

Competitive games in the language classroom

Competition is something we learn about early on in our lives: toddlers competing for the same toy, youngsters seeing who can run fastest, and so on. Children quickly learn of the excitement of games, such as desperately rushing to grab a seat in 'musical chairs' or shouting to teammates to pass the soccer ball. Children also learn how exhilarating it is to win a competition – particularly if the reward comes in the form of a prize – and how devastating it is to be the loser. They also learn how humiliating it is to let teammates down or to come in last in a race. In view of the strong motivational power of competition, shouldn't we encourage competition in our language classes?

Most students are familiar with pair and group work, but they don't always collaborate with their peers as enthusiastically as they might. One technique for enlivening collaborative tasks is to include a competitive element. Brainstorming activities become instantly more dynamic when conducted in a competitive spirit. The teacher can say, for example, *'Right, everyone, you have two minutes to come up with as many English words for jobs that you can think of, starting ... now!'* When the time is up, each group says how many words they have thought of, the group having thought of the most words being the winner. A more in-depth version of this competition (which encourages creative thinking) is to have the groups read out their lists of jobs, but only scoring points for jobs that no one else has thought of. Variations on this theme include having groups of students think of as many words or concepts as possible associated with common words, such as *mouse*, *foot* or *tree* (with or without the aid of dictionaries).

The overall atmosphere in language classes can sometimes become oppressive, particularly at the end of the day when everybody is tired. Teachers often try to squeeze every last ounce of effort out of their students, worrying that valuable teaching time will be lost if they allow anyone to relax for a single moment. Keeping classes under constant pressure is often counterproductive since students tend to switch off, with the result that little further learning takes place. Competitive team games – provided they are conducted in a spirit of friendliness and fun – can function as much-needed pressure release valves, particularly at the end of lessons when students have worked hard. Classes can easily be divided into teams: those sitting on the left of the room versus those on the right, for example. Allowing each team to choose a distinctive name for itself puts students in the mood, as does the behaviour of the teacher, who can exclaim, *'And now, everyone, for the greatest word game of all time!'* If possible, use props: a vertical spinning wheel (like a roulette wheel) containing the letters of the alphabet; fly swats; bells and buzzers for panel members to press; funny hats for competitors; matchsticks or counters for the scorers, and so on. But of course competitive games can be conducted successfully without any props at all.

In the 'Letter of the alphabet' game, the teacher calls out, *'The name of an animal (or sport, or item of clothing, or piece of furniture or any other category) beginning with ...'* (spinning

the wheel) ... *the letter S!*' The first person to call out a word beginning with that letter scores a point for their team. Alternatively, points can be scored by simple word recall or mental activity: *'a word that means the opposite of "heavy"', 'a word that can be formed by the letters EZIRP', 'a word beginning with the prefix "dis-"'*, etc. Teams can support their elected panel who sit at the front with bells and buzzers, ready to work out the answers to linguistic puzzles posed by the teacher.

A popular vocabulary revision game requires each team to provide definitions of recently-studied words for one of their teammates, who is seated in front of them with their back to the board (on which the teacher has written the word to be defined). 'Word-swat' is another favourite because of the physical activity involved. Two students holding plastic fly swats stand on either side of the board, which is filled with linguistic items from the lesson. The teacher then defines one of the items, the student being the first to 'swat' the correct one winning a point for their team.

It's always tempting for students to become too serious about winning, so although we should praise the winning team, we should also say something such as *'Well done, everybody! That was a close/well-fought/exciting contest'*. We must remain constantly alert to the fact that students can blame weaker teammates for their failure to win – and that individuals can use class competitions designed to provide light relief as an opportunity to settle scores with rivals. We should therefore ensure that the composition of teams changes on a regular basis, and that at all times an overall spirit of friendliness and generosity prevails within the room, with class members following our example by applauding the winners. If we give a reward, it should be something such as a packet of sweets that can be shared as widely as possible.

In sum, competition, with its innate power to enliven and motivate, can be used to advantage by any language teacher who wishes to boost the collective energy levels of their classes. Like any technique, however, it must be appropriate for the class and must not be over-used.

Questions for reflection/discussion

1. Having you ever used any of the competitive strategies mentioned in the article to enliven your classes? If so, which ones have you used? Share with others which ones were successful.
2. Which additional competitive games mentioned in the article do you think you could use in the future? Identify which ones you would feel comfortable using and try them out.
3. Have you used any competitive games in your language classes that are not mentioned in this article? If you have and they were successful, share them with colleagues or describe them on my blog.
4. In your experience have any competitive activities that you've used with your classes led students to behave aggressively or unkindly towards each other? If you have had a negative experience, what did you do to redeem the situation? How successful were you?
5. Brainstorm with your colleagues ways that teachers can set up competitive games in their classes so that students understand that active participation is more important than winning. (Might it be useful to say something, for example, before you set up your first competitive activity with a particular class?)
6. Do you think there is a place for an element of light-hearted competition, even in serious, exam-oriented classes? Share your views with your colleagues (there is no correct answer).
7. Students can easily become over-excited when engaged in competitive classroom games. What class-management strategies do you use to call your classes to order? (Remember that these should be firm yet student friendly.)