

Let Them Play: Board Games for Language Practice

Today, any discussion of games in the classroom is probably about digital games. And digital games *are* powerfully engaging. Take just one: Minecraft. Gamers around the world have spent a total of 68 million years playing it (Barone 2021). That needs to be repeated: *68 million years*. Just think if English educators could harness even a fraction of the excitement and engagement inherent in such games.

One way to do so is through traditional tabletop games, like board games and card games, which have been entertaining people much longer than video games. Backgammon has been played continuously for about 5,000 years. Chess is gearing up for a 2,000th birthday. And more than one billion people have played Monopoly since it debuted in 1935 (Johnson 2018).

The board-games market is soaring—predicted for rampant growth, hitting \$30.93 billion by 2028 (SkyQuest Technology 2022).

Recently, more studies have emerged about games and language learning. A review by Wong and Yunus (2021) gathered 18 published studies on board games and 35 articles examining these games' impact on the development of speaking skills. The findings indicate that students perceive board games as not only “fun” and “relaxing” but also as enhancers of their learning experience. A poll on the American English Facebook page from January 2020 echoed those results. Of 785 participants, 88 percent felt games “give EFL practice,” while just 12 percent said, “Games are just for fun.”

Despite the incontrovertible legacy and popularity of games, adults in an educational setting are often made to feel guilty and unproductive for enjoying games, even “sinful” (Brown and Vaughan 2009). What reaction would come from students, other teachers, principals, and parents if you played a game for the entirety of a lesson? Someone—perhaps even you—would think you were not doing your job effectively. But would it raise eyebrows if you spent an hour on gap-fill work, repeat-after-me drills, or grammar explanations?

STUDENT-CENTEREDNESS

One thing is certain: the very format of board games—with small groups and turn-taking—insists that your lesson moves towards being student-centered. It's not only that students have more time to speak, but they have more chances to express thoughts. The Activate games for learning American English described in this article are open-ended, eliciting knowledge, opinions, and experience from students (the games are available, for free, at <https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/activate-board-games>). These traditional games have the advantage of familiarity, simplicity, and flexibility. You don't

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need a computer or a cell phone, or even electricity. The games can be implemented in classes small or large. They can elicit speaking at all levels, from children to Ph.D. candidates. And the materials needed are minimal.

In these pages of *English Teaching Forum*, we offer four board games that you can photocopy. Other samples are freely downloadable from americanenglish.state.gov.

In the next pages, we will cover the following:

Part I: What Are Board Games, and Why Use Them?

... in which we attempt to persuade teachers that games are learning tools, not just time-eating tasks for special occasions.

Part II: How to Class-Manage Board-Gaming

... in which we show you how to set up a gaming session and manage time and resources.

Part III: How to Monitor (and Not Monitor) Gameplay

... in which we talk about the teacher's role during gameplay.

Part IV: How to Engage Students in Authoring Their Own Games

... in which we show how students can take an active role in creating their own games.

Part V: New Board Games in This Issue of *Forum*

... in which you find games that you can photocopy or print for your classes.

We hope that after reading this article, you too will advocate for the use of board games, seeing them as serious tools for language practice.

PART I: WHAT ARE BOARD GAMES, AND WHY USE THEM?

In commercial games, like Snakes and Ladders or chess, the board is made of cardboard stock



Figure 1. Rules for playing Activate games and a sample game board

In our view, this is the single most important benefit of board games: the turn-taking inherent in a board game gives all players a chance to speak.

or wood. For us teachers, the playing surface might only be a regular piece of paper that you print, or even something you design yourself.

How to Play

Each player has a token or game piece to represent themselves. Players put their tokens on the space that says START. They will use the token to track their movement through successive turns along the board. Players take turns rolling dice and moving their tokens the corresponding number of spaces.

Once on a space, they respond to the prompt there. Figure 1 shows an Activate game called “Name Your Favorite,” along with basic instructions.

Let’s say you roll a  (one). You then move your token to the first space and see the prompt: “Season.” A beginning English learner might respond to the prompt with a single word: “Summer.” And that’s fine.

A more experienced English learner might say, “Hmmm. I really like autumn, but I also like spring. So I will choose spring as my favorite. I like spring because the weather gets warm, and there are lots of wildflowers, and it’s nice to sit outside with a cup of coffee and read *Forum* magazine.”

