

## My Old Games: Can They Be Effective With ABAC Students?

*By Asst. Prof. San Shwe Baw*

### Abstract

Hardly deniable is the fact that language learning is a hard task which can sometimes be frustrating. Needless to say, various avenues and approaches have been explored by language teachers and researchers alike to help students maintain their interest and motivation while dealing with their monumental task of learning a new language. Of the many techniques today's language teachers occasionally use to lower students' stress in the classroom and also to teach some aspects of the language (i.e. grammar and structure, oral fluency, etc.), language games may probably be one of the commonest. Aiming to highlight the significance of games in language teaching, Richard-Amato (1996) states that even though games are often associated with fun, we should not lose sight of their pedagogical values, particularly in second language teaching. No doubt, well-chosen games are highly motivating and invaluable as they give students a break and at the same time allow them to practise language skills. The language games that I am going to discuss now were designed by me more than 15 years ago to use in my private English classes in Burma. An article entitled "Teaching English to Young Learners through "Gambling" in which I presented those activities was published by the 'Forum' magazine in the United States of America in July 1994.

### Introduction

In 1991, I was given an untimely retirement from the post of a university teacher in Burma. So, in essence, I was no different from any other human being who did not have a stable source of income to support his life. To talk without mincing words, I had belonged to that classification of people known as the jobless. Having no other particular technical skills to fall back on, I had but to stick to my original profession: teaching. That twist of fate

brought about some major changes in the way I taught English. While working in the university, I taught only the university students by using the prescribed textbooks. There was no need for me to worry about my salary, which I could draw on the last day of a month. After becoming an outside teacher (private teacher), however, my monthly income was decided by how many students I had and how many hours I taught to them. I could no longer be choosy with the types of students either. I had to teach virtually any kind of students: primary students, middle and high school level students, university students and anyone who wanted to learn English for various reasons. The more various the types of students, the more diverse their goals of learning English are. Some claimed they wanted to study only grammar, while others said nothing but speaking interested them. I had never been able to convince the learners of the fact that all the language skills are related to one another and therefore should not be treated on a separate basis. Finally I understood that having to teach English on a full stomach according to the learners' demands was more meaningful than having to go hungry by teaching with a methodology based on an approved principle that the learners were not prepared to accept. That was the juncture when I seriously began thinking of designing fun activities including language games for my classes. The two games to be discussed below used to be successful with my learners especially children and teenagers.

### Game 1

To play this card game, I use as many sets of handmade playing cards as necessary for my students with either a question or an answer written on each card. For instance, of the 52 cards in a pack, 26 will have questions written on them and their corresponding answers will be written on the other 26 cards. Questions requiring "Yes" or "No" answers as well as Wh- questions are included (i.e., Do you read regularly? Can you speak six languages? When do you get up in the morning? Why were you absent yesterday?). Answers to the questions are usually in the short form (i.e., Yes I do. No, I can't. At 6 AM. Because I was ill). The questions are also graded to the level of the students playing the game. I never use

questions requiring special content, lest it look like a knowledge competition.

With high-school students, I not only use questions and answers, but also parts of sentences, which, if correctly combined, will become simple, compound, or complex sentences. For instance, parts of sentences like the following can be used: *I like to hear / an interesting story; I am short / but he is tall; He finished early / though he began late.* Whether a student can make a correct match or not is both a matter of his knowledge of structure and chance or luck, i.e., a student may know which part he needs for constructing a grammatically meaningful sentence, but he may not draw the card with the part he wants.

The game begins with one of the players dealing six cards (one at a time) to each player. Luck decides how many questions or answers or parts of sentences a student will have in his hand. The player must try to make three meaningful matches using the six cards and the one who does will get all the money (play money) pooled before the game.

