Why lying is the best policy… to get learners speaking

Jason Anderson

Deception is a universally recognised form of creativity, a higher order thinking skill and also a very good way to get learners talking in class. It lends itself very nicely to game-type formats involving 'authentic' language use. Here I investigate both how we can do more lying in the foreign language classroom, and why we should.

Activities that involve lying, deceit or secret information

Alibi and Spy – memorising and recalling lies

Alibi is a classic of the language classroom. Two learners prepare an alibi for an evening in the past when a crime was committed. They pretend that they were together for the whole evening, and agree in detail on exactly what they did for the duration of the evening. Then they are interviewed separately by the whole class, who ask the same questions to both of them. Any differences in their stories indicate that they are guilty. This activity is great fun, but logistically difficult to organise. It also usually involves whole class interviews, where a small number of learners do the majority of the speaking. A possible suggestion here is to put all the students into pairs to prepare their own alibi. The class then break into 2 groups, and interview pairs from the other group only. The pairs whose story has the most differences are 'convicted' as the criminals!

An alternative activity of this type is the game called 'Spy', good at lower levels for practising basic personal information questions. Each learner is given a role-play card with personal information (e.g. name, nationality, job, telephone number, etc.) and has a few minutes to memorise this information. Learners split into 2 groups, and receive the personal information cards from the other group. They then interrogate all the members of the other group. The learner who remembers their 'spy identity' most accurately wins the game.

Separating truth from lies

This includes a number of activities, for example Call my Bluff and Two Truths and a Lie. There are many variations on this theme, the simplest of which is to get learners to write down 3 statements about themselves, 2 of which are true and one of which is false. Working in pairs, learners interview each other about all 3 statements, asking follow-up questions as required. Then they must try to decide which of their partners 3 statements is false. Learners can be asked to focus on a specific area of target language in their statements (e.g. going to / present continuous for future plans) if required.

As in the classic UK TV show 'Call my Bluff' (search for it on You Tube), learners can work in teams to prepare 3 longer texts describing the meaning or origins of an unusual word or idiom, only one of which is
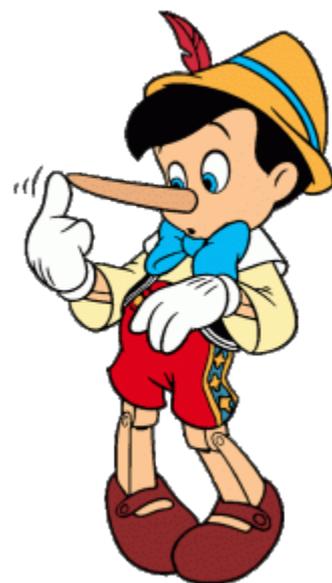
true. Opposing teams must try to guess which one this is. See my book Teamwork (2004), Unit 11 – Raining Cats and Dogs, for ready-made materials for this activity.

Truth or lie

In this activity, played in pairs or groups, a nominated learner must talk about a topic spontaneously, after which other group members may ask a number of questions before deciding whether s/he was telling the truth or lying. A nice way to make this dynamic is to randomise the choice between truth or lie, for example by getting the learner to flip a coin. If it lands on one side, they tell the truth, and if it lands on the other side, they lie. Discussion topic cards, or personalisation cards can be used (see, for example, p. 117 in Speaking Games). Alternatively, a 'ready-made' version of this game can be found on pp. 60-61 of Speaking Games.

Teacher anecdotes

A type of 'live listening' activity, in which you, the teacher, tell the learners two or three stories from your past, one of which is false. Learners have to decide which one was false. As a variation, you could tell them just one story but inform them beforehand that it includes a lie, which they must spot. It's a good way to retain learners' attention during a live listening. It provides a reason for listening, and, as such, may lead to higher receptive skills awareness and the 'noticing' of new language, which can be embedded in the anecdotes.

