# Brain breaks in the languages classroom

[Brain breaks](https://education.nsw.gov.au/schooling/school-community/wellbeing-framework-for-schools/cognitive-wellbeing-strategies/brain-breaks-for-cognitive-wellbeing) provide a low-stakes opportunity for students’ brains to rest and replenish focus (Department of Education 2023). Providing short breaks (approximately 5 minutes) in learning can help students to avoid feeling cognitively overloaded, enhancing their overall learning experience.

Brain breaks can also liven up the ‘mood’ of a lesson, boost energy, increase engagement and are a proactive measure to assist with classroom management (Lander et al 2024).

In this support document, you will find:

* important considerations when implementing brain breaks
* samples of language-based brain breaks
* samples of non-language-based brain breaks.

## Important considerations

When implementing brain breaks in the languages classroom, context is important. What could be considered a brain break in Stage 5 or Stage 6, may be a complex learning activity in Stage 4. Consider the learning context of your students, including the complexity of the language (where language is incorporated), the topic being studied and the nature of the brain break, to ensure all brain breaks are appropriately tailored to students.

### Other considerations

* **Purposeful break**: at the core of brain breaks is the idea that they should signify a noticeable shift in the lesson, providing rest from the preceding activities. This change may involve a transition in content (although it does not have to) or a change in format, such as engaging in a creative activity, physical activity, or mindfulness or mediation exercise. Brain breaks signify a change and provide mental rest.
* **Low-stakes environment**: design brain breaks to be low-stakes or no-stakes activities, ensuring a relaxed atmosphere for students.
* **Duration**: keep brain breaks brief, lasting approximately 5 to 10 minutes.
* **Language inclusion**: while brain breaks do not need to focus on language, incorporating language elements can be beneficial and provide students with extra exposure to the target language. Ensure the language is familiar and that the primary aim is to facilitate a break from learning rather than to reinforce content.
* **Support for students**: when integrating language into brain breaks, consider what support should be provided to students, if any, so that the language is not a barrier to students accessing the brain break and its benefits. Depending on the context and students’ levels, consider saying the English translations of instructions or vocabulary immediately after the target language is presented, allowing students to use English themselves, or show flashcards which correspond to the vocabulary used in the brain break.

## Sample language-based brain breaks

Below is a list of brain breaks which incorporate the target language, while also encouraging either an element of creativity or physical activity. They are designed to be ‘low-prep’, so you can embed them into a lesson any time you see students’ energy fading or evidence of cognitive overload. They only require resources commonly found in languages classrooms.

There are a range of brain breaks below to cater to Stage 4 through to Stage 6. Consider which brain breaks would be most suitable for your stage and context, adapting where necessary.

### Make a shape!

Students find a place anywhere in the classroom or take students outside, if appropriate. Ask students to form groups of 3 or 4. Say a vocabulary term in the target language, such as a food item or animal, and in groups, students must use their bodies to form a shape which resembles the term. Each round lasts approximately 30 seconds. Play for 4 to 5 minutes.

### Class charades

Students find a place anywhere in the classroom or take students outside, if appropriate. Say a vocabulary term in the target language, such as an adjective, verb or activity, and the class must act it out. Each round lasts approximately 15 seconds. Play for 4 to 5 minutes.

### Musical charades or statues

Students find a place anywhere in the classroom or take students outside, if appropriate. Say a vocabulary term in the target language, such as an adjective, verb or activity. Then, play a song, ideally from the target country. While the song plays, students must walk around, acting out that term to the best of their ability. When the music stops, students must freeze. Play several rounds. Play for 4 to 5 minutes.

### Draw this!

Say a vocabulary term in the target language. Students draw a picture of it on their mini whiteboards or pieces of paper. Once completed, students stand up. The teacher may introduce a point system where the student with the most accurate drawing is awarded a point. This may not necessarily be the first student to stand up. Play for 4 to 5 minutes.

