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# Chapter 5

## Games for Language Learning

by  
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# Introduction

“If we look at children before they start school we note that they do not play or work, they simply do: they experience and learn.”

(George Hein, 1973, p. 9)

Mona watched the older children playing with a jump rope on the playground. She listened as they chanted in English and jumped into the turning rope:

One, two, three

Jump in with me

Mona’s lips moved as she silently mouthed the words in English. After a few days, Mona brought her own rope to school and taught the rhyme to two of her friends.

All children learn through play. Children love to play games, and many of these games enhance language learning. Playing games helps children acquire language in a very relaxed, meaningful, fun and non-threatening atmosphere. Teachers use games in the classroom to impart language in a more interesting, exciting and motivating way. We know that children often learn language best indirectly – by using the language to do something they want to do rather than just learning about language. Games lend themselves to the learning of many aspects of language, such as vocabulary, grammar, and language patterns. They provide an authentic reason for children to use the foreign language. Besides teaching language, games are also valuable for teaching children important values such as respecting others and social skills such as taking leadership roles. This chapter will introduce a series of language games that can easily be used with the Hello! series in Egypt. They need not be time-consuming – five minutes at the beginning or end of the lesson will help you to make your classes start and end in a fun way as well as providing useful reinforcement of the language you have taught.

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## Advantages of Using Games in the Primary English Classrooms

Fun	Create an atmosphere where children enjoy learning
Interaction	Provide opportunities for children, even the shy ones, to be engaged in speaking and listening activities
Practice and repetition	Give meaningful practice and repetition of language in a fun atmosphere.
Following rules	Help children learn the discipline of respecting rules
Respecting others	Assist children in learning to respect each other's roles
Leadership	Provide opportunities for children to learn and practice leadership roles
Success	If designed well, games should provide all children with successful experiences
Feedback	Can also be designed to give learners immediate feedback on the correctness and comprehensibility of their language
Active, hands-on participation	Enable children to be actively engaged with one another and with hands-on materials
Risk-taking	Help learners to take risks – to try out language for the fun of it without fear of marks or mistakes

## Types of Language Learning from Games

Language games are not only enjoyable, but also help the children learn without having to pay much attention to what and how they are learning. Meantime, children learn to use the target language and to communicate with others. Uberman (1998, p. 20) writes, “I believe games are not only fun but help students to learn without a conscious analysis or understanding of the learning process while they acquire communicative competence as second language users.”

Many types of language learning can be enhanced by the use of games. The chart below summarizes the language learning possibilities of games.

### Language Skills Improved through the Use of Games

#### Reading

Children can learn and/or practice reading words, signs and instructions as part of a game.

#### Writing

Learners can write words, draw shapes, compose messages or write the results of a game.

#### Listening

Pupils can practice listening to instructions, listening to one another and learning to focus.

#### Speaking/Arguing

Children can learn to use spoken language for a variety of purposes appropriate in different contexts. They can learn to ask questions, to clarify meaning and negotiate with their peers.

#### Classifying and Sequencing

Pupils can learn to organize language in a variety of ways, for example by categories, time sequence, or order of importance.

#### Study Skills

Children can be motivated to study aspects of language for better retention and to develop effective language study techniques.

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# Criteria for Designing Games

When planning games we have to ask ourselves a series of questions about the purpose and content of the games. Habib (available online) offers the criteria below for game design. As you plan your game, ask these questions to make sure you are using games (and your time) effectively for language teaching.