TV and radio 'lying' games

As well as Call my Bluff, there is a very popular UK BBC TV show called 'Would I Lie to You' (check it out on You Tube). It's a basic Truth or Lie game, in which panel members receive an interesting fact about them or story from their past, which they must read out and pretend that it is true (irrespective of whether it is or not). The other team interview them and then decide if it's true or false. In class, it can be difficult to do well, as the stories need to be prepared in advance. See pages 78-79 of Speaking Games for a possible solution on how to do this.

The BBC radio show 'The Unbelievable Truth' is an inversion of Call my Bluff, in which panel members read out a pre-prepared text on a specific topic (e.g. the banana, smartphones, Winston Churchill, the Olympics, etc.). Everything they say must be untrue, excluding 3 truths hidden in the middle of their preposterous text. The other panel members must try to spot the truths. This works well in the classroom, and a number of variations can be thought of. See the Bonus Unit provided in my download for an earlier talk 'Have I got a dragons' den for you?', available from the Resources for Teachers page of my website: http://www.jasonanderson.org.uk/

'Secrets' games/activities

These games involve secret information that creates an information gap of sorts. The secret information could be an unusual fact, a secret sentence or a taboo word.

Question Taboo is one example of this (Speaking Games, pages 64-65), as is Definitions Taboo, in which learners must define a secret word without saying it or using several taboo words that would be useful in the definition (e.g 'airport'; the 3 taboo words could be 'plane', 'fly', 'travel').

Another really enjoyable game that can be played during a discussion or debate activity is called Secret Sentences (Speaking Games, pages 70-71), in which each learner has a secret sentence that they must smuggle into the discussion without the others realising that it is their secret sentence.

A third variation is the Party Secrets game, made popular by the UK/US TV show: 'Whose line is it anyway?' in which learners socialise at a party, each with a rather unusual personal secret that affects their behaviour during the party. See the Downloads page of the Delta Publishing website from June 2015 for a ready prepared example of Party Secrets appropriate for the language learning classroom: http://www.deltapublishing.co.uk/downloads

Role playing activities

All role plays involve lying in some way. A number of fun activities that involve improvised lying accentuate this interesting aspect of role plays, and challenge learners at higher levels to think quickly. Kangaroo Court (Speaking games, pages 76-77) is one example of this. The 'accused' must defend him/herself after being arrested for a rather comical or unusual crime, after which the other group members decide on an appropriate sentence. My earlier publication, Role Plays for Today (2006) provides a wide range of other ideas and materials for useful role plays for the language classroom.

Example sentences

Very often in class, we teachers are required to come up with example sentences to demonstrate usage of a new piece of language (grammar or lexis). It's possible to make this memorable and engaging by, rather than just giving a bland example, providing an interesting example that is insight into your past or personality. Learners suddenly become very interested, and ask: 'Is that really true?' Challenge them by asking them to raise their hand if they think it was true, and then them know if it was!

Why lying might be a good thing to do in class with learners

Lying is a higher-order thinking skill

The cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (e.g. Anderson et al., 2001) describes a range of thinking skills that are very well known in mainstream education, but somewhat neglected in TEFL/TESOL, presumably due to the often mistaken assumption that teen and adult language learners have already developed their full range of thinking skills. Personal experience leads me to suspect that many learners in both TEFL and TESOL contexts, due to a rather narrowly focused education, can benefit significantly by further practice of their higher order thinking skills.

Lying comes right at the top of the 'pyramid' (here I'm using Anderson et al.'s 2001 revised taxonomy, which describes the skills as learner activities), as part of
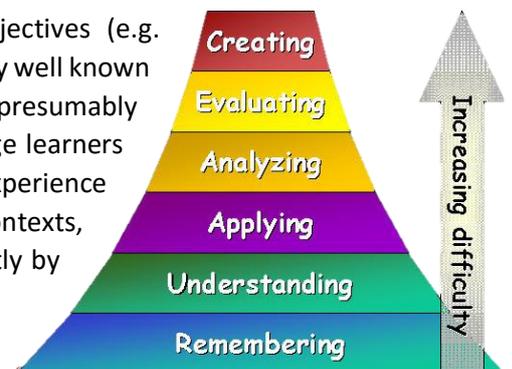
'creating'. When we attempt to guess whether somebody is lying or telling the truth, we are performing another higher order thinking skill; 'evaluating'. Given that higher order thinking skills not only involve meaningful language use, but also a greater level of mental engagement, it is possible that they lead to more acquisition than activities that only require description or recall.

