

Pommersion

A game of language learning through immersion

General Information

Game time	55 minutes
Number of players	1-8 players 1 moderator helpers (optional)
Purpose	To learn something new in your target language!

Overview

The **players** are motivated language learners. Their goal is to learn something new in the target language: a new word, a new construction, or a new phrase. Everyone who learns at least one new thing wins the game!

A **pomodoro** is a period of immersion. There are three pomodoros in a game, with breaks in between.

The most important rule of a pomodoro is this: **During a pomodoro, players can only speak in the target language.** Apart from this, there are no limitations on what players can do to make themselves understood. Hand signs, charades, and props are all allowed.

There are regular **breaks** to give players an opportunity to ask questions in their own language about the target language, or to talk about their communication techniques.

The **moderator** is the person who keeps the game going and enforces the rules. The goal of

the moderator is to make sure that all players learn something new in the target language, and everybody has a good time! The moderator can also be a player.

It's good if some friends who speak the target language can be present as **helpers** to answer questions. The moderator can also be a helper. But it is possible to play Pommersion without helpers. The players can still learn new things from each other or from whatever books or apps they have available, and internalize them during the pomodoros.

See the Guidance Notes section for more information about how these roles interact.

Backstory

When adults learn a language, they often spend most of their time and energy on learning *about* it. This doesn't work, because the key that unlocks the brain's language acquisition circuits is immersion, or meaningful and motivated communication in the target language.

But immersion is hard. Opportunities for immersion can be few and far between, and especially for English speakers there can be ways to avoid them.

Pommersion is a portmanteau of *pomodoro* and *immersion*. It uses the essential elements of the pomodoro technique in a game that gives adult language learners what they need: stress-free time *in* the language, and time to talk *about* the language. It is designed to be playable over a videoconference call such as Zoom.

The immediate inspiration was Viossa, a constructed pidgin that relies on absolute immersion. Other influences include the

community language revitalization program Where Are Your Keys? and elicitation techniques such as those demonstrated by field linguist Daniel Everett.

Gameplay

A game of Pommersion lasts for 55 minutes:

- First pomodoro (10 minutes)
 - First break (5 minutes)
- Second pomodoro (10 minutes)
 - Second break (5 minutes)
- Third pomodoro (10 minutes)
 - Third break (15 minutes)

During a pomodoro

The moderator tells each player when it is their **turn**. Each player gets at least one turn during a game. Usually all players get one turn each before a player gets a second turn, but the moderator can make exceptions if necessary.

During their turn, it is up to the player what they talk about, and with who. For example, they can:

- Pick up a prop and ask what it is.
- Say a sentence and ask if it was correct.
- Start a sentence and show that they want someone else to help them finish it.
- Start a conversation about a topic to try some new vocabulary.
- Just chat!

The player can decide that their turn is over whenever they want. Or, if they take too long the moderator can end their turn.

During a break

Everybody is free to speak whichever language they want.

The moderator gives each player an opportunity to ask questions about the target language. The first two breaks are short, so questions and answers have to be short and sweet. Complex questions and answers must be left until the third break.

Guidance Notes

Please be sure to read the notes below about your role before you play your first game of Pommersion.

The Player Role

1. **Know what you want to learn.** It's good to have something in mind before the game starts. But be careful not to set your sights too high. Don't forget, you only need to learn *something* new before the end of the game to win! For some tips, see Ideas for Your Next Turn
2. **Don't be intimidated** when you see that other players are more advanced than you. Don't forget, when it's your turn you will be the one who sets the level, and everybody else will fit in with you.
3. **When your turn comes, get creative!** The rule of a pomodoro is that you aren't allowed to *speak* any language other than the target language. That doesn't mean you have to communicate using *only* the target language. You're free to use hand

gestures, facial expressions, funny noises, pantomime, the objects around you, or any other trick you can think of so long as you don't *speak* any other *language*. Because you're still immersed! Use this freedom to the fullest to make yourself understood. For more ideas about how to do this, see Communication Techniques.

4. **Watch and learn.** You can pick up some new words and grammar as well as other cool communication techniques from the other players.
5. **No pressure.** Don't feel shy. But if you do, feel free to pass when it's your turn. You can still learn new things when it's not your turn, either during the pomodoros or the breaks.
6. **Make the most of the breaks** to ask questions in your own language. You can ask anything you like about what just happened in the last pomodoro. Ask for simple words or phrases in the target language that will help you during pomodoros, such as "Correct?", "Did you understand?", "How can I say...?" You can also agree on hand signs to use as signals.

If you are a more advanced player, sometimes you can also be a helper. But please make sure you read through the guidance for helpers before you jump in.

The Moderator Role

Your main job is to make sure that *everybody* has a *good* time.

1. **Make sure that all the players feel included**, and that they feel that they learned something by the end of the

game. This means that you particularly need to look after the shy ones. If they get stuck, try a Conversation Starter (see below).

2. **Make sure that none of the players feel pressured.** Make sure that all players get a turn, but if a player decides to pass or end their turn early, respect that.
3. **The player whose turn it is sets the language level.** Without meaning to, more advanced players and helpers can jump in and take over. If necessary, kindly take back control and give it back to the player whose turn it is.
4. **Keep the game moving.** The more confident players can eat up all the time if you let them. If you realize that a player is taking too long and there won't be enough time left for the others, kindly end their turn.
5. **Stick to the time limits.** Remind people to stay in the target language during pomodoros.

