

# MOTIVATING STUDENTS TO USE THE TARGET LANGUAGE THROUGH BOARD GAMES WORKSHOP

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Martín Nuñez  
Isabel Cristina Bolaños  
Universidad Nacional,  
Costa Rica

As it is well known by most professionals in the teaching area, one of the most important aspects that influenced successful learning is how motivated the students, and the instructors, are. Motivation marks the difference between the learning the students perceive as mandatory and the learning in which they find personal interests involved. Ramirez refers to this kind of learning by saying, “second language learning requires, among other things, the use of conscious learning strategies, a willingness to practice, a strong desire to communicate, and a positive attitude about the target language (164).” Based on Ramirez’s opinion, our job as language teachers must be to provide the students with the opportunities in which they will gain competence, as well as to encourage them to raise their confidence and motivation.

In a regular foreign or second language classroom, most teachers will find a variety of students: (1) those that are somewhat interested in the contents we teach, or the subject as a whole; (2) students who already have some language background that facilitates their learning; (3) those whose goals and interests lie far away from what we teach; (4) and finally learners who although are not very skilled, enjoy learning and are willing to. These varied populations bring to our work a gamut of challenges as well. Within the first and second types, our efforts must pursue to keep them interested, although they may already know the contents. The third type mentioned, gives us as teachers a bigger challenge in order to find the key to open the door of their interest; we must struggle to motivate them, and have learning activities that will show them the usefulness of learning the target language. While motivating and keeping interested all these learners, we must lower our class level to reach those, the fourth type of students, who lack the skills, desire, and even the willingness to learn the L2: these are our greatest challenge!

Well-chosen activities will give teachers the opportunity to reach all kinds of learners if we take the time to design the tasks that will keep them all interested. Teachers need to modify teaching tools regarding topics, to find those that better motivate our learners; lower the functions and knowledge these demand, in order for our students to be able to complete the tasks; and raise the complexity of the language required to accomplish the tasks, in order to challenge the students that are more advanced in the process of learning the target language. By having the ability to accomplish the mentioned modifications, instructors will bring to class activities that will lower the students’ affective filters, giving, as it is well known, a broader opportunity for the pupils to reach the goals of the course. This is supported by Hess’s opinion, in which she states that “in large classes, it is important to create activities that will keep the more advanced students interested and at the same allow the less advanced students to make progress at their own pace (137).”

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In addition, another important factor we must not forget and which needs to be taken into account when selecting instructional materials is student's susceptibility toward the teaching/learning process of a target language. As Krashen's Affective Filter theory states, when students' emotions are too high it is very difficult for them to focus on such process, but if their emotions are low, it is easier for them to be active participants of it. Here, as a tool for educational purposes, games have undoubtedly always facilitated learning. In agreement to Krashen's previously stated theory, Latorre and Baeza have stated that "games have long been accepted in language teaching as a means of relieving the students of much of the strain which results from work demanding concentrated attention" (Latorre and Baeza, a. q. by Mollica, 158). Continuing, these authors also mentioned that "in view of their appeal to the various types of learner, games should have a definite linguistic aim along with their function as a welcome change of activity (158)". Just as children learn new things from playing, language learners can highly benefit from games where they can trigger and use their target language competence.

Regarding language competence, Gass and Selinker mentioned that "although obtaining proficiency in a second or target language is a long-term process this achievement depends on the success of several short activities throughout the process (354)." Games are one good example of these short activities that allow students to be aware of their own progress, which at the end will end up becoming a motivation source. Many students will be motivated just by the fact that they are able to perform well in a game; others will need feedback to show them the advance they are achieving. During the game, students by themselves can see how well they are doing by the points they are scoring, and teachers have the opportunity to give positive feedback by letting them know in what aspects they have improved since the previous activity, or to finger point the specific aspects they must work on.

