wants. When the team member finally guesses the word (or gives up by saying "pass"), the assistant moves behind the next person on the team, displaying a new word, and the process is repeated. There is a strict time limit of one minute; the object is to guess as many words as possible in that time. Then the process is repeated with a new set of words for the other team, and the scores are compared. Both of these games are fast-paced, competitive, and provide a good review of vocabulary.

(6) Honmono wa dare da! (Who's Who Game, NTV/YTV, Mon. 7:30 pm) is similar to the American "To Tell the Truth"; the moderator announces that one of the three persons on the stage has done something notable (or unusual or has an unusual profession or hobby, etc.) while the other two will pretend that they are the ones with the unusual background. Student panelists then try to guess which of the three is "the real one *(honmono)*" by asking questions of all three. This can be done in the classroom with hobbies, for example. Have one student whose hobby is stamp-collecting go on stage with two others who will pretend that they are stamp-collectors and let the class practice their questioning and listening skills.

(7) Honto ni honto (Quiz Game: Which is True? NHK, Fri. 7:30 pm). Four panelists give different explanations for the same phenomena and the guests must decide which explanation is the true one. Example: Why is the Japanese word for bread *pan?* The first explanation might be that bread was originally cooked in frying pans; another might claim that this is the abbreviation of Port and North, a bakery in Kobe; a third might give the true explanation that the word is derived from the Portuguese and Spanish words for bread; and the fourth might claim that it is named after a Greek deity. Then the rest of the class, divided into teams, must decide which explanation is the true one. This discussion, as well as the explanations themselves, should of course be conducted in English.

(8) Quiz Grand Prix (Fuji/KTV, Mon.-Fri. 7:30 pm) is a quiz show in which four contestants vie to be first to answer a series of difficult questions in a variety of areas, including history, literature, science, sports, etc. It has been suggested that this could be a useful language teaching

game if it was turned around, with a moderator giving the answer and having the students try to be the first to come up with a reasonable question. Example: the teacher says "Charles Dickens"; the first student who says something approximating "What is the name of a famous English novelist?" would be the winner. Questions like "What is your name?" would not get any points. (Saunders, 1974, pp. 14-15 gives an adaptation of the American TV show "Jeopardy," which is quite similar to this.)

IV. Bingo Games

Bingo is a popular game which has been used for language teaching in many forms. The original game (for numbers practice) is described in detail by Shields (1970, pp. 11-14). Bingo for language teaching is available commercially under names like Lingo, Lotto, and Quizmo. Almost all the works on games cited in the bibliography discuss one or more varieties (e.g., Olsen, 1976, and Vaioleti, 1972). I will mention only two here.

(9) Category Bingo or Word Bingo (Dobson, 1972, pp. 363-364; Dobson, 1974, pp. 117-118; Dorry, 1964, p. 23). Tell your students to draw a grid with 9, 16, or 25 squares and to fill in each square with a word from some specific category such as food, items in the classroom, or sports. Then have each student call out one in turn; any student who has that word on his grid can cross it out. As soon as a student has crossed out 3 (or 4 or 5) in a row (horizontally, vertically, or diagonally), he yells "Bingo!" (The teacher should write down each word on the blackboard as it is called out so that the winner can be checked; if he has made a mistake he is out of that round.)

(10) Picture Bingo (English Journal, 1978, p. 65) is for students who have not yet learned how to read. Sheets are prepared with 9/16/25 pictures arranged in a grid. As the teacher calls out sentences like, "I see a pen," or "There is a book," the students cover the correct picture with a marker. The winner is the first to get 3/4/5 in a row. (Instead of preparing sheets with 9/16/25 pictures, it is more convenient to hand each student 9/16/25 of the picture cards you use for other activities; these can be quickly laid out in the form of a grid.)

V. Description Games

These games come close to meeting Savignon's criteria cited above. Nation (1979) calls them "combining arrangements" because "the learners are all on an equal footing; each one has information that the others need in order to complete a piece of work. Because of this, each learner must communicate his information to the others so that all the information can be combined to complete the task" (p. 12). This statement applies particularly to the Grid Pictures, as well as to similar games described in Nation's article. (See also Robb, 1978.)

