Competitive Exercises in Language Instruction

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Competiton is defined as the striving between two or more individuals, groups or teams to attain an object, position, award or prize through engagement in a contest or match usually governed by a set of fixed rules. It is solidly in the sense of this definition that competitive exercises reside.

Through the act of competition to win, competing students not only draw on everything they have within, but additionally learn from the efforts of their co-players. In a very subtle manner, competition brings together several attributes important to enhancing learning and remembering.

Competition:

Generates Excitement: Without question, competition in any form - games, sports, business, sibling rivalry, etc. - generates excitement among both the participants and the observers. Furthermore, it is contagious. As a result, in some form the entire class becomes actively involved in the exercise.

Focuses the Brain: Competition requires a maximum amount of input by which, often instinctively, decisions are made and actions are taken. Concentration on the task at hand is a necessity for effective competition. Loss of focus is the surest way to play the wrong card, make the wrong move or be in the wrong position on the field. Hence, brain activity focuses on the objective and the means of attaining it. In this process the student makes more connections between the input, the mental activity of analysis, and arriving at the solution.

Enhances Memory: Excitement results in physical and chemical reactions that originally protected us from predators and other perils, and prepared us for those to be experienced in the future. Much the same as the force of learning by touching the hot stove versus being told to beware, meeting a lion on the savannahs was a deeper and more permanent learning experience than being told of the danger. This holds true in the environment of the classroom where competition produces "positive stress" from excitement that reinforces the learning experience and memory. Think of your most vivid memories and your deepest learning experiences. What was the intensity of the moment that created them?

Motivates Participation: Most people do not want to be left outside the group, especially a group involved in an interesting activity. For many, the urge to compete is the motivator to participate. Thus, students are more likely to be an active participant or an active and supporting observer when playing to win or cheering for their team.

Engenders Teamwork: The process of competition fosters the development of teamwork and mutual support. In the goal for the team, team members act to assist each other. It is not a question of having or not having an answer or solution; it is who has an answer. Teamwork provides the structure whereby students learn from each other.

Every student on the team will not have every solution; but if even only one has the solution, it is shared with and learned by the others. Furthermore, the group works as a team to filter the answers, deciding which are valid, and why or why not. Thus, students share and learn analytical techniques while arriving at answers.

Stimulates Risk Taking: Working within, and with the support of the team, students are among their common competitors. They are equals who are striving for victory to be shared by all. They are not alone before the teacher and classmates. Thus, they are less hesitant to take the risk of putting forward a solution.

Creates a Fun Environment: Finally, an enjoyable environment fosters learning more than a dull environment. Competition is a fun and memorable experience. Competition unites each of these factors into a cohesive, multifaceted dynamic in which learning is a challenging but also fun activity of exploration and discovery rather than mechanical memorization detached from context and usage.

COMPETITION is well suited to elements of language learning in the area of vocabulary development, fundamentals of word construction and differentiation of meaning, and understanding idioms. In each of these cases a very narrow but unquestionably important component of the language can be explored with a minimum set of rules to govern the competition. Furthermore, it is through the process of competition that rules and methods employed by these elements are illustrated and learned.

Following are several exercises that encompass the elements noted above. While designed for use in English language instruction, except for the exercise dealing with phrasal verbs all are applicable to most other languages, especially those within the Indo-European group.

Descriptiveness Challenge
— The objective is to expand and develop a broad and deep vocabulary of descriptive words.
— The format utilizes visual cues from a real object.
— Memory is strengthened through the immediate relationship between the specific traits and the words employed to describe them.

Process
— Identify 3 or 4 separate desks at the front of the class; one for each team. It is necessary for the desks be located to enable the line of students of each team to easily access their desk in rotation, and to prevent teams from seeing what others are writing. On each is a sheet of paper.

— Select teams composed of five to eight students. Each team forms a line starting a couple steps away from their assigned desk.
— In a place easily seen by all teams, place a covered three-dimensional object. The object can be a figurine or sculpture, a complex tool, a stuffed animal; something of interesting and varied shape, color and texture.
— Instruct the students that within a given period of time they are to produce a list of words describing, in whole or in part, the form, color, texture, size and other attributes of the object you are about to uncover. One at a time, each member of the team adds a word to the list. No talking or sharing of words between team members is permitted.
— Expose the object:
  • The leading student in each row steps to the desk, scans the list to avoid duplication, clearly writes their new word on the list, and then rotates to the end of the line.
  • Following students continue to rotate in a similar fashion.
  • If after scanning the list a student cannot add a word, he or she goes to the end of the line and the rotation continues.
  • Teams continue to rotate until time is called.
— Call time:
  • Verify the answers and declare a winner.
  • See which words were used by all or most teams.
  • Discuss words found only on one or two of the lists.
  • Ask if anyone has thought of additional words to add.
  • Present for discussion words that you can add.