1. **Objectives.** Why should children play this game? What language will be introduced, developed, practiced, or revised? Can a maximum number of children be engaged in the game activity all of the time?
2. **Format.** What form should the game take in order to accomplish our language learning objectives? Will most of the class time be spent communicating in the target language?
3. **Materials.** What materials are needed for the game? Can they be easily and cheaply acquired or made? Can students help make them? Can they be used and re-used for a variety of purposes? Are they attractive to students? Is the language in the games accurate and easy to read/understand?
4. **Suitability.** Is the game suitable for the age group? Younger learners, for example, might prefer more cooperative games to more competitive ones.
5. **Instructions.** Are the instructions for the game clear and easy to follow? Do I check to make sure that students understand the instructions? Do I include instructions in the mother tongue when necessary? Do I model the game activities for my pupils? Is the game short enough to be played during one section of my lesson?
6. **Feedback.** Who will check the answers in the game – will it be the teacher, a student, a group, or an answer key?

## When to Use Games

Incorporate games into your daily lessons, at the beginning as a warm-up and revision, in the middle to practice a concept you have introduced, or at the end of the class to sum up the lesson. If you keep games time short and lively, you will be able to fit them into your curriculum and keep students interested and motivated.

“Learning noise is the one type of noise we need in our classrooms.”

-El-Naggar, 2000

Sometimes games lead to a little more noise than is typical in Egyptian classrooms. Manage your students carefully and keep the game times short at first so that pupils don't get overly excited. Also, explain to your principal and supervisor that some of your activities involve "purposeful, learning noise" that you expect and that this active involvement on the part of your pupils will help them learn better.

## Sample Games and Game Formats

# Number and Letter Games

## Alphabet Numbers

Objectives. Practice letter names and spelling

Materials. Alphabet charts

Procedures. Assign each letter in the alphabet a number as in the chart below:

A	1	G	7	M	13	S	19	Y	25
B	2	H	8	N	14	T	20	Z	26
C	3	I	9	O	15	U	21		
D	4	J	10	P	16	V	22		
E	5	K	11	Q	17	W	23		
F	6	L	12	R	18	X	24		

Give each team of children a group of numbers which they must "translate" into English words and phrases. For example:

18, 5, 4 = RED

9-12, 9, 11, 5-5, 14, 7, 12, 9, 19, 8 = I like English

Variations. Children can use the alphabet chart to write messages to each other, or to the teacher. Each team can form their own list of numbers to be changed by another team on one topic, i.e., food words, 3 words describing things, opposites, same meaning, etc.

## Typewriter (Curtain and Pesola, 1994)

Objectives. Practice number and letter names.

Materials. Number or letter cards for each child.

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Procedures. Divide the class into teams and give each team a group of number cards. Call out numbers with several digits and have the children in each team arrange themselves into the correct numerical order (or alphabetical order).

Variation. Distribute letter cards to each team. Call out a target vocabulary word from the current Hello! lesson. Have the children arrange themselves into the correct order to spell the word.

## Number Match (Curtain and Pesola, 1994)

Objectives. Practice number names from 0 to 9.

Materials. Number cards from 0 to 9, one for each child.

Procedure. Divide the class into teams and distribute number cards from 0 to 9 to each child in the team. Call out a number. The first child on a team who stands up with the number gets a point for the team. If two children stand up at the same time, no team gets the point.

## Who Has It? (Curtain and Pesola, 1994)

Objectives. Practice number and color names.

Materials. Number or color cards, one for each child.

Procedures. Distribute a number card to each child. Ask the children to place the card on the desk in front of them. Next, teach the children a simple clapping rhythm as follows:

slap, slap (knees)

clap, clap (hands)

snap, snap (left hand fingers)

snap, snap (right hand fingers)

Practice the rhythm until all of the children can follow along comfortably. Ask a question in rhythm and help the children to respond in rhythm.

Teacher: Who – has – sev – en?

Class: (slap, slap) Mo – na. (snap, snap as you say Mo-na)

Teacher: Who – has – four?

Class: (slap, slap) I – bra – him. (snap, snap as you say I-bra-him)

Variations. Ask the same questions using color names.

