

10 BEGINNING-OF-THE-YEAR ICEBREAKERS AND GAMES {IN THE WORLD LANGUAGE CLASSROOM}

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Icebreakers can be tricky in the World Language Classroom. They reflect the tension we feel most days, probably: how can we stay in the target language, connect with our students, communicate effectively, and make the whole process enjoyable? No wonder we're tired! In those first days, I do think it's important to establish a couple of things:

- We speak in the TL as much as possible. This isn't a class *about* Spanish; it's a class mostly *in* Spanish.
- I care about you. You're safe here: safe to try new things and make mistakes.
- My job is to make sure Spanish is comprehensible, and yours is to pay attention and stay with me.

As a semi-introvert, most icebreakers terrify me- all the ones that make you remember everyone else's name, think of a clever adjective, etc. I really think it's important to do low-pressure icebreakers those first days, especially if you're trying to do so in another language. Games that build community, look for things in common, and ease everyone into the target language can be a great way to start. Hopefully these will help!

Icebreakers and Games for Any Class:

1. The Glob Game

This is a low-pressure get-to-know-you game. Call out (perhaps show) a term like "eyes," "number of siblings," or "favorite subject" and the students with the same answer stand in a group. If two "globs" form over the same things, they should join. If students are upper-level, use words they know in the target language (TL). If they are new, use pictures to make it comprehensible.

This is good for getting to know each other and finding out things in common. (From [Cult of](#)

[Pedagogy](#))

2. The Cognates Game I

Mark one side of the room as “I like” and the other as “I don’t like” (in the TL if desired). Call out cognates (like “chocolate” and “animales” for English-Spanish) and student stand on the side of the spectrum that shows how they feel about it.

Alternatively, put a line down the middle of the room. Students stand on the side that matches their opinion/answer.

This game, of course, only works for languages that have cognates. It’s a good way to show students they can understand many words right away, even when they are brand-new to the language.

3. Strip Bingo

This one is more innocuous than it sounds! If you are planning to start off with an “About Me” presentation, or an intro to the syllabus or procedures, spice it up a little by with this one. Choose about 5-7 key words from your presentation, words that will be repeated frequently. Write those words on the board, and tell students to write them down in a horizontal row on a piece of paper, but in a random order. As you give your presentation, tell students they may tear off the key words as they hear them, but ONLY if the word is on the outer edge. If the word is blocked by a word to the left or the right, it can’t get torn off. The first student to tear off all the words gets a prize. (From from Martina Bex at the [Comprehensible Classroom](#).)

4. Games with Music in the TL

These don’t require speaking- they’re just for fun. Ending the first day of class with games played to really good music in the TL just makes everyone feel good about class, and leave with a good feeling about the language!

- *El Hueco*: This one was a favorite *dinámica* back in Peru, and requires no speaking. Arrange chairs in a circle, and everyone sits down. Make sure there is one extra chair. Start the music. Two students will have an empty chair between them, and they need to grab each other’s hand, and run and grab another students to sit in that chair. When the music stops, whichever two people have a missing chair are either out or get a “punishment.” In Peru, the *castigos* were pretty embarrassing; I’d suggest something light like high-five the teacher or count 10.

- *Musical Chairs*
- *Islands*: Set out several newspapers around the room. This is similar to musical chairs, except that when the music stops, everyone tries to stand on the newspaper. Each time, the newspaper gets folded in half, and whoever isn't touching the paper is out. There will be as many winners as there are newspapers. Obviously, this is more physical, so use your discretion!

5. The Cognates Game II

This is another version of the cognate game. Use my [PPT bracket outline](#) to project onto the board, and list cognates on either side. Do a tournament to see which cognate beats all the other ones. Start on the outside, and have students vote for the top or bottom choice by going to the left or right side of the room. This game is fun because you can introduce cognates and get to know one another as well.



If desired, use the TL and make it comprehensible with pictures, so that you can have more useful terms for finding out student preferences (hobbies and pastimes, for example). If you are calling out the terms in the TL and pointing to them, you can stay in the TL the entire time, and they will understand you. This is either great review for returning classes, or a good way to show new students they can understand the new language, even on the first day.

For Returning Classes:

6. Human Bingo

Prepare a board that has questions your students know from previous years. Remember to keep them simple, and include picture clues if necessary. The students must go around the room asking questions to their peers. (*Do you have a cat? Is your birthday in September? Are you a new student?*) If someone answers yes, they write their initials down in that spot. Whoever gets Bingo first wins.

7. If You Were on a Deserted Island...

Give this classic question a language twist by telling students to think of three things they'd bring to a deserted island- but only using words they remember from the year before in the

TL. Everyone writes down three things, and you collect the cards. Have everyone guess who wrote which card.

8. Two Truths and a Lie

Students write two truths and lie about themselves in the TL, on a note card. They write their name at the top, and give them all to you. If their language isn't perfect, you can correct errors and make the sentences comprehensible as you read them out loud. Don't say the name, but let the class first guess who wrote the sentences. Once everyone understands them all, and knows who it is, have the students guess which sentence is a lie.

Games in English:

9. The Circumlocution Game

Ok, this is basically Taboo. Prepare slips of paper with words on them, and divide the class into two groups. Set a timer (1-2 minutes). One student draws a slip of paper, and tries to get his/her team to guess the term without saying the word itself. After the word is guessed, the next team member draws a word, and so on until the timer goes off. Count the slips up and give those points to the team.

Use this game to talk about circumlocution, talking "around" a word you don't know in to avoid resorting to English. Establishing an expectation of circumlocution is a big part of staying at least 90% in the target language.

10. The Salad Game

Write celebrity names or any terms on slip of paper. Students sit in a circle. Divide the class into 2 or more teams by counting 1-2. For each team's turn, set a time (1-2 minutes).

1st round (verbal clues): The first team begins. One student draws a slip of paper, and describes the person or word to his or her team without saying the actual name. As soon as the team guesses, the next team member draws another slip and play continues until the timer goes off. Then the other team gets a turn. Once all the slips are used up, tally the points for each team.

2nd round (one-word clues): This round is the same as the second, except that the students must only use one word to get their team to guess the celebrity or word.

3rd round (actions): Similar to the first and second round, except that only gestures may be

used as clues.

This game would work to explain circumlocution, and also to talk about proficiency levels. You can discuss how being a “novice” might mean only being able to communicate in isolated words or phrases (and/or gestures), and moving up in proficiency will mean putting words together and then communicating through more complicated sentences.