

Vocabulary Building Games

Teachers know that having a large vocabulary is essential to students' academic success. This is one of the reasons that some of us teach Greek and Latin roots in elementary classes. Children enjoy the power that comes with owning and using long words. There are many games that you can play with your students which will help them develop more complex and varied vocabularies.

Categories

This long time favorite is great for helping young minds organize and retrieve ideas. Start with a 'tap, clap, snap, snap' rhythm, speaking on the 'snap, snap' parts.

Let's play -
Categories -
Names of -
Ci - ties -
Cleveland -

Each person around the circle takes a turn naming an item from within the chosen category.

Teach young students how to say, "I pass," using the correct rhythm. This could be the perfect way to get a little child or an ESL student started. They can play along, by listening to others, knowing that when it is their turn they will be able to participate without having to think of a word that fits all the criteria. Saying 'I pass' at the right time, in the right rhythm can be the first step toward success.

Ideas for categories are endless, here are a few to get you started: countries, types of fruit, colors, numbers, math words, famous people, rhymes with blue, technology, vehicles, characters, folk tales, clothing, kinds of toys, flowers, plants, things in space, movies, and so on.

The Farmer's Cat

You may have played this alphabet game under a different title when you were small. Each player repeats what the previous players have said, and then adds an adjective to the list describing the farmer's cat. Each word added must begin with the next letter of the alphabet. The first player starts with the letter A.

The farmer's cat is an adorable cat.

The farmer's cat is an adorable, beautiful cat.

The farmer's cat is an adorable, beautiful, curious cat.

Once the students have used every letter of the alphabet, they might enjoy creating illustrations of the cat. Post the pictures along with the sentence so everyone can read and reread the results of their hard work.

There are many educational variations of this game.

You could use another sentence starter such as, "My aunt's tea set -" or "The moon rocket-" or have your students make up their own. Once everyone understands how to play, divide your class into smaller groups so everyone's turn comes around more quickly. When your students play in small groups it could be fun to compare sentences.

You might want to have everyone make a different suggestion for adjectives that start with A, then B and so on. This variation gives students more time to think of words starting with each letter.

It may be interesting to keep lists of the adjectives your students come up with while playing The Farmer's Cat. Later you can challenge them to use those same words when doing some creative writing.

Shiritori

This game, adapted for English from Japanese, invites players to think of words that start with the last letter of the previous word. Shiritori can be played in pairs, small groups, or as an entire class. When a player can no longer think of a new word, they are out.

Once a word has been said, it may not be used again. Before you start, decide whether or not proper nouns will be accepted. You might decide to use some proper nouns such as place names and not others such as the names of people.

The first person begins by saying any noun, verb, or adjective.

Player 1: planet ('Planet" ends with t so the next word must start with t)

Player 2: taco ('taco' starts with t - the next word must begin with o)

Player 1: octopus ('octopus' begins with o, the next word must start with s)

Player 2: seven

Player 1: never

The chain of words continues: river, riverbank, kite, enormous, shelf, fancy, yellow, wishing . . .

You may decide on different rules based on the age of your students. For example, if you want younger students to focus on sounds rather than spelling, make the rule that words should start

with the final sound of the previous word. So, after 'taco' Player 2 could say 'over' because it has the long o sound that we hear at the end of 'taco.'

One advantage of this word game is that teachers can use words such as 'triangular,' or 'effervescent.' Students do not need to understand the nomenclature in order to play. This is a great way to let students hear complex vocabulary in a completely non-threatening way. Look for ways to use the mathematical and scientific vocabulary your students are learning.

A way to make this game more challenging might be to invite adventurous players to use two or three syllable words. You could challenge students to use spelling words, or vocabulary words from other subjects they are studying.

Experienced players can force their opponents to constantly search for difficult words by choosing words that end with the same letter time and time again, or by saying words that end with z, y or other difficult letters.

You can make the game easier by having some students work in pairs to think of words or by thoughtfully creating small groups of players to the benefit of more reflective students. Be mindful of supporting students who are new to English or those who speak different languages at home.

Hearing individual sounds (phonemes) at the end or beginning of words is an important skill for early readers and writers. This game will give students a fun way to sharpen that skill. However, until students are adept at sorting out various phonemes, this game might be frustrating for them. You could help them by repeating the individual phoneme they need to use when it is their turn. Otherwise, you could write the letter that makes the sound (grapheme) to help the child think of words. Finally, you may decide to allow students to repeat words that have previously been used.

These and other language games invite children into the world of word play and complex vocabulary. They provide low risk environments in which students can relax, participate at their own level, and expand their personal lexicon. Continue to juggle the rules until the games are difficult enough to be fun, but easy enough for all students to be successful.

