

In this article, originally published in ENGLISH TEACHING professional, Andrew Stokes uses computer-based games to enliven his classes.

ICT and Games

Do you have days when you just can't face the coursebook? Days when both you and your students desperately need a charge of energy? There's nothing like a game to break the mood and recharge the batteries. And it's better still when the game is on the computer and you change the focus of the lesson away from yourself - an occasional relief for both you and the students! First, three points on setting the activities up, and then a brief description of three ICT-based games...

Getting organised

1. The first rule is to play the game yourself before you use it with your students. You should know the program inside out so that when your students come to you with questions about the rules, the scoring, the buttons or the menu items, you can answer them quickly and competently without breaking the flow of the lesson.
2. Remember that computer games are not for everyone. There are students who hate them just as there are students who hate speaking activities. You need to be prepared to handle the occasional objection firmly and reasonably, and not let one student dictate which activities the class will or will not do.
3. Similarly, ensure that your students know that they are not "just playing". Some students feel that learning should be a serious and painful business and many teachers (including me) have had complaints that students' time is being wasted in "play". All the activities below produce demonstrable learning benefits, enhanced, most of us would agree, by being enjoyable. But it is worth pointing out the expected learning outcomes.

Crossword Challenge

On installation, the program provides a range of crosswords at all levels from beginner to advanced. But the possibilities of *Crossword Challenge* go beyond playing the pre-programmed puzzles. The program comes with an integrated authoring kit which enables teachers or students to add their own words and clues.

ACTIVITY

Briefly show the students how to use the authoring kit (it is very, very simple). Then, in pairs or groups, they create their own puzzles, in one of two areas:

1. a vocabulary area you are focusing on
2. an area of interest such as football, films or geography or perhaps British or American culture.

In each case students have to model their clues on the kind of definition or example sentence they would see in a learner's dictionary. The learning value comes not only in the language they use to express the clues in this way, but also in the communication between the students as they create the crosswords (you may have to appoint an English enforcer in each group to ensure that communication is in English).

Once each pair has completed its clues, a second pair checks them. The crossword is then passed to a third pair who actually does it. Why not make it a race? Note that with *Crossword Challenge* students can either complete the

puzzles on the computer (with hints), or you can print them out to deliver on paper.

MindGame

MindGame is a virtual boardgame, similar to *Othello*, which combines language learning with strategy. Devised by Mario Rinvoluceri of *Grammar Games* fame, the program is an effective way of helping students to learn finite language areas such as spelling, vocabulary, irregular simple past forms and long and short vowel sounds. *MindGame* is a game for two players (or one player against the computer) and is played on a board with 36 squares. The objective is to take over as many squares as you can, and in order to capture each one you have to answer a language question correctly. The psychology underlying the game is therefore clever: the students have a very strong motivation to beat their opponents, but they can't do this without thoroughly learning the language area.

ACTIVITY

It is easy to slot in *MindGame* as a practice activity after your presentation of a new language area, and it takes very little preparation. So, for example, once you have presented the present perfect, turn the focus away from yourself to the computer. Set students up in pairs, so that one pair plays another. This helps to generate a competitive spirit that makes the game more fun and also stimulates authentic communication as students discuss their answers with their partner. Clearly explain which game you want them to play, and let them get on with it. Don't forget to walk round and monitor to ensure firstly that students really do understand what they are supposed to be doing, and secondly that they haven't wandered off onto the Internet.

Quizzes

Quizzes make excellent writing and reading activities: writing for the students making up the quiz, and reading for the students doing it. Having a quiz in electronic format adds to motivation and gives a piece of work a published quality that students can really be proud of. Quizzes can, of course, be on any topic but let's look at a situation where you are teaching the simple past.

ACTIVITY

Put your students into groups to choose a topic in history on which to make up a quiz. They should not have access to reference materials; assuming there is a common level of general knowledge across the class, the quizzes will not then be impossibly difficult. Each group makes up ten questions and provides ten answers. Instead of doing this on paper, they do it in an authoring tool such as *Author Plus*. Once they have finished, the other groups do the quiz. All groups therefore get practice on both reading and writing questions and statements in the simple past. From a motivational point of view, students get a tremendous kick from watching another group doing their quiz. What's more, at the end of the lesson you have several electronic resources for the self access centre!

Clarity has a mission to help teachers integrate ICT successfully into their teaching. Please contact us at any time for advice on which programs to use and how to use them effectively with your students.