“Name Your Favorite” appears at first glance to be designed for play by learners at the elementary level, but players’ responses can be varied in length and complexity, as you can see from the second sample response above. Thus, this game works for players of all levels. Play it with a group of philosophers, and you will get philosophical answers.

Players continue taking turns, rolling the die, and speaking, until one or all have reached FINISH.

Following are the opportunities and skills that are activated during gameplay.

Activate Group Work and Sharing

In our view, this is the single most important benefit of board games: the turn-taking inherent in a board game gives all players a chance to speak. Reticent students have as much opportunity to express themselves as students who are talkative and confident. Everyone has something to say because the prompts elicit students’ own opinions and experiences. Moreover, because the teacher is not leading the game—and probably not even playing—they do not dominate the talk.

Activate Social Skills for Young Learners

We have seen these simple board games work effectively for elementary school kids and for teachers of English with a Ph.D. Some students, especially younger learners, will want to be first to reach FINISH. According to the Manhattan Psychology Group, “Children quickly learn that these games are not necessarily about skill acquisition but more about how one may cope with change in a playful environment” (Klayman 2023).

Activate Student Grammar

Some Activate games provide high-repetition practice of grammar forms. Figure 2 shows the board game “Have You Ever . . . ? Oh, When?” Here, players offer personalized answers according to the pattern seen on every space of the game. Teachers may be quick to identify that form as the present perfect tense. But you don’t *need* to emphasize that or even mention it when preparing to play. Just get players in groups and let them play. Chances are they will read the prompts aloud and use the present perfect structure in their replies.

Activate Student Opinion

Activate board games are open-ended. That means there is no single correct answer. In fact, there really are no *wrong* answers. The revealing of players' opinions and experience using their own words is what matters.

Activate Teacher Monitoring and Assessment

Group gameplay creates an ideal condition for the teacher to monitor student comprehension and production. Students get so involved in the games that they rarely notice the teacher's presence. By circulating during play, teachers can see who is performing and who is struggling—something they cannot do when addressing the entire class from the front of the room.

PART II: HOW TO CLASS-MANAGE BOARD-GAMING

Without a class-management plan, gameplay will appear chaotic, and teachers may throw in the towel before seeing the benefits.



Figure 2. Game board for “Have You Ever ... ? Oh, When?”

Students need to know how to play the game, of course; when to start and stop talking; and where and when to get and move gaming materials. The good news is that we can organize all of this in just a few minutes.

Let's begin with the three essential tools that you will need to run a board-game session effectively in your classroom, no matter the size of the class.

- 1. Board games.** You can photocopy the games here in *Forum* or print the Activate games on americanenglish.state.gov. You can put them in a plastic sleeve, and they will last a long time. Laminate the paper, and they will last forever. Or you can draw your own games on paper or cardboard. Take a large wall calendar and repurpose it—the squares that mark each day are numbered and easy to follow: instant board-game design! Later, you can get students in groups to design their own board games.
- 2. Dice (or alternative).** Dice are not expensive and can be found readily. But there are alternatives. You can cut up pieces of paper and write the digits 1 through 6 on them (or even 1 through 4—it doesn't really matter), then have students draw a number from the tabletop or a bag. They will move the corresponding number of spaces on the game board. Or you can write the digits on a pencil that has six sides, and then roll the pencil! Keep in mind that dice are bouncy, and they sometimes roll off tables. Get a few paper or plastic cups; let players shake the die inside and then turn the cup over onto the table. This keeps the dice from flying off around the classroom.
- 3. Tokens/game pieces/markers.** Players will need small pieces to represent their journey along the board. Anything will do: a paper clip, a rock, a coin, the cap of a pen, a crumpled piece of paper, an earring, a candy wrapper, a key, an eraser. It's important that *every*

**Give instructions and demonstrate how to play
before you distribute any materials because as soon as
you distribute them, it's playtime, and students—young people
and adults—will have trouble listening.**

player puts their game piece on START before playing. Everyone gets a turn. Everybody plays.

Efficient gameplay does not just happen. It needs organization. The first attempt will take time, as students learn what is expected of them. After that first experience, you can plop down the gaming tools on a desk, and students will know what to do right away. Don't give up if your first gaming session seems noisy or a little chaotic.