Furthermore, we language instructors should not forget that our principal objective in class is to have our students use English—or any other foreign language we teach—effectively in real communication. (Davies and Pearse, 35.) By using games practice, production, and evaluation stages of a lesson, the setting for real communication will be placed. It is our opinion that for the stage of presentation more teacher-directed activities should be used. During the lesson stages, games also give students the opportunity to practice and develop fluency, since they cannot take all the time they would like to perform a language function. Spontaneously and under some pressure, they must develop fluency, which sometimes is the hardest to practice in class when students mostly are focused in accuracy. Errors may and probably will be there while students play the games using the target language, but all of us that have gone through the process of learning and/or acquiring a language know that errors will persist even in real life, yet more in artificial situations. However, "accuracy practice does not have to be totally mechanical. By organizing it within an appropriate context or situation, you can make it attractive and meaningful

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for your learners,” as Davies and Pearse say, giving us the possibility to have accuracy-focused games (39).

For all these reasons we have just explained, it is our desire to have dedicated and conscious language teachers creating more imaginative activities in order to provide their classrooms with effective language learning tasks. Nevertheless, a common complain we generally listen from teachers is how difficult and how much time consuming the preparation of these could be. Planning, revising, preparing and/or adapting material to fit our needs is not an easy task, but it is even more difficult to fit our students’ needs. Thus, games offer a great opportunity for foreign language learners, especially in communicative oriented courses, to develop their language skills in a more relaxed, non-directed, though competitive way. This is so since competitiveness has shown to be an important factor in people’s achievements, and it has played an important role in human development and history,

Following it is our purpose to let EFL and ESL teachers know how, when, and why let board games, specifically, set a nicer environment in their classroom for a more effective learning to take place.

### Why using board games as instructional aims?

Board games do accomplish a very important function within familiar and social life in many cultures where competitiveness is also an important aspect of society. For this reason, as previously stated, games are being used in different content areas with teaching purposes. But, what makes board games more suitable to fit our classrooms than other games do?

For many EFL/ESL teachers (elementary, secondary or specialized, private or public education) it is a fact that most of the times we have to deal with large groups, small classrooms, limited resources, and perhaps deal with students’ tiredness, indifference, or lack of motivation. Sometimes we are really conscious of these facts and therefore we prepare a game or activity to motivate these students. Generally we ask our students to stand up, run, and/or perform other kinds of physical activities. However, having our students participate of a game where they have to move around the class or perform such kind of kinesthetic responses often turns out to be a complete chaos. Noise, disorder, screams, violent shoves, the breaking of objects, and even physical injuries are unexpected results of such activities. Contrastingly, board games offer learners the possibility to have a lot of fun without such irksome additional outcomes, and therefore, both students and instructors can completely focus on the main goals stated for each activity.

In this sense and although games have intended general and specific outcomes, it is very important to redefine those objectives to fit our syllabus, but specially to fit our students’ needs,

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and of course, to fit our instructional needs. Generally, board games offer the people who play them the opportunity to socialize while competing, but specially they offer players the chance to interact while developing and putting into practice, in terms of language, a wider variety of functions. For example, when people play SCRUPPLES™, they have the chance to discuss, refuse, accept, express, comment on, give opinions about an idea or statement, criticize, etc. When people play MONOPOLY™, players have the chance to buy and sell properties, negotiate loans, establish rents, complain, and so on. In the same way, board games can be designed, adapted, and/or used so language learners can perform the variety of functions previously established in our syllabi; and additionally, they offer the possibility to incorporate new, simpler, and/or more complex vocabulary, structures, and/or language functions.

### When to use an instructional directed board game?

Board games are played with none educational purposes at any time; they provide players with a more dynamic setting and a more relaxed environment to show one's abilities and/or skills. Children, youngsters, adults, and elders use them to share as a family or simply to socialize by having a nice time with friends and acquaintances. In educational contexts, board games are generally misused. Frequently, EFL/ESL teachers and/or instructors bring board games to class as a way to set aside routine and provide students with a time for mere leisure. However, board games can be used in more imaginative ways to step aside from customary teaching/ learning techniques and strategies. They can be addressed to motivate students to use the target language while reviewing and reinforcing their knowledge on the topics studied in class in a less threatening way. Therefore, in educational contexts, we recommend having board games once certain objectives have been introduced, covered, and reviewed in class, or to conclude specific units. As said before, for the practice, production, and evaluation stages of a lesson. Besides, instructors can also use them as a warm up activity in more advanced classes, or just like real life; whenever they feel the need to provide their students with a more dynamic and entertaining task, which at the same time would help them to improve their language proficiency.

