

INTRODUCTION

Why use language games?

Language games are used by many teachers of languages because

- they can be effective ice-breakers
- they can be used at all levels and to practise almost any structure or area of vocabulary
- they give learners a real chance to speak
- they encourage involvement and participation
- they can encourage collaboration as well as competition
- they encourage repetition without monotony, making practice more interesting
- they can simulate a real-life situation
- they can use relevant, meaningful language
- they can be used for all four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing
- they can be used to integrate different language skills
- they can help train learners to ask questions
- they can be a useful tool for revision
- they give the teacher a chance to step back and observe individuals and the group
- they are good fun and help you create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere in your classroom
- they are often task based. Succeeding at a practical task can be a great spur to motivation.

Games as ice-breakers

Often learners are nervous, especially at the start of a course when they do not know the teacher or the other group members. A well-timed and appropriate language game can help ease the tension at the start of a new course.

Games can be used at all levels

It might be thought that only intermediate or advanced learners can benefit from the use of games and other interactive activities. However, some games can be used from the very first lesson of a beginners course, as long as the language is carefully restricted and monitored by the teacher.

Games can be used to practise almost any structure or area of vocabulary

It is difficult to prove this, but I am sure it is true. To think of a game for a particular structure, first think of the practical circumstances in which the structure may be used, and then think of ways of manipulating these possible uses in different situations. One of the game types in this book will almost certainly be adaptable to the language that you want to practise.

Games give learners a real chance to speak

If the teacher works from the front of the class asking questions, he or she speaks for half the time at least. The individual learners have their own fraction of the time that is left. For a 40 minute session in a class of 10, this would be 2 minutes, allowing nothing for silences or time wasted! In an interactive group or pairwork activity, when learners are talking to each other, they have much more talking time.

Games encourage involvement and participation

When you use language games, learners are likely to move around the classroom and interact more with each other. Each has his or her rôle, and learners depend more on each other. They can influence their learning outcomes more positively themselves, rather than sitting back and waiting for the teacher.

Games encourage competition and collaboration

Many games involve the learner competing against other learners or sometimes, as in memory games, against himself or herself. More involved simulations can involve learners working as a team to achieve a particular result. In both cases the lessons is more exciting as a result of the increased interaction.

Games can simulate a real-life situation

Most people learn a language in order to be able to use it. A language game can give learners a taste of success at achieving a realistic task, even at beginner level, and the resulting sense of achievement can be an excellent motivator.

Games encourage repetition without monotony

We know that learners need to repeat over and over again before they really learn to use a new language construction. Повторенье – мать учения. A language game can give learners maximum opportunity for repetition without the “work” becoming monotonous.

Games can use relevant, meaningful language

A well-planned language game will use language that is practical and relevant to the needs of the particular learners. Most games can be adapted to use the specific language that is required.

Games can be used for all four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, and can be used to integrate them. You will see this in several of the examples in this book. Particular games can be used for particular skills, and in many cases several different language skills are needed to perform the required task.

Games help your learners to practise asking questions

When your learners go to Russia they will need to ask a lot of questions. They will need to do this to get around. However, in the traditional classroom with the teacher at the front of the class, the teacher usually asks most of the questions and the learners do not get much opportunity to practise asking questions themselves. Language games can reverse this. With a problem to solve in the classroom learners can get plenty of practice of asking questions, either of each other or of the teacher.

Games can be a useful tool for revision

When you need to revise work from a previous lesson or series of lessons a language game can be very effective to rework the same structures in a different context and without monotony.

Games give the teacher a chance to step back and observe individuals and the group

It can be difficult for the teacher at the front of the class, who constantly has to lead the dialogue, to see what is actually going on in the group. Once you have given your learners a task to complete in which they are interacting together, then you can step out of the limelight and watch the interaction from one side, which gives you the opportunity to see how learners are coping and perhaps help someone who is struggling or who needs individual support. Or you can just take a moment to enjoy the atmosphere of the group, or perhaps check the organisation of the next stage of the lesson.

Games are good fun and help you create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere

Not many teachers would disagree with this, as long as the teacher himself or herself is happy with the approach. If you are not relaxed and confident about giving your learners some freedom and self-determination in their learning, then this book may not be for you.

Succeeding at a practical task can be a great spur to motivation when learning a language

Most people learn a language in order to be able to do something with it, so give your learners an opportunity to do something with the language they are learning in the classroom.



Learners in Leicester playing “Куда ты идёшь?” (Page 30)

When to use language games

When starting with a new beginners class, introduce a language game or an interactive activity as early as you can. That way learners will get used to you using games and will not be put off by suddenly being asked to work in a new way. It is surprising how early beginner learners can have meaningful interaction. See the activity "Find the other engineers!" (page 25).

If you are working with an adult group, explain and discuss your teaching strategy. Adult learners like to think about how they learn and it will help if at some stage you discuss the reasons for using the methods that you use. It will also help to state the purpose of a particular activity before you use it. However, it may not always be a good idea to discuss new methods of working with a group before they have had some experience of them.

An interactive activity is particularly useful at the beginning of a short course to break the ice and loosen up the atmosphere.

