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Teaching Nouns Using *Things in Rings* and the Concept of Venn Diagram

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Item Details

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Key points

- **Name of ludic object:** Things in Rings
- **Type/genre/theme:** A tabletop game about finding hidden rules of objects and concepts
- **Intended audience age** 🧑: 10 and above
- **Intended audience proficiency** 🗣️: A1 and above
- **Typical time to play** ⌚: 20-30 minutes
- **Number of players** 👤: 2-6 players

Microblog synopsis

Through *Things in Rings*, a tabletop game that challenges players to uncover hidden logical rules within three intersecting circles, this article illustrates how nouns across different categories can be taught using Venn-diagram logic. By engaging in play, learners explore meaning, compare concepts, and negotiate shared understanding through interaction and discovery.
#gamebasedlearning #venndiagram #boardgames #EFL #cooperativelearning

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1. From a trend in the Vietnamese EFL teacher's community to an educational board game

At the beginning of 2025, many teacher communities across Vietnam were buzzing with excitement over a new idea: using Venn Diagrams in a classroom context. I belong to a network called the Community of ELT Practice, founded by Ms. Thu Trang Janes in 2021 with the goal of bringing Vietnamese language teachers together to collaborate, innovate, and support one another. The community regularly organizes challenges to encourage teachers to think creatively, experiment with new methods, and share insights.

In early 2025, the group launched a challenge on integrating Venn Diagrams into English lessons. During the time, I was a bit out of the loop so I could not place my finger on the trigger point of the rise in popularity for Venn Diagrams; however, many teachers eagerly posted their classroom experiments and ideas using this originally mathematical concept in teaching English. Some used Venn Diagrams in post-reading activities for young learners, helping them compare familiar stories and strengthen critical thinking. Others explored grammar-focused applications, such as visualizing countable vs. uncountable nouns and illustrating overlaps between words that could belong to both categories.

At the time, I had already been immersed in game-based learning for nearly four years. Although I found the idea intriguing, I couldn't recall any game that used the mechanics of a Venn Diagram, let alone one that could meaningfully support language learning. That changed when a friend sent me a post about a game he had played at CMON Expo Bangkok: *Things in Rings* by Peter C. Hayward and Snow Conrad (see *Figure 1*).

In *Things in Rings*, players aim to discard all their "Thing" cards by correctly placing them into a three-ring Venn Diagram. Each ring has a hidden logical rule that can be based on spelling, grammar, physical properties, cultural references, or categories like food, animals, and professions. One player, known as The Knower, determines whether the others' placements are correct or not, forcing players to think critically about categories and relationships between words and concepts.

Figure 1: Participants playing *Things in Rings* for the first time at CMON Expo Bangkok



When I first learned about *Things in Rings*, I realized it was more than just a coincidence; it was the missing link between a pedagogical trend and a real game mechanic. I immediately shared the discovery with my teacher community, sparking discussions about how such logic-based games could be adapted for EFL classrooms in Vietnam.

When ELT teachers in Vietnam started using VennDiagrams for lessons, I never thought it'd lead me to a real board game built on the same logic: *Things in Rings*.

2. *Things in Rings*: When a Venn Diagram becomes a mechanic

2.1 A game for everyone

At its core, this 2–6 player game challenges participants to uncover the hidden logical rules governing each circle. On their turn, players place cards into the Venn Diagram and receive feedback from The Knower. There is a maximum of three rings, each of which represents a set of rules: Red is for the context of words, Yellow is for spelling or pronunciation of words, and Blue is for the physical properties of words. If a player places the card in the correct position (according to the Knower), they get to place another card until they get it wrong. When a player places the card in the incorrect position, the Knower will stop them and put the card in the correct place. The player then draws a card from the draw pile and ends their turn. Which guesser finishes their hand first will win the game. A new game then starts with a different player taking the role of the Knower and the previous Knower will now become a Guesser.