As an extra challenge and to increase student engagement, students can take turns to be the caller. The student with the most points at the end of the game wins the prize.

### Pictionary

Use the [Team Picker Wheel](https://pickerwheel.com/tools/random-team-generator/) online tool to divide students into small groups. One student from each group goes to the teacher to receive a vocabulary term in the target language. Students return to their group and draw the term while their classmates try to guess what it is in English or the target language. The student who guesses correctly then goes to the teacher to get the next term.

The process repeats until one group has correctly guessed all terms, winning the game. This activity should take approximately 5 minutes.

### Do you like …? (heads or hips)

Ask students to find a place to stand in the classroom. Using the structure *‘*Do you like …?*’* in the target language, ask students about specific items related to the topic being studied. After each question, students gesture a response by placing their hands on their head if they like it or placing their hands on their hips if they don’t like it. This activity should take 2 to 3 minutes.

### True or false?

Students stand anywhere in the classroom. Say a statement in the target language about yourself, related to the topic or about the target language country. Students walk to one side of the classroom if they think your statement is true and the other side of the classroom if they believe your statement is false. Play for 2 to 3 minutes.

### 3 steps forward

Display a list of topic vocabulary in the target language on the board. Then, prepare a timer for 2 minutes using the [Rocket Countdown Timer](https://www.online-stopwatch.com/rocket-timer/) online tool. Students stand at the back of the classroom in a line. When students are ready, ‘think’ of one of the vocabulary terms. When the timer starts, students begin taking turns guessing what term you are thinking of.

To help them guess, display the vocabulary on the board. Students can guess at random or in order of where they are standing in the line at the back of the classroom. If a student guesses correctly, everyone in the class takes a step forward and the process begins again.

Students win if they take 3 steps forward. You win the game if the timer goes off before students have taken 3 steps forward. Play 2 to 3 rounds.

### Count to 21

Students can remain seated or find a place to stand in the classroom to encourage physical movement. The goal of the game is to count from one to 21 in the target language, with only one student saying a number at a time.

If a student says the wrong number, has incorrect pronunciation or if 2 students speak at the same time, the count restarts from one. Students must contribute at random each time the count restarts. Play for 4 to 5 minutes.

### Categories

Students stand in a circle in the classroom to encourage movement. Choose a category, such as food and drink items, animals or adjectives. Students go around in a circle, saying a word from the chosen category in the target language, without repeating any words.

If a student hesitates for too long or repeats a word, they must do 5 star jumps (or a pre-agreed activity) before sitting down. Students left standing at the end of 4 to 5 minutes are the winners.

### Alphabet categories – individual

Students stand in a circle in the classroom to encourage movement. Choose a category, such as food and drink items, animals or adjectives. Students go around in a circle, saying a word from the chosen category in the target language, starting with a specific letter of the target language alphabet and moving sequentially through the alphabet (for example, ‘A’ for ‘apple’, ‘B’ for ‘banana’ and so on).

If a student hesitates for too long or repeats a word, they must do 5 star jumps (or a pre-agreed activity). Students left standing at the end of 4 to 5 minutes are the winners.

### Alphabet categories – group

Use the [Team Picker Wheel](https://pickerwheel.com/tools/random-team-generator/) online tool to split students into small groups. Provide each group with a piece of paper and a pen. Choose a category, such as food and drink items, animals or adjectives. Select a letter of the target language alphabet that all words must start with, using a tool such as the [Letter Picker Wheel](https://pickerwheel.com/tools/random-letter-generator/). Set a timer for 3 minutes using an online tool such as the [Candle Timer](https://www.online-stopwatch.com/candle-timer/).

Each group must write down as many words as they can think of which fit the category and the chosen letter. The group with the most words after the timer has gone, wins.

As an alternative, students can play without the categories, instead just writing as many words as they can which start with the chosen letter.