As soon as the six cards have been dealt, the dealer checks his cards to find if he has already got any correct matches (i.e., *How old are you?* and *fifteen* or *I didn't see him* and *until last week*). If so, he keeps it and then takes one card from the pack to see if a match can be made. One card must be discarded and the move passes to the next player (on the right). If that player sees that the card left by the first player will make a match with one of his cards, he will take it and discard another card. But, if the card is useless, he will pick up another card from the pack and check if it makes a match. Even if this card does not make a match, he may keep it on the chance that it will be useful some time later. The rule of the game is that once a player takes a card either from the pack or from the discarded pile, he must discard one card from his hand. A player must never have seven cards during the game. Thus, the game goes on until a player finally makes three correct matches and wins.

Never before have my students been so attentive on finding a correct answer to a question or on combining parts of a sentence. When they are playing this card game, they think in advance about the possible parts that will grammatically and semantically fit in with the ones they have. I find this game effective in training my students to read with some sort

of expectation. This game also creates a lively atmosphere in which they speak English with ease. Since they are absorbed in the game, their expression becomes freer as the rounds continue.

## Game 2

This is a game I use to practice the use of *must* indicating strong probability and *can't be* indicating impossibility. Ten cards with pictures of different animals on each are required. Four players are given the same amount of play money. The first player takes one of the cards and asks the other players to guess what he has. They are allowed to make three guesses. The one who guesses correctly gets “the pot”, the total amount of “money” that everyone has bet. Here is a model presentation of the game:

*First player:* “Can you guess what I have in my hand?” (Now, all the players put their bets on the table.)

*Second player:* “It’s a dog”.

*Third player:* “It **must be** a cat.”

*Fourth player:* “Is it a horse?”

*First player:* “No, all your guesses are wrong”.

*Second player:* “It **must be** an elephant”.

*Third player:* Is it a tiger?”

*Fourth player:* “It is a rabbit.”

*First player:* “No, you are still making wrong guesses.”

*Second player:* “It **must be** a cow, then.”

*Third player:* “No, it *can’t be* a cow. It *must be* an owl.”

*Fourth player:* “It *can’t be* a cow or an owl. It *must be* a goat.”

*First player:* “It’s an owl.”

Sometimes I use the play money to play another game. All the players have a certain amount of play money hidden in their fists. Then, by turns, they guess how much the total will amount to. The one who correctly guesses the total amount gets all the money. If no one makes a correct guess, they start a new round with new amounts of money. In this game, students get additional practice in the use of *must* and *can’t be*. In the course of the games, I walk from group to group as a facilitator, enjoying the sight of the curious faces of the young “gamblers”, who gamble not for money but for the acquisition of another language.

Classroom-worthiness of the above-mentioned games at ABAC

Personally, I think many of my colleagues will be reluctant to use them in their classrooms for a reason. They may question the suitability of the game 2 in particular as the game looks suitable only for learners much younger than ABAC students. As I myself had used that activity with very young students (aged 13 or so) in Burma, I am in complete agreement with those who doubt about the merit of game 2 at ABAC classrooms. Of course, it would be absurd to expect university students to play with cards with pictures of animals on them.

Game 1 may not also be very welcomed by some, if not, by many. They may reason that the game is basically teaching them how to play cards – something a student should avoid doing. I totally agree with those who claim that students should not play cards for money; however, there is no reason why they should not play a card game if they can learn a foreign language by doing so. The game may not be good for students studying English 1 and higher levels as the main object of the game is helping the students to practice basic

English structures. But for students studying Basic English courses (i.e., BE 60 and BE120), the game may still be of some help. It is true that this game does not help them much with speaking, but many of our Basic English students have difficulty writing simple, compound and complex sentences. If necessary, this game can be designed in such a way that it covers other more complicated grammar and structures (i.e., the use of correct tenses, conditional sentences, passive voice, etc.). True, a classroom with students doing this activity may appear unsightly for a casual observer upon seeing groups of students playing cards, but if the end justifies the means, we should at least have a try.

## Reference

Richard-Amato, P., A. 1996. *Making It happen*. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Group. Pp 192-199.

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