Through this process of hypothesis testing and correction, learners naturally employ deductive reasoning and critical thinking to infer patterns, an engaging form of cognitive play that aligns well with language learning.

Figure 2

My teenage IELTS students playing *Things in Rings* for the first time in class



What stands out most, however, is how remarkably versatile *Things in Rings* is for learners of all ages and proficiency levels. Many board games struggle to strike a balance: those designed for younger players can feel overly simplistic to teenagers or adults, while more complex games can overwhelm younger learners. *Things in Rings* bridges this gap seamlessly. The reason for this is that the game's flexible structure allows for scaffolding and differentiation. Teachers can adjust the number of rings (one, two, or three) or select from three tiers of rule cards, each offering ten unique logic rules. This built-in adaptability enhances the game's replayability while allowing teachers to tailor cognitive and linguistic demands to their learners' abilities (see *Figure 2*).

Equally valuable are the Thing cards themselves, which resemble illustrated flashcards reminiscent of Dr. Seuss's playful style: colorful, quirky, and approachable. Each card features an image and a corresponding word, making them accessible to beginners yet stimulating for more advanced students who can use the same set to explore semantic, grammatical, or phonological relationships (see *Figure 3*).

Figure 3

Things in Rings card illustrations



Furthermore, *Things in Rings* includes a cooperative mode, transforming the experience from competitive problem-solving to collaborative inquiry. In this mode, players work together to deduce the rules, fostering teamwork, negotiation, and communication, which are skills essential for 21st-century classrooms. This cooperative format mirrors real-world interaction, where learners must articulate hypotheses, justify reasoning, and build shared understanding. It also supports mixed-ability classrooms, enabling peer learning through social constructivist and cooperative learning principles (Vygotsky, 1978; Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

In short, *Things in Rings* is not just adaptable in gameplay, it's pedagogically flexible. The game itself comes in three levels of difficulties for a range of players; hence, it could be used from low-level classes where the language range of the students is still limited to advanced groups of students where they prefer challenging gameplay to put their language knowledge and soft skills to use. In addition, the game offers a strong framework of gameplay that teachers could customize for the cards to be about adjectives, adverbs, or verbs in order to best fit their classroom profiles. Whether used in primary, secondary, or adult EFL classrooms, the game provides an inclusive, cognitively engaging, and socially meaningful framework for exploring language through play.

In *Things in Rings*, learners uncover hidden rules through logic and deduction. Its flexible design, adaptable difficulty, and cooperative mode make it a game for all ages, where reasoning meets language play.

2.2 Cognitive and theoretical foundations of vocabulary learning through *Things in Rings*

Things in Rings is built around the cognitive process of categorization, as players must identify, test, and refine hypotheses about the hidden rules governing each circle or, pedagogically speaking, each semantic category. On every turn, learners analyze the placement of “Things,” infer possible relationships, and test their ideas against peer or teacher feedback. This dynamic mirrors what Stark and Aitchison (1996) call semantic networking: the mental organization of words through webs of meaning, association, and conceptual proximity. In playing, learners are not simply memorizing words; they are constructing a mental lexicon that connects items through shared features and contextual relevance.

The visual–spatial design of the game, which is the use of interlocking rings resembling a Venn Diagram, further supports dual-coding theory (Clark & Paivio, 1991). According to Clark and Paivio, combining verbal information (words, explanations) with visual cues (the overlapping circles and illustrated cards) enhances retention and comprehension. As learners discuss where to place cards, they simultaneously engage visual reasoning and verbal articulation: seeing the relationships, saying their hypotheses, and testing them through interaction. Each round of trial and error thus becomes a mini-cycle of meaning-making, reinforcing both form and semantic relationships through multimodal learning.