Lying develops the imagination

Often as a result of a lack of focus on higher order thinking skills in many education systems around the world, I find that a number of the learners I work with (in both developing and developed countries) seem to have underactive imaginations (or, at least, to express these in the language classroom). They find it difficult to think creatively, to hypothesise, to joke, to play and even to write fictional texts. Lying can be one of many ways to help with this, both the spontaneous lying required in role play activities and truth or lie games, and the preparation of fictional texts required for games such as Call my Bluff, and The Unbelievable Truth. By including such activities in the classroom, both I, the teacher, and other members of the classroom community are able to mediate the development of each learner's ability to imagine, something that may make them more active members of the classroom, with more to contribute whenever hypothesising, creating and imagining are required. Indeed, this ability to imagine may be fundamental to all language use. As Guy Cook, in Language Play, Language Learning (2000), puts it:

> It might be that, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically, the first function of language is the creation of imaginative worlds: whether lies, games, fictions or fantasies.   (p. 47)

Lying provides opportunities to practise the interactional function of language

Brown and Yule (Discourse Analysis, 1983) make a distinction between the transactional function of language (the expression of 'content' – propositional information) and the interactional function (expressing social relations and personal attitudes). Language use in the language classroom tends to focus on the former of these, often to the detriment of interactional language use. However, for us to lie successfully, we must focus carefully on *what* we say and *how* we say it. Consider the following, common white lies, all of which are usually told with the primary function of maintaining social relationships:

> 'No, it looks really nice.'

> 'You haven't changed a bit!'

> 'Yes, it's exactly what I wanted.'

> 'Sorry - I just got your message…'

> 'I can't, I'm afraid. I'm busy that evening.'

And even:

> 'Can I be honest with you…'

For us to pull these off successfully, we have to be surprisingly good actors. We need to attend to body language, facial expression, proxemics and non-linguistic vocal sounds – i.e. paralanguage – something that is so important for successful communication, yet surprisingly difficult to get into the classroom. By including activities that depend on successful paralanguage in our lessons, such as lying/deceiving, we are likely to develop learners' awareness of the interactional function of language, thereby enhancing their 'emotional intelligence' (if there is such a thing) as a result. Aside from the importance of this to their language learning in general, an additional benefit is the likely improvement in relationships and rapport that may result in the classroom community.

Speaking Games – Secrets and Lies

I have devoted one of the 4 sections of my photocopiable resource book for English language teachers, Speaking Games, to games that involve telling lies and guessing secrets. On the next few pages you will find the Contents page for this section, and 3 example games from the workshop.

See the Delta Publishing website for more free downloads from the book, including bonus units from the Delta Downloads page:

http://www.deltapublishing.co.uk/

Go to Amazon.co.uk to buy the book:

http://www.amazon.co.uk/Speaking-Games-Photocopiable-Activities-Language/dp/1905085982
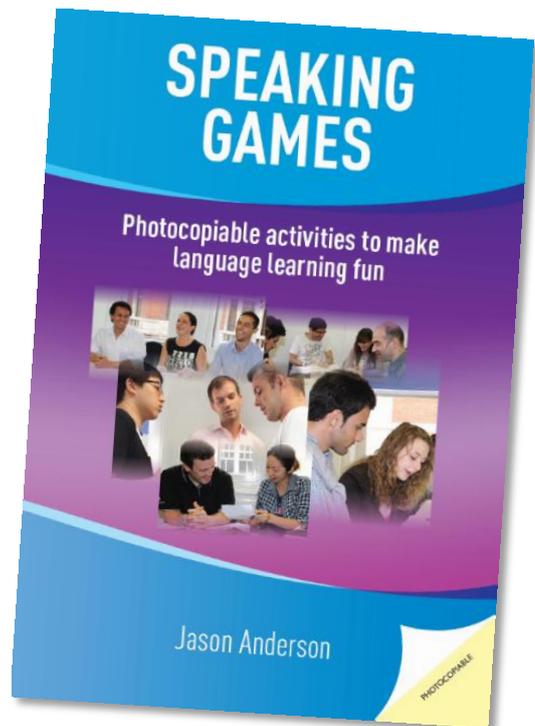
References

