It’s Okay to Have Fun

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Abstract

Students in intensive English Language programs are usually immersed in English 20 hours per week which can cause frustration and boredom from the challenge of learning a second language. The inclusion of FUN in the classroom can promote a lower affective filter and higher language acquisition, as well as cater to different learning styles. Multiple forms of input are a successful way for students to understand, practice, and remember the information. We have garnered a plethora of simple activities, techniques, strategies, and methods that provide a change of routine for students of all ages and levels. This assortment includes classroom management techniques, vocabulary reinforcement activities, and task-based games that require minimal preparation time and can be easily implemented on a daily basis. While their impact on time is small, the impact on the overall classroom atmosphere, student rapport, and motivation is huge in making class not only informative, but fun.

Introduction

Typically students in intensive English Language programs are immersed in English around 20 contact hours per week, not including study time. Students can become tired, frustrated, and bored by the challenge of learning a second language. The inclusion of fun in the classroom can be extremely effective. Students like and need to laugh and relax from time-to-time during their arduous studies. Simple, enjoyable activities that are made a regular part of the classroom experience can promote a lower affective filter and higher language acquisition. Multiple forms of input are one of the most successful ways for students to really “get it” or save information to their brain’s “hard drive” or long-term memory. Sometimes it is necessary to close the books and engage students in more active, hands-on activities.

Background

These activities lower students’ affective filter (Krashen, 1982) and target a variety of learning styles (Gardner, 1983, 2006). Krashen (1982) states that “the best methods [for second language acquisition] are therefore the ‘comprehensible input’ in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear” (p. 14). Teachers, therefore, should provide a variety of fun activities that appeal to students in order to lower students’ anxiety level. In the early 1980’s, Gardner introduced a variety of learning styles: musical, logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, bodily-kinesthetic, naturalistic, and existential. While these activities provide a break from the routine of daily textbook-driven activities, they also cater to various learning styles.

In addition to learning styles, culture must also be taken into consideration. Foreign language instruction often includes discussion of “Big C” culture and “Little c” culture. “Big C” culture refers to visible forms of culture including things like holidays, art, popular culture, literature, and food; whereas “Little c” refers to the invisible components such as communication
styles, verbal and non-verbal language, symbols, cultural norms, myths and legends (Bilash, 2011). Based on the “Big C” / “little c” concept of culture, we devised the “Big F” / “little f” concept of fun. Some instructors believe that including fun in the classroom is limited to the “Big F” items such as food, fiestas, films, and field trips. These are useful, but in our opinion, incorporating “little f” activities on a regular basis is just as, if not more, important. “Little f” includes laughter, smiles, a lower affective filter (Krashen), and fun activities such as games.

We have garnered a multitude of these simple activities, techniques, strategies, and methods that provide a change of routine in language classrooms whether the learner is five or fifty-five, beginner or advanced. The various activities can be modified to address the specific skill level and background knowledge of the intended audience. These activities can motivate students and encourage them to be actively engaged in learning as long as they are meaningfully integrated into the lesson. This assortment includes classroom management techniques, vocabulary reinforcement activities, and task-based games.

Many of these simple activities we will be sharing require minimal preparation time and can be easily implemented on a daily basis. Others can supplement and reinforce a traditional curriculum. And while their impact on time is small, the impact on the overall classroom atmosphere, student rapport and interest level is great. In other words, they make class not only informative, but fun and enjoyable.

Objectives
There are numerous goals and objectives in using these engaging activities. Alternative methods of practice and reinforcement can be implemented with the end goal to achieve the following results:

- To lower students’ affective filters
- To promote higher language acquisition
- To provide multiple forms of input
- To appeal to multiple intelligences
- To target learning styles
- To enhance motivation
- To offer a variety of methods to reduce boredom and enliven the classroom setting

Procedures
We have divided our activities into four primary categories: vocabulary, games, music, and classroom management. Each category contains specific activities which can be modified to instruct, review, or support established curriculum within any program. Within each of those categories, reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, and culture are incorporated at some level. Some of the activities are well-known games that we have adapted for English language learners.

Vocabulary Activities
Traditional games of Hangman and word search can be created to include vocabulary specific to the given lesson. In addition, crossword puzzles using web sites such as puzzlemaker.com can be modified to be gap activities. Gap activities are those in which partners have different parts of the information needed to complete an activity. For example, in a crossword puzzle, one partner might have the “down” clues, while the other partner has the
“across” clues. The collaboration required in these activities helps to make them more meaningful and constructive.