Ten Steps to Optimizing a Board-Game Session

1. Demonstrate. Demonstrate the rolling of the dice and provide sample responses to several prompts from a game. Always give instructions and demonstrate how to play *before you distribute any materials* because as soon as you distribute them, it's playtime, and students—
young people and adults—will have trouble listening.

2. Create groups. Each group will play *one* board game. Make random groups: divide players alphabetically by name, date of birth, shoe size, height—whatever. It's a good idea to create new groups whenever you play board games. Each group should have a flat surface on which they will put their game board. Most often this will be a desk, but a chair is good, or a binder on someone's lap, the floor, or the grass if you are outside. Remember: You are just creating groups and establishing the place where the students will play—don't distribute the games yet.

3. Let each player in each group have a number. If a group has four players, they should identify themselves as Player 1, Player 2, Player 3, and Player 4. This is not part of the actual game, but it will make organization and management simpler. Anytime you want something distributed—as you will see in the next step—you simply call Player 3, or Player 1, or whomever, to come and get the material for their group. This way, students do all the work, not the teacher. It's much quicker.

4. Distribute game pieces, one for each player. Each player must have a game piece or token to represent their movements along the board. As mentioned above, game pieces can be just about anything small that will distinguish each player from the others—even a little piece of paper with the player's initials written on it.

5. Distribute dice (and cups). Now ask Player 1 (or Player 2 or Player 6—it

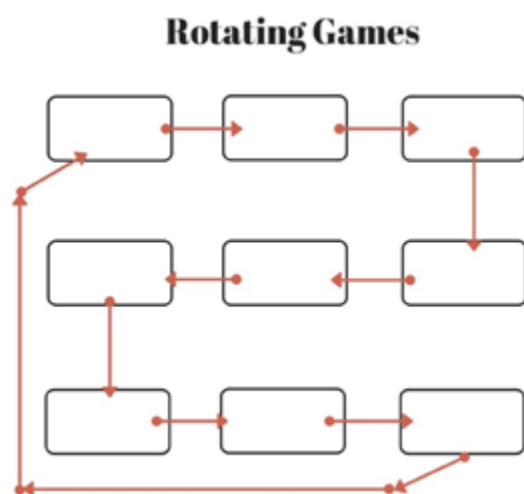


Figure 3. Possible game-rotation pattern for nine game-playing groups

doesn't matter) to come up and get a die for their group. Each group gets one die. If you have inexpensive plastic cups, each player can take one for their group at this point.

6. Distribute games. Call a different player number to come up and get one game board for their group. The games can all be the same, or they can be different. It's fun when each group has a different game.

7. Make certain all players put their tokens on START. This is important. All players should understand that they have their *own* turn and their own token. Board games are about equity; everyone should start from the same spot, together.

8. Play. Announce a time limit for the game. Ten minutes is a good length of time. You can shorten or lengthen the time contingent upon students' eagerness to play. This is your chance to circulate and listen to students as they talk about themselves. It is a great time to learn about the lives and ideas of the people in your classes. Some groups will not finish their games in ten minutes; that's okay. It means they are talking more than other groups. Some groups will finish early—but it's usually just that one player has finished. Let the others in the group finish, and if everyone is truly done, give them a new game.

9. Transition and rotate. If you are using a number of different games in

the classroom, you can rotate them. This will increase playing time, which in turn increases student practice. *Rotate* does not mean *exchange*. You need to be systematic in moving the games ahead. In Figure 3, you can see nine desks. This class is using nine different board games. The rotation goes clockwise. The first rotation might be a challenge for students, but after that, it will go smoothly. We often have students practice rotating some items before we begin gameplay.

To rotate smoothly, you must get the entire class to quickly stop talking and playing. Try a countdown to zero, or use a bell. Perhaps more effective is to appoint one player in each group to manage transitions by ensuring everyone is quiet in that group.

10. End play. When groups have played a few board games, you can draw the activity to a close. If things are going well, and everyone is speaking and no one is bored, keep going. Students are getting lots of practice!

Games in Large Classes

Getting large numbers of students to play is not difficult. It may be messy the first time you try, and it may be loud, but don't be discouraged. With each successive time you play board games, the class knows better what to do and how to play.

