

## There are better games than Buzz!

### Background:

Recently, during a discussion about favourite warm-up games on Twitter, the game, *Buzz*, was nominated. As I quickly typed my objections and suggested several alternatives, I decided that this was a good time to write a post as to why *Buzz* should no longer be a favourite game in maths classrooms.

### What is Buzz?

Although there are possibly alternative rules played across the country, the basic set-up of the game Buzz is that all students in the class stand up. The teacher will nominate a number, for example 5, and students will begin counting forwards by one going around the room (or circle) with each student saying the next number in the sequence. When students arrive at a multiple of the nominated number, instead of saying the number, the student will instead say "Buzz!". If students either miss the count or say the number instead of saying "Buzz!" they are out of the game and need to sit down. Play continues until one student remains or the count reaches a given end target. For example, the initial sequence of responses in the game described above would be:

**1, 2, 3, 4, Buzz, 6, 7, 8, 9, Buzz, 11, 12, ...**

Variations on the game Buzz, sometimes called Bing, Bang, Buzz! (or Buzz, Fizz, Whizz!) allow the teacher to nominate more than one number, for example, 3, 4 and 5. The students still count forwards by one but on each number that is a multiple of either 3, 4, or 5 they must say the corresponding word. For example (assuming Bing = 3, Bang = 4 and Buzz = 5) the initial sequence of responses would be:

**1, 2, Bing, Bang, Buzz, Bing, 7, Bang, Bing, Buzz, 11,  
Bing-Bang, 13, 14, Bing-Buzz, Bang, 17, ...**

As shown in the above example, in this version of the game, numbers like 12 that are a multiple of more than one of the nominated numbers, need to be labelled with all terms. So instead of 12, a student would say "bing-bang" and instead of 30 a student would say "bing-bang-buzz."

### What is the problem with Buzz?

There are several issues with the game Buzz. Firstly, regardless of the year level this game is played, there will be students in the class who are unfamiliar with the number sequence. Research conducted by the Grattan Institute (2015) has shown that at any given year level there is a five to six-year difference between the most advanced and the least advanced ten per cent of students. This gap only widens as the year levels increase. With this in mind, it is important that all students in the class are hearing the correct number sequence and not a sequence where particular terms are changed. The sequence is meant to be stated as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 not 1, 2, 3, 4, buzz.

Secondly, as students who make errors are eliminated, Buzz is effectively favouring the more able students and penalising the students who need the most support. Imagine a student who is unfamiliar with the counting sequence or has difficulty recalling the multiples of particular numbers, in front of the whole class they must attempt to name the next number in the sequence. They do not have access to a visual aid and must recall from memory the next number, which they may then need to replace with a different term. If they get it wrong, despite demonstrating a need to practise this skill, they are asked to sit down. The students who are familiar with the number sequence and have a good knowledge of multiples will be the students who remain in the game.

Any game, where the students who need to most support in developing a particular skill are the first ones eliminated, really needs to be reconsidered. Such a process potentially only adds to maths anxiety and the belief that some people are simply not good at maths. This is not a belief that any teacher would aim to develop in their classroom.

### How Buzz can be improved?

If teachers really want to play Buzz a few simple changes can make it more beneficial for a wider range of students. Firstly, instead of saying Buzz on the multiples of the given number, students say the number but perform an action, for example, place their hands on their heads for multiples of 5. Further actions could be added for other multiples, for example, on multiples of 3 students place their hands on their shoulders and on multiples of 4 students place their hands in a cross across their chest. This change from new terms to actions mean that all students are able to hear the correct number sequence.

Secondly, students who need further support could also be provided with a counting chart (or number line) so they can follow along with the sequence as it moves around the class. Alternatively, a large chart could be displayed in the room, so that all students have the same advantage, and no one will be left feeling that they are 'bad at maths' for needing to use it.

### Alternative Games

Buzz is not a new game. I remember playing it in school in the mid-1980s. I enjoyed maths and was never one of the first students eliminated. As a teacher today, I worry about the impact this game may have had on some of the less capable students.

Here are several alternatives that allow students to practice their ability to recall the number sequence and identify multiples of numbers, but do not penalise students for suggesting incorrect answers:

- Whisper Whisper Loud: <https://calculate.org.au/2020/03/04/whisper-whisper-loud/>
- Number Trails: <https://calculate.org.au/2020/03/04/number-trails-2/>
- Pass the Count: <https://calculate.org.au/2018/09/26/pass-the-count/>
- See and Say: <https://calculate.org.au/2018/10/03/see-say/>
- Guess my Number: <https://calculate.org.au/2020/06/17/guess-my-number/>

If you do have a similar-ability group of students who are familiar with the number sequence, then you may choose to play Buzz in its traditional form. Just be aware that there are better games out there.

### References

Goss, P., Hunter, J., Romanes, D., Parsonage, H. (2015). Targeted teaching: How better use of data can improve student learning. *Grattan Institute*. Retrieved from <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/827-Targeted-Teaching.pdf>