

# "Ways Verbal Play such as Storytelling and Word-games Can Be Used for Teaching-and-learning Languages"

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Today one can telecommunicate globally near-instantly, and can travel from one side of the world to the other in less than 24 hours. However, one of the last great barriers between people is language. Many people seek to teach-and-learn languages, but the process is often relatively frustrating and unsuccessful. No standard method of teaching-and-learning languages has emerged: each teacher and educational institution pieces together his/her/its own conglomeration of teaching-and-learning activities and methods.

This brief essay presents some verbal play activities that could be used for teaching and learning languages. Four topics touched upon are:

- 1) Repetition with variation.
- 2) Physical enactment of words (saying and doing the same thing simultaneously).
- 3) Role-playing.
- 4) Question-and-answer routines.

Finally, a story that involves language -- and when performed, can prompt audience-participation -- is presented.

## Repetition with variation.

Some aspiring learners may feel "at sea" when approaching a language that is new to them. If they might indeed feel "lost in an ocean", they might benefit from having something to "grasp onto". This something could be a simple grammatical structure that could be transformed in various ways. Such activities are sometimes known as, Substitution, Addition/Removal, and Transformation Drills.

These are instances of "making parallels" -- introducing something new that works similarly to the way something that one already knows works.<sup>1</sup>

Learners could be asked to substitute a word in a sentence.

Some of the following are "fill-in-the-blank" games.

The substituted word could be the sentence's object --

- I am going to the (house).
- I am going to the (shop).
- I am going to the (school).
- I am going to the (restaurant).

A condition could be that the words to-be-filled-in need to rhyme --

- I am going to the (house).
- I am going to see a (mouse).
- I don't want to see a (louse).

The rhythm is the same in each sentence.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Cathryn Fairlee for this thought.

The substituted word could be the sentence's subject --

(He) is going to the house.  
 (You) is going to the house.  
 (They) are going to the house.

Different tenses could be used --

(Yesterday I went) to the house.  
 (Today I am going) to the house.  
 (Tomorrow I will go) to the house.

An adjective, which describes the noun, could be added --

I am going to the (blue) house.  
 I am going to the (old) house.

An adverb, which describes the verb, could be added --

I am (slowly) going to the house.  
 I am (happily) going to the house.

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Make it a statement --

I am going to the house.

Make it a question --

Are you going to the house?

Make it a question regarding wanting to do something --

Do you want to go to the house?

Make it a command --

Go to the house!

Make it a suggestion --

Let's go to the house.

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Meanings and actions could be built up around an object (a noun).

House.

In the house.

Under the house.

The house was built.

The house fell down.

He built many houses.

I live in a house.

I would like to live in a house.

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The poem, "Going on a lion hunt", involves substituting the preposition --

Going on a lion hunt.  
 Came to a river --  
 Can't go under it.  
 Can't go through it.  
 Can't go around it.  
 Have to go over it.

The story, "Goldilocks and the Three Bears", involves substituting "degree" terms --

The baby bear's chair was (the smallest).  
 The mother bear's chair was (larger).  
 The father bear's chair was (the largest).

The father bear's bed was (soft).  
 The mother bear's bed was (softer).  
 The baby bear's chair was (softest).<sup>2</sup>

Physical enactment of words (saying and doing the same thing simultaneously).

This can be done together with the fill-in-the-blanks game. This is related to the game, Charades. For examples:

I am going to (throw) the ball.  
*(Do a gesture for throwing.)*

I am going to (climb) the mountain.  
*(Do a gesture for climbing.)*

I can (see) you.  
*(Do a gesture for seeing.)*

I can (hear) you.  
*(Do a gesture for hearing.)*

Role-playing.

Teaching-and-learning processes should be emotionally and imaginatively -- as well as intellectually -- engaging. It is helpful if activities feature human drama that learners can get involved with, and project themselves into.

The terms, "Register" and "Voice" refer to ways characters speak. One can have various characters speak in different tones, using informal and formal formulations of words and sentences.<sup>3</sup> For example, some characters might speak in slang and use a lot of contractions (for example, instead of saying "they are", saying "they're"). Other characters might be careful to say complete words, use formal diction and grammar, and enunciate each word, even in exaggerated ways.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Asha Sampath for this thought.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Richard Martin for this thought.

One could design a character in terms of the way he/she speaks, and what he/she speaks about. A character may speak differently in different situations, to different characters. One might ask such questions as: What status does a character have in a particular relationship, and in his/her community? Is he/she confident, timid, etc? What is her emotional stance and condition? When designing dialogue between characters, it is often helpful to have a wide contrast between characters. For example: How might a king speak to a servant? How might a servant speak to a king?