You will normally decide to use a game to reinforce or revise a particular language structure or area of vocabulary. Make sure before you start that you have given a clear presentation of the forms that are needed and that your learners have a reference should they forget something.

Before the game

Define the structures and vocabulary to be used.

Check the logistics - will it work?

Make sure the room is suitable.

Prepare any necessary cards or pictures.

Make sure the instructions are clear and as simple as possible, and understood by the group.

Presenting the game

If you need a vocabulary list for a particular game the most effective way to produce this is often to ask learners to give you the words. For example for the game "Пикник в лесу" you can elicit from the learners a list of things that they need to take on the picnic and write them on the board or flip chart as they give them to you. Have your own list ready as a check in case anything is missed.

Instructions for playing the game must be clear and learners must understand what they should be doing. Demonstrations at the front of the class will often be necessary.

Put the game in context

Many activities will benefit from a dramatic presentation of the imagined situation by the teacher. To increase dramatic effect and involvement so that learners are more likely to enter into the spirit of the activity, you can describe the scene and circumstances. For example, to set the scene for "Пикник в лесу" you could talk about how happy you all are to be leaving the city for a picnic in the forest, and perhaps show a picture of Yaroslavsky vokzal and of the forest where the picnic will take place.

Workcards

Card is often better than paper for worksheets, especially when you are going to be asking your learners to move around and make notes. One solution is to have a set of clipboards ready in the classroom. These are cheap to buy and will last for a long time, or you can make them from strong card and foldback clips. If learners have clipboards, rather than pieces of paper, an interview type activity becomes more manageable and more realistic.

The classroom

Ideally, a language classroom for a teacher who uses language games needs to have a formal area for learners to sit at tables, as well as a more flexible area where they can stand or sit or move around, according to the activity. The strategy suggested for exploiting picture differences, for example, requires first several groups of four to eight learners, then random pairs, then groups again, and then the whole group working together with the teacher at the front of the class. It is asking a lot for every language classroom to be this flexible and compromises are usually needed, but if you plan to use a large number of language games in your teaching, do make this known before rooms are allocated and explain the classroom layouts you will need.



Room 212 at Brasshouse Language Centre, Birmingham, was an ideal room for active language teaching. The chairs and tables were in a horseshoe but were easily moveable, and there was plenty of room outside the horseshoe to move around. There were moveable screens on which to pin workcards, and a trolley on wheels for the CD player or laptop.

Brasshouse Centre has now moved to new accommodation in Birmingham Central Library.

Language games for 1:1 or very small groups

Many of the activities in this book can be used or adapted for small group or pair work. In a one to one situation you can of course always use *матрёшки* (page 42) to bring more people in to the room!

Language games for Russian

Russian is more highly structured grammatically than English and many other languages. For this reason the teacher needs to take greater care that he or she is not asking learners to use grammatical constructions that they have not previously learned.

Some language structures that are relatively easy in many languages require quite difficult grammatical manipulation for Russian, for example telling the time with minutes before and after the hour. Because of this additional complexity, more care is needed in the preparation of language games for Russian than for many other languages, and language use sometimes has to be more strictly limited.

Drawbacks and pitfalls

Some teachers find that they do not have sufficient time to include language games and activities in their course programmes. The question to ask is whether their learners have enough time practising the language they are trying to learn.

Some teachers find that they do not have time for the large amount of preparation that is often involved. However, once you have prepared materials for a game you will have it to use again in the future. This handbook will help considerably with preparation for language games.

Often classrooms are not suitable for learners to move around and speak to each other. This is something that can only be resolved locally. Bear in mind however that once demonstrated, some task based activities can be completed outside the classroom.

One thing we don't want to encourage is for learners to copy each other's mistakes, or reinforce their own mistakes by repetition. The teacher needs to make sure that language structures are correct before they are practised in a free situation, and must listen to different groups as the activity is taking place. The teacher must be prepared to stop the proceedings if a serious error is being repeated, to point it out, drill it if necessary, and then to start again.

Mixed language groups

As discussed above, it is very important that the instructions for the activity that you want to use are clear, not too complicated, and understood by every member of the group. With a single language group, for example a group of English speakers in the UK, this is not a problem. You can give the instructions in Russian and then again in English, to make sure that everyone understands. For a mixed language group it is more difficult to be sure that instructions are fully understood, especially with beginner or near beginner learners.

One possible solution, bearing in mind that learners' reading abilities are likely to be better than their listening, is to give the instructions for the game as a reading homework in Russian prior to the class. Learners will then know that they have to be ready for the game or activity and will have a reason to work out the instructions in advance.

Language games for highly motivated, academic learners

I have heard it argued that for a group of highly motivated and linguistically aware language learners with academic targets, language games and activities like those described in this book are unnecessary and a waste of time.

I would agree that for these learners language games may be less necessary. However, highly motivated learners still need a lot of practice before they reach a high level, especially in speaking, and while they may be able to put up with and even sometimes enjoy tedious language drills and exercises, there is every reason why those teachers who are lucky enough to have such groups should try to make the classroom experience as exciting and varied as possible.



Language games in action

Images from the the annual UK Russian Summer School in Cambridge organised by CamRuSS.

For info go to www.ruslan.co.uk/courses and follow the link.

