

# Ten Good Games for Recycling Vocabulary

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## Introduction

Learning is remembering. If we respect this axiom, the review and recycling of new language items will be critical if they stand a chance of becoming readily accessible in long-term memory. In fact, students do the majority of their forgetting shortly after the lesson and then the rate of forgetting diminishes. To avoid this lexical vanishing act, one solution offered is to follow the 'principle of expanding rehearsal'. This idea suggests that learners review new words shortly after they are presented, and then at increasingly longer intervals. To stimulate long-term memory then, ideally, words would be reviewed 5-10 minutes after class, 24 hours later, one week later, one month later, and finally six months later. Teachers might even consider doing a quick review of words and phrases which were introduced just a short while ago in the lesson. But unless these new language items are noticed and understood on multiple occasions, they will likely fade from memory and be forgotten.

Experts these days concur that learners actually need as many as 5 to 16 'meetings' with a new language item in a variety of contexts before it can be truly learned and activated for genuine use. Teachers then can help solidify new words in long-term memory by creating regular opportunities in their learning program that encourage students to make form-meaning connections of new vocabulary items. Both repetition and retrieval practice of new items are key. In my experience, this is best achieved by organizing fun, competitive, and motivating vocabulary games and activities which adhere to the expanding rehearsal mentioned above. Over the past decade, I've put together a variety of sure-fire and engaging vocabulary recycling activities drawn from a number of sources: resource books, teachers, trainers, and some of which are of my own invention. Give them a try, and have your students start remembering today.

## 1. Taboo (aka Hot Seat)

Divide the class into Teams A and B. Team A sits in a group on one side of the classroom, Team B sits on the other side. Bring two chairs to the front of the room so that when seated, a student is facing his or her respective team and their back is to the blackboard or white board. One member from each team sits in their team's chair. The teacher writes a word, phrase, or sentence on the board. The students in the chairs mustn't see what's written on the board. Once the teacher yells 'go', the teams have one minute, using only verbal clues, to get their seated teammate to say the item written on the board. The only rule (or taboo) is that they MUSTN'T say the item written on the board, in full or part. The first student in the hot seat to utter the word scores a point for their team. When the round is over, two new team players are rotated into the hot seat and a new item is written up. The first team to score X number of points wins.

Variation: To ensure a slightly quieter and less chaotic game, the teams can take it in turns. Rather than two students in the hot seat, only one member from each team plays at a time. The teacher as usual scribbles a word on the board and gives the team one minute to get their teammate to say the item. If the hot-seated player manages to say the word, the teacher quickly writes another item on the board and so on until the minute is up. The team scores a point for every item they manage to say within one minute.

## 2. Memory Challenge

Put the students into pairs or small groups. Give them a time limit (e.g. 3 minutes) and ask them to write down as many words, phrases, and/or expressions as they can from the last lesson on topic X. The pair or group that can remember the most items wins.

**Variation:** To add a spelling accuracy component, teams can also earn an extra point for each correctly spelt item.

### 3. Last One Standing

Give the class a topic (e.g. food, clothes, animals, things in a kitchen) and ask them to stand up, in a circle if possible. Clap out a beat and say, one, two, three, followed by a topic-related word. After the next three beats, the next student in the circle gives a word related to the topic, and so it continues. Anyone who can't think of a word or repeats a word already said has to sit down and it's the next person's turn. The winner is the last one standing.

### 4. Pictionary

Divide the class into Teams A and B. Team A sits in a group on one side of the classroom, Team B sits on the other side. One member from each team goes to the board. The teacher flashes them a word, phrase, or expression written on a piece of paper. The students have one minute to get their respective team to say the item only by drawing pictorial clues on the board. Written words, verbal clues, or gestures are forbidden. The first team to say the word scores a point.

Variation: The teams review their notes from prior lessons, and collectively come up with a list of items the other team will have to draw.

### 5. Bingo

The teacher writes up 10 words, phrases and/or expressions on the board. Each student chooses any 5 of the items from the board and writes them down. The teacher then selects one of the items at random (bits of paper from a hat, for example) and offers a brief definition or synonym of the item but does not say the word itself. If a student thinks they have the word the teacher described, they tick it. When a student ticks all of their words, they shout BINGO!! The first student to shout BINGO wins the round. Additional rounds can be played with different sets of words.

### 6. Outburst

Divide the class into Teams A and B. The teacher assigns each team a particular topic (e.g. sports, vehicles, things in an office) which is to be kept secret from the other team. Each team meets for 5 minutes in private and collectively draws up a list of ten items related to the topic. After the lists are made, the game begins. The teacher tells Team A the name of Team B's topic. Team A then has one minute to try to guess the items on Team B's list (hence producing a noisy outburst). The members of Team B must listen and tick the items which Team A manages to guess. For every word Team A guesses correctly, they score a point. For every word they miss, Team B gets a point. After the points are recorded, it's Team B turn to guess Team A's list. Additional rounds can be played with different topics assigned by the teacher. The first team to score X number of points wins.

### 7. Concentration

Divide the class into small groups. Each group is given a set of cards which are spread out on the table face-down. The sets are made up of two kinds of cards: word cards + definition/picture cards. Students in turn pick up a card, turn it over, and try matching it to its corresponding card. If there's no match, the cards are returned to their original place on the table and play passes to the next student. If a match is made, the student keeps the pair and tries to make another match. Once all the cards are matched, the winner is the player who has matched the most number of cards.

**Variation:** Rather than using word + definition/picture cards, students can match the first and second half of common phrases, expressions, idioms or other multi-word lexical items; e.g. "have" on one card, "a good time" on the other card.

### 8. Scrambled Letters

Write up eight words with their letters shuffled (e.g. eicscen for science) on the board. When the teacher says 'go', the students, individually or in pairs, endeavor to untangle the words as quickly as they can. The first student or pair, to do so wins. The teacher can then quickly run through each of the scrambled letter groups on the board, eliciting information about each word or concept. Tip: Don't make them too difficult.

Variation: Phrases, expressions, and idioms larger than 2 words can also be used (e.g. "you're having when time flies fun" for "time flies when you're having fun".)

## 9. Q & A

Write up two separate word lists on the board; an A list and a B list. Assign half the class the A list and the other half list B. Each student takes each word from their list and contextualizes it into a coherent question. Ideally, the question should demonstrate some understanding of the word (e.g. Is your family very hospitable?, NOT What does hospitable mean?). If students need help, they can consult the teacher, their notes, or their textbook. When the students have finished writing their questions, As and Bs pair up and exchange their list of questions. The students read each question and write an answer to the question on the same piece of paper. In their answer, they need to use the same word that is underlined in the question. After the answers are written, the papers are exchanged again and read by the original student.

example:

Student A's question: Are there any skyscrapers in New York City?

Student B's answer: Yes, New York City has several skyscrapers.

## 10. Categories (aka The Alphabet Game)

Divide the class into 3 or 4 teams and assign a secretary for each group. On one side of the board, write down six categories related to the current topic or syllabus of your course (e.g. countries, sports, jobs, movies, furniture, verbs, things that are round). To start the game, the teacher randomly selects a letter of the alphabet and scribbles it onto the board. Each team must then work together to quickly find a word for each of the six categories that starts with the chosen letter. The first team to complete all six categories shouts "stop!" The class then stops writing, and a member of the team goes to the board to fill in the categories. The teacher then checks each word with the class and also elicits what other teams had for each category. If the quickest team has filled in each category correctly, they earn one point for their team. The teacher then chooses a different letter and another round is played. The first team to score X number of points wins.

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