Falsos amigos en inglés: Cómo aprender palabras difíciles a través de juegos

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Resumen

La mayor parte de los profesores de inglés nos damos cuenta de la dificultad que tienen los estudiantes con los falsos amigos y muchos eruditos han demostrado este hecho con pruebas empíricas (Laufer 1997; Frantzen 1998; Chacón Beltrán 2000; Palacios y Alonso 2005). La complejidad de estas palabras ha llevado a los profesores a incluirlos en sus programaciones para darles tratamiento pedagógico en el aula. Sin embargo, las técnicas de enseñanza utilizadas para presentar estas palabras a los alumnos son bastante tradicionales. Así, los profesores normalmente recurren a tareas poco originales, actividades a menudo a base de traducción, y listas de las palabras que resultan desalentadoras. Este trabajo propone algunas tareas más interesantes para los alumnos como pueden ser: juegos (p.ej. el ahorcado), tareas visuales (diagramas en flor) y recursos en línea (p.ej. blogs y aplicaciones de móvil) que pueden ser útiles para la enseñanza y el estudio de los

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falsos amigos. Además, muchas de las actividades aquí propuestas tienen como objetivo promover la autonomía del alumno y el aprendizaje por descubrimiento. De hecho, los alumnos se darán cuenta por sí mismos de que se pueden encontrar falsos amigos ingleses en contextos cotidianos como en señales de circulación o en etiquetas de alimentos. Al final de este artículo nos daremos cuenta de que los falsos amigos no solo son interesantes sino también divertidos.

**Palabras Clave:** Falsos amigos, enseñanza del inglés, juegos, tareas visuales, recursos en línea

**Abstract:**

Most English teachers share the opinion that false friends are challenging for EFL learners and many scholars have shown it with empirical evidence (Laufer 1997; Frantzen 1998; Chacón Beltrán 2000; Palacios and Alonso 2005). The complexity of these vocabulary items has led language teachers to include them in their content syllabuses and address false friends in the EFL classroom. However, the techniques used to teach these words continue to be based on the grammar-translation method showing little originality and innovation. Thus, teachers normally resort to unappealing tasks, often translation-based activities, and boring lists of words which are often discouraging for learners. The present paper aims to propose some tasks to arouse the students’ interest in English false friends and presents a good combination of language games (e.g. hangman), visual tasks (e.g. flower-like diagrams) and online resources (e.g. blogs, mobile language learning apps) which can be useful for the teaching and learning of English false friends. Furthermore, some of the activities presented in this paper are intended to foster learner autonomy and to enhance the learners’ sensitivity towards these misleading words in real English contexts (e.g. diverted traffic). Accordingly, this paper also shows that false friends are not an occasional occurrence but many of these words are found in everyday contexts including road signs (e.g. follow diversion) or food labels (e.g. contains no preservatives). The ultimate goal of the present paper is to demonstrate that these difficult English words can be engaging and fun to learn.

**Keywords:** False friends, EFL teaching, games, visual aids, online resources

Most English teachers admit that false friends are complex vocabulary items and many scholars have shown it with empirical evidence (Laufer 1997; Frantzen 1998; Chacón Beltrán 2000). Language specialists such as Frutos Martínez (2001), Wagner (2004) or Chacón Beltrán (2006) who studied these lexical items, recognise the need to teach these words in the classroom. In particular, they show strong support for the use of explicit
techniques which help learners notice these words clearly and in an overt way. Explicit vocabulary instruction implies a conscious and intentional teaching of lexical items and involves “any activity geared at committing lexical information to memory” (Hulstijn 2001, pág. 271).

There are many different tasks which teachers may use to tackle these vocabulary issues in the English class. When talking about false friends, most instructors tend to resort to translation-based activities (e.g. English sensible means “sensato” in Spanish, not “sensible”) and long lists of words which may deter students from learning these words. The strategies used to teach and learn difficult items, such as false friends, should be entertaining and encouraging; otherwise these words may disappoint learners and may make the students’ vocabulary learning task troublesome. There are hundreds of amusing tasks which may arouse the students’ interest in these words. This paper aims to present a combination of language games (e.g. hangman, crime stoppers, secret codes), visual tasks (e.g. flower-like diagrams, word-picture matching exercises, funny cartoon pictures) and online resources (e.g. blogs, online language games) which can be helpful for the teaching and learning of English false friends and motivating for learners. Before going into the description of the tasks, it seems necessary to discuss the advantages of using language games and assorted tasks in an EFL context.

