

2013

## Vocabulary Games for the Beginner Interpreter Classroom

Fatima Cornwall

Boise State University, [fcornwal@boisestate.edu](mailto:fcornwal@boisestate.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/ijie>



Part of the [Education Commons](#), and the [Sign Languages Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Cornwall, Fatima (2013) "Vocabulary Games for the Beginner Interpreter Classroom," *International Journal of Interpreter Education*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/ijie/vol5/iss1/6>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Interpreter Education by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact [kokeefe@clemson.edu](mailto:kokeefe@clemson.edu).

# Vocabulary Games for the Beginner Interpreter Classroom

Fátima Maria Cornwall<sup>1</sup>

*Boise State University*

## Abstract

According to the (American) National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (NAJIT) and many experts in the field of court and legal interpretation, every court interpreter should strive for an ample and extensive vocabulary in his or her working languages. Although some more traditional vocabulary activities such as fill-in-the-blank exercises, crosswords, and word searches may aid prospective and practicing court interpreters reach this goal, there are some new approaches to language teaching that make this daunting task more entertaining and engaging. In this article, the author shares five vocabulary development games for any beginner spoken-language court interpretation classroom.

Key Words: vocabulary development, games, language activities, active learning

---

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence to: [fcornwal@boisestate.edu](mailto:fcornwal@boisestate.edu)

# Vocabulary Games for the Beginner Interpreter Classroom

## 1. Introduction

According to the (American) National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (NAJIT), one of the prerequisites to becoming a court interpreter is “an ample vocabulary,” and this ample lexical inventory must be in their two or more working languages (NAJIT, 2013). This is no small feat when, for example, the estimate of words in the English language alone is one to two million (Gall, 2009). The discrepancy in the estimated amount of words results from the lack of agreement if to include “slang, dialects and influences from foreign shores” to the number of words in the English language (Gall, 2009). However, NAJIT also states that judiciary interpreters must have “an extensive vocabulary ranging from formal discourse to colloquialisms and slang,” or vocabulary that “spans the entire spectrum of possible language” (González, Vásquez, & Mikkelsen, 1991, p. 455). Also, Trabbing (2002), a U.S.-certified court interpreter and author, notes that language interpreters must have “a wide range of terminology” (p. 8) and should strive to learn “three new words a day” (p. 60). In order to help prospective court interpreters learn and retain new vocabulary, I have created some dynamic and active games so that this seemingly daunting task may be more pleasant, manageable, and achievable. Many of these games precede the interpreting activities, that is, these games serve as warm-up activities to learn and practice the vocabulary before students start using the three modes of interpretation.

To participate successfully in the more challenging interpretation activities, students must have the vocabulary memorized. To help them reach this point, I teach games in which students practice the words in a more dynamic, engaging, active fashion than the rote memorization they work on at home. Almost all of these vocabulary games require movement; Jensen (2000), in “Moving with the Brain in Mind,” asserts that “teachers that have learners of any age sit too long are missing the boat” (p. 36). Activities or games that require students to walk or stand up in the classroom rather than sit at their desks promote active learning that offers “significant advantages over sedentary learning [. . . including] learning in a way that is longer lasting, better remembered” (Jensen, 2000, p. 37). Activities that require movement, even very limited movement, reach “more kinds of learners” (Jensen, 2000, p. 37). Furthermore, games are able to trigger the learners’ “intrinsic motivation and provide highly engaging challenges to promote learning” (Lo & Tseng, 2011, p. 1).

## 2. Classroom Structure

In the university-level class I teach, Spanish 381: Introduction to Court Interpretation, I cover ethics, criminal procedure, and the three modes of interpretation, but one of the main focuses is precisely vocabulary development. Although some of my students are seriously considering pursuing medical or court interpretation certification, most take the class as an upper-division Spanish elective. In class evaluations, students have identified vocabulary development as one of the strongest aspects of the course, and the main reason why they would recommend the class to other university students.

