

Five Reasons to Use Games in the Classroom

Thanks to its partnership with publisher Eye on Education, EducationWorld is pleased to present this blog post by [Rebekah Stathakis](#), author of [A Good Start:147 Warm-Up Activities for Spanish Class](#).

I have always enjoyed playing games. My family regularly plays board games when we get together, I play games with my own children almost every day, and (not surprisingly) I have used a wide variety of games* as instructional tools in my classroom. I have never had a student ask “Why are we playing games?” Instead, students usually ask, “Can we play this again soon?”

Some people may wonder, “Why play games in a class?” I think it is important to articulate the value of game playing for myself, my students, colleagues, parents and others. Over the years, I have come up with my own list of the top five reasons I believe game playing is a powerful instructional tool.

**(By “game,” I am referring to learning through play, active engagement and fun).*

1. **Students learn through the process of playing the game.** By playing a game, students may be able to understand a new concept or idea, take on a different perspective, or experiment with different options or variables. For example, in my beginning Spanish classes, I often played a card game the first week of school. The students were in groups of 4-5. Each person read through the directions to the card game; then, the game was played in complete silence. After the first round, one student from each group (typically the “winner”) moved to a different group. We typically played three or four rounds.

What my students did not initially know is that each group had received a different set of rules. When a student moved to a new group, he often felt confused and was unsure as to why the other people were playing differently (students usually say “they were playing wrong”). We used this as a starting point to discuss the experience of moving to a new country. Having moved from Spain to Venezuela to the United States, I shared my own experiences of learning new cultural rules and, at times, feeling like others were “playing wrong.”

Then, we played the game again, but I allowed all the students to talk. Through discussions, students explained the rules to “newcomers,” and the game ran more smoothly (and students reported feeling much more satisfied). At this point, at least someone said, “I get it. You are trying to show us this is why we need to learn another language. So we can all explain the rules to each

other.”

2. **Games provide a context for engaging practice.** As a world languages teacher, I know students need a lot of practice to internalize important vocabulary and structures. However, for the practice to be meaningful, students must be engaged (and let’s be honest, countless workbook pages or textbook exercises are not always highly engaging!). Through lively games of charades, \$25,000 pyramid, or others, my students willingly use the vocabulary and structures, repeatedly gaining much-needed practice.
3. **Through games, students can learn a variety of important skills.** There are countless skills that students can develop through game playing such as critical thinking skills, creativity, teamwork, and good sportsmanship. For example, with my Spanish students, circumlocution is a very important skill. By playing word guessing games, I have seen my students’ ability to use circumlocution improve dramatically. I love to watch my students’ creativity during game sessions (we have used Play-doh, drawing, acting and many other activities in our games).

One of my first years as a teacher, a student commented that he loved the verb game we were playing (a variation of “Yahtzee”). I told him I was glad he liked it, but that it wasn’t my invention—it was based on a game he might have played at home. He then told me that he had never played games at home and I was the only adult who had ever sat down to play a game with him. At times, I am surprised that students don’t logically think through how to play “Guess Who?” Then, I remind myself that this 14-year-old had never played a game with an adult before he came to my class! I see this as an opportunity to teach a wide range of life skills that don’t necessarily show up in my curriculum’s scope and sequence.

4. **While playing games, students develop a variety of connections with the content and can form positive memories of learning.** Some of my favorite classroom memories are from game times. I will never forget watching Miguel jump around the classroom to help his peers guess the word “Mono” (monkey). Fortunately, the students won’t forget it either (and they all got “mono” right on their assessments). The fun, silly or interesting moments tend to stand out in students’ memories, and they latch on to the vocabulary/structures we are studying. A positive emotional connection can facilitate learning. Furthermore, many games feature a variety of different stimuli; some students might remember the vocabulary words from acting them out, others remember reading the clues, and other students remember hearing classmates call out answers. Games can provide a variety of sensory experiences for students.

5. **Games grab students' attention and actively engage them.** I find that because students really enjoy playing games, it is a good way to focus their attention and actively immerse them in Spanish. This can be especially useful in a wide variety of ways. For example, after a fire drill students sometimes have trouble settling down and returning to class. A game allows students to quickly engage and transition back to the content we were working on. After hours of state-mandated standardized tests, I find my students are often tired of sitting and full of energy; an energetic game with lots of movement may be just what they need.

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