In addition to games, the use of realia in the classroom can bring vocabulary to life. Realia refers to real items, not imitations that are used in the classroom for educational purposes. For example, during a unit on food vocabulary, the teacher can bring in empty containers such as a milk carton, a bag of chips, an egg carton, a jar of peanut butter, a can of soup, a box of crackers, and other food packaging. Tactile learners can handle the realia for better comprehension and retention. Magazines, catalogs, and store advertisements are other useful examples of realia. These can be used for locating pictures to represent vocabulary, for scavenger hunts to search for specific items or information, for cultural information (such as holidays), or to present a grammar point. For example, students can look for a list of vocabulary items in a store ad to find the price of each item. They can also look for a list of nouns to determine if they are count or non-count or irregular plural.

Not only can scavenger hunts be used with magazines and store ads, they can also be created for Internet searches and live activities. Internet searches can be done to find pictures of vocabulary using Google Images. For example, the teacher can give students a list of methods of transportation and have the students find a picture for each type of transportation. It is advised that the teacher search for the images first as there may be some inappropriate pictures on the website. Another activity is doing photo scavenger hunts during orientation where students have to take pictures with their cell phones of various locations on campus.

A final method to represent vocabulary is using word clouds. Word clouds are visual representations of words using websites such as wordle.net or tagxedo.com (see Appendix A). These word clouds can be used with a preset list of vocabulary (Wordle, Tagxedo). For a writing class, students can copy and paste a portion of a writing assignment and paste it into the cloud generator. The cloud (Wordle) will then visually represent the most frequent ideas or vocabulary. Another type of cloud, Yippy Cloud Creator, can generate a word cloud bank based on one word. This can be useful for brainstorming related vocabulary on a topic. Word clouds appeal to visual learners and those with spatial intelligence.

Games

The games described in this section can be used to practice any skill: speaking, listening, reading and writing, as well as grammar.

The Dice Game

The Dice Game is good for reviewing vocabulary and/or grammar concepts (see Appendix B). First, draw the dice on the board or put up pictures to represent the six faces of a die. Under each die, write a category of vocabulary or grammar that you have been studying or want to review. For example, you could write: question words, weather expressions, clothes (women’s, men’s, above waist, below waist, and other clothing categories), jewelry, daily activities, food groups, rooms in the house, family members, transportation, colors, professions, school subjects, past participles of irregular verbs, and count/non-count nouns.

Next, divide students into at least two teams. If the class is larger, it can be divided into more teams. Students roll the dice one-at-a-time. The numbers on the dice indicate which numbered categories to which they must provide an example. For each correct answer, the team earns the points of that die category. If a student rolls doubles, s/he gets an additional turn. The teacher can keep a tally of the points on the board so the students can see. The teacher can also
periodically count off how many points teams have earned to review counting by fives. It helps to have each team use a different colored marker.

This game can be adapted for various skill levels. In an intermediate level, the students have to provide the word and spell it correctly. They may look at their notes while at their seats, but once they have rolled the dice, they cannot review their notes. In lower levels, the student whose turn it is has to provide the word, and then his teammates may help with the correct spelling. The teammates may use notes, books, translators, and other available resources.

**Flyswatter Game**

This is a great way to review vocabulary. Before the game, write a list of vocabulary words (ideally 15-20) on the board or project them on the overhead screen. Divide students into two teams and have one student from each team come to the front. Explain the rules and give each teammate a flyswatter. Provide the definition for a word, and the student who “swats” the correct word receives one point for his/her team. Continue the game until every team member has gone and all the words have been chosen. The winning team receives a prize such as candy.

*I’m Going on a Picnic, and I’m gonna take…*

This is a fun brain teaser that serves to liven up class and make the students think. This can be used when discussing a topic like food or adapted for other topics. For a food-related topic, start off by saying “I’m going on a picnic, and I’m gonna take…” (and then say an item beginning with the same letter as their first name). Then ask the students, “What are you gonna take on the picnic?” If a student says an incorrect item, say, “I’m sorry, but you cannot take that on our picnic.” Give hints such as, “Steve, you can take a salami sandwich on the picnic, but not a tuna sandwich.” Keep going until all or most of the students have figured out the pattern. This can also be used for travel-related topics such as “I’m going on a trip, and I’m gonna pack…,” “I’m going on a trip, and I’m gonna visit… (name of city/country),” or “I’m going on vacation, and I’m gonna...(name of activity).”

