



The Pedagogy of Partying: Party Games for the ESL Classroom

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The test of a great language game is whether learners would play the game outside of the classroom (Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 2006), but many tried-and-true English as a second language (ESL) games don't pass muster. Sometimes, teachers must choose or design games to fit a specific classroom objective, and though these games can be fun, they can also be a bit contrived.

Where can a teacher find exciting, authentic games to perk students up? Parties! There are hundreds (if not thousands) of games traditionally played at all sorts of social gatherings for no other purpose than for sheer joy and excitement, so why not take advantage of these in the classroom? With a little modification, party games can be used to practice grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and other objectives.

Why Party Games?

Games played at parties and family functions are perfect for the ESL classroom for so many reasons:

Sense of Flow

These games stand the test of time because they create a sense of flow, and this feeling of intense enjoyment and focus is associated with a decrease in self-consciousness and an increase in intrinsic motivation (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990). These are both essential ingredients for language learning. Any teacher whose students have ever lost themselves in an activity and continued to work through the end of class or break time knows the power of flow, and these moments can bring joy to teachers as well as students.

Classroom Community

Also, the best party games create a sense of bonhomie and good will among participants, which strengthens the bond of the classroom community. Many of these games require participants to work together in a light-hearted way, so they provide a nice opportunity for students to break the ice throughout the academic term.

Cultural Awareness

Finally, if the game comes from an English-speaking place, a carefully chosen party game can provide students with a window into the target culture. Before playing the game with students, teachers can give a cultural background of the game, including the types of parties where it's traditionally played and maybe some personal anecdotes about playing it. Even teachers in rigorous academic ESL programs can feel as if they're teaching culture if the game is one that addresses a curricular objective. However, it's important to note that games from *any* culture can make great additions to the classroom—as long as they're fun!

Choosing Games

How can a teacher choose the right game for his or her classroom? There are several different avenues for thinking of creative ideas for using party games. Teachers can create a list of the games that they've enjoyed at parties in the past. Depending on the makeup of a group of students, childhood games can be just as fun as adult games if chosen and modified carefully. Internet searches and Pinterest can help to spark one's memory or provide examples of previously unknown games, and interviewing friends, family, and colleagues about their favorite games can help, as well.

Party Games: Examples and Modifications

After selecting the games, examine each game individually. What language skills/functions, grammar forms, or vocabulary themes do participants naturally utilize when playing this game in their native language?

Determine what language the students will use naturally while playing and make any necessary modifications.

1. Never Have I Ever

Never Have I Ever, commonly played as an alcoholic drinking game for adults, is an example of a speaking game that requires the use of a particular grammar structure, namely the present perfect tense to talk about past experiences at an unspecified time.

Each person takes turns making a statement that starts with “Never have I ever...”, such as “Never have I ever visited Hawaii.” For each statement made, anyone that has ever done the action must drink. Obviously, a drinking game is not appropriate in the classroom. Luckily, this game can easily be turned into a card game. Instead of drinking, players surrender cards to the person who formed the statement, and the player with the most cards in the end wins the game.

If your students haven't studied the present perfect tense, use a tense they've already learned. For instance, the simple past tense could be used. Students could begin their statements with “Last year...” (e.g., “Last year, I went on a vacation with my family”) or “During winter break...” (e.g., “During winter break, I decorated a Christmas tree”). Can you think of other tenses that would work well with this game?

2. Celebrity

Celebrity is a party game that requires guessing as many names of celebrities as possible in a limited amount of time. This game is played in teams. Members in each team take turns giving clues to their own teams. For example, for Tom Cruise, the clue giver may say statements like, “This is the actor who starred in the Mission Impossible movies. He was married to Nicole Kidman.” As soon as his or her team members guess correctly, he or she can move onto the next celebrity until the time is up.

For the ESL classroom, guessing celebrity names might be too difficult because English language learners may not have the cultural knowledge about celebrities to enjoy the game. Instead, modify it to review content that students are familiar with. After reading a novel, students could play the game using words and names from the story. In a citizenship class, this game could be played using a list of important historical events or figures. Essentially, celebrity names could be replaced with any set of words that need to be reviewed.

There is a variation of this game that has three stages, and the chosen content is reused for each stage. In stage one, the clue giver can use an unlimited number of words. In stage two, only one word can be used as a clue. Finally, in stage three, no words may be used, only gestures and facial expressions. The three stages of the game pose an interesting challenge for students to express what they know about a word in three different ways. While playing, students practice giving concise descriptions in Stage 1 as well as synonyms or other relevant words in Stage 2. In Stage 3, students can show their understanding through nonverbal communication. We guarantee your students will enjoy the challenge.

3. The Paper Plate Game

The Paper Plate Game is a popular party game often played during special occasions, like baby showers or holiday gatherings, that involves listening and drawing. Players each receive a paper plate that they have to place on their head. They listen to a narrator describe a picture or a scene, and they have to draw it on the plate as they listen without taking the plate off their head. Once the narrator is done, the players can take the plates off their heads, have a good laugh at their pictures, and exchange them with a partner. The narrator would review the description and indicate how many points the player gets for accurately drawing the picture. For example, if the narrator says that the player has to draw a rabbit on the grass, the narrator can specify that the player gets three points for drawing an acceptable rabbit and one point for drawing the rabbit on or on top of the grass line instead of below the grass line. In the end, the person with the most points wins.

This game is great for practicing listening skills, specifically following directions. The sentences used to describe the picture could contain simple present and present progressive tenses and prepositions of location. A winter scene that includes a Christmas tree and a snowman would be an example of a holiday theme, while a sandcastle on the beach could be used for the summer. Beyond drawing a scene, students can draw body parts or faces, or any number of illustratable vocabulary items of all types—nouns, verbs, and adjectives. This game is sure to get your

students laughing as most drawings look outrageous, and it's a great conversation starter that leads to students using the vocabulary meaningfully.

Party games are more than a fun time in class. They are a unique way for students to use language while reaping the benefits of being in a flow state, improving rapport with other students, and learning more about the target culture. If you find yourself playing a game and having a good time, try modifying it to fit your class. Have fun bringing the party to your classroom!

Do you have any effective party games you use in your classroom? Please feel free to leave questions and comments.

For more information on rules and materials needed for the games mentioned in this article, visit [Teach With Emily](#).

References

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