



# ESL

## Games & Activities

Fun Ideas for Teaching  
**Vocabulary**

Hey there!

As a thank you for signing up to my teaching blog's email list, I decided make this handy guide just for YOU!

Here you'll find engaging vocabulary activities for kids that every English teacher can rely on anytime of the day! They require little to no preparation and can be given to both kids and adult learners alike by adjusting the level of difficulty.

I encourage you to use these games and fun activities to warm up your class before the lesson begins, to break the ice or simply as a time filler. Warmers bring energy to class and definitely fills the time with more learning when the lesson runs shorter than expected.

So are you ready to get your class off to a good start? Read on!

Here's to a fun teaching,

Mel

P.S. I'd love to hear from you!  
Feel free to drop me a line at [englishteaching101@yahoo.com](mailto:englishteaching101@yahoo.com)

# ESL WARM UP GAMES & ACTIVITIES

## ANAGRAM

The teacher writes preferably an 8-letter word or longer on the board and students make as many new words as they can using all the original letters from the given word exactly once. The team that produces the most number of words after the time runs out wins the game.

**Variation:** When checking the answers, cross out common words that appear in at least two of the teams. The team with most number of unique words wins the game. You may also vary the point scale with higher point goes to difficult or longer words.

## JUMBLED WORDS

The teacher writes a scrambled word on the board that students need to un-jumble in their teams, e.g. LEJMUB → JUMBLE. The first team that guesses and spells the word correctly gets the points.

**Variation:** For more advanced students, you may give 3 or more jumbled words at once which they need to solve in 1 minute. Points earned per correct answer. You may also try giving scrambled sentence which will test both vocabulary and grammar.

## SLAP THE BOARD

This game works best with beginner students. The teacher writes words arranged randomly on the board and calls one player from each team to stand equidistantly from the board. The teacher will say one of the words and students should run up to the board and slaps the word when they find it.

**Variation:** A variant of this game is called “Swat It!” where students use fly swatters to swat the word instead of slapping the board.

## WORD SNAKE

Each team makes a line near the board, then one student per team comes up to the white board and writes a word. The next student has to use the last letter of the word on the board to make another word. At the end of the game, the team with the longest word snake with all the words joined up wins the game.

## MESSAGE RELAY

The participants are divided into groups and each group forms a line. The person in front will be given a message and must pass it correctly to the next person by whispering until the student in front of the line writes it down. The goal is to get the message relayed to the last person intact and without any changes. If the sentence is perfect they get a point.

## BACK SPELL

A kind of relay game where teams of equal size sit down in a neat line. The first student of each row should have a board and marker (but a pen and paper will do). Teacher gives a word to the last students at the end of each line. They need to pass the word along by drawing the word, letter by letter onto the back of the person in front of them until it reaches the first person at the front of the line who need to write the word on their board or paper. The first team to spell the word correctly wins the game.

**Variation:** You may give different words with the same amount of letters to the last student of each row to prevent cheating. You might also want to teach them some actions or signs before playing the game such as tapping or shaking their head to signify “repeat the drawing”.

## SIMPLE SIMON SAYS

This is a classic game for teaching imperatives, parts of the body or simply as a classroom management. The teacher gives a command by saying “Simon says \_\_\_” and students obey, e.g. “Simon says... put your hands on your head.” Players are eliminated from the game by following a command that is not immediately preceded by the phrase “Simon says”, or by failing to follow an instruction which does include the phrase.

**Variation:** You may ask one of the students to act as “Simon” and give commands to the whole class. The object for the player acting as Simon is to get all the other players out as quickly as possible; the winner of the game is usually the last player who has successfully followed all of the given commands.

## LINKING WORDS

This is a word association game where the teacher gives 2 words (example: “house and soda”) and students have to link the words by inserting other related/relevant words in between, i.e. “house – kitchen – refrigerator – soda”. You may decide the number of words the player can use to link.

## ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS!

Form two teams with equal number students who will line up and compete against each other. The first person from each line will meet at the center and play Rock, Paper, Scissors. The winner can ask the other player to give a word from a category or to answer trick questions. If the player answers incorrectly, they are out and the first team to get all the players from the other team out is the winner.