The benefits of games and varied tasks in the English class

Language games are highly beneficial to language learners for several reasons. On the one hand, games reduce anxiety in the classroom (Richard-Amato 1988) and add an amusing component to the learning act; on the other hand, students feel that they are active agents instead of passive learners. Moreover, “[g]ames also reinforce learning through many of Gardner’s multiple intelligences” (Talak-Kiryk 2010, pág. 6) as they often contain hands-on language experiences, kinesthetic elements, visual stimulation and spatial relations. Besides, games are advantageous since they enhance repetition and retention (El-Shamy 2001) allowing learners to remember lexical items without too much effort. Apart from all that, word games are highly motivating and offer learners a fun-filled learning atmosphere (Chen 2005).

However, in spite of the advantages of language games, they have never played a major role in language courses. In fact, they have long been used as warm-up activities, fill-in exercises when there is extra time left, or as
occasional “bits of spice” to add variety in the language class (Jacobs 2012). This study mainly aims to show that language games can be frequently used to the extent of constituting whole lesson plans. As a matter of fact, this paper illustrates how a good mixture of language games may result in an attractive lesson plan which will encourage learners to discover, practise and experience English false friends in an active way.

**Language games with a focus on false friends**

The present paper contains a set of different language games which can be used as an effective way to teach a difficult area of the English vocabulary such as false friends at different levels of language learning. The tasks here take into account the three main stages of any lesson plan, i.e. presentation, practice and production (Mauer 1997) and are arranged in order of difficulty, going from the easiest tasks (e.g. hangman, picture matchings) to the most complex ones (e.g. comic vignettes and self-discovery tasks). The games have been designed to provide learners with a gradual and increasing knowledge of English false friends; thus, as learners progress through the different games, they acquire a deeper knowledge of these words. The sequence of the games somehow follows the Engage-Study-Activate principle (Harmer 2007) which consists of introducing the contents by means of stimulating activities, practising those contents and activating them through free practice. Accordingly, the first four games have an introductory and engaging function to help students become aware of the existence of false friends between English and Spanish (i.e. hangman, crime stoppers and categories) and to elicit examples of the false friends students already know (i.e. wordstorm task).

After these four preparatory games, students start practising and experiencing false friends by means of semi-controlled activities which involve detecting the correct meaning (i.e. one picture out) and examining the words’ senses and most common uses in English (i.e. meaning and use detectives, flower-like diagrams, English signs competition). Then, following the practice-stage, students are asked to use false friends freely, productively and creatively while making up their own stories based on a series of funny cartoons which evoke the use of false friends. At a final stage, students are proposed self-discovery activities (such as word-builders and the use of online tools) which encourage learners to improve, review and expand their knowledge of these English words.
A brief description of the different language games, main aim and procedure to carry them out are gradually explained in the next poses (below).

**Game 1: Hangman**

The first activity is a guessing game in which the whole class is involved and should join efforts to discover the word hidden behind six dashes (Figure 1).

Aim: To work together and guess the word behind the lines.

Procedure: Students must spell out a letter from the alphabet with the aim of guessing the secret word. Whenever someone tells a letter which is not part of this word, a piece of the hung man is drawn. The game ends when the word is complete.

On this occasion, the word *carpet* is the hidden word. This word is a well-known example of an English false friend; and it can be used as a starting-point to introduce the topic of false friends. Thus, immediately

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2 All the games in this paper can be adapted to higher levels of the language by using more advanced and sophisticated vocabulary.
after this opening game, the teacher may ask learners to explain the meaning of this English noun. In order to complement this initial task, a different game called “Crime stoppers” is proposed to the students.

**Game 2: Crime Stoppers**

This game constitutes a novel approach to matching activities. Students are told that a shoplifter stole a *carpet* from a famous shopping centre in London last week. Students are given a number of pictures and they should point out the item that the criminal stole by selecting the picture which best describes the word provided at the core of the task, i.e., *carpet*.

Aim: To explain the meaning of a false friend through a picture selection exercise.

Procedure: Students should highlight the image which best illustrates the meaning of the false friend. Whenever someone selects an incorrect image, the rest of the students should explain why it is not correct.

![CRIME STOPPERS](image)

Figure 2. Crime stoppers
This game provides a visual representation of the false friend under examination; besides, it also favors lexical comparisons and contrasts between the learners’ mother tongue and the foreign language. Thus, this activity provides an opportunity for students to become aware of the fact that similar words in different languages may have completely different meanings.

![Figure 3. Meaning through pictures: Eng. carpet vs. Sp. carpeta](image)

At this point, the term *false friend* should be introduced and some more examples of false friends might be provided (e.g. English *collar* “T-shirt neckline” vs. Spanish *collar* meaning “necklace”). Then, learners are asked to think about other examples of false friends through a wordstorm task.

**Game 3: Wordstorm**

This task consists in asking learners for other examples of false friends they have learned or encountered at some point in the English learning process.

