

C'est fantastique: Learn French with fun games



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As all early years educators know, playing games is a very serious business indeed. Behind each game, there is a great deal of psychology which can lead to a great deal of learning.

Every teacher and nursery nurse knows that games make a difference to children's learning and that choosing the right games is an important part of planning lessons.

You can teach anything in game form: English, Maths, PE. The same applies to languages. Here are a few suggestions to help you teach French using the children's best-loved games and activities.

Find the fun

Mary Poppins summed it all up when she said 'find the fun and here's your game'. Fun is what attracts the children, provides excitement and makes them want to play the same game again and again.

The children will learn better if they enjoy themselves and they will become more responsive as a result. Even the shy ones will be more willing to take part as they will relax and feel under less pressure to perform. So fun is what you should concentrate on first of all.

A lot of language teachers decide on what they want to teach and then think up ways to make it fun. In my opinion, if your first task is to find the fun element and then decide what you wish to teach, you will be more likely to succeed. This is because you will have given priority to the approach and this approach will determine whether the children enjoy the activity or not.

Valerie Nicholls has some great ideas to teach French (or indeed any other language) through fun games. Why not have a go?

You can change the linguistic content as many times as you wish, your approach will remain the same and this is what the children will respond to.

Once they have tuned into your method, they will accept anything you wish to teach them. These few hints will guarantee a fun time:

Think about what they enjoy doing

Children aged three to six enjoy pointing, closing their eyes, guessing, lifting things, opening bags and boxes, searching, holding, chanting. They also like the idea of magic tricks and surprises.

Ignore what they cannot achieve

Whispering is difficult for a three-year-old, but great fun for a six-year-old, for instance.

Make sure everyone is a winner

As you know, three-year-olds will not be able to understand the concept of losing, so it is better to choose games where no one loses. The children's anticipation will be high and the expectation to win is already half the fun!

Keep games short

A minute at the most, especially if your game involves moving about a lot, such as treasure hunts. Very young children are impatient, so it is better not to choose games where they have to wait for their turn for too long. Make them respond as a whole group instead wherever possible. More reserved children will do much better when they can blend within a group.



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Above: Try to involve all the senses, not just hearing and sight

I often see children move their lips and laugh when they take part with other children when they would not normally wish to speak or make eye contact on their own.

Keeping games short also enables you to play many games in a row. The children will be very excited at the variety and the dynamics changing games creates.

Use lots of props, pictures and sounds

Small children cannot abstract ideas, they need a permanent visual reference. Using props will stimulate the children and referring to something visual all the time will help them learn by association.

Choose your pictures well, make them clear and choose funny ones to attract giggles and comments. Sounds can also be associated with words. When I teach 'les mains' (the hands), we clap hands. When I say 'les mains' in subsequent lessons, the children clap without being asked to do so: they have associated the word with the sound of clapping hands.

Let them lead the games

Offer the children the chance to lead the games. They will enjoy being 'teacher' by doing small tasks (giving out cards, hiding

props). The four to five-year-olds I teach enjoy being in charge and a favourite game is giving an object to each member of the group and calling its name. We all have to show our matching object as quickly as we can.

Leading songs is also a very valuable activity, children will benefit greatly from singing on their own and listening to each other. They gain confidence in doing so and they will always volunteer for another round of songs and rhymes.

Add comedy to your teaching

I always get things wrong when I am being asked to perform by the children. Not only does it make them laugh, they also correct me, which, from a linguistic point of view, is very worthwhile. So, if you are temporarily forgetful, muddled up or cannot hear properly in order to attract repetition, the more fun your game will be, so long as you can keep the excitement under control.

Involve the children's senses

Stimulating the children's senses is a dominating aspect of my teaching method. Although it is easy to involve hearing and sight, what about the other senses? The more involved the children are, the more they will retain.

This involvement can be maximised if the senses are stimulated, either individually

or, better still, together. It is more difficult to use taste, but even if you pretend to eat the food, it is already a good start and a worthwhile activity. To teach my three and four-year-olds the word 'merci' (thank you), I pretend to give them ice-creams.

They get their favourite ice-creams, say 'merci' and eat them. They give me lots of ice-creams too, so I have to say 'merci' many times. They never forget the word 'merci' after this. Or the ice-creams for that purpose: one child asked me weeks after this game if I had anymore ice-creams!

If you read a story featuring a cake or cooking activities, encourage the children to smell the food that is being prepared. Miming stories provides many opportunities for stimulating the children's senses.