Figure 4 shows the materials you need to conduct board games in classes as large as 200 persons. Look how few materials you

Total number of students	Number of groups	Students per group	Number of board games	Number of dice/cups
20	5	4	5	5
50	10	5	10	10
78	13	6	13	13
100	20	5	20	20
200	20	10	20	20

Figure 4. Groups and materials needed in classes of different sizes

You have provided the conditions for students to work together, explore unscripted English, and develop their own ideas and opinions.

need. Note that even with 200 students, the materials amount to only 20 pieces of paper (your game boards) and 20 dice (which, again, might be little bits of paper made by students). You can put the responsibility of finding tokens on the groups themselves. And it's a good idea to add plastic cups, the kind that are available at every store and in which your school may serve tea.

Noise Level

To some teachers, a noisy classroom is great—it means that students are active and talkative. However, the mathematics teacher in the next room may not feel that way. Another teacher may resent your active class—either because it's distracting or because they can't get that much engagement from their own students.

Fortunately, we have a few solutions. First, try **Whisper Style**. Play the games as usual, but everyone speaks in a whisper. You must practice whispering beforehand for the Whisper Style to be effective. Try it in pairs. You can ask for one volunteer from each group to be Noise Monitor. Their job is to make sure people keep whispering. As the teacher, you can make a physical sign with “Shhhh” or “Quiet, please” written on it and move around the room, showing the sign to the louder groups.

Second, if possible, you might **Move Your Class**: take the groups someplace where they won't bother other classes. This may be a corner of the room, the cafeteria, or somewhere outside.

Third, try **Writing Board Games**. Instead of speaking their responses, students write them. Pass one sheet of paper along with the die for each turn. The player will write their answer on the paper, then show the written answer

to the rest of the group. Naturally, answers will be shorter, but that's not a bad thing, *and* we get a written record of what occurred throughout the game.

Finally, technically adept classes can try **Texting Board Games**. Players quickly form a messaging group on their phones (via WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal, etc.) and share their answers with each other using that service. Super fun.

PART III. HOW TO MONITOR (AND NOT MONITOR) GAMEPLAY

The Teacher's Role During Gameplay

A well-managed class is one where students are all on task—doing the planned activity together, efficiently. With a board-games session, all students are taking turns and talking. You have provided the conditions for students to work together, explore unscripted English, and develop their own ideas and opinions.

You are not interfering, just helping. It is such a great time for you to be a listener and to hear the stories of your learners' lives. And keep in mind, teachers can't *force* students to speak English correctly.

How Long Should Students Play?

We authors recall a time at an English camp when we introduced simple board games. Fourteen-year-olds played in groups. They were active and engaged, and they played for 80 minutes. We wondered, were we teaching enough? Should we have ended the game session after ten minutes and returned to grammar explanations, read-alouds, or textbook exercises? But the teens were giddy with excitement and success. It was evident that they had never in their lives had an opportunity to explore English so freely and for so long.

Few teachers have the freedom to allow students to play games the entire lesson. Not with the demands of curricula, principals and inspectors, and high-stakes tests. Nevertheless, no teacher should feel they are not doing their job by allowing students large chunks of class time to engage in English, to practice and polish, to take risks, and to investigate.

If an official curriculum does not allow time for students to communicate and to formulate their ideas, we must ask: Are we truly preparing our students to use English in the future?

But here is a more practical answer: students can play a game until interest starts to wane—that’s probably seven to 15 minutes. As soon as you sense a loss of interest, change things up: rotate games, move players, etc.

Monitoring for Mistakes

If every student in your class is playing the games at the same time, then you cannot monitor all correct/incorrect utterances. And you don’t need to. You already probably correct homework, exercises from the coursebook, student writing, quizzes, and tests. But with games, let students *play*. Show interest in ideas, not mistakes.

It’s play. And play is improvisational, involving risk and creativity. The teacher should refrain from interrupting or correcting students (unless of course the board game is designed primarily for producing correct language rather than the elicitation of ideas). Students get so few opportunities to express themselves in English; let them have this one.

But if mistakes during gameplay really disturb you, make notes and address them later. Better yet, design a new board game that gives high-repetition practice of those problematic forms.