Other important aspects to take into consideration when choosing a board game as an instructional procedure is identifying and analyzing the group size, their age range and their interests and needs. EFL/ESL instructors must remember that even though people like to compete, many games are suitable for certain students but not for others, or some students might like a game while others might not. Knowing the target group will allow teachers to anticipate plausible problems while implementing a specific task, game, and/or activity. Once we know such troublesome spots we can work on tailoring, modifying, and/or adjusting learning procedures to make our activities enjoyable and productive for everyone.

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## What to include in an instructional directed board game?

In an instructional context, language learners should be provided with the tools or knowledge (generally and wrongly limited to grammar rules and vocabulary) to perform specific tasks accordingly to a specific level and type of course. Such aspects should be reflected in our expected game outcomes. For example, in a conversational course taught by the authors, the program included a unit on sports. This unit was intended to have students list and talk about common sports practiced in their country and those practiced in the target culture. Therefore, the board game included an option where these students could list and talk about common sports in both countries. Accordingly, in a course where the objectives in the program were to compare and contrast weather conditions worldwide, the board game included an option where the students were allowed to compare and contrast climate and weather conditions in different parts of the world.

One possibility we personally consider very important and which EFL/ESL teachers and instructors should consider when designing a board game (or any other activity or task) is Krashen's "i + 1" hypothesis (also called Input Hypothesis), which states that *foreign* (our italics) language students can always go beyond their own limits, and therefore, achieve greater outcomes than those you usually would think of. Thus, having students exposed to a greater input than the one they are "supposed or expected" to handle and/or command, will encourage students to develop greater abilities, just like a stage from a video game a player just can not complete.

In other words, this means that instructors can always prompt their students to perform a "higher leveled" or more advanced task. As a matter of fact, if lesson objectives were merely checking sport related vocabulary, teachers could have their students defining in the target language a specific item, giving advice and/or suggestions, making invitations, commenting about a match or event, and so on; or if learners were talking about food, they can always be asked to describe how a certain dish or meal is prepared, to comment on what occasions is the dish eaten, to list a set of ingredients, and any other language function that could force students to take a step ahead in the learning process.

Finally, the inclusion of cross-curricular themes has recently become an important aspect in lesson design. Board games give the chance to practice and review other subject-matters beside language. For example, in a class where an objective was to use comparative and superlative structures, the tasks of the board game included Social Studies' contents as, "what is the longest river in the world?", or "what is the highest mountain in Costa Rica?", and so on.

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## How to Design an Instructional Board Game?

The first thing to take into consideration as mentioned before is to establish what is the target population in terms of gender, age, group size, what their needs and interests are, and their level of foreign language proficiency. Additionally, in some groups identifying other factors such as nationality and/or religion is always helpful.

Next, it is time to review the objectives and outcomes specified in the course syllabus. Once the program's content-matter and objectives have been covered in class and the student's weaknesses and strengths have been monitored and recorded, it is time to define the language skills to be involved and the objectives to be reached in the board game. A detailed list of functions and objectives should be defined, e.g. describing, telling, explaining, commenting, comparing, contrasting, asking for, answering, inviting, refusing, retelling, discussing, etc.

Thirdly, it is important to visualize the needs of the learners in terms of language syntax, morphology, lexicon, phonics, and others. A set of studied vocabulary needs to be identified, grammar structures should be stated (if required), and cultural aspects should be taken into consideration (if needed or desired).

Last, but not least, a list of the materials needed and/or available should be prepared. We can always use a commercialized board game as a guide to our project. Even though creativity is highly important when designing innovative materials, most of the time an already existing game can do the job; we only need to redirect its goals and match them to our instructional goals.

## What types of board games can I use as my model?

In the market, there are a series of board games designed for specific purposes (cards, memory games, trivia, word puzzles, dominoes, etc.) Although, it is the user/users who really give a purpose to the game, it is important to relay in the objectives and functions we have previously defined in order to obtain the desired outcomes from the game. A deck of cards for instance can be used in many ways: poker, go-fishing, solitaire, rummy, etc., but each game has its own rules and its specific goals; we cannot change such rules, if rules are changed, so will be the results. Summarizing, It is up to your creativity finding and/or creating those games you and your students will get the more advantage of.