**Yes/No Game**

This is a great game to play if you have extra time at the end of class or you want to practice yes/no questions. Divide the class into teams and explain the rules. Each team will ask you a yes/no question. If you respond to their question with a “yes,” the team receives three points, but if you say “no,” the team receives only one point. For example, the students could ask, “Are you a teacher?” Give the students time to brainstorm questions before they start. Keep track of the points on the board. If the students do not ask the question using correct grammar, you can choose not to award them points. After a few minutes, change the point value so that a “yes” response receives one point and a “no” response receives three points. This reversal surprises students and causes them to think of different questions to ask. For example, the students could ask you, “Are you a student?” Students could also ask each other these questions to encourage more student interaction. In the end, the team with the most points is the winner and receives a prize.

**Jeopardy and Other Premade Games**

Jeopardy is an excellent game for reviewing concepts, vocabulary, or other content. You can use a premade board (from the Internet) or a template to create an original version. Some other games that are good for teaching or reviewing vocabulary include Scrabble, Memory,
Boggle Junior, and Scattergories. Guess Who provides great practice for students at lower levels in describing different types of people. In addition, Apples to Apples provides vocabulary practice and also presents cultural information about famous people. Bingo is a versatile game that can be incorporated in the classroom as an icebreaker in Find Someone Who (See Appendix C) or to teach items such as numbers, minimal pairs, vocabulary, irregular verbs, or syllable stress.

Music

Music is an effective medium that can increase students’ motivation and enjoyment and provide a meaningful context for the target language skill being taught. Not only can music be used for listening comprehension, but it can also be used to teach many aspects of language such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and reduced forms. For example, the popular song, “Somebody that I Used to Know” by Gotye can be used to teach the simple past and relative clauses. The song “Mr. Mom” by Lonestar can be used to teach family and home vocabulary, while the song “Complicated” by Avril Lavigne can be used for pronunciation, specifically enunciating words. Another aspect that can be addressed through music is that of theme. For example, “True Colors” by Cyndi Lauper teaches the theme of accepting others. Music can also be used to teach reduced forms such as gonna, wanna, and shoulda as well as slang which are so common in informal spoken English. See Appendix D for more examples of songs and activities that can be used with music.

Classroom Management

Fun activities can be used beyond educational purposes. They can also be incorporated to lessen the tedium of day-to-day classroom management activities. We have found that taking a more lighthearted approach to some mandatory activities can make them less tiresome. Starting class on-time and doing class activities such as timed writings can be facilitated by the use of online timers (http://www.online-stopwatch.com/). When students can see that there are five minutes left until the end of break or until the end of a pair activity, there is no squabbling about time. This online stopwatch is also useful for giving students a time limit for in-class tests or writing journals so they can see how much time they have left and cannot argue about not having enough time.

If students insist on using their cell phones when they are not supposed to, try making it mandatory for them to use them by providing polls (http://www.polleverywhere.com). Polls can be used to review a grammar point, to see who did homework, or to see which of two assignments students want to review. The only limit is the instructor’s imagination. After registering at this free website, the instructor just needs to type in the question and the possible answers. The poll is then projected where students can see it. Once they have been taught how to respond, they just send a text message with their responses, and the results are instantly tabulated before their eyes.

Another activity that can help reduce use of students’ first language (L1) is the Penny Game. This game provides positive reinforcement for students who speak their L1 too much in class and need to be reminded to speak English only; this usually occurs in a Beginning-level class. At the beginning of class, give each student a certain number of pennies (such as three or a number of the teacher’s choice). Anytime a student uses his L1, a penny is taken away. The student(s) with the most pennies at the end of class receives a prize such as a piece of candy. The teacher can decide if s/he wants to give extra credit points for each remaining penny, or give a
reward to only the person with the largest quantity of remaining coins. If your students are competitive, this can be a good motivation to avoid speaking their L1. You can also have students donate a penny or another coin if they accidentally speak their L1. Then you can use the money you collected to pay for a party at the end of the term.

To practice language, it is not unusual for students to be placed into groups or with a partner. Usually the easiest way is to just let students choose their own partners, but our experience has shown that they typically choose the same partner time after time. Thus, we incorporate different “random” ways of assigning groups. We say “random” because with slight manipulation, the teacher can actually control who works together while allowing the students to believe it is random. Three common devices we use are playing cards, colored index cards, and candy. With these, you can have each student randomly select one. The teacher can then say either, “get with others who have the same number, candy, color” or form a group of three (four or five), where each member has a different item. When using playing cards, the teacher might first have numbers get together, then regroup with people in the same suit to repeat the activity or compare responses.