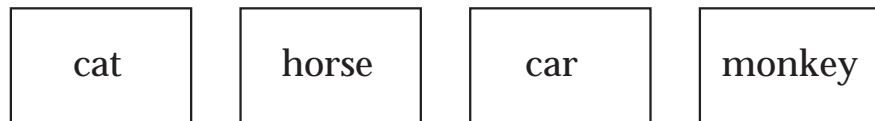
## Vocabulary Games

### Odd Man Out

Objectives. Vocabulary practice.

Materials. Word cards.

Procedure. Prepare words that go together from a unit in Hello! 1. Write them on cards and place four of them in a pocket chart. Include one word that does not fit, one that is “odd.”



Children can work in teams to determine the “odd” word. They can write it on paper. The first team to write the correct word earns a point.

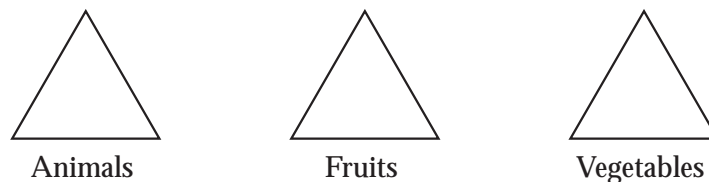
Variation. Pupils read the cards and write down the “odd” words individually.

### Touch the Pyramid

Objective. Practice vocabulary and spelling.

Materials. A blindfold.

Procedure. The teacher draws a number of pyramids on the board matching the teams in the classroom. On each pyramid she writes a category. Animals, Vegetables, Fruit, Drinks, etc. One child from each team volunteers to come to the front. Blindfolded, s/he goes to the board and touches any of the pyramids, takes off the blindfold and writes an example of the category s/he touches.



Variation. Depending on the lessons, categories could change to opposites, same meaning, or past tense of the word picked by the student while blindfolded.

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## Memory or What's in the Bag/Box?

**Objectives.** Practice vocabulary and simple grammatical structures.

**Materials.** A bag or box and simple objects or pictures.

**Procedure.** You can play a variety of guessing games with your pupils to help them practice the vocabulary they are learning in Hello!

1. Pull out items or pictures from the bag, keep them partially hidden, and describe them to the children. Have the children guess to identify the items.
2. Play "Twenty Questions" about an item in the bag. The children must guess an item you have hidden. They can ask twenty yes/no questions. If they can guess the item, they win the game.

Child: Is it a car?

Teacher: No, it isn't.

Child: Is it yellow?

Teacher: Yes, it is.

Child: Is it a banana?

Teacher: Yes, it is.

3. Place a number of familiar items in a bag and pass it around the class until the music stops, the teacher rings a bell, or some other signal occurs. The child who is holding the bag must take out one item and identify it. The game proceeds until all items have been identified and each child has had a turn.
4. Use the items in the bag to teach simple command verbs such as take out, put, give and throw.
5. Place a number of familiar items on a tray and allow the children a few minutes to memorize the items. Next, place a cloth or a sheet of paper over the tray and remove one item. Show the tray again and have the children guess which item is missing.

Child: Was it the car?  
Teacher: No, it wasn't.
6. Place items on a tray that belong to one child in the class. Have the other children guess who the items belong to.

Child: Is it Mohamed's pencil?
7. Hold an item from the bag secretly in your hand. Ask the children to guess what you are holding.

Teacher: What am I holding?  
Child: Are you holding a piece of chalk?

## Ducks Fly/Birds Fly (Curtain and Pesola, 1994)

**Objective.** Practice nouns and simple verbs.

**Materials.** None.

**Procedure.** Ask the children to stand up. Be sure there is room around each child. The leader (you can be the leader) calls out “Ducks fly!” “Birds fly!” “Horses fly!” and so forth. When the leader names an animal that can fly, the children must raise and lower their arms as if they were flying. When an animal is named that cannot fly, the children must not “fly.” A child who “flies” at the wrong time becomes the leader.

**Variation.** Practice other verbs and nouns by changing the game in various ways: “Dogs eat” “Cats eat” “Pencils eat.” The children can pantomime eating behavior. “Teachers talk” “Children talk” “Trees talk.” Now the children can use their hands to mimic talking.