### Spelling bee

Students find a place anywhere in the classroom or take students outside, if appropriate. Choose a word in the target language. Select a student to start. The chosen student begins by saying the first letter of the word. Students take turns, going clockwise, each saying one letter of the word in sequence to spell it out loud.

After the word is fully spelled, students say ‘Buzz off, you’re out!’ in turn, each saying one word, until there are none left. The student who does not have a word left to say, must do 5 star jumps (or a pre-agreed activity). Then provide the next word. Play for 4 to 5 minutes.

### Simon says

Students find a place to stand in the classroom to encourage physical movement. If the teacher says ‘Simon says …’ or an equivalent in the target language, followed by a phrase, the class must complete the gesture associated with the phrase. However, if the teacher only says the phrase, not preceded by ‘*Simon says …’,* the class must not act out the gesture and must remain frozen. Play for 4 to 5 minutes.

### 4 corners

Label the 4 corners of the classroom with different categories, using the target language (include the English translation of the words, if appropriate to your context).

For example:

* frequency words, such as ‘never’, ‘rarely’, ‘usually’and‘always’
* degrees of likes and dislikes, such as‘really like’, ‘like’, ‘don’t like’and ‘really don’t like’*.*

Students stand in the centre of the room. Call out a vocabulary item in the target language related to the topic. For example, on the topic ‘sports and hobbies’, you could call out activities such as ‘*to play an instrument*’, ‘*to go to the beach*’, or ‘*to play tennis*’. For the topic of ‘eating and drinking’, you could call out vocabulary items, such as ‘*pizza*’ or ‘*lemonade*’.

Students move to the corresponding corner that best represents the frequency they complete the activity or their opinion on the vocabulary item. Play for 4 to 5 minutes.

### Would you rather?

Students stand in the centre of the classroom. Give 2 options in the target language, for example, the ocean or the mountains, fruits or vegetables, doing homework or doing household chores, playing sport or playing video games and so on.

Allocate one side of the classroom to the first vocabulary item and the other side of the classroom to the other. Students move to the side of the classroom which reflects what they prefer. Play for 3 to 4 minutes.

### Trading places

Students stand behind their chairs at their desk. Say a trait in the target language such as ‘blue eyes’ or ‘sporty’. Students who have that trait must change places with someone else who has the trait. Play several rounds to foster physical movement. Play for 4 to 5 minutes.

### Ball toss

Students stand in a circle in the classroom or take students outside, if appropriate. Toss the ball to a student, and say a vocabulary term, for example*,* ‘to go to sleep’ or a sentence, for example, ‘We eat dinner together.’

The student who the ball is tossed to must translate the sentence into the target language. Then, they toss the ball to a classmate at random. The teacher can choose to give prompts or allow students to provide the phrases to translate. Play for 4 to 5 minutes.

### Box breathing

Play the [Box Breathing – 1 minute in length (1:04)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6RbW2LtdFs) video. In silence, students follow the instructions in the video, breathing in for 4 seconds, holding their breath for 4 seconds, breathing out for 4 seconds and holding their breath for 4 seconds. While students concentrate on their breathwork, say the counts in the target language.

## Sample non-language based brain breaks

Below are a list of brain breaks which do not include any target language. These may be useful in contexts such as in Stage 4, where students’ language knowledge is minimal or at times where completing a brain break in the target language would require cognitive load. They are designed to be ‘low-prep’ so that you can embed them into a lesson anytime you see students’ energy fading or evidence of cognitive overload.

Each brain break below should be adapted to your context and your students.

For more information, visit the department’s [Brain breaks for cognitive wellbeing](https://education.nsw.gov.au/schooling/school-community/wellbeing-framework-for-schools/cognitive-wellbeing-strategies/brain-breaks-for-cognitive-wellbeing#:~:text=Brain%20breaks%20are%20simple%20physical%20and%20mental%20exercises.,competence%2C%20improving%20classroom%20behaviour%2C%20and%20strengthening%20teacher-student%20relationships.).

