

Barrier Games

Barrier games are an effective and fun way to help pupils practise new vocabulary, practise communicating clearly and precisely, practise asking questions to clarify or gain more information, and develop listening skills.

Barrier games involve children in sharing information through spoken language. Some games involve giving instructions or describing; others involve children in gaining information through questioning each other. Children sit either side of a 'barrier' (which may be a large book, or ring binder etc.) so that they cannot see each other's materials.

Games can be played with one child either side of the barrier, or pairs of children. It is helpful if an adult is part of the activity, at least initially, to model the language required.

Usually, the adult (or one of the children with the adult's help) begins by giving the pupil(s) on the other side of the barrier a series of instructions, pausing after each instruction to allow the listener(s) time to respond to the instruction. The instructions often involve placing objects or pictures on a grid. At the end of the game, the barrier is lifted so that the players can check that their materials look the same. The game is then repeated with the other child(ren) giving the instructions.

The activity can be made as simple or as difficult as you wish, so it can be adapted to the individual needs of the pupil.

E.g.

Basic: 'Find the dog. Put the dog on number one.'

Complex: 'Find the dog with the long fluffy tail. Put it next to the small brown dog.'

Barrier games can be designed which prompt children to develop and use a range of language: the language of description, classification, comparison, sequencing or ordering; directional or positional language; mathematical vocabulary; asking and answering questions; giving and following instructions.

Barrier game activities

- Drawing characters, imaginary creatures, scenes, shapes or maps
- Constructing - using materials, bricks or lego
- Creating patterns - drawing, using mosaic or gummed paper shapes
- Sequencing pictures
- Spotting differences in two similar pictures
- Creating models with dough or clay
- Dressing dolls or figures
- Placing pictures, shapes or objects on a numbered, coloured or blank grid or a background
- Sequencing and threading beads
- Identifying a person (as in 'Guess who?')
- Identifying an object
- Creating and describing scenarios with play people, animals, mini-beasts, dinosaurs or vehicles
- Giving and following or tracing directions on a map
- Matching pictures and labels

Tips

- It is beneficial to have at least one good language model within the group or as one of the pair.
- It is important to ensure that all children involved have opportunities both to give the instructions (or descriptions) and to follow them.
- Emphasise, to the child who is giving the instructions, the need to allow their partner(s) time to respond before moving on to the next step.
- If it is possible to group or pair children who share a first language, it may on occasions be beneficial for children to play the game in their first language before they attempt to play the game in English.
- Games can be played with a child in the role of observer, who listens out for and reports back on the language used in the game. Observers could be provided with a tick sheet listing language to listen out for.