

# Cultural Learning Through Playground Games

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## **Abstract**

Culture is often seen as country-specific but extends beyond geopolitical borders. The instructional language of playground games and the engaging play used in many games adds to EFL learners cultural and linguistic understanding of others. With little or no specialized equipment required, a sense of fair play and collaboration, improvisation and leadership skills make playground games from all over the world a shared bank of activities from where we should all contribute and draw. This article explores the commonalities and pedagogy involved behind playground games and the benefits of sharing and learning them.

## **The Culture of Playground Games**

Playground games are normally played by children in the sanctity and safety of the grounds of their school with little or no oversight by adults or teaching staff. Rather, this type of learning is instigated by the students themselves and involves the sharing of rules and etiquette between players often of a range of age groups, free from the bounds of racial differences, ethnicity, religious beliefs or any other constraint that often stops adults from interacting with each other and learning through play. Not limited to children, playground games can be played by anyone at any age as long as they have the mobility to take part. That being said, it can often be the case that the games can be adapted to include even those with mobility or other issues in order for all to share in the fun of the game. With little or no specialized equipment needed for most playground games the limitation of wealth is stripped away and an even playing field allows everyone involved to be an active participant of equal standing.

While playground games differ from school to school, region to region, and also group to group, the basic structure of most games remains consistent and affords students the opportunity to engage in the play even when they do not know the language initially, giving them time to absorb information over time with repeated instruction from playmates. The culture of these games are such that teachers often do not play any part in the games and players themselves teach each other in a very fast paced environment under immediate pressure but with little or no penalty or risk. The awards that can be gained from the learning and play are often immediate and can be incredibly rewarding, although not always. The games which are usually high-paced, short and fun, also add to the excitement, and motivation for players to actively engage in the play.

Each country -and regions within- has variations of the same games that are commonly known around the globe making them easy to understand even when the languages used may be different from their

mother tongue. Those games which are alien or new to the participants can normally be learned quickly through gesturing, short language structures and the biomechanics of the games themselves. By acting out gestures and teaching each other rules and limitations real learning can take place, in a fun environment, and often the impact can be very impressive. (Bafile, 2008)

There is no record of the exact history as to where these games dates back to but there are mentions of play in early North America in the journals of the great explorers when the “men divided themselves into two parties and played prison base, for “those who are not hunters have had so little to do that they are getting rather lazy and slouthfull” (Lewis & Clarke, 1804). Previous to this were games played during the renaissance which may or may not be recorded in different museums and libraries around Europe (Leibs, 2004). According to Bishop & Curtis (2001) “contemporary folklorists have tried to construct a notion of tradition as a dialectical process within culture (cf. Toelken 1979) – in other words, a process of both continuity and change, stability and variation, dynamism and conservatism, both through time and across space”. We know this term now more commonly as cultural heritage, of which we now know a huge expanse of information.

Games that school children play around the world range from the traditional Maori game of Ki-o-Rahi, played in New Zealand; Kabaddi in Sri Lanka, Tag (UK), Dodgeball (USA), Kho Kho (India), Hajla (Syria), Shadows (Ireland), Daruma-San (Japan), Oonch Neech (Pakistan), Jonah (Uganda), Core Corre La Guaraca (Chile), Luta De Galo (Brazil), Lukson-Baka (Philippines), Road Tennis (Barbados) to Three Tines in South Africa. These games are described by the United Nations International Child Education Fund (UNICEF) as “traditional games” of which they note “The accessibility and expressiveness of traditional games help children think, express and expand their ideas about our world, and support cognitive and social development” (Children's Games of Nomads, 2018).

## Commonalities in Playground Games

Often these same games are played around the world under different -national or regional- pseudonyms but still share a similar common structure or base of play. The smaller differences are case by case, adapted based on the local language and often differ only by a small degree. Perhaps the most commonly known playground game is “Tag” which has many variants but exemplifies the global simplicity of the idea of any playground game in that it costs nothing, can be played anywhere by anyone, has no limitation on the number of times it can be played, and can be adapted into many different forms with multiple changes even within the turns of the game by allowing players to adjust and seek new agreement on how to keep the game fresh and invigorating.

This game “*involves two or more players chasing other players in an attempt to "tag" or touch them, usually with their hands. There are many variations; most forms have no teams, scores, or equipment. Usually when a person is tagged, the tagger says, "Tag, you're it!"*” (Wikipedia)

Continuing with the example of “Tag” we can see that there are multiple variations of the game worldwide, and the longevity of the game is testimony to the value with which it has been regarded by so many for so long.

