

THE MOST FUN: A SERIES OF GAMES
AND PLAYFUL ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHING THE
COMPARATIVE AND SUPERLATIVE FORMS OF ADJECTIVES

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By presenting and practicing a grammar point through games, a situation is created and made real by the urgency of competition. Much of the use is nonsensical, granted, for I am a member of the nonsensical school, though not strictly an orthodox one. A soupcon of nonsense is fun, and ordinarily students rally around what is fun. I must confess to wanting to be a popular teacher and trying to have popular classes, largely because many students have been turned off by English with mechanical and repetitive lessons; further, they often hold some rationally anti-Gringo attitudes which I do not want directed at me. And though this fun-and-games approach may appear frivolous, especially to colleagues deadset on meaningfulness in its most rigid form, its end is the common one of all serious language teachers: to encourage improved communication.

Of course, occasionally one finds a group of students in which a grim and deadpan attitude predominates. This is their privilege. One must be sensitive to their mentality, and shift one's tactics accordingly.

The activities described herein, which I presented at the Oaxaca Mexico Conference, are meant to illustrate the type of activities that can be used to teach and practice many other aspects of a language. They were developed while I was teaching in general English courses in Michoacán and at the University of Chiapas, where the highly flexible program, payment for time devoted to materials development, as well as contact with gifted colleagues, boosted my inventiveness. Now that I am primarily teaching ESP, I find that the same type of strategies work in a reading comprehension course, especially for augmenting vocabulary and training recognition of the structures common in specialized reading.

1. Handwriting analysis.

The blackboard is divided vertically in three parts. Three students are asked to go to the blackboard, ostensibly for a dictation. Any dictation of four or five sentences can be used, but I usually give one that begins like this:

"The worst day in George Washington's life was the day that he died..."

When they finish, I ask questions like these:

Who is neater, Rosa or David?

Who is the neatest?
Who is the messiest?

...more artistic? ...the most artistic?
original, economical, eccentric, relaxed, careless, better-organized,
etc.

I also ask the students, "What can you say about Rosa from her handwriting?" And about the other two writers as well.

2. A card game.

72 rectangular cards are needed. The most convenient way to acquire these is by cutting small-size index cards in half, resulting in a card of approximately $6\frac{1}{2}$ by 10 centimeters, a handy size for shuffling and dealing.

Print clearly on each card: 34 nouns, 32 adjectives in the comparative or superlative and 6 prepositional phrases indicating place.

Examples:

| NOUNS | ADJECTIVES | PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES |
|---------------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| jazz | farther | in Mexico |
| marimba music | sweeter | in the world |
| Robert Reford | wiser | in America |
| Mrs. López Portillo | deeper | in this Solar System |
| a bucket | dirtier | in the movies |
| a glass | handsomer | on television |
| the Pacific Ocean | more fattening | |
| Mars | quieter | |
| Pátzcuaro * | the strongest | |
| Aconcagua | the funniest | |
| Mount Everest | -the laziest | |
| the Concorde | the highest | |
| the Boeing 727 | | |
| a pig | | |
| a snail | | |
| mezcal | | |
| beer | | |
| the Pope | | |
| Eduardo Manzano | | |

* I select some items from the students' own experience. While in Chiapas I used the names of towns there: San Cristóbal, Cintalapa.

Similar groups of cards can be made with vocabulary for students in specific areas.

Instructions for playing:

From two to ten people may play with this number of cards. Six cards are dealt to each player, the remainder of the pack turned face down. The purpose is for players to form two books (or sentences) of three cards each. They may add the words "is" and "than". (A glass is more breakable than a bucket.) No other words may be added.

The play is begun by the dealer, who discards a card first and then draws a new card from the pack. Subsequent players may draw either from the pack or the exposed discarded cards. Only when a player has his hand complete -- with two correct sentences -- and it is his turn, may he put down his cards. He then receives six points, and the deal and the first turn go to him for the next hand. No player may put down his hand until every player has had at least one turn. Score is kept, and the other players receive points for any sentences they may have: i.e., three points for each book. It is convenient to keep the score accumulatively for each hand played: 3, 12, 15, 15, 18, etc.

During the game a language is practiced which is relevant to the activity: It's your deal. Whose turn is it? Shuffle better! You have to discard. She has seven cards! That isn't a sentence. What does "snail" mean? I won!

The game is appropriate on many levels and for many age groups. I have also made variants to practice "can" and "may" and the passive voice.

3. Game with alliteration and superlatives.

Students sit in pairs or by threes. Each group is given from ten to fifteen slips of paper or more if needed.

Write an example such as this on the blackboard: "What did Fred find? He found the finest fish. He found his fattest friend.