### Scissors, paper, rock and say!

Students find a place anywhere in the classroom or take students outside, if appropriate. Students move around, playing ‘Scissors, paper, rock’ (or similar, depending on the target language) with a peer. The student who does not win ‘Scissors, paper, rock’ says a fact (in English) about the target language country or culture. For example, ‘In France, students don’t wear a school uniform.’

Students play several rounds, moving to a new classmate for each round. Play for 4 to 5 minutes. Use a tool such as the [Bouncy Balls](https://bouncyballs.org/) online tool to provide real-time feedback to students regarding the noise levels in the classroom, while they complete this activity.

### Just Dance

Play a ‘Just Dance’ video from YouTube. If possible, select a ‘Just Dance’ video which features a song from the target country, such as this [French example (4:44)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cfYzSjSg-J0). Students find a place anywhere in the classroom and follow the dance moves as shown in the video.

### Walking tours

Play a ‘walking tour’ YouTube video showing the target language country. Students watch the walking tour for approximately 4 minutes. Encourage students to reflect individually while watching the video by asking prompt questions such as:

* What do you notice?
* What do you hear?
* What seems different?
* What seems the same?’

### Songs

Play a song in the target language, such as this [Italian example (3:35)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WchCVZKParI). Students listen to the song. Encourage students to close their eyes or rest their heads on the desk, where appropriate, to avoid distractions and allow them to listen to the song in silence.

Encourage students to reflect individually while listening to the song by asking prompt questions such as:

* What words do you recognise?
* What is something you find interesting about the target language country’s culture?
* What is something you want to learn more about?
* What is something you have enjoyed at school this week?
* What is something you are grateful for?

Provide only one question, depending on the purpose of the reflection.

## References

State of New South Wales (Department of Education [DoE]) (2023) ‘[Brain breaks for cognitive wellbeing](https://education.nsw.gov.au/schooling/school-community/wellbeing-framework-for-schools/cognitive-wellbeing-strategies/brain-breaks-for-cognitive-wellbeing#:~:text=Brain%20breaks%20are%20simple%20physical%20and%20mental%20exercises.,competence%2C%20improving%20classroom%20behaviour%2C%20and%20strengthening%20teacher-student%20relationships.)’, Cognitive wellbeing strategies, NSW Department of Education website, accessed 30 August 2024.

Lander NJ, Contardo Ayala AM, Mazzoli E, Lai SK, Orr J and Salmon J (2024) ‘[Beyond “Brain Breaks”: A New Model for Integrating Classroom-Based Active Breaks](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07303084.2024.2308253#abstract)’, *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, *95*(4):22–30, accessed 10 December 2024.

**© State of New South Wales (Department of Education), 2025**

The copyright material published in this resource is subject to the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth) and is owned by the NSW Department of Education or, where indicated, by a party other than the NSW Department of Education (third-party material).

Copyright material available in this resource and owned by the NSW Department of Education is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

[](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

This license allows you to share and adapt the material for any purpose, even commercially.

Attribution should be given to © State of New South Wales (Department of Education), 2025.

Material in this resource not available under a Creative Commons license:

* the NSW Department of Education logo, other logos and trademark-protected material
* material owned by a third party that has been reproduced with permission. You will need to obtain permission from the third party to reuse its material.

**Links to third-party material and websites**

Please note that the provided (reading/viewing material/list/links/texts) are a suggestion only and implies no endorsement, by the New South Wales Department of Education, of any author, publisher, or book title. School principals and teachers are best placed to assess the suitability of resources that would complement the curriculum and reflect the needs and interests of their students.

If you use the links provided in this document to access a third-party's website, you acknowledge that the terms of use, including licence terms set out on the third-party's website apply to the use which may be made of the materials on that third-party website or where permitted by the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth). The department accepts no responsibility for content on third-party websites.