(11) Grid Pictures have been described by Schumann (1975, p. 232) and Olsen (1975, p. 232). Students work in pairs; each has a grid with 20 squares (about 7 cm on a side) arranged in four rows of five each. (Of course the size, number, and pattern can be varied at will.) Student A is given a grid on which a picture has been pasted in each square; B gets a plain grid with no pictures pasted on, and a set of the identical pictures loose (they should be pasted onto cardboard for durability and if necessary an arrow should be drawn to indicate which side is up.) The object of the game is for A to direct B to place the pictures on the empty grid in the same order as they appear on A's grid. This is accomplished by A's describing each picture in turn and telling B where it is located on the grid. B may not look at A's grid but may ask questions. This can be done with or without a time limit.

One advantage of this game is its flexibility; pictures can be chosen to illustrate certain grammatical features (on top of, underneath, next to; is closing, will close, has closed) as well as vocabulary. Also, choosing pictures which are very dissimilar make the game easy while pictures which are quite similar to each other make the game difficult to do. For example, you might have all 20 pictures on a baseball theme, with 6 pictures all showing a ball against a grass background. The only difference among the 6 pictures is the location of the ball; in one it is in the upper right-hand corner, in another in the center, etc. Then there might be several pictures showing the batter in various stages: just about to hit the ball, hitting it, having just hit it, etc. By careful selection of pictures the teacher can build up a set of games to reinforce many different teaching points.

(12) Construction Engineer (Olsen, 1975, p. 236) is a variation of the above in that Student A must direct B in a task. In this case, A is given Cuisenaire rods, toy blocks, tinker toys, Lincoln Logs, or any similar device, and builds a structure, either representational or abstract. He or she then must direct B to build the same thing, B having been given identical materials. Of course there is a screen between them so that neither can see the other's work, but they are encouraged to talk back and forth, A explaining and B asking questions. Krupar (1973, p. 35) describes similar games with an added complication; A and B communicate through a messenger, C, who carries A's instructions to B and B's questions to A. (See also Cisar, 1978)

(13) Guessing Game is a description game in which students work in pairs. Each pair is given a picture containing many objects (e.g., a xerox of a page of an illustrated dictionary such as Parnwell & Shimizu, 1973). One student pretends that he or she wants to buy one of the objects but can't remember the English word for it. He or she proceeds to describe it in terms of color, weight, size, shape, texture, material, function, and so on. The other student may ask questions. The point of the game is for the second student to guess which object the first is describing; when that happens a new round begins with the two students changing roles. This is a useful review of vocabulary and basic structures and is also very practical shopping practice.

VI. Word Salad Games

These appear in different books under different names and have many variations.

(14) Word Salad. Divide the class into two teams. Ask everyone to write any word at all on a slip of paper, and collect the slips into two paper bags, one for each team. Then draw ten slips from Team A's bag and write the words on the board. Each member of Team B must say a sentence which contains at least three of the words; they get one point for each correct sentence, more if the sentence contains more than three of the words on the list. Then the process is repeated with Team A making sentences from Team B's words. The winner is the team with the most points after a predetermined number of rounds have been played.

(15) Sentence Salad (Rivers & Temperley, 1978, pp. 302-303). Ask each member of the class to write any simple sentence on a slip of paper. Collect and write any 10 on the blackboard (silently correcting any errors). Students must then write a paragraph using *all* 10 sentences. After allowing ample time, collect and write on the blackboard, read aloud, or reproduce and distribute. I am not sure how valuable this exercise is for the students, but it is dazzling for the teacher to see how creative and imaginative his or her students can be in a language they have not yet mastered.

In a variant of this game (for which I am indebted to my colleague Yasuo Hatanaka), a long sheet of paper is prepared and one student is asked to write one sentence at the top. The next student reads that sentence and writes a second sentence. The paper is then folded at the top so that only the second sentence is visible; the third student reads it and writes the next sentence. The paper is folded again and the process is repeated, so that every student reads only the sentence before his or her own. After everyone in the class has contributed, the result is read to the class.