---

## Vocabulary Games

At the beginning of the semester, students receive 13 thematic vocabulary lists of about 50 words each that they must memorize during the course (see Figure 1), even though memorizing is “one of the most difficult tasks for students” (Page, 2010, p. 56). In order to help students memorize the words every week, I ask them to transcribe the vocabulary lists onto index cards (2% of their grade). I also strongly encourage them to orally record the lists and to make an audio file that they can download to their electronic devices so that they can use their time at the gym or on the commute to and from campus to study. This initial memorization of the vocabulary words is done outside of class, but in the classroom I use a series of games to also work on making these words part of the students’ active vocabulary, before we move on to interpreting practice.

**Figure 1: Thematic vocabulary lists**

Legal and courtroom vocabulary  
 Crimes  
 Appliances  
 Clothing  
 Car parts  
 Tools  
 Road terms  
 Action verbs  
 State-of-mind adjectives  
 Weapons  
 Drugs  
 Insults and slang  
 Idiomatic expressions/proverbs

Memorizing vocabulary words from the thematic lists is just a first step in a series of learning activities and assessments that require and engage students in higher order thinking skills. The learning objective for these preliminary vocabulary activities/games, to recall the equivalent term in the other language, reflects the first category in Benjamin Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning Domains Table (1956), *knowledge*. In class and out of class, students are asked to perform other vocabulary activities such as fill-in-the-blank exercises, term-matching, writing sentences or paragraphs, crossword puzzles, word searches, and so forth, which move the students further on the Taxonomy Table to the second category, *comprehension*. I also give students writing assignments such as short scripts emulating legal affidavits, opening and closing statements, witness interrogatories, and victim statements that incorporate the newly acquired vocabulary. By asking students to apply the vocabulary in contexts that they themselves create, these writing activities move even further on the Taxonomy Table toward *synthesis*. These scripts are used for in-class as well as out-of-class practice of the three modes of interpretation.

A last activity, requiring a *higher order thinking process*—the fourth category of the Bloom’s Taxonomy Table—requires students to evaluate a term based on its context and find the most appropriate term in Spanish. For instance, Student A creates a script using the word *hood*, as in an article of clothing; Student B, receiving this script to interpret, must listen carefully to the context to determine if it is *hood*, an article of clothing, or *hood*, a car part, which are both introduced in the thematic lists.

## Vocabulary Games

**Figure 2: Clothing**

<i>apron</i>	<i>delantal (m), mandil (m)</i>
<i>belt</i>	<i>cinturón (m)</i>
<i>blouse</i>	<i>blusa (f)</i>
<i>boot</i>	<i>bota (f); botín (m)</i>
<i>bow tie</i>	<i>corbata de moño (m), pajarita (f)</i>

These thematic lists, whenever possible, have more than one synonym per entry (see Figure 2) and are considered “living documents.” That is, whenever a student offers a different interpretation for a term, as long as he or she can support that term with reputable evidence (dictionaries, newspapers, governmental Web sites, and so on), I add the word to the list. To illustrate this point, on the “car parts” thematic list, for the English word *hood* I offered two Spanish terms: *capó* and *capote*. However, one of my Mexican students used the Spanish word *cofre* while participating in a game. Because this particular word was not included on the thematic list during the semester in question, I asked the student to look for the definition of the word on the online version of the Spanish monolingual dictionary of the Real Academia Española. The student did so, projecting on the big screen the definition that said it was the term preferred in Mexico for the part of the car that contains the motor. What ensued was a class discussion about the importance of being open-minded to different terms used in different Spanish-speaking regions, as well as to know how to act professionally and assertively if one is challenged in open court by another bilingual individual who questions the validity of a word or expression used by the court interpreter.

The following games are common foreign language classroom activities, some similar to commercially available games such as Pictionary and Guesstures, that I have adapted for use in an introductory class on court interpretation.

### 3. Games

The vocabulary games appear here in the order that I normally use them in the classroom. Some games may be played with just one list of words, whereas others serve as good activities for review, that is, to incorporate all vocabulary covered to date. None of the games requires much or costly materials (see Figure 3).