**Aim:** To elicit the false friends students already know.

**Procedure:** Students say examples of false friends and the teacher writes them on the blackboard. In order to encourage learners to talk, teachers can exploit pictures that may evoke the use of a false friend.
Following this wordstorm and still in the presentation phase, students can be encouraged to play “categories” (Figure 5.). In this game students become aware of the existence of both true friends and false friends between English and Spanish.

**Game 4: Playing Categories**

In this task students become aware of the fact that there are true friends, that is, words in English and Spanish which are similar both in form and meaning (as is the case of English *videoconference* and Spanish *videoconferencia*) and false friends, i.e. words in both languages which diverge in meaning at various degrees.

Aim: To know of the existence of both true and false friends.

Procedure: Learners are given two sets of English words; and they must reflect on the meaning of these words and see whether they mean the same as in Spanish or they mean something different. If they have a similar meaning, they would fall under the category of “true friends”; on the contrary, if they denote something different in both languages, they would be included in the column of “false friends”.

**Figure 4. Wordstorm**

![Wordstorm Image](image-url)
Figure 5. Playing categories

We can make the game more difficult if we provide students with each of these words as individual entities and not as two different sets or groups.

After this game, students should start practising the knowledge of false friends gained.

**Game 5: One Picture Out**

This game is based on the popular language activity *odd man out*. In this version of the game, students are presented with an English word and two pictures; the learners’ task is to get rid of the picture which does not correspond to the English word provided.

**Aim:** To be able to determine the correct sense of an English false friend.

**Procedure:** Students must cross out the picture which does not illustrate the meaning of the false friend under analysis. Students must explain their choice and say why the other picture does not represent the English word.
In the next stage, students should explore deeper into the meaning and use of these English words.

The previous games help learners become acquainted with and gain a surface knowledge of false friends. However, knowing a word well implies being familiar with its meaning, collocations and contexts (Nation 1990; Lewis 1993; Schmitt 2000). The next game urges students to act as inspectors of the word’s meaning and use of English false friends and allows them to find the suitable contexts for these words.

**Game 6: Meaning-and-Use Detectives**

In this game, students play the role of detectives. They must find out how English false friends work by selecting an appropriate source of information (e.g. online or paper dictionaries) which allows them to analyse the meanings and uses of several false friends in detail.

Aim: To look into the different senses, main linguistic co-occurrences and context of use of different English false friends.

Procedure: Students are given two cards with two different false friends. Their mission is to look up the meaning of these words in a dictionary, provide an illustrative example of their use and find out about the main
contexts of occurrence. Students must summarise the main sense and use of the pre-established words and explain their findings to the rest of the class (they have to place special emphasis on the features of these words that struck them most).

**MEANING & USE DETECTIVES**

- **DEFINITION**: a building that houses books and other materials
- **LIBRARY**: e.g. You can find this book at the university library
- **CONTEXTUAL USE**

Figure 7. Meaning-and-use detectives

To give them further practice, students can be encouraged to build flower-like diagrams that may help them organise all the relevant issues about false friends.

**Game 7: Building Flower-Like Diagrams**

In this game, students develop their creative side and their ability to organise vocabulary knowledge. Learners should draw flower-like diagrams to illustrate the most basic semantic and pragmatic traits of several false friends.

Aim: To work on the different sides of vocabulary knowledge and keep vocabulary records well-organised.

Procedure: Students are asked to write down the information about the false friends they consider most important and distribute this information
into four main linguistic sections: meaning, collocations, examples of use and main contrast with the mother tongue. The false friend analysed should figure prominently at the core of the flower with its corresponding pronunciation; the petals are filled in with information about meaning and use.

**FLOWER-LIKE DIAGRAMS: MEANING & USE**

In order to finish with the practice stage, students may work in small groups. This task encourages learners to think about the message of some notices which contain false friends.

**Game 8: English Signs Competition (Group Work)**

The class is divided into four different groups. Each group receives one English sign containing a specific message. Students have to think about the context of occurrence of that particular sign (e.g. road signs, food packages, etc) and say where it can be found and what it means (message conveyed). All the signs contain a false friend. The group which best explains the sign is the winner.
Aim: To understand and translate common English signs into Spanish.

Procedure: Students are given a worksheet with four different signs. They must give a convincing explanation of where these signs are usually found and translate them into the Spanish equivalent.

**ENGLISH SIGNS COMPETITION (Group Work)**

![Example:]

- **Gee & Edwards Solicitors**
  - **Translation:** Gee & Edwards. Abogados.

