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Teaching Descriptive Adjectives Using *Du Ký* (*Dream Adventure*)

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Item Details

Keywords:

Board games
EFL
Game-based learning
Vietnamese board games
Cultural learning
Authentic learning

Key points

- **Name of ludic object:** *Du Ký* (*Dream Adventure*)
- **Type/genre/theme:** A co-op board game about guessing each other's dreams
- **Intended audience age** 🧑: 10 and above
- **Intended audience proficiency** 💬: A2 and above
- **Typical time to play** ⌚: 20-30 minutes
- **Number of players** 👤: 2-6 players

Microblog synopsis

Using *Du Ký* (*Dream Adventure*), a Vietnamese board game, this study shows how descriptive adjectives can be taught authentically in EFL classrooms. Learners narrate and interpret dreams, fostering creativity, context-based practice, and intercultural engagement.

#gamebasedlearning #vietnameseboardgames #boardgames #EFL
#culturallearning #authenticlearning

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1. The original spark

During the COVID-19 lockdown, two independent Vietnamese board game developers sought to bring the joy of travel indoors. Inspired by virtual galleries and fueled by a longing to escape daily monotony, they created a game where players describe iconic landmarks in Ho Chi Minh City. After extensive living-room playtesting, the result was *Du Ký* (pronounced YOU-KEY) or *Dream Adventure*. Today, it remains one of their best-selling titles, both nationally and internationally.

For me, the release of *Du Ký* came at a turning point. After three years of teaching English, I felt constrained by repetitive pedagogical routines that dominated much of the local ELT landscape: teacher-centered lessons, test-focused drills, and limited opportunities for authentic communication. Much like the developers who sought a creative escape, I longed for something fresh. In *Du Ký*, I discovered not only a game but also a spark: a playful medium that could reframe the classroom as a space for imagination, collaboration, and authentic language use. What's more special is that the game allows the flexibility of being a tool to review previous learnt vocabulary as well as learn new words while playing the game.

Born in lockdown, *Du Ký* turned travel dreams into play. For me, it became more than a game. It became a way to escape stale teaching methods and spark fresh learning.

2. *Du Ký*: A game that brings everything and everyone together

2.1 The game itself

Du Ký is a cooperative guessing game where players interpret each other's "dreams" as the goal of the game is "everyone must work together to play all the Dream cards in their hands" (Nguyễn, T & Trần, M, 2022). In a sense, in order to play all the Dream cards from one's hand, the player whose turn it is has to guess the cards correctly. Each turn, a player can ask one question using a descriptive adjective. Peers respond non-verbally to their friends' questions (see *Figure 1*). After getting the responses from everyone, the active player (or the Leader) notes down the information on the Memory note (see *Figure 2*) before proceeding to guess the Dream cards of everyone other than themselves. The group has only two lives and a limited number of skips before losing.

Figure 1

Screenshot from the rulebook of *Du Ký* on how players will give hints based on their friends' questions

0- Hold a fist: NO cards relate to the adjective
1- One finger point up: ONE card relates to the adjective
n- Raise a hand: MULTIPLE cards relate to the adjective

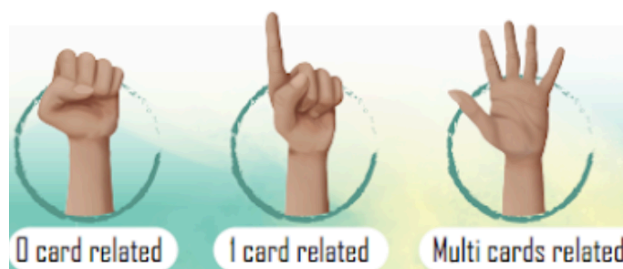


Figure 2

Picture of the Memory note that the Leaders noting down information from the clues that everyone had given

?	Người hỏi / questioner		Người đáp / responders			
	?		0/1/n			
	Nguyen Huiep	Sơn Đạt	Bix	Huyen		
Âm tiết	0	?	0	1	1	1
Hồng	?	N	1	0	1	1
Bay bổng	1	0	2	?	0	0
no nê	0	0	?	1	0	0
ngọt ngào	0	0	0	0	0	0
xanh tươi	0	0	0	0	?	0
che chắn	1	?	1		N	

First, to set up the game, assemble and place the Hope track at the center of the game table. From the three spirit meeples, choose two and place them on the Hope track. These two spirits represent the group's Hope or the group's remaining lives. The remaining spirit becomes the "Guide spirit". Randomly draw 16 Location tiles and place them next to the Hope track. Then, gather the Dream cards that correspond to these locations and form the Dream deck.