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## Sample Board Games:

Following you will find two board games the authors have designed to use in their conversational English classes at an English Institute. It is our intention to illustrate the previously stated aspects involved in their design as well as to let the audience see the results that can be achieved through their use. We have chosen to include two different board games designed for two different levels for the teachers to have samples of how these instructional aims can be used with different populations. In the annexes you can find the sample tracks and cards.

## First Board Game: Vocabulary Game A

Game objectives:	Reading short statements, following directions, citing, defining, and listing simple vocabulary
Background Information of the Target Population	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Type of Course: Conversational</li> <li>❖ Course Length: 180 hours</li> <li>❖ Student's Level: Low Beginners ❖ Age Group: Teenagers and young adults ❖ Class size: 12 students</li> <li>❖ Textbook in use: None, a compilation of different materials is in use.</li> </ul>
Students' strengths:	Vocabulary knowledge
Students' weaknesses	Problems with sentence formation, third singular person.
Content(s) to be covered:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Vocabulary related to :               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The family</li> <li>○ Likes and dislikes</li> <li>○ Sports and leisure activities</li> <li>○ The Community: Goods and Services</li> </ul> </li> <li>❖ Grammar:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Adverbs of frequency</li> <li>○ Third Singular Person</li> <li>○ Simple Present Tense</li> </ul> </li> <li>❖ Language functions:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Mentioning</li> <li>○ Defining</li> <li>○ Listing</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Procedures:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Decide on materials to be used: scissors, glue, cardboard, markers, color paper, etc.</li> <li>2. Prepare a set of simple questions or tasks based on the functions and contents of the units you want your students to perform. Ex. Mention 10 family members List 5 items you can find in a hardware store Define what a step-child is</li> <li>3. Create a track where you include as many spaces as the number of questions or tasks you prepared in procedure number two (see annex 1).</li> <li>4. Decide on the rules of the game (see sample rules below).</li> <li>5. Include extra spaces containing penalties or rewards to add excitement to the game.</li> <li>6. Prepare as many copies as many sub-groups you will divide your class on.</li> <li>7. Look for tokens and die.</li> </ol>
The rules to use this game	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Divide your class in as many groups as many copies of the track you made. (Make sure your groups are balanced regarding student's number, language level, personality, etc.)</li> <li>2. Ask the students to choose a coin or other small object as his/her token.</li> <li>3. Have your students roll the die and move the token along the board as many spaces as the die show.</li> <li>4. When the student lands on a specific category space, he/she must perform the function or task stated in that space.</li> <li>5. You can put a time limit to achieve the task in order make it more challenging.</li> <li>6. When the student answers appropriately, and within the time span previously set, he/she will stay in that space. If she/he does not, the student must return to his/her previous position.</li> <li>7. When the student lands on a "penalty" or "reward" spot he/she would move as indicated but would not perform the task or function requested.</li> <li>8. The student who gets to the Finish Line first is the winner.</li> </ol>



