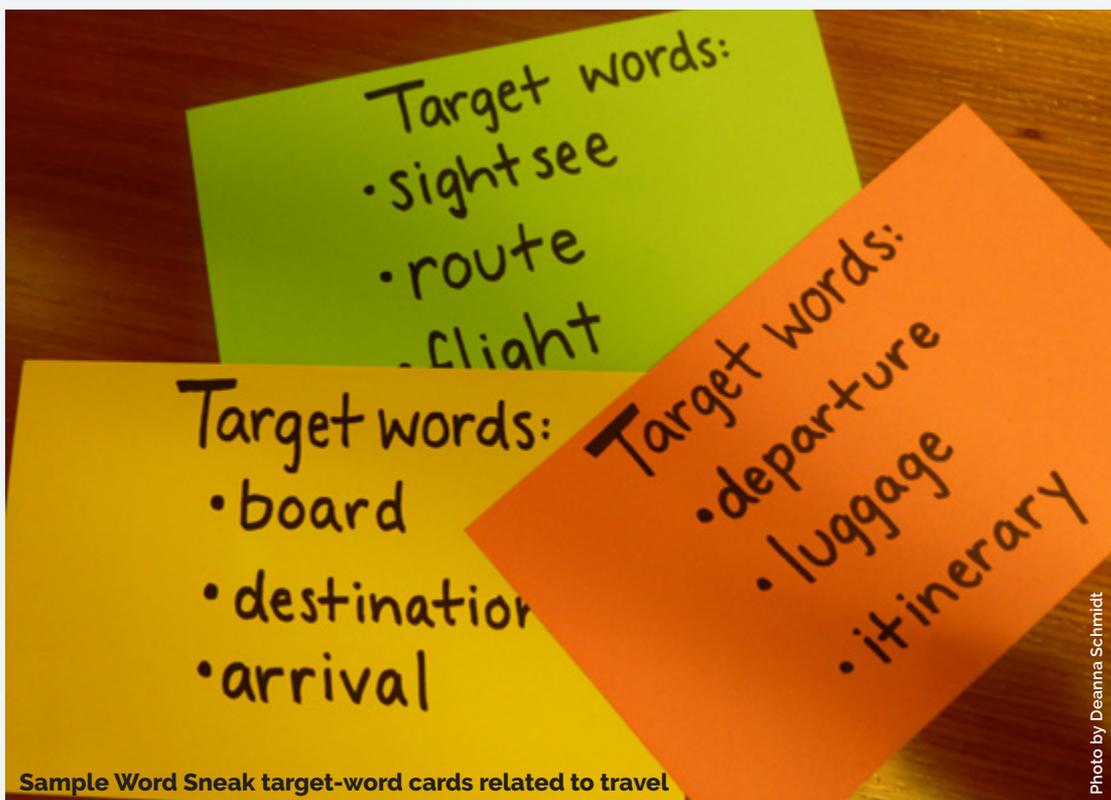


The Tonight Show Vocabulary-Review Games

by KELLY KEEGAN



Sample Word Sneak target-word cards related to travel

I've been a fan of the American comedian Jimmy Fallon ever since he began on *Saturday Night Live* (a comedy-sketch program) more than 20 years ago. Now that he is the host of *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, I particularly enjoy watching him play silly games with his celebrity guests. Luckily for language teachers, these entertaining games are often word games related to pop culture, so with a few changes, I was able to adapt two of these games to use in my English-language-learning classroom.

I teach an intensive class for college-level students that focuses on learning the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) vocabulary, so I wanted to create and play vocabulary-review games that encourage flexibility and spontaneity in authentic contexts. My students were good at memorizing dictionary definitions of the TOEIC words but often struggled when using those words freely in conversation or discussions. In many vocabulary-review games, students simply report memorized

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dictionary definitions, but my goal was to create games that give students opportunities to use the specific TOEIC words in conversation and storytelling.

I also wanted to play games that are lighthearted and allow students to get to know one another better. These *Tonight Show* games naturally require creativity and quick turn-taking, reflecting authentic usage. As a result, students can improve their overall fluency while playing—and laugh a lot in the process. These games give students the opportunity to practice using their vocabulary in creative and interactive ways.

Note that you need to teach or assign the target vocabulary as homework before playing these games. Students should already be familiar with the meanings and common usages of the target words. The first time you play, you will need at least 20 to 25 minutes to explain the rules, demonstrate and/or model, and have students play. After that, these games could easily be used as a warm-up activity of five to ten minutes. Little preparation time is required by the teacher.