Use of the Mother Tongue

Activate games provide prompts and models that support and encourage students to respond in English. Take for example, the game “Would You Rather ... Why?” (available for download

here: https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/would_you_rather.pdf). This game offers a pattern throughout: Would you rather be a baker, a dentist, or an accountant? The player might respond, “I would rather be a baker because” Students can see the structure on the game board, and they will hear it multiple times. This linguistic support discourages them from slipping into their mother tongue. We have rarely seen any group play Activate games while predominantly speaking their mother language.

PART IV: HOW TO ENGAGE STUDENTS IN AUTHORIZING THEIR OWN GAMES

Now that you have modeled and facilitated gameplay with your students, and now that you have witnessed first-hand the fun language production and interaction from these games, you are ready to let go, to give your students even more responsibility for their learning by allowing them to write their own board games. There are several approaches to turning over control of development, to provide a move from consuming to producing games while giving students greater responsibility in the classroom. The first option is for the teacher to provide guidelines that could include the topic, rules, and specific language; the second is to give students general themes to follow; the last is to leave the themes, game rules, and development open-ended. This last option provides the greatest opportunity for creativity, critical and reflective thought, and ownership of learning.

Game topics can be drawn from what the students themselves identify, from what they have learned in past units, or from cultural topics of interest, or students can select topics to foster positive change in their lives and communities (protecting the environment, promoting a positive self-image, developing healthy eating habits, etc.). Students thus learn through discovery and creativity as they try out ideas on how to make the game fun, while providing interaction on a theme or topic of importance. Students make up the rules. This is more fun for both students and teachers and provides twice the learning and opportunity



Is this thing a **die** or a **dice**?

Actually, the singular is “die” and the plural is “dice.” But this is one of those situations in English where you are allowed to be wrong. The fact is, so many people say “dice,” even for a single item, that we really can’t say the form is wrong anymore. It’s probably just as well. The word “die” is not very pretty. Our suggestion is to let students say “die” or “dice.” If the whole English-speaking world can’t decide, why should we put the responsibility on our students?

for critical thinking: students use the target language in groups to come up with their own topics, then debate and draft their own rules. Finally, students in each group model and teach their game—in English—so that other students can enjoy the game as well. An added benefit of having students create games is that it develops a growing library of board games created by each group of students.

You can download blank templates for board games or just have students draw their own on paper or a cutout side of a cardboard box. The original idea for Activate board games was started by drawing them on pizza boxes (see Figure 5).

PART V: NEW BOARD GAMES IN THIS ISSUE OF *FORUM*

We have provided four new board games in this issue of *Forum*. At the end of this article, you can find descriptions and instructions for these four games:

- 1.** What Do You Know about the USA?
- 2.** Creatures of Earth
- 3.** Classroom Break
- 4.** The Comparing Things Game

Where to Find More Activate Games Online?

You can find 11 Activate board games available for free download from the American English website (<https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/activate-board-games>).

CONCLUSION

Board games are having something of a revival, but will that continue? More research may tell us what kinds of games work best for cooperative learning, for language learning, for problem-solving, and for critical thinking.

But teachers should feel confident in bringing board games to class. People have been playing them for thousands of years. Games are not just for children, but perhaps they can help

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keep us young. As the playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote, “We don’t stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.”

Let us play.

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Kevin McCaughey is the Regional English Language Officer for Central Asia, based in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. He has played and invented games all his life, with friends in cars, on planes, and in parks, and with students in classrooms. Once, during a class in Moldova, on the spur of the moment, he invented a game called “Spill the Glove.” It was terrible—but later it grew into something useful. Kevin believes teachers have a right to take risks, fail, rethink, and improve.

That is *play*. Kevin designed many of the original Activate board games on the lids of pizza boxes during a summer camp in Aqaba, Jordan, a project organized by co-author Rick Rosenberg.

Rick Rosenberg is a Regional English Language Officer, most recently in Jakarta, Indonesia, where he works with teachers and schools and students, exchanging ideas and sharing resources. As materials manager in the Office of English Language Programs from 2010 to 2013, Rick realized the potential of games as a learning tool, was project director of the “Trace Effects” educational video game, and led teams to publish numerous materials to activate classrooms worldwide. Rick is also committed to sharing the communal joy, peace, and passion of playing the ukulele.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank South African artist Marelise Prinsloo, who designed the game boards for “Classroom Break,” “Creatures of Earth,” and “What Do You Know about the USA?”

