Language Games: Innovative Activities for Teaching English

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The Business Apprentice

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INTRODUCTION

Current simulation and gaming theory supports active learning as a motivation stimulus (Cummins, 2000). Simulation and gaming theory, which was started as a mathematical method of interactive decision making, may be used in language learning contexts where the language of negotiation and decision making is sought. It is commonly used as a type of competition where the ultimate response or best product is desired. In the language learning environment, it is a good tool for encouraging and motivating students to put their best foot forward.

One of many avenues to promote active learning, The Business Apprentice game is based on the use of current reality television programming to inspire and motivate participants to compete for the best marketing presentation of an everyday consumer item. The main purpose of the game is to focus on presentation skills. Additional benefits include cross-cultural comparisons of group dynamics and exposure to idiomatic language.

Learning Objectives

- Negotiate in groups to determine a product and create a marketing and advertising scheme.
- Create presentations and develop necessary language functions and vocabulary to make a presentation.
- Become aware of pronunciation skills within the context of a real-world presentation.

CONTEXT

The authors’ teaching environment is a graduate business school with students in their early 20s and older. The learner level is typically intermediate to advanced or near native. This is in an English as a second language (ESL) setting at a private university in the southeastern region of the United States.
Getting Started

Inspired by the popular American reality television show *The Apprentice*, this game provides students with an opportunity to be creative, practice team dynamics, and hone presentation skills. Students are asked to create a marketing and advertising campaign for a product and present their concept using production techniques such as video and audio recordings, slideshow presentations, and personal presentations. Students are given 1–3 weeks to complete their project. Depending upon class time, several episode clips from *The Apprentice* are used throughout the course to provide listening comprehension and a context for the task. We use the following clips from the first season of *The Apprentice*:

- The beginning of the opening episode, “Meet the Billionaire,” which depicts the concept of the game, the organization of teams, and execution of the first task. This clip introduces the idea and provides a backdrop for the game, although we do not tell students about the game details until later.

- The final part of “Sex, Lies and Altitude,” where each team presents its marketing campaign for an airline. This clip is the basis for the task the students are to prepare.

This activity is ideally suited to undergraduate and graduate business students with at least high-intermediate language proficiency. It has been used as a capping activity after students have done several previous assignments aimed at improving their presentation skills and building vocabulary. Students work in teams of 3–6, depending on class size. Each team chooses a team leader and a team name.

The assignment is to create a marketing and advertising concept for a product to be marketed by a corporation. The team must define a target audience, distribution channels, and price point; select a brand name; and produce a 30-second television advertisement and a print advertisement (see sample assignment sheet in Appendix A). Each team has 10 minutes to present its concept, during which each member of the team must have a meaningful speaking part. The presentations are judged by a panel of business school professors, and the winning team is awarded a prize.

This game encourages students to work in the team format, which is a mainstay of business programs. Students also practice valuable language used in negotiation, argument, expressing opinion, compromise, agreement, and disagreement. This task also provides students with an opportunity to research a product, determine an advertising message, and present their concept in a creative framework.

This has been a very popular activity with both students and judges and allows mastery of language skills within a realistic business context. It also allows par-
Participants to explore cross-cultural comparisons of team dynamics, especially those related to leadership.

Before Game Day

1. Students are given the assignment. If accessible, an episode from The Apprentice, in which teams present marketing concepts, can be used for reference. Each team chooses a team leader and picks a team name.

2. Each team selects a product and begins the process of determining the concept for marketing. The only restrictions are that it must be a tangible product, it cannot be a product or service from any of the television episodes, and it must be a completely original marketing concept.

3. Presentation skills and public speaking skills should be reviewed and practiced to help students master their techniques. If time allows, teams can also be given an opportunity to present before a nonjudging instructor for feedback on presentation skills, language structures, and pronunciation.

Game Day

For large classes, it may be necessary to run several preliminary rounds of presentations to narrow the number of teams down for a final competition. Presentations, which are made to the class and a panel of judges, are judged based upon presentation skills, use of language, and creativity (see Appendix B). It is important that access to more advanced production techniques not be a factor in judging; thus students without access to video cameras can present a concept in storyboard format and not be penalized.