VII. Values Games

These games may be based on "values clarification" (see Simon, Howe, and Kirschenbaum, 1972) or on general communication or guidance principles; a vast number are being commercially produced in America for use in schools, church groups, and other formal and informal groups. They have names like "The Ungame," "Social Security," "Hang Up," and "Choices," and help the players achieve such goals as values clarification (i.e., a fuller awareness of one's own subconscious prejudices and assumptions) or better communication (by making the participants more aware of how what they say is perceived by others). My own preference is to use these games at the surface level only, as a means of stimulating conversation, without trying to grapple with students' values.

(16) The Ungame (The Ungame Company; available from EMI, Box 4272, Madison, Wisconsin 53711 USA) is a board game for six players. The heart of the game is a set of "Tell It Like It Is" cards, by which the student is ordered to speak. Several different sets of cards are available, with a range of problems from fairly easy items like "What is your favorite color?" to quite difficult and rather personal items. It is a simple matter to weed out the cards that might be too difficult or otherwise inappropriate for any particular group of students. There is no competition in this game; in a sense it is nothing more than the kind of free discussion exercise found in many conversation textbooks at the end of each chapter. The advantage of using the game is that the colorful board and the picking of cards by chance creates a playful atmosphere, so that students feel that they are playing a game rather than doing an exercise. (This is not to say that many students won't soon catch on that this is a pretty hard way to have fun.)

(17) My Cup Runneth Over (Pennant Educational Materials; available from EMI) covers eight basic values: affection, respect, skill, enlightenment, influence, wealth, well-being, and responsibility. Each player takes a turn drawing a chip which will direct him or her to tell a story illustrating one of these values. Example: a player draws "minus wealth" and says, "My bike had a flat yesterday so I had to buy a new tube and tire." If the other players guess that the story was an example of "minus wealth," he and they win a point; if the other players think that he is describing "minus skill" or some other value, then he does not get a point for that turn. This is a very simple example; the instructions suggest many variations and refinements, but the main point is a useful one for language students--are you sure that your hearers are getting your message?

(18) Choices (Family Pastimes, R.R. 4, Perth, Ontario, Canada K7H 3C6). This game has been described by Jim White

of Tezukayama Gakuin (Women's) College. It gives a number of situations (e.g., somebody broke a window at school and you know who did it) and several possibilities for resolving the situation, from which the students must choose one or make up their own alternative and justify their choice. The game takes the students through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age.

VIII. Simulations

Shirts (1975) defines a simulation as "anything which simulates or models reality" (p. 76); the best example is role-playing. Role-playing as a device for language learning has been discussed repeatedly (see, *inter alia*, Pauston et al., 1975). Dana Carton-Caprio (1974, 1975, 1977) has published a series of detailed descriptions of elaborate role plays for language learning. (See also ACTFL, 1974). But the activities I want to mention here are what are generally called "simulation games" or "educational simulations." Seidner (1976) gives a complicated but useful definition:

> Simulation refers to the dynamic execution or manipulation of a model of some object system... In all-man (non-computerized) simulations the parameters of the referent system are embedded in a set of specifications, or rules, that define the roles and resources of participants. These specifications are devised to reflect the restraints inherent in the referent system so that simulation participants will experience some of the same kinds of pressures and influences that would occur in a real-life setting... [Simulations] are abstractions and simplifications of the real world... In *simulation games*, success is defined in terms of players' *goals*; there is a prescribed criterion for winning. (pp. 221-223) (See also Spannaus, 1978.)

The literature on simulation games is extensive (e.g., Greenblat & Duke, 1975; Gillispie, 1973; Troyka and Nudelman, 1975; bibliographies in Gohring, 1978 and Extension Gaming, 1977), but to my knowledge they have not been used for teaching foreign languages to any extent. Since they are rather complicated enterprises even for native speakers, the difficulties would be many, but I believe it would be worth the effort, for these reasons:

1. From all reports a simulation game is an all-embracing, highly motivating learning experience. While simulating a greater or larger reality, the simulation game is in itself a real experience. (Seidner, 1976, p. 233)
2. Communicative skills are brought to the fore.

3. They are ideal for large classes since they often require a minimum of 15-20 and a maximum of 40 or more participants.

4. They are often useful for conveying the social values of the countries where they are produced.

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