In classroom practice, this process is deeply aligned with the principles of game-based learning (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). GBL (game-based learning) provides the system rules, goals, and feedback loops that transform linguistic exploration into meaningful play. This experience makes the “play” part of the lesson become more genuine and allows students to actually enter the stage of deep learning through playing a real game, rather than just importing a few game-like terminologies to “bait” the students in learning (York, 2025). SDT (self-determination theory), in turn, explains why such environments motivate learners. The autonomy to hypothesize, the competence gained from successful deductions, and the social relatedness built through collaborative reasoning all fulfill the three psychological needs identified in SDT. When learners are engaged in uncovering rules, rather than being told them, their motivation shifts from extrinsic (“to get it right”) to intrinsic (“to figure it out”). Traditionally, Vietnamese students have always been taught to get it right at every task that they do. It leaves no room for error in the way they were taught. Hence, *Things in Rings* allows students / players to be comfortable with getting it wrong in order to get the right answers later. This combination of structured challenge and self-directed discovery is precisely what makes *Things in Rings* an ideal bridge between cognitive science and classroom practice.

Ultimately, *Things in Rings* embodies an integrated model of vocabulary learning where semantic network building, dual-coding, and motivational scaffolding converge. The game’s structure ensures that cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions of learning operate together, turning what might otherwise be a static vocabulary exercise into an active, collaborative, and self-reinforcing system of play.

In *Things in Rings*, learners build meaning networks like cognitive cartographers: seeing, saying, and testing how words connect across categories through play and discovery.

2.3 Flow of a lesson with *Things in Rings*

Designing a lesson around *Things in Rings* requires more than simply bringing the game into class. It involves aligning gameplay with language learning objectives. The following sequence integrates the game into a coherent lesson structure grounded in task-based language teaching (TBLT) and GBL. This framework ensures that students experience learning through play, not play instead of learning.

The lesson plan follows three key stages: pre-task, while-task, and post-task, with each serving a distinct cognitive and pedagogical purpose. This structure moves learners gradually from guided discovery to independent hypothesis testing and finally to reflective language awareness, turning gameplay into a cycle of experiential learning.

The lesson plan using *Things in Rings* follows a three-phase structure common in task-based and game-based learning frameworks: **pre-task** (scaffolding and input), **during-task** (gameplay and negotiation), and **post-task** (reflection and language consolidation) (Hashemi, Azizinezhad & Darvishi, 2012). This flow ensures that the game functions not as a break from learning but as an integrated stage of the lesson.

Stage 1: Pre-Task – Setting the Language and Cognitive Frame (10–15 minutes)

Before gameplay begins, students need to be familiarized with the vocabulary, categories, and language functions they will encounter during the game. The teacher first introduces or revises a set of lexical items connected to the lesson's topic (e.g., animals, occupations, emotions, or cultural concepts). Visual aids such as flashcards or images are ideal here, as they align with the game's visual reasoning component.

Next, the teacher models the logic of categorization using a simple example of a Venn Diagram on the board, perhaps using two circles (e.g., "Things you can expect to find at school" and "Things that are red"). Together, the class brainstorms items that fit one, both, or neither category. During this phase, teachers should highlight target grammatical or lexical structures, such as:

- *It belongs to both categories because...*
- *I think it fits in the left circle because...*
- *It can be categorized as...*

This stage activates prior knowledge, builds schema for the gameplay logic, and provides linguistic scaffolds for the next stage.

Stage 2: While-Task – Gameplay and Negotiation (20–25 minutes)

Once the concepts and structures are clear, students are divided into groups of 4–6 players. Each group receives a *Things in Rings* set with three visible rings and a chosen set of "Thing" cards. One student acts as The Knower, secretly reviewing the hidden rule cards and confirming whether other players' placements are correct.

During play, students:

1. **Place a card** on one of the circles or intersections.
2. **Justify their reasoning** verbally: *"I believe 'apple' goes here because it's both red and edible."*
3. **Receive feedback** from The Knower ("Yes" / "No"), prompting further hypothesis-testing and peer discussion.