Acting-out characters involves being playful with one's voice. There needs to be a sense of trust and mutual respect in the classroom for people to engage in this kind of pretending behavior.

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#### Question-and-answer routines.

Some "chain games" follow. They are known as chain games because each question-and-answer forms a link in the progression. Players tend to be motivated to give ingenious answers.

The games include:

- 1) The "Why?" game.
- 2) The "What kind of thing is it?" game.
- 3) The "What is the use of it?" game.
- 4) The "What actions go with what actors?" game.
- 5) The "Word association" game.

In games 1-4, no matter what answer is given, the child character asks the same question regarding an aspect of that answer.<sup>4</sup>

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- 1) The "Why?" game.

For example:

Parent: Please eat your vegetables.  
Child: Why?

So you will grow up to be healthy and strong.  
Why?

So you can travel and see many things.  
Why?

So you would not be bored.  
Why?

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<sup>4</sup> For Tamil children's traditional verbal games that follow some of these patterns, please see Chapter IV, pp. 158-353, in "Ethnographic Videoconferencing, as Applied to Songs/Chants/Dances/Games of South Indian Children, and Language Learning", by Eric Miller. PhD dissertation, Folklore, University of Pennsylvania, 2010. [www.storytellingandvideoconferencing.com/280.html](http://www.storytellingandvideoconferencing.com/280.html) .

So you would have a lot of fun.  
Why?

And so on, until the game ends like this:

Why?

Because I said so.

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2) The "What kind of thing is it?" game.

For example:

I am going to drink some juice.  
What kind of juice?

Orange juice.  
What kind of orange?

An orange-colored orange.  
What kind of orange-color?

A soothing orange-color.  
What kind of soothing?

And so on.

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3) The "What is the use of it?" game.

For example:

I am going to get a chicken cage.  
What is the use of a chicken cage?

To put chickens in.  
What is the use of a chicken?

To eat.  
What is the use of eating?

To have a lot of energy.  
What is the use of having a lot of energy?

To do many things.  
What is the use of doing many things?

And so on.

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4) The "What actions go with what actors?" game.

For examples:

*Name an action (verb).*  
*Say what actor (subject) does that action.*

*Name an actor (subject).*  
*Say what action (verb) is done by that actor.*

One variation of this game is:

Can a barber sing?  
 No, for singing you need a singer.

Can a singer teach a class?  
 No, for teaching you need a teacher.

Can a teacher make ice cream?  
 No, for making ice cream you need a dessert chef.

Can a dessert chef wash a window?  
 No, for washing windows you need a window-washer.

Other variations:

*Name a profession.*  
*Say what a person in that profession does.*

*Name an animal.*  
*Say what that animal does.*

*Name an object (noun).*  
*Say a description (adjective) that could go with that object (noun).*

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5) The "Word association" game.

*Say a word.*  
*Then someone else says a next word (and explains the connection to the previous word).*

*And so on.*

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A combination of the questions in games 1-4 (and other questions inspired by the questions in these games) is used in the following question-and-answer exchanges.

Please note that the objects being discussed are physically present in the classroom. These objects are actually on the teacher's body. In the early stages of teaching-and-learning a language, it is a good idea to name objects that are visible to the students.

What is this? (Pointing to his/her eye.)  
This is an eye.

What use is an eye?  
To see.

To see what?  
To see a nose.

What is this?  
This is a nose.

What use is a nose?  
To breathe.

To breathe what?  
To breathe air.

or,

What use is a nose?  
To smell.

To smell what?  
To smell a flower.

What kind of flower?  
A daffodil.

What is this?  
This is a tongue.

What use is a tongue?  
To speak.

To speak what?  
To tell a story.

What is this?  
This is a tooth.

What use is a tooth?  
To eat.

To eat what?  
To eat a fruit.

What fruit?  
A banana.

What is this?  
This is a hand.

What use is a hand?  
To throw.

To throw what?  
To throw a ball.

What kind of ball?  
A blue ball.

What is this?  
This is a head.

What is inside a head?  
A brain.

What use is a brain?  
To think.

To think about what?  
To think about chocolate.

The following is a story I composed to help teach aspects of the English language to children.

When performing this story, I encourage audience-participation. That is, I ask the listeners to help the story characters. Listeners could do this by supplying some of the answers the characters need to provide in order to get home.