Word Gradation Championship
— The ability to employ words along a graduated scale adds depth and subtlety in the use and understanding of a language.
— Comparative and superlative forms are one option. However, the thrust of this exercise is to differentiate the meaning of a particular concept through a vocabulary placed along a graduated spectrum.
— A good thesaurus is the best resource to have at hand for this exercise

Process
— Select and describe a simple theme to illustrate the exercise. For example, what words describe the degree of temperature? As words are suggested by the

class write them on the board in the order they are suggested. Use hints or suggestions to bring forth as many words as possible before you add any extras.

Hot, Cold, Boiling, Freezing, Searing, Icy, Frigid, Broiling, Roasting, Chilly, Chilling, Cool, Cryogenic, Frosty, Sizzling, Biting, Arctic, Tropical, Scorching, Wintry, Nippy (of course this list is not comprehensive)

Then ask the class to rank the words from coldest to hottest. For example:

Cryogenic, Arctic, Biting, Frigid, Icy, Freezing, Wintry, Cold, Frosty, Chilling, Chilly, Nippy, Cool, Hot, Tropical, Boiling, Sizzling, Roasting, Scorching, Searing, Broiling

Are the center and extremes easiest? But what debate arises between *nippy* and *chilly*, or *scorching*, *searing* and *broiling*?

Note: Doubles, such as might be given for the rate of motion – *snail paced, light speed* and *warp speed* – are acceptable; but not the use of qualifiers such as *very fast* and *quite fast.*

— Form two teams, each of three or four students. Locate them at separate desks or tables where they can easily work together but apart from each other. Of course the entire class can also be broken into teams.

— Provide each team with an ample number of small slips of paper large enough to write a single word. Hold more in reserve in case needed.

— Give them the time they have for the exercise. 5 minutes is good, but you can adapt according to your class and your expectations. For example, with an advanced class you might hold lightening rounds of only 1 or 2 minutes to develop the word lists.

— Announce the theme plus provide one obvious word that fits this theme. This word should be near the center of the theme so they can expand the scale in both directions.

— Start the clock. They start by writing words that match the theme; one word on each slip. At some point they must begin arranging the slips in scale order, then sliding new words into the scale, and possibly rearranging the order as they proceed.

— Announce the half-way point. At this point you might remind them they need to arrange the slips in grade order. Announce the time again at the 1 minute mark and 30 second mark. Then count down the final 10 seconds.

— At the finish:
  • The teams come to the front board to write their word list on the board with the highest intensity at top to the lowest intensity at the bottom.

  • Question any words that you feel do not belong. Ask if they can defend it.
  • Identify differences in ranking between teams for the same word or words, and ask why each placed it where they did.
  • Ask the full class if they have any additions.
  • Open a class debate about the words and their order.

Examples (none is exhaustive).

Rate of Motion, from the prior exercise, can also add:

Snail paced, Sluggish, Languid, Leaden, Jetting, Racing, Quick, Inching, Fast, Rapid, Hasty, Swift, Hurried, Plodding, Leisurely, Crawling, Fleet, Speedy, Light speed, Warp speed, Trans-warp speed

Degree of Fear:

Apprehensive, Nervous, Scared, Terrified, Horrified, Petrified, Timid, Anxious, Hesitant, Dreading, Trepidatious, Frightened, Panicked, Startled, Shocked, Stunned, Alarmed, Trembling, Quaking, Shivering, Shuddering, Jumpy, Tingling, Aghast

Suggestions of other themes with samples in the scale.

Theme	From >>	To
intensity of light	*pitch black*	*blinding*
intensity of sound	*inaudible*	*deafening*
intensity of work	*effortless*	*Herculean*
frequency	*never*	*eternally, unending*
appearance	*ugly*	*radiant, angelic*
rain conditions	*misty*	*torrential*

Playing with Suffixes Tournament

— By understanding the function and meaning of suffixes, through their adept addition to known and understood root verbs and nouns, one has the ability to construct a significant vocabulary.

— Furthermore, the reverse of the prior point is that the understanding of suffixes provides a technique by which to decipher new, not fully understood words, where one understands the root word and the meaning of the appended suffix or suffixes.