Use a variety of materials

To stimulate the children's senses, use a variety of materials:

- Sight and touch: bags (magic bags, feely bags), boxes (the type of boxes you buy in card shops – shiny ones especially), large colourful foam dice, hoops (for colours games), lotto games, games pieces (large dice, large counters), props they can easily handle and fit in a bag. Choose all sorts of textures for the props (plastic, wood, fabric). Large colourful pictures and cards
- Hearing: sound tapes, whistles and bells.
- Smell: fruits and food essence bottles, various scents and perfume bottles.
- Taste: with parental permission, use safe food.

Game ideas

Combine fun and stimulation of the senses. To maximise the children's learning, find a fun approach that involves as many of the children's senses as possible and introduce or practise some French words at the same time. Here are some ideas:

What's in the bag?

I mentioned earlier on that children enjoy bags as well as feeling with their hands. I use a feely bag to teach all sorts of

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Above: Naming what is in the feely bag

vocabulary (food, numbers, animals and so on, even colours).

Take a feely bag and choose words and matching props which the children already know because they cannot see what they are feeling. Go through the words as a quick revision and place the props into the bag – no more than five, perhaps just three with very young children. Ask the children to name what they can feel, taking it out to show the other children, and putting it back. Sight and touch are very easily paired.

What's my colour?

Young children find it difficult to think of a colour for others to guess. You can guess colours with a feely bag. Place bricks of various colours in the bag, having said the colours together first. Ask a child to take one object in his or her hand and hold it tight inside the bag. With your help, the other children try to guess what the colour of the object is and the object is pulled out slowly. The children can also lead the game, safely handling all the material thus using more than one sense at the same time. Start with three colours.

What's the picture?

Guessing games are a very interesting way to understand children's perception and their ability to recognise.

Find a picture (on any topic) and hide it behind a flap. Slowly reveal it and let the

children tell you what they see. All sorts of words will come out and when they have the correct answer, introduce the French word and encourage the children to chant the word again and again, which they may do over 10 times until the picture is revealed, with much excitement. Let the children be the teacher, giving them the chance to handle the material.

Treasure hunts

Being physically involved in a game is very appealing to most children. Treasure hunts are a favourite of the three to four-year-olds I teach every week in nurseries. Use the idea of searching for things for many topics (colours, numbers, clothes, food).

You can pretend you are in the jungle. Place some fluffy animals around the room (always check the children know the words you need) and walk across the forest, cutting the thick vegetation as you go along. Tell the children you need their help to spot the animals. Name them one after the other and see who spots them. As you spot the animals, stroke them so as to stimulate their sense of touch. A background tape of jungle noises will add a bit of drama.

What's in my basket?

Use various items with a strong distinctive smell: a bar of soap, toothpaste, coffee, food and so on and place them in a basket. Cover the basket and ask the children to close their eyes. As they close their eyes, gently make them smell the items and ask what they smelt. When they tell you, show them the items and name them. Place the objects back into the basket. At the end, recap on the words and let the children handle the objects if it is safe to do so. Name them again.

Use this game as a revision of vocabulary or as a way to introduce new words. Five-year-olds enjoy this very much and remember the words much better for having been stimulated in so many ways.

What's that noise?

You may have a tape of sound effects which you could use in various ways. Stimulating hearing will have great benefits beyond the


linguistic activity itself: it will help children concentrate.

Select a few good household sounds from a sound tape (cutlery, tap or toilet flushing, for example) and link it with a lesson on the house. Play the sounds and ask the children to link the objects with a room in the house. This works well with five-year-olds.

You can also use the same tape and name the objects you hear. Use the same principle with animals sounds, but instead of listening only, you could ask the children to mime the animal as well, therefore involving them further in movement.

Conclusion

The children's interest is in the mystery, the guessing right, the finding, the unexpected. They will tell you lots of words (French and English) as they try to find out what they are feeling, where the animals are hidden, what the colours are, and this is when their learning takes place. Make the most of their enthusiasm and slip in French words when they drift back into English vocabulary. They will absorb them by repeating them naturally.

Mix together learning and fun and create an emotion for the children to benefit  even more from your lessons.

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A few tips

- **Fun should come first, then think of what you wish to teach**
- **Here are a few tips to make your lessons more engaging: make sure everyone is a winner; keep games short; use lots of props, pictures and sounds. Also offer children the chance to lead the games and put some comedy into your teaching style**
- **Try to stimulate all the children's senses, not just sight. Mixing sight and touch is easy**
- **Aim for enjoyment, not perfection**