Take the Dream deck, shuffle it, and deal one by one to all players (the number of cards in each player's hand may vary depending on the number of players). Each player secretly looks at the cards in their hand. Choose one player to be the Leader; then, starting with the Leader and proceeding clockwise, each player randomly selects a card from the hand of the player to their left and places it face down in front of them. Do not reveal these cards as they

become a Nightmare. Collect all the Nightmare cards and form a Nightmare deck, placing it next to the Hope track (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
Picture of the set up of the game (second edition)



An example turn goes like below:

- Ken (the round leader): Are your dreams **floaty**?
- Everyone looks at their cards to see if they have any *floaty* dream cards.
- Mãn: *raise one finger* (indicate that she only has one card that is *floaty*)
- Toàn: *raise a fist* (indicate that he doesn't have any dream cards that are *floaty*)
- Phương: *raise an open hand* (indicate that she has more than one dream cards that are *floaty*)

- Ken proceeds to note down the information on the Memory note.
- Ken takes his guess based on the information everyone gave him, asking 'Is this anyone's dream?' as him placing the Guide spirit on a Location tile.

After a Location tile is selected, all players check their Dream cards. Any player who has a Dream card that matches the chosen Location reveals it by placing it face up, then claims the Location tile as a successful rescue. After a successful rescue, the Leader may choose to attempt to rescue another Location or end the rescue and proceed to check the Hope track. If no player is able to play a Dream card that matches the chosen Location, the rescue attempt fails. Remove the Location tile and the Leader loses their turn. The whole team also loses a life consequently.

As for the Hope track:

- If no Locations are rescued, move the Hope spirits down two levels on the Hope track.
- If one Location is rescued, move the Hope spirits down one level on the Hope track.
- If two Locations are rescued, the Hope spirits stay the same on the Hope track.
- If three or more Locations are rescued, move the Hope spirits up one level on the Hope track.

The entire group will lose the game if they lose their two Hope spirits or fall off the Hope track. In contrast, the group can only win when they rescue every dream card there are on everyone's hands.

Unlike many competitive board games familiar in classrooms, *Du Ký* thrives on inclusivity. There is no deception or dominance; instead, players succeed by reading cues, testing interpretations, and collectively navigating uncertainty. The artwork blends the urban landscapes of Hồ Chí Minh City with dreamlike textures, making each playthrough feel both familiar and surreal.

Du Ký is not about winning alone. It's about decoding dreams together. Cooperative play, non-verbal cues, and Vietnamese art make it both engaging and culturally unique.

2.2 Why it changes the way students learn English

Within just a few rounds in 2022, I could see *Du Ký's* potential for language classrooms. It epitomizes authentic learning which is a term coined by Lombardi (2007) and later developed by Lee et al. (2024): students have a genuine reason to collaborate, negotiate, and use the targeted language in real-time.

Here, Salen & Zimmerman's (2004) definition of games as "rule-based systems with quantifiable outcomes" is vital. Students are motivated not by grades but by the intrinsic goal of staying alive in the game. Each action, from asking, interpreting to signaling, becomes meaningful because it impacts their shared progress.

This shift contrasts sharply with Vietnam's grammar-translation traditions or test-oriented teaching. In *Du Ký*, learners, not the teacher, control language use. They choose words, interpret meanings, and co-construct understanding. This sense of agency, emphasized in Ryan & Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, helps move learners from external motivation (grades, teacher approval) to internal motivation (curiosity, teamwork, playful competition).

In *Du Ký*, learners don't "practice" language—they use it authentically. Motivation shifts from grades to gameplay. Agency and collaboration take center stage.

2.3 Flow of a lesson with *Du Ký*

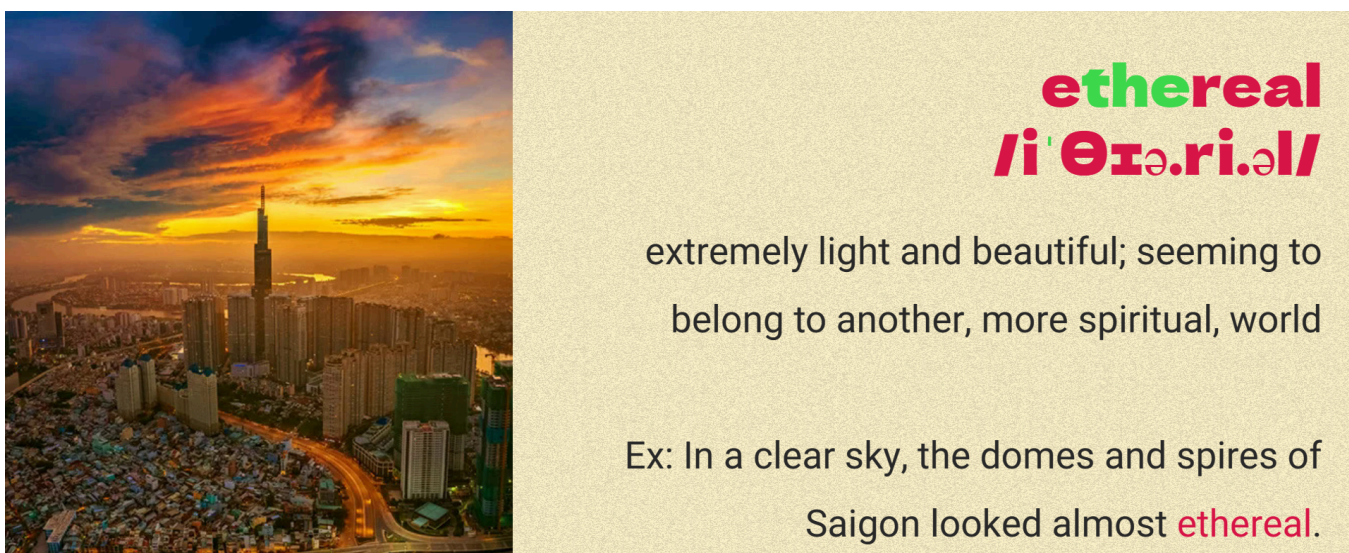
Many teachers in Vietnam use games merely as warm-ups or end-of-class fillers (T. K. P. Nguyen & Trinh, 2025). I propose something different: centering a lesson around the game.