GAME 1: WORD SNEAK

The materials you will need are notecards or paper, a marker, a timer or bell, and possibly a noisemaker for each group.

The objective is for each player to “sneak” or secretly use selected target words in a casual conversation with a partner or small group without others noticing the use of the target word(s). Students must be good listeners

in order to follow the flow of conversation, respond, and at the same time creatively shift the conversation so that they can use their own secret word(s).

Step 1: Explain or model how the original game is played. When Fallon plays this game on his show, he and his guest are each given five random words or names as their secret words. For example, Fallon might have a stack of cards that say *Pokémon*, *jellyfish*, *zucchini*, *ninja*, and *LeBron James*. He must begin a casual conversation with his guest (by asking a general question, such as “How was your weekend?” or “What movies have you watched lately?”) and then somehow slip in his first secret word, *Pokémon*, while his guest is trying to do the same with his or her secret words. Once Fallon has successfully used *Pokémon* in the conversation, a bell rings, alerting his guest that he used a secret word, and Fallon can then move on to his second word, *jellyfish*. Fallon’s goal is to use all five of his secret words before his guest finishes all five of his or her words. The game is over when both players have used all their secret words.

If you have access to the Internet in your classroom, you might begin by showing a video clip of Fallon playing this game with a guest on his show. On YouTube, you can find examples with a variety of celebrity guests. The clip with comedian and actor Melissa McCarthy (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mSeY9WGYMs>) is a clear example that I have used in class. If you want, you can let the students guess or discuss the objectives of this game, then explain that they will be sneaking in their own target words instead

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of Fallon’s random, silly words. Model an example before letting the students play on their own.

If you do not have Internet access in your classroom, you can demonstrate the game with a student, with the class as a whole, or by having two students play a sample game in front of the class.

Step 2: Divide your class into pairs or small groups. Pairs will allow for maximum talk time for each student; however, if you have a large class, groups of three or four students would also work well. Give each student a notecard with at least one target word written on it. You can give each student one target word or up to five target words, depending on the time available and the abilities of your students.

Step 3: Prepare a general conversation prompt for all groups to discuss or, for advanced students, brainstorm questions with your class to give them conversation-starter ideas before beginning the game. Make sure the prompt is on a broad topic so that students can maximize opportunities to manipulate the conversation and sneak in their word(s). You might also prepare a prompt related to the topic or theme of your target words. For example, in my TOEIC class, we were studying words related to traveling. We had target words such as *departure*, *board*, *destination*, and *itinerary*, so my conversation prompt was, “Where have you traveled?” The prompts could also be tailored to help students practice specific grammar structures (past, present perfect, future, hypotheticals, modals, etc.), depending on the lesson objectives.

Once you have revealed the prompt, you might give students a short amount of time

(one or two minutes) to review their word(s) and/or think about how they would like to try sneaking the word(s) into their conversation. A student with the word *itinerary*, for example, might start talking about a recent family vacation and mention how his or her father planned an annoyingly detailed itinerary for everyone to follow.

Step 4: Set a time limit of about four or five minutes. Depending on the skill level of your students, you might want to make the time shorter or longer. You don’t want to give students too much time, however, because they should feel pressure to use their word(s) as soon as possible in the conversation. Give each group some kind of noisemaker for students to ring or shake when they successfully use their target word(s) in the conversation. If noise is an issue in your classroom, students can simply raise their hands or count as they move through their words. For example, after they use their first word, they would say, “One!” Even if students have used all their word(s), they should continue having a conversation until the timer goes off to end the game.

Step 5: When the timer goes off—or when you tell students that time is up and the game is over—students should share their secret target word(s) with their partner or group by showing their notecards. For an added listening challenge, you could have students guess each other’s target words to see how well they were able to casually sneak the words into the conversation.

Step 6: If you have time, rotate the notecards to different partners or groups to give each student a new target word or set of words. You could also mix the pairs or groups to give students a new speaking partner, and you

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could offer a different conversation prompt to keep students engaged.

Step 7: At the end of your allotted playing time, collect the notecards from all the students. Choose a few words randomly from the stack and have students volunteer any funny or clever examples about how those words were used in their conversations.

GAME 2: BOX OF LIES

The materials you will need are notecards or paper, a marker, and a timer or bell.