#### Figure 3: Materials needed for all games

- One kitchen timer or sand clock for every six students
- Three hundred 3×5 index cards
- Two foam swim noodles (may be substituted by the fly swatters)
- Two fly swatters
- One hundred 5×8 index cards
- Whiteboard or paper pads
- Desks or chairs for each student

---

 Vocabulary Games

### 3.1. “Use Your Noodle”

I generally play “Use Your Noodle” with my students at the beginning of the class period to review words from the first thematic lists, as a warm-up activity before the class starts practicing interpretation with scripts that include these particular words. Students are able to see the Spanish words spelled out correctly on index cards, therefore improving their spelling in Spanish. They must listen to the word called out in English and recall its Spanish translation. Once they remember the word from the thematic list, they must locate it from the cards displayed.

“Use Your Noodle” forces students’ minds to “work and keep lots of vocabulary” (Trabbing, 2002, p. 41). It mimics simultaneous court interpreting to the extent that the words spoken out loud are all in English, which is the official language of the U.S. courts, and the students are engaged in searching for the Spanish equivalent in their minds and connecting it with the terms visually displayed. The game also promotes thinking fast to avoid being the player in the center.

1. Students arrange their desks or chairs into a big circle. (For a big class, form two groups into two circles.)
2. One player stands inside the circle and holds a swim noodle.
3. Each seated student receives a 5×8 index card with a vocabulary word. The word appears on one side of the card in big letters in the target language (TL) and on the opposite side in smaller font in the source language (SL). The students hold the cards with the TL-word side facing the center of the circle.
4. The teacher initiates the game by reading out, in the SL, one of the words from the index cards being held by the seated students.
5. The player in the center must quickly interpret the word into the TL, identify the index card with that specific term, and use the noodle to gently tap the student (or the desk of the student) holding the card.
6. If the player in the center succeeds in tapping the seated student with the correct word, then the two students exchange places. However, before being tapped and losing his or her place, the student who is holding the correct term can say a term in the SL that corresponds to a word on another classmate’s card; then the player in the circle must locate that card.
7. When students exchange places, the newly seated student initiates the game (back to Step 4).

Students may switch their cards occasionally during the game, so that the player in the center does not merely memorize where the words are “located.” The teacher should also have some additional index cards on hand, to replace words that students seem to have already memorized.

### 3.2. “Around the Room”

Similar to “Use Your Noodle,” because the teacher reads out all words in the SL, “Around the Room” mimics the audio-based focus and time pressures of simultaneous interpretation. However, this game goes one step further than “Use Your Noodle,” because it requires students not only to search for the equivalent TL interpretation but also to say it out loud. At times, heritage and/or native speakers know synonyms of the words being read out loud, but I remind them that only the words that are on the thematic lists will get them the coveted seat. Nevertheless, I recognize the new term as another possible interpretation by writing it on the whiteboard, creating an added learning opportunity for all.

In this game, students walk around the room, with the teacher controlling the pace. I remind the class that the pace is equivalent to the rate of speech in simultaneous interpretation, and that “the less time spent searching for equivalents [. . .] the more capacity the interpreter has available for attending SL input and generating the appropriate TL output” (González et al., 1991, p. 363).

1. Students form a circle around the classroom.
2. The teacher places two to three chairs in the center of the circle.
3. The teacher slowly reads out the vocabulary list for the week in the SL.

---

## Vocabulary Games

4. The students walk slowly clockwise around the chairs. Each time a student comes face to face with the teacher, he or she must interpret into the TL the word that is being read.
5. If the student does not know the correct translation, he or she keeps walking. The teacher reads out the same word until a student does know it.
6. When a student says the correct word, he or she sits down on the first chair.
7. The next student who correctly translates a word displaces the first student into the second chair, and the third student displaces the other two by one seat, and so forth. Eventually, the first three seated students are, one by one, reintegrated into the circle.
8. The three winners are those who are seated when the teacher reaches the end of the vocabulary list.