Standard variants of the game include but are not limited to: British Bulldogs, Bull Rush, Chain Tag, Duck-Duck-Goose, Freeze Tag, Kiss Chase, Last Tag, Octopus Tag, *Oni Gokko*, and more. Team tag versions include but are not limited to: Cops and Robbers, Zombie Tag, Manhunt, Prisoner's Base, What's the time, Mr Wolf?, Ringolevio, Kabaddi, Kho Kho, and Tag Rugby or Touch Rugby. And also variants requiring some equipment, e.g. Blind Man's Bluff(a blindfold), Computer Tag(multiple computers), Flashlight Tag(a flashlight), Fox and Geese (rope or snow), Kick the Can (an empty can), Laser Tag(laser guns), Marco Polo (a swimming pool -or equivalent- and swimwear), Muckle (a ball), Paintball (compressed air guns and paintballs), Sock Tag (a sock and some flour), Flag football (fabrics) and Spud (a ball). (Tag(game) Wikipedia)

In this type of game there is sometimes a safe zone, or some other place of sanctuary where players can rest within the game and gather their thoughts momentarily. This accommodation is especially important for those who are learning the game in order for them to have some cognitive processing time to consider the rules and the situation at hand before entering into the action again. Again, the rules of the area can be agreed in advance or explained mid-game between players. Players may also make themselves safe from being tagged by employing the use of a truce term. Sometimes indicated by the gesture of crossing fingers or folding arms, where players can let others know that they, the player, cannot be tagged at that moment, allowing again momentary rest and thought processing. This defacto barrier also allows players to communicate again (mid-game) without the need for interruption. This extension may only come into play if the players agree it as a standard and a sense of fair play continues to be in place (*Tag (game)*, *Wikipedia*). The game may also include an area of penalty for those who break the rules or are caught in the game, with the opportunity for release and continuation without serious penalty or shaming. In different cultures the idea of a penalty may be frowned upon, however, it would be very common for a safe zone to be welcome in most.

When we consider the rules involved with gaming and playground games we do well to note the description of rules as given by Hughes (1999)

“We commonly think of rules, and perhaps especially game rules, as being rather rigid and explicit, as primarily prescriptive and proscriptive in function (Shimanoff 1980). This contrasts with the perspective commonly adopted by those who describe social life in terms of rules, and who think of rules as highly ambiguous, largely implicit, and essentially productive or generative in function (Harre and Secord 1972; Hymes 1980; Shwayder (1965))”.

## **The Instructional Language of Playground Games (Modals)**

Most playground games begin with the leader explaining the rules of the game with others, including the limitations and sense of fair play with which the spirit of the game should take place. The language of rules is deeply entrenched in modals including phrases like; you have to, you must, you cannot, you need to, you should, you shouldn't, you don't have to, you can't, you mustn't, etc. With these modals we can employ all the rules of the games and the parameters within which the game should take place. Those parameters normally include an agreement between the players of: the extent of the field of play, the time duration of

the game, the terms of disqualification, the specifics of any requirements to facilitate the success of the game, and confirmation of integrity that the rules will be strictly adhered to.

These modals are used to express others ability to do something (can/can't), express obligation or advice (must/should/have to), make requests with permissives (could/may/might) as well as describing players habits (e.g. We would often play over there). Linguistically, the instructional language is of most interest; and pedagogically the student centeredness nature of the gaming is most important. The language that players teach each other can expand players knowledge of synonyms and antonyms as instruction is clarified and confirmed repeatedly until a fair enough knowledge of gameplay is attained. Foreign or regional language learning also expands to encompass different dialects and pronunciations. Examples of this can be seen when players contest their understanding of the local rule and reaffirm and restate exact instruction in order to avoid confrontation and speedy recovery to game continuation. In the cases of possible cheating or game misconduct players will use the language of probability and often reported speech. These can be used when we want to say how sure we are that something happened / is happening / will happen. These modals of deduction or speculation allow us to express a degree of certainty or probability to the reportage of events which may have taken place.

In physical education, the Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) pedagogical strategy has attracted significant attention from theoreticians and educators for allowing the development of game education through a tactic-to-skill approach involving the use of modified games (Chow, Davids, Button, Shuttleworth, Renshaw & Duarte, 2007). However, some have proposed that as an educational framework, it lacks adequate theoretical grounding from a motor learning perspective to empirically augment its perceived effectiveness.