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Section 3 of the Contents of Speaking Games

Section 3: Secrets & Lies		Levels			Language Focus	
Page		B1	B2	C1	Sub-skills & Functions	Grammar Ⓖ & Lexis Ⓛ
57	True Secrets		✓	✓		
60	Truth or Lie	✓	✓	✓	• making short, unprepared speaking turns • inventing information quickly • analysing a spoken text critically	Ⓖ past simple Ⓖ reported speech
62	Tag on the Back	✓	✓	✓	• making guesses • using intonation to sound friendly • correcting misconceptions	Ⓖ question tags Ⓖ 'same way' question tags Ⓛ use of *actually* to correct factual errors
64	Question Taboo	✓	✓	✓	• paraphrasing • reformulating an idea	Ⓖ present simple tense Ⓛ personal information
66	Truth Mingle	✓	✓	✓	• identifying things in common • speculating on possible future events • enquiring about future plans • describing future plans	Ⓖ future perfect Ⓖ future continuous Ⓖ present continuous / *going to* for future arrangements / intentions
68	Gotcha!	✓	✓		• improvising questions • leading a conversation	Ⓖ question forms Ⓛ food and drink (or any other lexical area)
70	Secret Sentences	✓	✓	✓	• agreeing and disagreeing • challenging someone's opinion • eliciting agreement	Ⓛ spoken discourse markers
72	This Weekend	✓	✓	✓	• describing future plans and arrangements • interviewing someone	Ⓖ *going to* for future plans Ⓖ present continuous for future arrangements
74	Passive Porkies	✓	✓	✓	• improvising responses to questions • describing recent events • asking follow-up questions	Ⓖ passive forms (present simple, past simple, present perfect) Ⓖ question forms
76	Kangaroo Court		✓	✓	• justifying past actions • thinking creatively • interrogating a suspect • responding to accusations	Ⓖ narrative tenses Ⓛ crime and courtroom
78	Would I lie to you?	✓	✓	✓	• asking questions / interrogating • describing past experiences • recalling an anecdote	Ⓖ narrative tenses Ⓖ present perfect for life experience
80	Lie Auction	✓	✓	✓	• describing abilities, past events and habits • hypothesising about possible abilities, events and habits • asking questions	(any or all of the following) Ⓖ present perfect for life experience Ⓖ *can/could* for ability Ⓖ *used to* for past habits

Truth or Lie

Time	20–40 minutes
Interaction	Groups of 3–5 learners
Level	B1 (Intermediate) to C1 (Advanced)

Language areas practised

Sub-skills and Functions

- making short, unprepared speaking turns
- inventing information quickly
- analysing a spoken text critically

Grammar and Lexis

- past simple
- reported (indirect) speech

Preparation

Photocopy the **Rules of the game**, the **Game board** and the **Truth or Lie cards** (one copy of each per group). Cut up the cards as indicated. Players will need one counter each (e.g. coins).

Notes

Depending on your learners and how much time you have, you can let them vary how they play. Some groups will naturally start asking questions to the player who is speaking, others will choose not to. Make sure each player moves forward one square at the start of their turn so that they are talking about a new topic. Learners often make use of reported speech when analysing each other's summaries, e.g. *'He said that he had been to Italy, but…'*.

Variations

- **Higher Levels** – Players are allowed to ask three questions to the speaker after the initial answer, or the speaker has to speak for one minute before they decide whether it's the truth or a lie.

Truth or Lie
Rules of the game

Preparation

Play in groups of 3-5. Each group needs a set of **Truth or Lie cards** and all players need a counter (e.g. coins). Shuffle the cards and place them face down in a pile on the Game board.