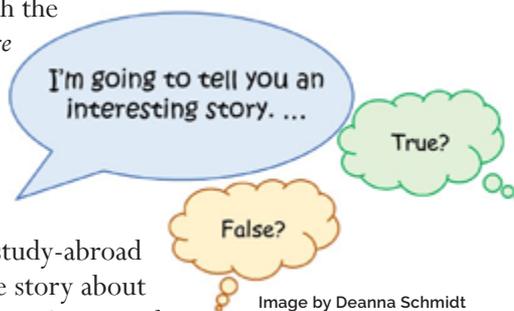
The objective of Box of Lies is to tell a story that is either true or made up, using target vocabulary. Partners or group members must decide whether or not the story they heard is true by asking questions to reveal more clues from the storyteller.

Step 1: Explain or model the original game. On *The Tonight Show*, Fallon and his guest sit across from each other with a black screen between them. One at a time, Fallon and his guest choose from six to ten boxes, each with a mystery item inside. They open their chosen box behind the black screen so that their partner cannot see what is inside. Once the box is opened, they must either describe the item exactly or tell a lie and describe a completely different item. The items are always ridiculous, like miniature gnome figurines doing yoga or a dinosaur toy wearing a ballerina outfit. The partner listens carefully to the description and asks questions in order to determine whether the description is the truth or a lie. Then the partner must make a guess by shouting either “Truth!” or “Lie!” If the person is correct, he or she earns a point. Fallon and his guest play for an allotted time; when time is up, the one with the most points is declared the winner.

If your classroom has Internet access, you can show a clip of Fallon playing Box of Lies with a celebrity guest. The clip with actor Chris Pratt (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Md4QnipNYqM>) offers a clear example. Let the students guess or discuss the objective of this game, and then explain that they will play a similar game. Instead of having boxes with secret items, they will tell a story that is either a true experience or a fictional experience, using their given target word. Model an example before letting students play on their own. If your classroom does not have Internet access, explain the game carefully and model it to make sure students know the purpose of the game and how to play it before they begin.

Step 2: Divide your class into partners or small groups. Distribute notecards with one target word on each card. Give a stack of about six to ten cards to each pair or group.

Step 3: One student draws a card from the stack and must tell a story using the target word on that card. Unlike the mystery black boxes, this target word is *not* a secret and can be revealed to the partner or group if desired. The story can be either a true story or a creative, made-up lie. If we use the same example of travel-related TOEIC words from above, a student with the target word *departure* might tell a true story about waiting at the *departure* gate in the airport when traveling to the United States for a study-abroad semester—or a false story about an unexpected late bus *departure* that made the student miss a cousin's wedding ceremony. The more creative and detailed the stories are, the harder it should be for the storyteller's classmates to detect a lie. You



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might want to give students a minute or two (you can set a timer for this) to think about what they want to say before sharing the story with their partner(s).

Step 4: Once the story is told, the partner or group members listening to it can ask questions to gather more information before making a guess. Classmates should ask detailed questions specific to the story, such as “When did this event happen?”; “Who was with you?”; and “How long did you wait?” The storyteller’s answers, facial expressions, or hesitation in answering could reveal clues about whether he or she is telling the truth. After questioning, the partner or group members must declare “Truth!” or “Lie!” by shouting out their guess. (In some classrooms, they might have to “shout” quietly so they don’t disturb others.)

Step 5: After the partner or group members have guessed, the storytelling student must say truthfully whether the story was true or not.

Step 6: The next student picks a card with a different target word, and the game is played in the same way. Students can continue until all the words from their given stack are used or until the allotted time is over.

Step 7: Collect the notecards from all the groups. Draw a few cards randomly and have students volunteer funny or clever examples about how the words on those cards were used in their groups.

POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

I prefer having students play these games without keeping track of points or declaring a winner. In my experience, students seem satisfied with simply knowing that they tricked their listener(s) or used target words

appropriately. If you would like to add a competitive element, you could have students or groups collect points for each successful use of a target word in either game, and winners could be declared.

In addition, teachers with students of varying skill levels might find it useful to pair or group students according to their level or abilities. Offering different vocabulary words and/or modifying the prompts for each level is an option for differentiating instruction.

Lastly, these games could be played with a target grammar objective combined with a vocabulary objective. In that case, you could include grammar on the notecards with the target words. For example, you could list the word *departure* along with a grammar focus like *present perfect*. For both games, the student would have to use the word *departure* in the story or conversation while also using the present perfect tense.

Above all, I hope you find these games useful and adaptable to your classroom and context. Using these games in my classroom has been a fun and successful way for students to get to know each other better, build fluency, and practice using their target vocabulary in an authentic context.

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