For a variation, the teacher reads out a word in the TL, and students provide a synonym in the TL.

### 3.3. “Draw That”

“Draw That” is similar to the commercially available game Pictionary. This classroom adaptation does not require a special board, nor are the terms divided into categories. I typically use this game for review with all vocabulary words included. Because no letters are permitted, and therefore no words are allowed, students are forced to find drawings and symbols to convey the words. This activity is the perfect segue to note-taking as a memory aid for consecutive interpretation. Although there are many ways for a court interpreter to take notes during witness testimony, one suggestion is to use pictures and diagrams: “If the witness gives an answer that can be easily visualized, the interpreter may choose to draw a picture rather than noting down words” (González et al., 1991, p. 394).

1. The teacher prepares cards with vocabulary words from the thematic lists.
2. Students divide into groups of two or three; groups are paired for play against each other.
3. A player on the first team draws a card from the prepared pile.
4. After viewing the word, the student passes the card to the opposing team’s players, so that they can verify that the player’s team members call out the correct word.
5. The opposing team turns the sand clock or sets the kitchen timer for 1 minute.
6. The chosen player draws images on the whiteboard or paper to evoke the word.
7. The player’s team must guess the exact word before time runs out.

An important ground rule is that no letters are allowed. Numbers and mathematical symbols are permitted.

## Vocabulary Games

**Figure 4: Sample drawings for different verbs**

<i>to doubt, to question, to wonder, to inquire</i>	
<i>to yell, to shout, to scream</i>	
<i>to sleep, to snooze, to nap</i>	

**3.4. “Act Out”**

“Act Out” is similar to the commercially available Guesstures. (I have actually used the Guesstures timer to hold four cards up, but I prefer that each student have only one word at a time.)

I have traditionally played this game after introducing the thematic list for action verbs. I believe it helps students learn and use synonyms because, for example, *to yell*, *to scream*, and *to shout* all require the same gesture, which will most likely evoke all three verbs from the list.

1. The teacher prepares cards with vocabulary words from the thematic lists.
2. Students divide into groups of two or three; groups are paired for play against each other.
3. A player on the first team draws a card from the prepared pile.
4. After viewing the word, the player passes the card to the opposing team members, so that they can verify that the player’s team members call out the correct word.
5. The opposing team turns the sand clock or sets the kitchen timer for one minute.
6. The player acts out the words to evoke the word he or she drew from the pile of cards. Students may point to objects in the classroom, and they may make noises like grunting, crying, and laughing, but they may not say full words.
7. The player’s team must guess the exact word before time runs out on the sand clock or kitchen timer.

**3.5. “Fly-Swatting”**

Because slang and idiomatic expressions or proverbs are “[some] of the most difficult elements for non-native speakers of a language, and for interpreters striving to achieve full command of their working languages [to master]” (González, 1991, p. 309), I play “Fly Swatting” not only with single vocabulary words but also after introducing idiomatic expressions.

I have all the Spanish expressions typed on a Word document that I project on the screen. I say aloud the English equivalent or translation, as well as any similar expressions in Spanish or English (see Figure 5). The players must identify the term or phrase that corresponds to the English translation. Prospective court interpreters

## Vocabulary Games

must have “as large a repertory as possible of both idiomatic and non-idiomatic equivalents” (González et al, 1991, p. 245); “Fly Swatting” builds this repertory because it exposes students to similar expressions or paraphrases of the idiomatic expressions/proverbs provided.

1. The teacher writes selected words from the vocabulary already covered in class on the whiteboard in the SL. (The teacher can also type up the words in advance and project the document onto the whiteboard.)
2. The students are divided into two groups. Each group lines up facing the whiteboard.
3. The two students closest to the whiteboard each receive a fly swatter.
4. The teacher says the definitions of the terms on the whiteboard, also in the SL. The teacher may also give synonyms.
5. The players must find the word that matches the definition or synonym in the medley of words and must hit the word with the fly swatter. The remaining students on each team may help the two players only by saying “left,” “right,” “up,” or “down.”
6. The first player to hit the correct term earns the point for his or her team.
7. The two players then move to the back of the line, and the next two compete for the next term.