How to play

Player A moves forward one square and picks up a **Truth or Lie card**, keeping it secret from the other players. She must then talk about the topic on the square she landed on. If her card says: *'Truth'*, she must tell the truth. If the card says: *'Lie'*, she must lie about the topic. When she has finished, the other players must discuss and agree on whether she was telling the truth or lying. Then she reveals her card before putting it at the bottom of the pile of cards. If the others guessed correctly, her turn finishes. If they guessed wrongly, she moves forward, takes another Truth or Lie card and talks about the topic on the new square. Again the other players must guess *'truth'* or *'lie'*. Player B goes next by moving forward one square.

How to win

The first player to reach Finish is the winner!

If…

- If the others can't agree whether you are telling the truth or lying, the person on your right should decide.

- If you deceive your classmates three times in a single turn, your turn ends and the next player takes her turn. Thus, you can move forward a maximum of three squares in a turn.

Truth or Lie
Cards

truth	lie	truth	lie
truth	lie	truth	lie

Truth or Lie

Game board
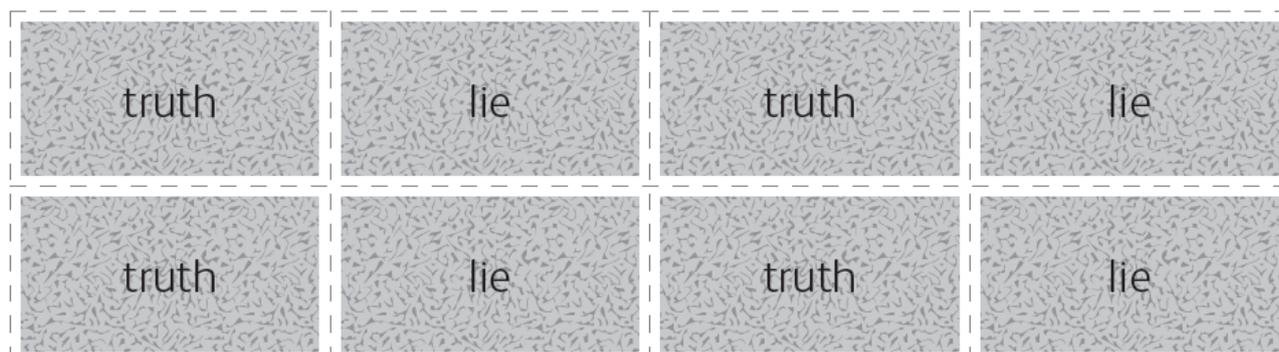
FINISH

the shoes you are wearing now

the last text message you sent

your favourite website

a picture on your wall at home

a habit that you have recently given up

the last book you read

the most enjoyable thing you did last year

the first time you went on holiday without your parents

the first person you fell in love with

the first pop group / singer that you really got into

your favourite subject at school

family holidays when you were a child

your favourite childhood game

your first memory

⬆ ⬆ **all players start here** ⬆ ⬆

Don't forget to put used cards to the bottom of the pile

PUT THE TRUTH OR LIE CARDS HERE

Kangaroo Court

Time	40–60 minutes
Interaction	Groups of 3–5 learners
Level	B2 (Upper Intermediate) to C1 (Advanced)

Language areas practised

Sub-skills and Functions

- justifying past actions
- thinking creatively
- interrogating a suspect
- responding to accusations

Grammar and Lexis

- narrative tenses
- crime and courtroom

Preparation

Photocopy the **Rules of the game** and the **Crime cards** (one of each per group). Cut up the cards as indicated. Optimum group size is 4-5. Depending on time available, players can each stand trial once or twice. With lower-level classes, check key vocabulary before they begin (*sentence*; *stand trial*; *justify*; *the accused*; *blame*; *(suspended) community service*; *impersonate*; *acquit*; *witness*; *forge*).

Notes

This game turns the traditional ELT activity of matching sentences to crimes into a comical role play. The rather implausible synopsis encourages the learner standing trial to be as creative with her story as possible in order to receive a lenient sentence. It encourages quick thinking and rigorous interrogation. As always with free-flowing creative role plays, timings are very difficult to predict – so be flexible if possible!