Questions of this type, having a verb and noun, or other combinations starting with the same letter, or are asked orally.

Who used Ulysses' unguent?

(The ugliest Uruguayan.)**

What is Peter going to paint?

Who brought the booze?

Where will the baby be born?

What is Catherine carrying?

Participants are to write answers, following this formula, on their slips. The slip is handed to the teacher, who corrects it. Regardless of spelling or grammatical errors, if the adjective, noun and idea are all right, the writers

** Warning: You must have possible answers in mind, because if you cannot think of them readily, the students certainly will not be able to.

are given a "chit" as a reward. These will be counted later to find the winners. Good chits are tabs from beer and fruit juice cans.

Some advantages of this: It is fun for the teacher to think up the questions, and the students are often capable of clever answers. It is also good experience for students who practice translation, since alliteration makes this impossible.

4. Comparison of two similar but different drawings.



It helps here if you can draw or know someone who will help you draw. Use as your model an interesting magazine ad with a variety of elements therein to compare. I was inspired by a "Strega" ad, but it should be no problem to find another such suitable one. For use in class, these pictures were produced on a full-size piece of posterboard.

To introduce the matter, I ask questions for the students to answer.

- In which picture is the man older?
- ... younger?
- ... are the glasses fuller?
- ... emptier?
- ... is the sky darker?
- ... is it windier?
- ... is it later?

and so on. Then I give sentences for them to comment "true" or "false". Students also ask questions and make sentences for "true" or "false" answers. On a subsequent day for follow-up, I bring the pictures back, divide the class in two teams and have each team write questions about the pictures for the other team to answer.

This can be done in a beginners' course.

5. Popularity contest.

The teacher writes categories on the blackboard for which the students will choose winners from the class. The students are asked to contribute other categories.

The person with the most expressive eyes.

... the most beautiful hair.

... the biggest feet.

... the prettiest legs.

The one who speaks the best English.

... the most Spanish in class.

... who comes late to class most often.

The funniest person, ... quietest ... most mysterious...

After votes are counted the teacher brings inexpensive gift-wrapped prizes for winners in certain categories: shoe polish for the biggest feet, candy for the thinnest, a comb for the most beautiful hair.

6. Comparison between a raw and a hard-boiled egg.

The students are to identify the differences (heavier, lighter, more transparent, more opaque, etc.) and to try to figure out why. Some interesting horse-play is possible with the teacher attempting to throw both eggs for the students to catch, while they try to calculate the hazards. (A broken raw egg is equivalent to flunking.)

7. A comparison between Mexican and American men.

Usually only the women in the class are permitted to participate in this. The men are told to sit quietly.

The teacher directs, dividing the board in this fashion:

| | AMERICAN MEN | MEXICAN MEN |
|------------|--------------|-------------|
| Handsome | | X |
| Attractive | | X |
| Polite | | X |

| | AMERICAN MEN | MEXICAN MEN |
|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| Intelligent | | ? |
| Cultured | X | |
| Athletic | X | |
| Fat | | X |
| Tall | X | |
| Honest | X | |
| Humorous | | X |
| Prolific | | X |
| Affectionate | | X |
| Hard-Working | X | |

(Students are asked to contribute adjectives for comparison).

The teacher does not ask questions, but asks the students to make sentences according to the items on the chart. She marks the answers on the chart.

Curiously enough the students I have worked with have had fairly convincing ideas about both of these groups. This game has produced animated reactions, particularly among the male students, who have had difficulty controlling themselves, protesting frequently and loudly IN ENGLISH. Prohibition is a very effective stimulus in this case.

8. Group discussions according to topics on cards.

The class is divided into groups of four or five students. Each group is given a numbered card with a topic for discussion according to the points listed and whatever others the students might care to discuss. A secretary in each group notes the responses and reports on these in a subsequent class.

CARD ONE. TASTES REGARDING FOOD.

- Who (in the group) is the fussiest about what he eats?
- Who likes the most unusual foods?
- Who eats the smallest quantity?
- Who eats the most?
- Who ate the most recently?

Other topics with the questions on cards:

| | |
|-----------|----------|
| hometowns | politics |
| names | noses |
| shoes | clothes |

This may seem long and exhaustive, but even so it falls short of all that is needed for the student to master this small portion of the English language. And nowhere have I mentioned the introduction of these forms of adjectives nor the

role of a textbook.

Briefly, I introduce them with cardboard-mounted pictures clipped from magazines: cold place, colder place, the coldest place; lazy man, lazier man, the laziest man -- a series of ten sets -- not to be used all on one day, but with some extras for follow-up.

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