## GUESSING GAMES

Divide the class into two or three teams and in turns, ask one student from each team to come to the front. The student picks a word and conveys the word to his team. This game can be done using actions (charades) or drawings (Pictionary) where student pantomimes or draws the word, respectively. I usually tell my students to choose whichever they feel more comfortable using to convey their ideas across. The team must guess the word correctly before the time runs out. If not, other teams may have the chance to “steal” and gets the points if their answer is correct.

## PASS THE BALL

Students make a big circle and pass a ball in one direction (clockwise or the other way around) while the teacher is playing a music. The student who is holding the ball when the music is paused will give a word from a given category, i.e. countries, animals, verbs, etc. If the player repeats a word that has already been said or fails to give a word after 5 seconds, he is out of the game. My students love this game specially when I play an upbeat pop song that they know!

**Variation:** Without the music, start by tossing the ball at a student who will give a word related to the category. He/she will then throw the ball to another student.

## WHAT'S ON THE LIST

Divide the class into two teams and give each team a mini-whiteboard or a paper. Let the team leaders pick a topic written on strips of paper. Give them 2-4 minutes (depending on their level) to shortlist 12 items related to the topic they've got. When the time is over, tell whoever goes first the topic of the other team. They have 30 seconds to guess what's on the list and will get a point for each item they guess correctly. Play as many rounds as you want with different topics. The team with the highest points wins the game!

## HANGMAN

The teacher draws a row of dashes on the board representing each letter of the word that he wants the students to guess. If the guessing player suggests a letter which occurs in the word, the teacher writes it in all its correct positions. If the suggested letter or number does not occur in the word, the teacher draws one element of a hanged man stick figure as a tally mark.

Variation: Split the class into two teams to compete against each other and associate each team with a different marker color, e.g. black v blue. Play hangman regularly except now each team gets one guess per round. When the class solves the mystery word, the point goes to the team that guesses more letters. You may also give each team points equal to the number of letters they have guessed.

## WORD ASSOCIATION

In this game, students may stay in their seats or make a circle. The aim is to say a word that are associated together. Start by saying a word related to your lesson or topic. The first student will say aloud any word that they associate with your given word. The next player will then do the same with the previous word, and so on, i.e. "tomato → red → Mars..." The student who gives an unrelated/dissociated word is out. Make the game more challenging by making the exchanges fast (maybe only 5 seconds to think?!).

## RHYME CHARADE

This is a good way to teach students rhyming words. The teacher gives an example by saying, "I'm thinking of a word that rhymes with 'Light'" Teacher then calls a student who thinks he knows the answer. But instead of saying the word, the student goes to the front and pantomime his guess. (For example, the student might act like he is becoming taller if he is thinking of the word 'Height'). The rest of the class will then guess what the student is miming. If one of the students mentions the correct answer even if it isn't what the actor is doing, it won't be counted as a correct guess.

## BINGO

The teacher gives students a list of 20 words, phrases or sentences and ask them to copy 7 words they want on their notebook. The teacher then gives the definition of a random word from the list but does not say the word itself. If students think they have the word the teacher defines, they tick it. The student who ticks all 7 words they had chosen shouts BINGO and wins the game.

**Below are 6 vocabulary games that need a PowerPoint presentation. Demo slides and rules are available on blog under *Free Resources*.**

## **DISAPPEARING WORDS**

In this simple activity, students are shown a word, phrase or sentence that disappears in 2 seconds! They need to remember what they saw and write them down on a mini-whiteboard or paper. The fastest team to show the correct answer wins the round.

## **HIDDEN PICTURES**

The teacher slowly removes the squares while students take turn guessing what is the picture hidden behind it. The student who guesses the right word wins the game.

## **HOT SEAT**

One student will help the person in the “hot seat” to guess the secret image behind him/her before the time runs out! This is a classic way to develop word association and description.

## **FIRST LETTER GAME**

Students are shown different pictures and they need to take the first letter from each picture to form the mystery word. This is a fun activity that tests students vocabulary!

## **MEMORY GAME**

This is a matching type activity where each team is given a set of cards. Students spread out the cards on the table face down and take turns picking up a card and finding its pair.

## **MEMORY GAME**

Students form a group of four and number themselves from 1-4. Students will all “sleep” by putting their heads down. When they hear the teacher calls their own number, they will “wake up” and have to remember what they see. After 4 rounds, everyone “wakes up” and puts the word or sentence together. Credit to the owner of the slides.