Variations

- **Lower Levels** – Give each learner their Crime card in advance and allow 3-5 minutes for preparation.

- **Courtroom Drama** – Choose one card, read out the crime, assign roles to learners for a mock trial (judge, lawyers, defendant, etc.) and allow 10 minutes for all to prepare.

Kangaroo Court

Rules of the game

Preparation

Play in groups of 3-5. Your teacher will give you a set of **Crime cards**. Without looking at them, place them in a pile on the table.

Background Synopsis

You will take turns to stand trial in court for a crime described on one of the Crime cards. Unfortunately, the court's computer system has been damaged by a virus, so all other details of the crime have been lost. As the player on trial, you can tell the court what you want about the crime in order to justify it. You will have no time to prepare for the trial and don't know what the crime is until the trial begins. The court psychologist has checked the mental health of every player and reported no illnesses or problems of any kind.

How to play

Player A stands trial first. The other players take the top card, read out the crime and the maximum and minimum sentences. Without preparation, Player A must explain exactly what happened and why. The other players can ask as many questions as they want, and then must choose a sentence from the card. The player receives the corresponding score. Player B stands trial next.

How to win

The player who receives the lowest score for their crime(s) wins.

If…

- If you choose to blame somebody else for your crime, you must still stand trial along with the person you blamed – and play both roles. Both of you are then sentenced at the end of the trial and you score whichever sentence is the highest.

Kangaroo Court

Crime Card 1

You were arrested after trying to steal a British policeman's hat in London.

Sentence	Score
6 months in prison	5
3 months in prison	4
1 month in prison	3
fine of £1000 and 3 months' community service	2
fine of £500 and 2 months' community service	1

Crime Card 2

You were arrested for pretending to be a panda in a zoo.

Sentence	Score
6 months' community service	5
3 months' community service	4
1 month's community service	3
suspended community service	2
acquitted (no sentence)	1

Crime Card 3

You were arrested after you were caught on CCTV stealing toothpaste from a shop on four separate occasions.

Sentence	Score
1 month in prison	5
fine of £1000 and 3 months' community service	4
fine of £500 and 2 months' community service	3
1 month's community service	2
suspended community service	1

Crime Card 4

You were arrested at a hospital for trying to impersonate a doctor.

Sentence	Score
2 years in prison and £5,000 fine	5
1 year in prison and £5,000 fine	4
6 months in prison and £5,000 fine	3
3 months in prison and £5,000 fine	2
1 month in prison and £5,000 fine	1

Crime Card 5

You were arrested after biting a dog on the leg. The dog required veterinary treatment.

Sentence	Score
6 months' community service	5
3 months' community service	4
1 month's community service	3
suspended community service	2
acquitted (no sentence)	1

Crime Card 6

You were arrested after someone noticed you had 'borrowed' two live chickens from a farm for two weeks.

Sentence	Score
1 month in prison	5
fine of £1000 and 3 months' community service	4
fine of £500 and 2 months' community service	3
1 month's community service	2
suspended community service	1

Crime Card 7

You were arrested in a shop after you tried to buy four boxes of chocolates using a forged £50 note. Investigations showed the note was printed from your computer.

Sentence	Score
6 months in prison	5
3 months in prison	4
1 month in prison	3
fine of £1000 and 3 months' community service	2
fine of £500 and 2 months' community service	1

Crime Card 8

You were arrested for knocking down and killing a robber who had just come out of a bank with £20,000 he had stolen.

Sentence	Score
25 years in prison	5
5 years in prison	4
6 months in prison	3
1 year's community service	2
acquitted (no sentence)	1

Crime Card 9

You were arrested for eating your best friend's wedding cake two hours before the wedding.

Sentence	Score
1 month in prison	5
fine of £1000 and 3 months' community service	4
fine of £500 and 2 months' community service	3
1 month's community service	2
suspended community service	1

Crime Card 10

You were arrested for hacking into the email account of a famous author.

Sentence	Score
3 months in prison	5
1 month in prison	4
fine of £1000 and 3 months' community service	3
fine of £500 and 2 months' community service	2
1 month's community service	1