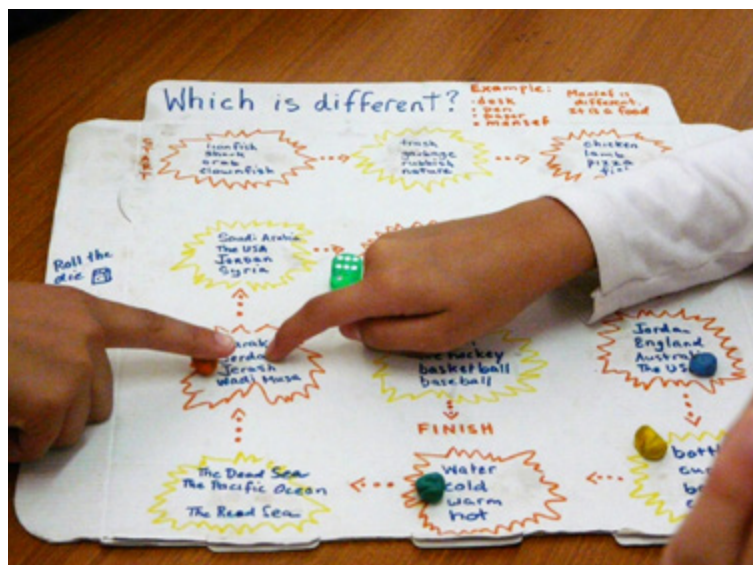
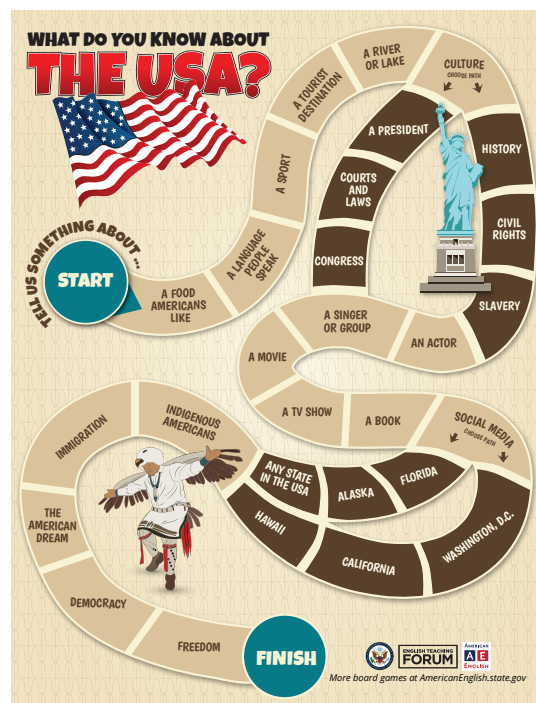


Figure 5. Playing a board game drawn on a pizza box

NEW BOARD GAMES

in This Issue of *Forum*

What Do You Know about the USA?



In this game, players roll the die, move along the board accordingly, and then respond to a prompt about the United States. Students can say something—*anything*—about the topic in question. For example, a player who rolls a five will land on “A RIVER OR LAKE.” Here is a range of possible responses:

- *I don't know any lakes or rivers in the United States.*
- *The Mississippi is a river in the United States.*
- *The United States is a big country. It must have many rivers.*
- *I think people fish in the rivers and lakes.*
- *Early explorers traveled along rivers.*
- *There are several lakes in the north called the Great Lakes.*
- *I traveled to America when I was young, but I don't remember much. I can tell you about a lake in my country though. Would you like to hear?*
- *There is a beautiful lake in the state of Oregon called Crater Lake. It is an ancient crater made by a meteor and is now filled with water.*

Each player can say anything according to the prompt. They can even say, “I don’t know anything about this.” The possible responses from students are endless.

Purpose: To get students talking

Creatures of Earth



This game offers four ways to play! That's right—you can play this game four different times in your classroom.

On each space, players will see three animals or creatures.

Variation 1: Say anything. This is similar to “What Do You Know about the USA?” In this case, the player will choose one of the three animals on the space and say anything about that creature.