If you are a player, give yourself a turn. If you are a helper, all the guidance for helpers also applies to you.

The Helper Role

It's great to have you on board! Without you the players would only have each other, so thanks for being here. But with great power comes great responsibility. You have the power to make or break the game.

1. **Don't worry about sharing too little. Worry about sharing too much.** The purpose of the game is to learn *something*

new, not *everything*. If you share too much you can overwhelm the players and they won't have a good time.

2. When it's a player's turn, **allow them to decide** how much they want to learn, and from who. Let the player decide if they want to be corrected, or if they just want to be understood. If you are unsure, first say "Well, I understand you." If they decide that that's enough for now, that's OK.
3. When a player decides to talk to you, **let them take their time**. If they take time to search for a word, patiently let them search. Only finish their sentence for them if they ask you for help with their eyes. If they get really stuck, you can try a Conversation Starter (see below)
4. **Stay at the player's level**. Do your best to understand the level of the player whose turn it is, and speak with them at that level. When you sense that something is new for them, just focus on helping them learn the new thing. Use good communication techniques (see below) to make sure they understand. Don't introduce another new thing until they show you that they are ready.
5. **Correct one thing at a time**. If you are sure that this is what the player wants, it's OK to correct their mistakes. But it's not necessary to correct all their mistakes, unless they ask you to. If you correct one thing, the player will remember it. If you correct too many, the player will remember nothing and won't have a good time.

Tips
Ideas for Your Next Turn

On your next turn in the pomodoro as a player, try to learn at least one new thing. Don't try to learn too many things at the same time!

But what should you try to learn next? It's really up to you. But if you need some inspiration, feel free to take a look at the suggestions below. (Codes are CEFR levels.)

The important thing is to have something specific in mind that you want to learn, and to use good communication techniques (see below) to make sure the other player or helper understands what you're looking for.

Suggestions

If you know absolutely nothing...

Make up a random word, like "wug." Say the name of a helper or another player. Then pick something up, point to it and say, "Wug?" The other person will tell you what the correct word is.

Say the name of a helper or another player. Then mime an action, such as laying your head on your hand to sleep, or moving your arms as if you are walking. If your name is Joel, say "Joel wug?" The other person will tell you what the correct word is.

If you know some basic sentences...
 (A1)

Think of something you don't know the word for. Say the name of a helper or another player. Then use the words you know to talk about the thing. Then ask, "What is this?"

If you can talk about what you did today... (A2)

Use a "fill in the blanks" technique: Say the name of a helper or another player. Then say a sentence, but leave a "blank" for the word that you want to learn. Make it obvious what the "blank" is. For example, you could say "This pen is for me. This pen is for ...?" while giving the pen to the other person. The other person will tell you what the correct word is.

Say the name of a helper or another player. Then experiment with the sentences that you know. You can tell a short story if you like. Then ask, "Is that right?" or "Did you understand?"

When you learn something new, and it's still your turn, immediately use it again but in a different sentence. Ask, "Is that right?" or "Did you understand?"

If you can survive in most daily situations... (B1)

Talk about something you like until you get to something you can't say! Ask a helper, "How can I say this?"

If you can say almost anything you want to say... (B2)

Think about the last situation where you struggled in the target language. Talk about it with a helper. Tell them what happened and what you struggled with. You might not get the answer you wanted, but you will still learn something new.

If almost everything you say is correct... (C1)

Start a conversation with a helper. But make sure that you tell the helper what you need from them. Do you want them to correct your grammar, your accent, or both? Keep going until they correct you, then focus on what they corrected.

Talk to a helper about a subject that you don't know much about. Before long, you will learn something new: A new word, a new saying, a correct pronunciation, or a grammar point.

Communication Techniques

Whether you're a player or a helper, if the player doesn't know the word for something or an essential grammatical element, how can communication happen? By getting creative!

You might find it inspiring to watch the video *First Contact Survival Kit* by NativLang on YouTube, which explains some of the techniques field linguists use.

Here are some more general ideas:

Clues

Add emotion with your **facial expressions**. Use a **hand sign** that is well-known or that you have agreed upon. Use a **prop**, or an object, to show what you mean. Search on the Internet for a **picture** and show it to the other person on your device.

Provide or invent **context** to make it clear what word you're searching for, or what an new

word means. The "fill in the blanks" technique is an example of this.

Examples

To make it clear what a word means, or which word it is that you need, give more than one example. **Tell stories** to paint a picture of the different situations where the word is used. You can even act out the situation, like **pantomime** or charades.

Contrasts

If the player doesn't know a word, maybe they know the **opposite**. If they don't know the word "white", they can say "Milk isn't black, it's ...what?" The helper will know which word they need. Or to learn the word for "you", the player could say: "This doesn't belong to me, it belongs to... who?" and point to the other person.

It can also be good to use **comparisons**. For example, imagine that the player knows the word for "big", but doesn't know how to say "bigger". They could say, "A car is big, but a house is... big-big? How can I say this?" The other person will give them the word "bigger."

Conversation Starters

If a player is unsure about what to say on their turn, a moderator or a helper can try one of these suggestions to help them get started:

- How are you?
- Did you have a good day today? What did you do?
- Where do you live? Is it a nice place?
- How many houses are on your street?

- When did you start to learn this language?
- Do you like different foods? What is your favourite food?
- What do you do for work?
- Do you like to travel to different places? Where do you like to go?
- Do you like books or movies? Which books or movies do you like?

Version 5.1
© 2020 Joel Thomas
Visit bit.ly/pommersion