The below brief lesson plan was based on my real class of nine high school students at the level of C1 on the CEFR level. The lesson's duration is 90 minutes.

- **Lead-in:** I begin by asking students to close their eyes and imagine a dream destination. They share their images in pairs, then with the whole class. As they describe, I note their adjectives on the board. This step allows me to confirm my students' prior knowledge, my assumption on the students' vocabulary range to prepare for the upcoming lesson. At this stage I haven't introduced the new words or expected my students to use them in this activity.
- **Pre-teach vocabulary:** Together, we refine their language and add new words (e.g., "ethereal," "luminous," "melancholic") (see *Figure 4*). Students practice pronunciation and usage through drills. This step is rather conventional with the traditional teaching method; however, this is the building block of later steps where the play comes into fruition as the students start using the targeted lexical items purposefully in context. This also replaces the uncontextualized practice drills where students have to power through a handful of worksheets to remember the words, and most of the time, alone.

Figure 4

Screenshot of my slide being used to pre-teach useful vocabulary items for students to practice later



ethereal
/i'θɪə.ri.əl/

extremely light and beautiful; seeming to belong to another, more spiritual, world

Ex: In a clear sky, the domes and spires of Saigon looked almost **ethereal**.

- **Gameplay:** I group students into groups of six and model the rules in action. Instead of lengthy explanations, I scaffold through demonstration (see *Figure 5*). Vocabulary lists are visible (on slides, handouts, or the board), ensuring students actively recycle new words during play (see *Figure 6*).

Figure 5
Picture of a group of students play Du Ký (second edition) with a worksheet containing targeted words they need to use through the game



Figure 6

Screenshot of the worksheet that the students used during play as a way of practicing the newly learnt vocabulary through playing *Du Ký*

Vocabulary	IPA	Meaning in English	Meaning in Vietnamese
ethereal	/i'θi:ə.ri.əl/	extremely light and beautiful; seeming to belong to another more spiritual world	hư ảo
luminous	/'lu:.mi.nəs/	shining in the dark; giving out light; very bright in colour	lung linh
serene	/sə'ri:n/	calm and peaceful	thanh bình
gloomy	/'glu:.mi/	nearly dark, or badly lit in a way that makes you feel sad	ảm đạm
vibrant	/'vai.brənt/	(of colours) very bright and strong; (of music, sounds, etc.) loud and powerful	rực rỡ sôi động
hazy	/'heɪ.zi/	not clear, especially because of heat (of memory) not remembering things clearly	mờ ảo
melancholic	/.mel.əŋ'kɒl.ɪk/	having or expressing the feeling of being very sad, especially for a long time and in a way that cannot be explained	man mác

- **Teacher role:** I step back as facilitator, observing language in use, clarifying rules, and prompting where necessary but avoiding direct correction to preserve the authenticity of communication.
- **Reflection:** With 10 minutes left, students reflect: Which adjectives helped most? What moments were funny or confusing? I then highlight effective usage and celebrate learner creativity.

The result? A classroom buzzing with energy, laughter, and meaningful English use. Students leave still discussing the game in English, smiling as they head out the door.

Imagine a whole English lesson built around one game: warm-up → vocab prep → gameplay → reflection. *Du Ký* makes students forget they're learning, while learning deeply.

3. Conclusion

Du Ký demonstrates how tabletop games can shift classrooms and pedagogy from test-oriented to learner-centered spaces. Its cooperative mechanics encourage descriptive language use, intercultural curiosity, and learner autonomy all while being engaging and playful.

For educators, this suggests that games can be more than “add-ons.” With thoughtful mediation, they can become the core of a lesson, fostering authentic communication and deeper learning. While my context is Vietnam, the potential extends globally: *Du Ký* could be adapted for any EFL classroom all around the world.

Ultimately, what makes *Du Ký* powerful is not just its gameplay but its alignment with contemporary pedagogy. It embodies Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural view of learning as social interaction, Deci & Ryan’s (2000) call for autonomy-driven motivation, and Lombardi’s (2007) push for authenticity. It shows that games that are rooted in local culture yet open to international classrooms can be legitimate teaching tools that foster not only language skills but also identity, agency, and joy.

Du Ký shows how tabletop games can be the heart of a lesson, not just a warm-up. They bring agency, joy, and authentic language use into classrooms worldwide.

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