## Grammar Practice Games

### Simon Says

**Objective.** Listening vocabulary, following oral instructions

**Materials.** None.

**Procedure.** The children all stand up facing the teacher. The teacher acts out gestures and gives commands. “Simon says touch your toes. Simon says smile. Put your hand on your head.” The children only follow the commands when the teacher says, “Simon says.” Pupils who “miss” and follow a command without “Simon says” sit down. The game continues until there is only one child standing. That child becomes the new leader.

**Variation.** Play No Lose Simon Says. Divide the class into two groups with two leaders. Anyone who misses moves to the other group. This is the preferred format in a large class. In the “No Lose” version, children remain in play constantly rather than sitting in their seats outside of the action. Or play “Mirette Says”: Substitute the name of the leader or any other term students are learning for “Simon.”

### Pass the Microphone

84 **Objective.** A memory game for vocabulary building, listening and speaking.

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**Materials.** A microphone from a tape recorder, or anything to be passed around as a pretend microphone.

**Procedure.** One pupil begins by saying: "I went to the zoo and saw a monkey" Then he passes the microphone to the person who must say "I went to the zoo, saw a monkey and a lion." The game continues as each student repeats what is said and adds another animal.

**Variation.** The children can create stories about themselves using the past tense: "I went to the supermarket and bought a bottle of milk." You can use this game to reinforce the present simple when Ss say things they like or dislike. "I like to play football." "I like to play football and swim."

## Secret Message

**Objective.** A listening game using the vocabulary learned in class from Hello! 1 and 2.

**Materials.** None.

**Procedure.** The first pupil in a row whispers a brief message to the child on his right. That child passes the message to the next, and so on until it has gone to all the students in one row. The last person says the message aloud without changes. Messages should be relevant to what the children are learning in class. For example, the message could be taken from Hello! 2 – Unit 8. "Fifty years ago, there were no tall buildings in Cairo."

**Variation.** You can begin with one word or two for 4th year pupils. Choose words that have problematic sounds to Egyptian speakers such as /p/ & /b/, /t/ and /th/

## Scrambled Eggs (Curtain and Pesola, 1994)

**Objectives.** Practice simple conversational exchanges.

**Materials.** None.

**Procedure.** Teach the children a simple conversational exchange such as the following:

1st Child: Hello. My name is \_\_\_\_.  
My favorite \_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_.  
What's your favorite \_\_\_\_?

2nd Child: My favorite \_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_.

The first student chooses the second child and initiates the exchange. At the end of the conversation, the first child sits in the second child's seat. Next,

the second child chooses a pupil to practice the conversation. The activity is finished when all the children are sitting in another child's seat.

**Variation.** If you have a large class size, you may want to have four children initiate the conversation in four different corners of the room simultaneously. In this way, the activity will be finished more quickly and more children will be involved at one time.

## Conclusion

Language games help children learn the way they learn best – by doing. They also help teachers to enliven the language curriculum and make language learning meaningful and purposeful.

Include language games in your daily lessons and curriculum. Help your students learn to become skillful and cooperative game players. Feel free to use and adapt the games described here for your own teaching purposes. And always remember to enjoy these times of fun and language learning with your students.

Children like to play games  
As they differ, so do games.  
Some like to play with words,  
Others like to play with numbers,  
Some like to play alone,  
While others with others.

-Sirvart Sahakian

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## voices from the field

Omneya El-Sayed, Assiut

### Pass the Microphone

Before I asked the students to hold the microphone I told them not to be afraid of making mistakes. First, I wanted to simplify the game so I asked them to speak about themselves and their hopes for the future. Then I asked them this question:

T: What are you going to be?

S1: I'm going to be a doctor.

After that I asked this student to pass the microphone to another student who wanted to talk. I repeated this until the pupils understood what is meant by the structure 'going to.' Then I began to play the game but in another way, i.e., asking them what they were going to do in El Adha Feast.