**Figure 5: Sample expressions and clues for “Fly Swatting”**

On the Whiteboard	Clues
“Birds of a feather flock together.”	“People who have the same likes and/or dislikes tend to form small cliques.” Similar expression: “Two peas in a pod.”
“Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”	“Imprudent people don’t think twice sometimes, and they do silly things.” Similar expression: “Look before you leap.”
“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”	“Children inherit many characteristics from their parents.” Similar expression: “A chip off the old block.”

## 4. Conclusion

These dynamic vocabulary games serve as effective precursors or warm-ups to sight translation or to simultaneous and consecutive interpretation. They allow teacher and students to quickly review vocabulary in an engaging, low-stress fashion before students are tasked with simultaneously interpreting, at 120 words per minute, scripts in which these words appear as scoring units.

A variety of vocabulary activities provides opportunities for students of all learning styles to practice and retain new vocabulary in ways that suit them, from a more passive approach, such as a fill-in-the-blank worksheet, to a more kinesthetic activity, such as the “Act Out” game. Most of the games require paired or group work, which “usually generates high levels of motivation and enthusiasm” (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 47), allowing for less stressful situations. And the stakes are low, because many of the games can be played in pairs or groups, or because the “winner” is the luckiest student, not necessarily the most knowledgeable one. I have not perceived any resistance on behalf of the students to this more active-learning approach; on the contrary, class evaluations have been very positive. All activities require movement in the classroom, from simply standing to walking, bending, leaning, squatting, and so forth. This variety of postures aids concentration (Jensen, 2000, p. 36). It is more

---

## Vocabulary Games

entertaining to act out the verb *to yawn* than to write the verb in a fill-in-the-blank activity; and such opportunities to stand up and move “can energize the class” (Jensen, 2000, p. 37). Students who are more energized, more motivated, more enthusiastic, and less stressed may be better able to memorize as many as 650 new words required of them in a semester, which equates to six or seven words a day. If they are able to retain even half of those words, they will have met Trabbing’s (2002) recommendation of learning three new words a day, and they will be advancing toward the goal of an extensive, ample vocabulary (p. 60).

## References

- Bloom, B. (1956). *Bloom’s taxonomy of learning domains: The three types of learning*. Retrieved from <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/bloom.html>
- Bonwell, C. C., & Eison, J. A. (1991). *Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom*. Washington, DC: School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University. Retrieved from <http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/bib/91-9dig.htm>
- Gall, C. (2009, April 28). The words in the mental cupboard. *BBC News Magazine*. Retrieved from [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/8013859.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/8013859.stm)
- González, R. D., Vásquez, V. F., Mikkelson, H., & Summer Institute for Court Interpretation. (1991). *Fundamentals of court interpretation: Theory, policy, and practice*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- Jensen, E. (2000). Moving with the brain in mind. *Educational Leadership*, 58(3), 34–37.
- Lo, J.-J., & Tseng, F.-L. (2011, October 18). A Bingo game for English vocabulary learning. *Communications in Information Science and Management Engineering*, 1, 8, 1-4. Retrieved from <http://www.jcisme.org/paperinfo.aspx?id=297>
- National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (NAJIT). (2013). *Frequently asked questions about court and legal interpreting and translating*. Retrieved from <http://www.najit.org/certification/faq.php>
- Page, B. (2010). 12 things teachers must know about learning. *Education Digest: Essential Readings Condensed for Quick Review*, 75(8), 54–56. Retrieved from <http://teachers.net/gazette/wordpress/bill-page/12-things-teachers-must-know/>
- Trabbing, M. E. (2002). *Introduction to court interpreting*. Katy, TX: Berkana Language Center.