This stage embodies what Aitchison (2012) calls semantic networking: students articulate the connections between words and encourage communicative negotiation of meaning, a cornerstone of both Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and TBLT, according to Qasserras (2023). Teachers circulate among groups, listening for the use of target language, prompting elaboration ("Why do you think so?"), and offering corrective feedback when necessary.

For lower proficiency learners, teachers can reduce the cognitive load by limiting the number of circles (one or two instead of three) or by pre-teaching more concrete vocabulary. For advanced groups, abstract categories (e.g., “Things related to luck,” “Words with two syllables,” “Things that can change form”) can deepen both linguistic and conceptual engagement.

Stage 3: Post-Task – Reflection and Language Consolidation (10 minutes)

After the game, students engage in a structured reflection process to consolidate language and reasoning skills. The teacher facilitates a discussion focused on both the cognitive and linguistic dimensions of gameplay, prompting learners to think about how they discovered the hidden rules and what language they used to express their ideas.

Using a **3–2–1 feedback framework**, students individually or in pairs write down three things they learned, two things they found difficult, and one question they still have. For example: “I learned that ‘whale’ fits both ‘mammal’ and ‘animal that lives in water’,” or “It was hard to explain my idea in English.”

This framework encourages learners to evaluate their learning strategies, identify linguistic challenges, and reflect on how reasoning, vocabulary, and communication interacted throughout the activity. The teacher then elicits responses, summarizing key takeaways on the board and linking them back to the lesson objectives, particularly how categorization supports vocabulary retention and how meaning overlaps across linguistic contexts. This reflective phase reinforces metacognitive awareness and positions play as an integral part of purposeful language learning.

The teacher concludes by connecting gameplay to explicit learning outcomes: highlighting how categorization mirrors vocabulary acquisition in real life and how patterns of meaning overlap across linguistic contexts.

Pedagogical Summary

Through this structure, *Things in Rings* transforms a seemingly simple logic puzzle into an interactive lexical learning task grounded in:

- **Cognitive linguistics:** Building semantic networks through categorization.
- **Dual-coding:** Combining verbal explanation with visual representation.
- **Motivational psychology:** Leveraging autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

The flow ensures that students move from guided discovery to autonomous play, and finally, to reflective metalinguistic awareness, making language learning both analytical and playful.

A board game can be more than play. In *Things in Rings*, students move from guided discovery to hypothesis testing to reflection, building vocabulary networks, reasoning skills, and motivation through structured play.

3. Conclusion: from circles to systems of learning

Things in Rings demonstrates how the boundaries between play and pedagogy can blur in productive ways. What began as a coincidence between a trending visual tool and a board-game mechanic evolved into a model of how teachers can translate educational ideas into embodied, interactive learning experiences. Through its blend of categorization, hypothesis testing, and collaboration, the game transforms Venn Diagram logic into a living system of meaning-making.

At a **cognitive** level, learners are not just sorting words; they are building semantic networks and strengthening conceptual connections. At a **social** level, they negotiate, justify, and co-construct understanding, echoing the communicative and collaborative nature of authentic language use. At a **motivational** level, the structure of the game fulfills the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, allowing students to learn *because they want to discover*, not merely because they are told to.

For teachers, *Things in Rings* offers more than an engaging activity as it represents a replicable framework for game-based vocabulary teaching. It encourages educators to rethink how classroom tools, from diagrams to card decks, can be reimagined as spaces for inquiry and dialogue. In doing so, it bridges theory and practice, showing how cognitive linguistics, dual-coding, and self-determination theory can converge within a simple, joyful act of play.

In the end, three overlapping circles become more than just a diagram. They become a metaphor for holistic learning: where **thinking, speaking, and playing** meet in one shared space.

Things in Rings turns three circles into more than a diagram; they become a metaphor for holistic learning, where thinking, speaking, and playing meet. A bridge between pedagogy, cognition, and the joy of discovery.

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