- **Bournbrook Road CLOSED ahead Follow diversion**
  - **Translation:**

- **J. Long & Co.**
  - **Translation:**

- **Carpet Department**
  - **Translation:**

- **NO ARTIFICIAL COLOURS OR PRESERVATIVES**
  - **Translation:**

- **LARGE DISCOUNTS**
  - **Translation:**

Figure 9. English Signs Competition

Following this exercise a production activity is proposed. Students can be asked to have a look at some funny cartoons and make up a story based on this material.

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**Game 9: False Friends and Humour**

Students have to write a story using a cartoon or comic strip as a starting point. In this task, learners are required to include the words highlighted in their stories. In the activity proposed here (Figure 10), students are required to use the word *insane*.

Aim: To use false friends productively.
Procedure: Students are given a cartoon. Learners must get inspiration on the words and images in the cartoon with the aim of producing a funny and interesting story.

**HUMOUREOUS STORIES**

![Humorous story cartoon](https://via CartoonStock.com)

Figure 10. Humorous stories

As a knowledge expansion or discovery activity, students can be encouraged to notice and discover more misleading items on their own. Word searches or syllabic games make vocabulary learning more enjoyable and may help learners remember and come across new false friends. Thus, learners may be given a word search exercise as part of the reviewing/discovery process. In this lesson, students are provided with a grid. In this grid, there are false friends hidden. Students must look for six false friends which are written in various directions.

In addition to this, learners can be encouraged to look for more examples of English false friends beyond those that have occurred in the classroom. As a motivating task, they can be shown word syllables that learners have to put together to discover English false friends.
**Game 10: Word Builder**

In this last game, students are given a pyramid full of word syllables. Learners have to find two sentence adverbs by putting together the syllables provided.

**Aim:** To expand the learners’ knowledge of false friends

**Procedure:** Students are given a pyramid with word syllables. Learners must find out which adverbs are hidden in the pyramid. Extra-syllables can be included to add difficulty to the task. In this case, learners have to come up with eight- and ten-letter words. At the end of the task, learners must realise that the words *actually* and *eventually* are the mysterious false friends.

The teacher can also include clues to help learners with the task if it becomes too difficult for learners to accomplish. They can include colour clues, that is, syllables belonging to one word are in the same colour, e.g. dark or light grey, or linguistic clues of the following type:

- These adverbs are synonyms of: a) In the end; b) In fact
- They are derivatives of the noun *event* and the adjective *actual.*
- They appear in the following sentences:

![Figure 11. Word search](image-url)
Eventually, after midnight, I arrived at the hotel
Did you spend much money?/ Well, yes. Quite a lot, actually.

Figure 12. Word builder

After this task, learners are asked to find more interesting false friends and draw syllable-pyramids for their classmates to solve.

To finish with this lesson plan, teachers can encourage students to use the new technologies including the latest mobile language learning apps such as English Monstruo, a Cambridge app for learners of English which contains exercises of false friends, online word lists such as the one provided by Wiktionary (found at http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Appendix:Spanish_false_cognates_and_false_friends_with_English) and English language websites that devote some space to discuss false friends (e.g. BBC Learning English). Apart from that, “these lexical items have become the focus of attention of entire blogs” (Roca-Varela 2011, pág. 85). Thus, there are many different blogs which may help learners increase their curiosity and knowledge about English false friends (see, for instance, Pearce’s entry in the OxfordWords blog at http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2011/07/keep-your-friends-close-and-your-false-friends-even-closer/).

Undoubtedly, online resources are useful sources of linguistic knowledge since they can provide easy, direct and quick access to these words through online dictionaries and other online platforms and allow
learners to expand and increase their vocabulary knowledge in a more attractive way.

Conclusion

This paper provides a number of activities and games which can be useful to teach and learn difficult English words such as false friends. In addition to this, the tasks included here illustrate the didactic and educational use of games in the language classroom. In particular, it shows that teachers can make use of different games a) to build a whole vocabulary lesson plan and b) to address a difficult area of the English vocabulary. Apart from that, this paper shows that there exist various activities that can be used to motivate learners to look into difficult lexical items (e.g. guessing games, picture-matching activities, sign-competitions word searches, mobile phone apps) and make these items interesting and enjoyable at all levels of linguistic competence. The present paper also shows that word games can be useful to learn various aspects of word knowledge (e.g. form, meaning and use) and that difficult words can be fun. Therefore, learning vocabulary in depth and playing games are fully compatible and are highly advisable.

In sum, the didactic proposal presented here has shown that language games may play an important role for the teaching and learning of difficult English words in the language classroom. It is now the duty of language instructors to consider this approach and act as a major driving force to introduce changes in vocabulary learning. In line with this, teachers should do their best to run parallel to the many advances currently seen in the modern world and incorporate more innovative techniques in language teaching. The games provided here might offer a good starting point for this.

References


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