— Thus, the objective of this exercise is to enhance the ability to construct words from a given root word by the addition of one or more suffixes that change its part of speech, function and meaning.

Process

— Competition can be between pairs of teams of 3 to 5 students each, or divide the full class into several teams. Depending on how you form teams, you can have a single competition with the full class,

multiple rounds between pairs with playoffs, a single competitive exercise each day between pairs, or other some variation.

— Running the tournament
  • If pairs compete, have them at the board or flip chart so the class sees their work progress, but neither team can see the work of the other. If the full class is engaged, teams work at desks well separated from each other.
  • Set a specific period of time for each match.
  • Within that time period each team is to create new words from the given root word only by adding suffixes, and suffixes to suffixes.
  • The addition of "-s" for plurals or the first person singular of verbs is not allowed because a new word or part of speech is not created. Similarly, adding "-ed" to form the past and past participle of a verb is not a new word. "-ing" is usually excluded, but can be included at your option.
  • Once again competition is limited to a set amount of time.
  • At the end, words are checked, discussed by the class, and a winner is declared. There often is a debate about "new" words that are created. Does the formation properly follow the rules? How is it used? What does it mean?

— To be successful, created words must possess understandable meaning. This can be part of the discussion after each contest. Or, to be judged correct or for bonus points:
  • each new word must be identified as to its part of speech, and/or
  • each new word must be properly used in a sentence that clearly illustrates its meaning.

— In regard to the above, you might suggest teams create a chart with headings for the parts of speech under which new words are added in the appropriate column as they are created, such as below.

Example: IMAGE

This list might not include all possibilities.
  • Other excellent root words include:

Constitute *Continue* *Convene* *Elect*
Govern *Person* *Sign* *System*

  • The best word I have discovered to date is "Sense". From it can be derived some 90 different words and meanings. This count does not include a number of specialized technical, medical, psychological and philosophical forms. Test yourself. See how many you can create.

Verb	Noun	Adjective	Adverb
Image	Image		
		Imagable Imaginal	
	Imager Imagery Imagism Imagist		
		Imagistic Imageless	
Imagine	Imaginant Imaginer Imaginarian Imagineer Imagination Imaginarium		
		Imaginational Imaginable	
	Imaginability		
			Imaginably
Imaginate		Imaginary Imaginative	Imaginarily Imaginatively

Phrasal Verb Ordeal

— Phrasal verbs present one of the most perplexing aspects of English, even to native speakers of the language.
— These expressions tend to be a composite of short, simple words used in every day speech. Though meaning may be difficult to decipher, there is nothing grandiose or pretentious in their nature. However, a very large percentage of phrasal verbs can be replaced by single word equivalents of different derivation. They are part of the mixed heritage of English vocabulary with a matching of basic Anglo-Saxon words with richer sounding words derived, or absorbed whole, from Latin and French.
— Here are some examples from the probably hundreds that exist:

abide by	*obey, follow*
account for	*explain*
ask for	*request*
back down	*retreat, withdraw*
back out of	*quit, renege*
bank on	*trust, depend, rely*

cut back on	*reduce*
dawn on	*realize*
get at	*attain, reach*
get by	*survive*
get in on	*join, participate*
get into	*enter, involve*
get over	*heal, recover*
get through	*survive, finish*
give away	*bestow, donate*
look in on	*visit (briefly)*
look into	*examine, investigate*
look on	*observe, spectate*
look out for	*mentor, protect*
look over	*inspect, examine*
look through	*scan, examine, search*
push back	*repulse, rebuff*
push on	*continue*
stand by	*support*
stand for	*represent*
take after	*resemble, copy*
take in	*absorb; learn*
take off	*depart, leave*
take out	*date*

Process

— Create at the front of the class two or three teams, each of three or four students; or divide the entire class into several teams.

— Prepare a collection of phrasal verbs with single-word equivalents. There are a number of sources to be found on-line, though it might require you to supply the matching single-word equivalent.

— You read a phrasal verb to the contesting teams.

— Any student in a team who thinks they have the answer signals by raising their hand or other means you define. But, they do not shout the answer.

— The first to respond is acknowledged to state their answer. If correct, they earn a point. Furthermore, they can earn a point for additional words that qualify as a substitute.

— If incorrect, no points are deducted, and the second to have signaled can answer, or you open it again to the remaining teams.

— Keep score on the board where all can see the positions of the teams against each other.

— Play for a set period of time, to a set score total, or until a set number of phrasal verbs are employed.

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