## Second Board Game: The RAT Game

Background Information of the Target Population	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Type of Course: Conversational</li> <li>❖ Course Length: Bimestrial</li> <li>❖ Student's Level: High beginners</li> <li>❖ Age Group: Young Adults and Adults</li> <li>❖ Class size: 15 students</li> <li>❖ Textbook in use: Let's Talk 1</li> </ul>	
Unit(s) to be covered:	<p>Unit 1. Communicating in English</p> <p>A. Let's get to know each other!</p> <p>B. Numbers and letters</p> <p>Functions</p> <p>Greeting and leave taking</p> <p>Spelling</p> <p>Using numbers</p> <p>Unit 3. Free time</p> <p>A. What are your interests?</p> <p>B. Do you like sports?</p> <p>Functions</p> <p>Talking about likes and dislikes</p> <p>Asking for preferences</p> <p>Expressing ideas and opinions</p> <p>Unit 5. Money</p> <p>A. Shopping</p> <p>B. Saving and Spending Money</p> <p>Functions</p> <p>Talking about shopping</p> <p>Commenting on ways to save money</p> <p>Asking for and giving advice</p> <p>Unit 7. Travel and Tourism</p> <p>A. Close to Home</p> <p>B. Traveling the world</p> <p>Functions</p> <p>Talking about travel and tourism</p> <p>Commenting on travel experiences</p> <p>Giving opinions about tourist places</p>	<p>Unit 2. Different kinds of people</p> <p>A. What do they look like?</p> <p>B. Your personality</p> <p>Functions</p> <p>Describing physical appearance</p> <p>Asking about people's appearance</p> <p>Talking about people's personality</p> <p>Unit 4. Weather and Climate</p> <p>A. It's going to be a beautiful day!</p> <p>B. Extreme weather</p> <p>Functions</p> <p>Talking about climate</p> <p>Commenting on weather conditions</p> <p>Talking about extreme weather</p> <p>Unit 6. Food and drink</p> <p>A. Eating Out</p> <p>B. Food around the world</p> <p>Functions</p> <p>Talking about food preferences</p> <p>Comparing food around the world</p> <p>Discussing on eating habits worldwide</p> <p>Unit 8. Entertainment</p> <p>A. Let's see a movie!</p> <p>B. A good read</p> <p>Functions</p> <p>Giving opinions about movies &amp; books</p> <p>Comparing movies</p> <p>Discussing about movies' features</p>

Students' strengths:	Good vocabulary, good sentence elaboration
Students' weaknesses:	Problems in question elaboration, person-verb agreement.
Game objectives:	Expressing opinions about different topics covered in the course, using learned vocabulary and structures, mentioning, commenting, discussing, describing, defining, asking and answering questions, giving advice, and explaining processes.
Procedures to create the board game:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Decide on materials (scissors, glue, cardboard, computer, color pencils, etc.) you will use.</li> <li>2. Prepare a set of questions or tasks you might want to test your students on. Ex. Mention 10 kinds of fruits. Mention 3 typical dishes; explain how to prepare one of them. Give advice on how to act during seismic activity.</li> <li>3. Write each question or task your questions in an individual card. You may add the time limit the student has to complete the task (see sample cards in annex 2)</li> <li>4. Design a game track where you randomly include four different categories: weather, money, food, and travel (see sample track in annex 2).</li> <li>5. Decide on the rules of the game (see rules below)</li> <li>6. Include extra cards containing go forward/backwards commands, and the "RAT" card which allow players to perform a specific task according to established rules (below).</li> <li>7. Find token that you students can use to play with.</li> </ol>
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Once you have the material ready (copies needed), divide your class in as many groups as you wish (3 to 4 players in each group is recommended).</li> <li>2. Place all five groups of cards separately according to their category.</li> <li>3. Ask the students to use a coin or other small object as his/her token.</li> <li>4. Have your students roll the die and move the token along the board as many spaces as the die show. When the student lands on a specific category space, he/she picks up a card from the corresponding deck. The student has to read the instructions the card has and has to carry out the task presented.</li> <li>5. When the student answers appropriately and within the time limit previously set, he/she will keep the card. If he/she does not, the card must be returned to the bottom of each pile, and the next student will continue with his/her turn.</li> </ol>
The rules to use this game	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. When the student draws the "RAT" card, hez/she is allowed to steal the cards her/his partners have already won. However, the student has to answer all the questions stated on the cards, and he/she could only "steal" those questions he/she answers appropriately.</li> <li>7. When a player draws a "MOVE BACK" or "MOVE FORWARD" card he/she would move as indicated but would not take another card from the pile.</li> <li>8. The student who gets the most cards at the end of the game is the winner.</li> </ol>

## MODIFYING THE BOARD GAMES

Teachers can modify these board games by:

1. Adapting the games to the contents (units) studied in your course.
2. Tailoring the functions, time allotted, number of tasks, complexity of structures, vocabulary

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- used, and any other aspect in order to suit the students' necessities and language skills.
3. Having an extra set of cards, or different track, for students who are in a more advanced stage of their language learning process, or for those who are below the average of the class.
  4. Adding any other extra card that you think may add more excitement to the game according to your creativity.
  5. Giving your students the opportunity to create new tasks, cards, or tracks they consider useful to practice what they have learnt.

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