Variations

The activity can be limited to a specific product or opened up to allow students to select the product. Depending upon the time and scope of the class, a number of expansions on this activity are possible. For example, students can analyze and discuss popular current advertising campaigns, make comparisons of advertising in different cultures, or research and discuss advertising bloopers. Teachers may even wish to invite guest lectures from business school professors on marketing- and advertising-related topics. We have had a great deal of success with this game and its alternate uses and expansions.

REFLECTIONS

The students’ feedback on this activity has been overwhelmingly positive. This game provides a relevant and authentic business theme for language mastery set against the backdrop of a popular reality television show.

The process of negotiating a team concept and a team name alone is a valuable
exercise in preparing the students for the American classroom culture and dynamics. Even the students with the least advanced language skills in the group are incorporated into the final presentation, often boosting their own confidence in their ability to perform favorably in another language. Students learn valuable visual as well as audio presentation skills and use them in a real-life scenario.

Students learn important skills for making their own presentations and, possibly more importantly, they gain valuable experience in group dynamics and peer critique (giving and receiving). By working with their peers, students are vested in the entire presentation and not just their own parts of it. They begin to master many of the subtleties of transition and organization. Because they must present their concept in a set timeframe, they also learn techniques for concise, clear communication.

This game provides a challenging but achievable task for students across various language levels. The resulting presentations build language and presentation skills as well as confidence and never cease to impress the students themselves as well as the judging panel. The activity has become a highlight of the business school, with various faculty and staff requesting to be included in the final judging each year. Because of the wide range of language skills and presentation skills employed, as well as the authenticity of the task, this activity prepares students for success in their classes.

**REFERENCE**


**Additional Resources**


The Business Apprentice


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Susan M. Barone is a sociolinguist whose research focuses on interactional language in professional settings. She has created discipline-specific programs in business, law, engineering, nursing, and medicine at the Vanderbilt University English Language Center, in Nashville, Tennessee, in the United States, where she is currently director.

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**APPENDIX A: SAMPLE STUDENT ASSIGNMENT SHEET**

The Business Apprentice Project Due Date: __________

The Business Apprentice Project is one in which you and your team members will be given the opportunity to practice the language structures and functions of negotiation, decision making, and presentation. This task is based on a popular U.S. television program where an apprentice is selected for a high-level position in a company. Your team is to select a product to add to the consumer product repertoire of a corporation and create an original and compelling advertising campaign for the corporate marketing advisors.

Your team will present its proposal on the last day of class in a 10-minute presentation that should include:

1. A marketing concept
   a. What is the product and why is it good for the corporation’s product portfolio?
   b. Who is the target market and what are the key points of distribution?
2. Price

3. A sample print advertisement

4. A sample TV advertisement (either on video or a slideshow storyboard)

Time will be closely monitored and you will not be allowed to exceed 10 minutes. All members of your team must participate equally in the presentation, both in terms of time and substance. A panel of faculty judges will evaluate your final presentations, and the winning team will receive a prize. The judges will evaluate the following factors:

- presentation skills
- originality of your concept
- quality of the peripheral materials (easy to read, grammatical accuracy, professional appearance)

You must turn in a copy of your slideshow or video as well as a hard copy of any written materials that accompany your presentation.

Be creative! Be original! Enjoy! Good Luck!

**APPENDIX B: SAMPLE EVALUATION RUBRIC**

**Apprentice Task Presentation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team Name __________________________</th>
<th>Product: __________________________</th>
</tr>
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</table>

**Presentation Skills:**

- Effective Speaking: 1 2 3 4 5 (BEST)
- Smooth Transitions/Flow: 1 2 3 4 5
- Organization: 1 2 3 4 5
- Overall Effectiveness/Time management: 1 2 3 4 5

Subtotal (20) __________

**Concept/Content:**

- Creativity: 1 2 3 4 5 (BEST)
- Print Ad: 1 2 3 4 5
- TV Ad: 1 2 3 4 5
- Overall Impact: 1 2 3 4 5

Subtotal (20) __________

Total Score (40): __________