

Dictionary Bluff – Teacher’s Notes

Level: Intermediate to Advanced
Age group: Secondary school to adults
Practices: Reading, writing, listening and speaking
You will need: List of “bluff” words, several dictionaries

“Dictionary Bluff” as I call it, is by no means a new idea but rather an oldie but goodie. This “vocabulary” game requires little preparation on the part of the teacher yet gets students practising all 4 main skills in a fun and lively way. It also gets students familiarized with using a dictionary. (*Note on dictionaries: If at all possible, I would recommend using a learner’s dictionary for this game. The definitions in normal mono-lingual dictionaries are unclear to students and using a learner’s dictionary makes their task infinitely easier.)

The game goes basically like this:

(Before you start it is a good idea to make sure everybody knows what “bluff” means.)

1. Divide the class into pairs or threes.
2. Hand out a word, previously prepared on slips of paper, to each group. (You have to select words carefully for this game. See list below.)
3. If possible, have on hand at least one dictionary for each group.
4. The task is to look up the word and find out what it means and how to pronounce it. Then write a simple definition and an example sentence using the word in context.
5. After this has been done, two “bluff” definitions with example sentences must be prepared. All definitions should be clear and simple. Teacher should circulate and give helpful advice when necessary. Set a time limit (15 minutes?)
(Tip: Put on some background music during the preparation stage so the groups do not hear each other, plus, it adds to the fun of the activity.)
6. Presentation time: In turns, pairs or groups present their word to the class. The word is written on the blackboard and pronounced. The 3 definitions are given including the part of speech (verb, noun, adjective etc.), definition and example sentence. The class can ask for repetitions and/or clarifications.
7. After allowing a minute for consultation in pairs/groups, the class votes for the definition they think is the correct one. The presenting team writes up the votes on blackboard.
8. All wrong guesses are worth one point for the presenting team, the winner of course being the best bluffers!

There are many variations of this game and it can be adapted in many ways.

I have played it many times over the years and I have tried to refine the rules to get the most out of it. Invariably the students enjoy it and want to play it again. In fact, this game needs to be played more than once for learners to get the hang of it.

The best way to introduce the game is by doing one or more examples to demonstrate. I usually can bluff most of my students with one of these:

EXAMPLE 1: RUNT

Definitions:

1. (Noun) A small animal, esp. the smallest of the litter/family.

Ex. "The little black one is the runt of the family."

2. (Verb) To look for something by feeling with the hands.

Ex. "She was runting for the light switch in the dark."

3. (Adjective) Dull, not sharp.

Ex. "This knife is too runt to cut anything."

EXAMPLE 2: GRUBBY

Definitions:

1. (Adjective) Having a delicious flavor, tasty.

Ex. "Hmm! These cookies are grubby. Who made them?"

2. (Adjective) Sloppy, dirty. Not neat and tidy.

Ex. "The food in this restaurant is ok but the place is a bit grubby."

3. (Adjective) In a bad mood, unfriendly.

Ex. "My wife is usually grubby when she wakes up in the morning."

Choosing words that are good for "bluffing"

There are lots of words that lend themselves well to this game. The words should be "hard" enough so as not to be familiar to the students yet useful enough to merit learning them. I have found that words originating from non-romance languages work best. Knowing your students and their level, you can pretty well guess which words will work. Here is a list of some good ones:

*brat tacky fumble frisk binge rut fret scrimp flimsy doodle gripe fling crave trounce
pamper nag flatter prank toddler plump tug spank gadget hoax mooch smooch hunch
gimmick dwindle swindle shabby brisk spinster crabby scrub cozy squander trudge
grimace gash gasp gulp cringe bundle lump hunk guzzle crust dump drench dud
budge grudge tuck*

I have also played this game with idioms like:

*be out of the woods over the moon under the weather have a crush on sb. have a bone to pick
can't beat it be pissed it serves you right have a blast out of this world hit it off with sb.
spill the beans once in a blue moon sitting pretty chill out not my cup of tea*

It is a bit more difficult using idioms but it works well with advanced students and some of the bluffs turn out to be quite funny.

I hope you find playing "Bluff" with your students to be as fun and useful as I have.