Let's say you are on the space with OCTOPUS, LEMUR, and SPIDER. You might choose LEMUR and say, “This is an animal from Madagascar. I think it usually lives in trees.”

Remember, you can say anything! It can be scientific, personal—anything. You can even say, “I don't know what a lemur is.”

Purpose: To get students talking

Variation 2: Which is different? Let's use the same example: OCTOPUS, LEMUR, and SPIDER. How is one of these creatures different from the other two? Here are three sample responses:

- *The octopus is different. It's the only one that lives in the ocean.*
- *The spider is different. It's the only one that can make a web.*
- *The lemur is different. It's the only one that is a vegetarian.*

Again, there are hundreds of answers for *each* creature.

Purpose: To practice and develop critical-thinking and compare/contrast skills

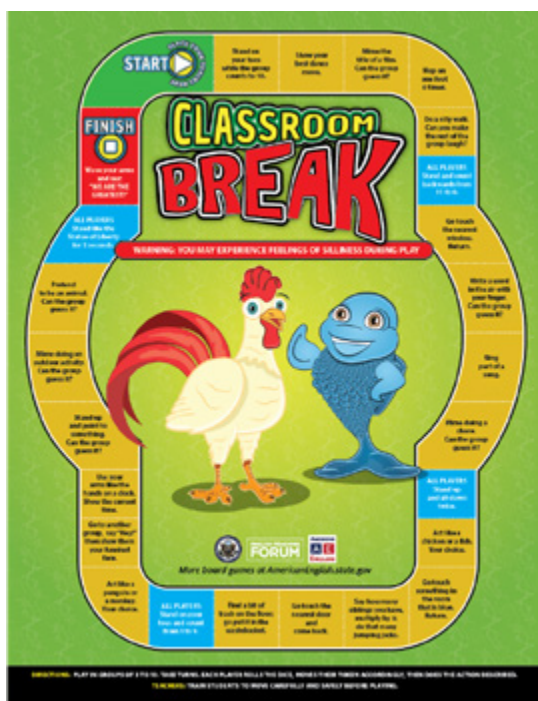
Variation 3: Rank. Rank the three creatures according to how much you like them. If you land on the space with BABOON, SLOTH, and LADYBUG, you might say, “Of these, I like the ladybug best. Ladybugs are pretty, and they don't hurt you. In second place for me would be sloths. They are just so unusual. In third place is the baboon. They are cool and funny-looking, but I might be afraid if I met one.”

Advanced students can choose the concept by which the creatures are ranked. For instance, you can rank them by how dangerous they are, which make the best pets, or which are the most endangered.

Purpose: To increase awareness about our neighbors on Earth

Variation 4: Which would I be? Choose one creature listed on the space where you land and say why you would choose to be that one, rather than one of the others.

Purpose: To express and explain preferences based on an imaginary/impossible situation



Classroom Break

Every class needs to have breaks—sometimes even in the middle of the lesson. This game allows students to practice reading comprehension and other basic skills. But most importantly, the game serves to get your students out of their chairs for a few minutes and move around. This movement is good for the mind and the body.

Remind students to move safely.

And if you think this only works for kids ... no. We have had great success with English teachers playing this game!

Imagine that you had soccer camp, and you wanted to practice dribbling the ball. You ask for one student to stand up and dribble the ball. What are the others learners doing? They are watching. If we want them to be good soccer players, if we want a successful team, everybody gets to *do*, not just watch.

That is a principle of Activate games: everybody plays.

Purpose: To allow everyone to take a break, move around, and have fun



The Comparing Things Game

Each player makes a comparative statement—expressing their own opinion—using the adjective on each space *and* the nouns or noun phrases directly under the adjective.

When players land on a space, they choose two of the three things and compare them, using the adjective in that space. For example, a player who lands on the first space (with the nouns MATH, BALLET, and LITERATURE and the adjective INTERESTING) might say, “Ballet is more interesting than math. I’m terrible at math. Besides, movement is more interesting than numbers.”

Playing again:

Several weeks after you play, you may wish to play again, but this time, you can practice superlative constructions. For example, a player who lands on the first space (with the nouns MATH, BALLET, and LITERATURE and the adjective INTERESTING) might say, “Of these three things, ballet is the most interesting because it is physical and immediate, like human art.”

Purpose: To practice giving opinions and making comparative statements