## **The Benefits of Sharing**

In New Zealand Bauer & Bauer (2003) found that during playground games that students language “showed a high degree of creativity: there was lots of evidence that children play with language. This is not necessarily the kind of creativity recognised and rewarded in the classroom, but it shows a degree of linguistic awareness and an enjoyment of language jokes which is there to be tapped”. They went on to explain that “some of the words which show variation are the names of basic playground games, but there are also likely to be differences in the words which children use to express feelings, and also in the range of senses of certain insult words (Ibid).

As reported in a study by Willett (2013) their analysis showed “that in their play and game design process, children draw on and perform particular social positions on the playground” which means that blending of language skills and social skills occurs quite clearly during gameplay and cultural development of the players is attenuated. The socialization that occurs during playground games is not limited to children and has room to be quite dynamic in other age groups as well.

Schecter & Bayley in (2004) stated that “language socialization research has traditionally focused on how young children are socialized into the norms and patterns of their culture by and through language” but that “research in this tradition has typically conceived of the process as relatively static, bounded and

relatively unidirectional. This suggests that measurement is quite difficult to do and the dynamics of the social group, the climate -the rapport- involved between players, and ways of categorizing the situations are perhaps undeveloped. They went on to show that “language socialization is a dynamic and interactive process that extends throughout the lifespan as people come to participate in new communities, define and redefine themselves according to new roles, and either acquiesce in or challenge the definitions and role relationships formulated by others” (Ibid). In simpler terms, one might suggest that there is learning happening between people, learning happening of people themselves, and learning of the dynamics of the culture within which the games are being played.

## Recent Developments

In its guide to children's games, the United Nations children's agency declare that sports-based games are a chance to be fun and active but also "a way of learning important values and life skills, including self-confidence, teamwork, communication, inclusion, discipline, respect and fair play". This is clearly manifest in Asia in the 2018 World Nomad Games as they testify that “development, popularization and promotion of ethnocultural traditions of nomadic people and ethnoses of the world at the international level as part of global ethnocultural movement in the era of globalization (World Nomad Games, n.d.). These games are more competitive in form and do not conform to the simplicity of playground games for the most, however some of the games do maintain these simplistic characteristics and the sense of play and cultural exchange.

Conversely, in North America governmental groups are trying to legislate and formulate more rigid parameters within which they wish to promote gameplay and exercise for a number of reasons. Mainly, they wish to promote the idea of individuals being physically literate and capable of maintain youthful health without the need for expensive equipment or maintenance. It would appear that the lifestyle change back to an age of more activity is being sought by many parties in order to shape a more robust, healthy nation, both mentally and physically.

According to America’s National Standards for Physical Education (SHAPE) The physically literate individual:

*Demonstrates competency in a variety of motor skills and movement patterns.*

*Applies knowledge of concepts, principles, strategies and tactics related to movement and performance.*

*Demonstrates the knowledge and skills to achieve and maintain a health-enhancing level of physical activity and fitness.*

*Exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others.*

*Recognizes the value of physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction.*

All of these facets one would assume are already inherent in children of school age who would partake in playground games with verve and enthusiasm. These and other campaigns and agencies are often found around the globe in response to different national health issues and can be reactionary more than facilitatory. Bafile (2008) asked the question “In light of the prevalence of childhood obesity, should schools limit the physical activity of kids during what is often their only "free time" for play at school?”. The simple answer should be “no” but in any litigious society with a culture of making claim against

institutions there is cause for concern and caution.

There is minimal risk involved with playground games due to their nature but there is of course -as is evident in any daily activity- the opportunity for injury or harm. Of the game “tag” the president of the US National Association for Sport and Physical Education Craig Buschner said that “*Tag games are not inherently bad ... teachers must modify rules, select appropriate boundaries and equipment, and make sure pupils are safe. Teachers should emphasize tag games that develop self-improvement, participation, fair play, and cooperation.*”

In Maryland, USA, part of the school curriculum includes such playground games in their physical education classes and is blended into their programs to encourage physical activity. The Society of Health and Physical Educators is the nation’s largest membership organization of health and physical education professionals who set the standard for health and physical education in the U.S. (SHAPE America). With little or no specialized equipment, a sense of fair play, leadership, collaboration, improvisation and language skills, playground games remain to be a shared bank of activities from where we can all learn culture, language and the wonders of societies from all around the world. These games, our heritage, may one day be recorded as intangible assets by organizations like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) who describe heritage as “our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration” (World Heritage, 2018).

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