#### "Lost in a Forest of Words"

Once there was a brother and sister. They and their mother were getting ready for dinner. The mother said, "Now children, please don't go far. We're going to have dinner in a few minutes, when father comes home. So you can go out and play if you like, but don't go far".

So the brother and sister went outside. They lived in a meadow, with a forest on one side. Well, the two children wandered off into the forest, and before they knew it, they were lost. They walked and walked, and finally they came to see a little man. He was standing in front of a tall tree. The brother said to the little man, "Sir, Can you help us? We are trying to get home, but we're lost."

The little man said, "I will help you. But you have to pay me."

"Pay you?!", exclaimed the sister. "But we're only children. We don't have any money."

"Oh, I don't want money!", replied the little man. "I want to be paid in words. Don't you know? -- You are lost in the Forest of Words. Look up at the leaves of the trees."



The brother and sister looked up. They were very surprised to see that all of the leaves were shaped like letters. They saw the Latin letters which are used to write the English language. They saw Tamil letters, and letters from many other languages.

The little man said, "I'll tell you what to do, but you'll have to pay me five words that rhyme with book".

The brother and sister said, "Cook, look, crook, hook, and took".

"Very good!", said the little man. "Ok. Go down this hill. You'll see a huge tree. Go left. After some time, you'll see a medium-sized boulder. Then go right. You'll come to a village. Go to the fruit market, and you'll see a lady who is selling watermelons. She would help you get home".

So off the brother and sister went -- to the huge tree, to the medium-sized boulder, and sure enough, they came to the village. They found the lady who was selling watermelons. It looked very delicious, so the girl said, "Excuse me, but we would like two pieces of watermelon -- and also we need to find out how to get home".

The lady who was selling watermelons looked up at the children and said, "I would be happy to help you. But first you must tell me five words that have a double e in their middles".

"Two e's. Hmmm," said the brother and sister. "Ok -- keep, sleep, weep ... "

Can anyone help?

"Need". "Seek".

Well done!", said the woman. "Ok. You've got to go down the hill on the far side of the village. You'll come to a river. You'll need to cross that river in order to get home. There will be a man there in a boat. He will take you across the river".

"Thank you very much!", exclaimed the children, and they ran off. Down the hill they went, and there they found the man standing in his boat.

"I will take you across the river", said the man. "But first you have to pay me five puns".

"What's a pun?", asked the sister. She was very young and did not know this yet.

"A pun is two words that sound the same -- but they are spelled differently, and they have different meanings".

"Ok", said the brother and sister. "Sun and son. Sun is s-u-n, it is in the sky. Son is s-o-n, it is a male child".

"Beat and beet. B-e-a-t means to hit. B-e-e-t is a root vegetable."

Can anyone else help?

"New and knew. N-e-w means not yet used. K-n-e-w is the past form of, to know".

"Prophet and profit. A p-r-o-p-h-e-t is a messenger from a god. P-r-o-f-i-t means, to make money".

"Piece and peace. A p-i-e-c-e is a part of something. P-e-a-c-e means, quiet and calm."

"Well done!", said the boatman. And he took them across the river. From there the brother and sister walked and walked, until they came to another river. There they saw another man with a boat.

"I will take you across the river", this second boatman said. "But you have to pay me two triple-puns."

"Triple-puns!?", exclaimed the sister. "That's very difficult! Now we'll never get home."

"Let's try", said her brother. "I know one --- Two, too, and to. T-w-o is a number. T-o-o means, also. T-o is a preposition, meaning approaching a place."

Does anyone else know any triple-puns? I'll tell you one -- and this is one many people live their entire lives without understanding. Their, there, and they're. T-h-e-i-r is a possessive pronoun. T-h-e-r-e is a place pronoun. T-h-e-y-'r-e is a contraction of they and are. A sentence containing all three is, "They're going to their house over there."

The man took the brother and sister across the river. From there, they ran as fast as they could, and soon they reached home. They came into the dining room just as their mother and father were sitting down at the dinner table. The children's mother said to them, "Where did you go? I asked you to stay near by."

The brother and sister looked at each other. The brother said, "We're sorry! We got lost in the Forest of Words."

Their father said, "Please try to not do that again. Especially not just before dinner".

"Ok, we promise!", said the brother and sister.

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A benefit of telling this story is that it can facilitate listeners identifying with the brother and sister. If this occurs, the listeners may be emotionally drawn to thinking about, and to helping to supply, the needed words.

A story like this, as well as the games mentioned in this essay, give students motivation for thinking and speaking. These activities can make the learning process fun and exciting.