**Conclusion**

Using a variety of methods for classroom management keeps each day fresh for both the teacher and the students. Boredom can lead to absenteeism and apathy, so these methods are an effective way to make the classroom more lively and exciting. Assessment in these activities is informal and based on teacher observation of the students’ performance. These games can be viewed as a type of assessment to see if the students have learned the target language structure. Furthermore, activities can be modified and made easier or more difficult in process if necessary, but any activity is only as good as how it is presented. Students need to realize that they are not just playing a game, but they are actually learning. The teacher must promote the value of the activity if s/he wants the student to believe in its worth and be fully engaged in active learning. For more information about these activities along with sample materials, a list of websites, and our conference PowerPoint presentation, please go to our website: http://itsokaytohavefun.webs.com/.

**Authors’ Note**

Jolene Jaquays and Sara Okello are affiliated with the University of Michigan: Flint. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jolene Jaquays at this email address: (jjaquays@umflint.edu).
References


Appendix A: Sample Word Clouds

Wordle:

Tagxedo:
Appendix B: The Dice Game

Rationale: This game is good for review for vocabulary and/or grammar concepts. General rules: On the board I draw the dice or put up pictures to represent the dice. Under each die, I write a category of vocabulary or grammar that we have been studying or want to review. Examples: question words, weather expressions, clothes (women’s, men’s, above waist, below waist, and other categories.), jewelry, daily activities, food groups, rooms in the house, family members, transportation, colors, professions, school subjects, past participles of irregular verbs, count nouns, non-count nouns

Students are divided into teams. There should be at least two teams. If you have a larger class, you can have more teams. One at a time students roll the dice. The numbers on the dice indicate which numbered categories to which they must provide an example. For each correct answer, the team earns the points of that die category. If a student rolls doubles, s/he gets an additional turn. I keep a tally on the board so students can see. I also periodically count off how many points teams have to review counting by fives. I usually have each team use a different color marker.

This game can be adapted for various skill levels. For an intermediate level, I require students to provide the word and spell it correctly. They may look at their notes while at their seats, but once they have rolled the dice, they are on their own. In lower levels, I make the student whose turn it is provide the word, then his teammates may help with the correct spelling. I allow the teammates to use notes, books, translators, etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team one</th>
<th>Team two</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>fruit</th>
<th>vegetables</th>
<th>beverages</th>
<th>meat</th>
<th>dairy</th>
<th>containers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>abble</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>can</td>
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</table>

|                   |           |           |      |       |            |
|                   |           |           |      |       |             |
# FIND SOMEONE WHO...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Find Someone Who</th>
<th>Is wearing the same color as you</th>
<th>Likes to travel</th>
<th>Has never had a cavity</th>
<th>Can say the English alphabet</th>
<th>Is an only child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has a birthday the same month as you</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plays a musical instrument</td>
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<td>Can speak more than 2 languages</td>
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</table>

- Has a birthday the same month as you
- Likes to ride roller coasters or go to amusement parks
- Cooked a meal recently
- Likes living in the U.S.
- Has been in a car accident
- Is a vegetarian (doesn't eat meat)
- Saw the same movie as you recently
- Doesn't like pizza
- Likes chocolate
- Whose favorite color is red
- Likes to read
### Appendix D: Sample Music Selections for Various Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Samples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grammar</strong></td>
<td>“Somebody that I Used to Know” by Gotye (simple past and relative clauses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Hello Goodbye” by The Beatles (opposites – beginner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Find Out Who Your Friends Are” by Tracy Lawrence (parallelism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vocabulary</strong></td>
<td>“Mr. Mom” by Lonestar (family, home vocabulary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme</strong></td>
<td>“True Colors” by Cyndi Lauper, Phil Collins, Glee (acceptance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pronunciation</strong></td>
<td>Jazz Chants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Complicated” by Avril Lavigne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Life’s a Dance” by John Michael Montgomery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reduced forms</strong></td>
<td>“Ain’t no Sunshine When She’s Gone” by Bill Withers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Don’t You Worry ‘bout a Thing” by John Legend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I Wanna Hold Your Hand” by The Beatles</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Listening comprehension</strong></td>
<td>“Because You Loved Me” by Celine Dion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Types of Song Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cloze activities</td>
<td>Dictation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap activities</td>
<td>Finding antonyms, synonyms, or homonyms of words in song</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reordering lines of song or stanzas</td>
<td>Choral reading of song</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matching beginning of line to end of line</td>
<td>YouTube karaoke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo vocabulary</td>
<td>Discussion of theme of song</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Preview the songs you choose to make sure they are culturally appropriate as we are often desensitized to some of the content. Also, review the videos as our interpretation is not always the same as the producers.