T: What are you going to do in El Adha Feast?

S1: I'm going to go to the zoo to see a hippo.

Then the student passed the microphone to the student who wanted to talk.

S2: I'm going to go to the zoo to see a hippo, and a lion.

S3: I'm going to go to the zoo to see a hippo, a lion and an elephant.

And they continued in this way.

A week later I practiced this game again but this time "in the past", with a new topic that related to the past.

S: I visited the zoo and saw a hippo, a lion, etc...

Reflecting on my experience in the classroom, I can point to both the advantages and disadvantages of using this game in my classroom

Advantages	Disadvantages
1. It helped in increasing students' ability to speak. Shy students spoke without fear of making mistakes.	1. I found that when the sentences were long, students were not able to say them in an easy way.
2. It gave students the chance to participate successfully in class.	2. Most students who participated in it were the good ones. Weak students did not participate as much. Next time, I will give them extra encouragement.
3. It helped students to feel that language is easier than they thought.	3. It took some time to apply at first but will move faster now that the children have learned the game.
4. It made the classroom atmosphere more interesting.	
5. It increased thinking ability because it required students to say something new each time they talked.	

## Key Terminology

### Feedback.

Letting students know about the quality of their responses – right, wrong, complete, incomplete, etc.

### Hands-on.

Involving students actively, often with teaching aids which they can actually use.

### Study skills.

Ways that students can monitor and enhance their own learning. Learning how to figure out new words, how to memorize quickly, how to plan study time, how to organize one's writing are all examples of study skills.

### Criteria (singular: criterion).

Standards or measures of effectiveness. For example, clarity is an important criterion for the instructions for a game. A criterion for successful learning might be if 80% of the pupils pass the test.

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## Understanding Check

1. Why are games helpful in primary language classrooms?
  2. What kinds of language can games help you teach?
  3. Choose a unit from Hello! Try to design games to help teach and reinforce the objectives of that unit.
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## Resources

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## Web Links

Creative Games for the Language Class. A rationale for using games and a few sample team games at this site. Available at:

<http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/vols/vol33/no1/P35.htm> Retrieved on May 30, 2001.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. Large archive of articles and research related to early childhood education; excellent resource for methodology and classroom management.

Available at:

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Games for the Children's EFL, ESL Classroom – Taiwan Teacher. A growing collection of games and activities specifically for the ESL/EFL classroom. Available at:

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/1979/games.html> Retrieved on May 29, 2001.

Games Kids Play. Rules for more than 250 popular kids games from all over the world, almost any of these could be adapted for the EFL classroom. Available at:

<http://www.gameskidsplay.net> Retrieved on May 29, 2001.

The Holiday Zone. Seasonal language activities, learning games, songs, finger plays and action rhymes, art projects and craft ideas, and more for young English language learners. Available at:

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Troy/9087/index.html> Retrieved on May 29, 2001.

Host Country Games. Nancy Habib. An attractive site for learning about novel games to play in elementary classrooms. The site also contains a rationale for including games in the curriculum. Available at:

<http://www.acsamman.edu.jo/~el/2/games> Retrieved on May 30, 2001.

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## Summary Handout for Chapter 5: Games for Language Learning

### *Why do we use games?*

- We use games to help teachers teach the language in an interesting, exciting and motivating way.
- Games help the children to learn many aspects of language as well as important social values.

### *What language is learned from games?*

- Reading
- Writing
- Listening
- Speaking
- Vocabulary
- Grammar
- Study Skills
- Social Language

### *What are considerations for designing games?*

- What are the language objectives for this game?
- What form should the game take so that all of the children can participate and use the target language to play?
- What materials are needed?
- Is the game suitable for the age of the class?
- Are the instructions for the game clear and have I modeled the procedures sufficiently for the children to understand them?
- Who will check the answers in the game?

