

Cuisenaire Rod Activities for Language Development

by [Sarah Sahr](#)

Alright, ESL teachers! Walk down to the maths department and borrow all their Cuisenaire rods! What are [Cuisenaire rods](#), you ask? Simply, they are counting blocks to help students with basic math functions. They vary in length (length 1 to length 10) and color, with each length always assuming a specific color. (E.g., the 1 cm rod is always white, and the 10 cm rod is always orange.) While working in Viet Nam, I was introduced to ways Cuisenaire rods could be used for language development. The reason: Cuisenaire rods are able to take abstract concepts and make them more concrete. So, like most teachers, I took these ideas and tried to make them my own. I found that some students took to it like “fish to water”! Others took some convincing. You be the judge.

Side note: Because Cuisenaire rods are a little bit expensive, all activities are set up to be done in groups of two or more students. I would say, 10–15 Cuisenaire rod sets would be enough for most of the activities below (obviously, if you have a class of 50 students, your groups will be larger, but still doable. I have had success in grouping five students to one Cuisenaire rod set).

If you are able, construction paper or card stock can be a great substitute. Use the included Cuisenaire rod template, or make your own: you’ll want to make at least five of each color or, if color isn’t an option, just measure out the lengths (you’ll need a ruler). Construction would go like this:

1 cm	white	6 cm	dark green
2 cm	red	7 cm	black
3 cm	light green	8 cm	brown
4 cm	crimson	9 cm	blue
5 cm	yellow	10 cm	orange

Most Cuisenaire rod sets come with multiple blocks, meaning more than one of each color. Depending on the activity, three complete Cuisenaire rod sets can go a long way.

Teaching Materials: Cuisenaire rods (and maybe some flashcards, paper, etc.) or Cuisenaire rod template
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Audience: These activities are geared mostly for early primary students. Their lack of inhibitions allow for such adventures! However, with some adaption, secondary and adult beginning proficiency learners might like them.

Duration: Activities vary

Create a Zoo for Comparisons

Materials: Cuisenaire rods and flashcards

Pull all the animal flashcards out of your collection. Assign each animal a Cuisenaire rod. It would be best to make sure you relate the sizes of the rods to the sizes of the animals (e.g., the elephant gets the size 10 Cuisenaire rod, the parrot gets the size 2 Cuisenaire rod). Go over each pair to make sure students know which Cuisenaire rod represents each animal:

What color is the elephant? (Orange)
What color is the lion? (Black)
Hold up the penguin. (Students hold up the light green)
Hold up the mouse. (Students hold up the white)
Etc.

From here, move onto comparisons: tiny/tinier/tiniest, small/smaller/smallest, large/larger/largest, big/bigger/biggest, or even fat and thin. Have students line up the “animals” from biggest to smallest or smallest to biggest. Ask some questions:

What animals are bigger than lions?
What animals are smaller than monkeys?

Allow for time to have group mates talk with each other about the “animals.” If possible, have the group create a story about the zoo animals. They must animate the Cuisenaire rods: What movements do the animals make? How do animals interact?

Syllables

Materials: Cuisenaire rods

First, some background on the magic of Cuisenaire rods. Rods are measured out by centimeters. The smallest Cuisenaire rod is white and 1 cm in length. Next comes red at 2 cm (see chart list above), etc. When working with spelling and syllable activities, it’s best to remember the lengths of rods. For example, as a warm up to the next activity, you could ask students “How many letters does *cat* have?” Because *cat* has three letters, students would hold up the light green (3 cm) Cuisenaire rod. If you said *house*, students would hold up the yellow (5 cm) rod.

If you are helping students with basic reading skills, having students break words into syllables can be useful. For example: first, count the number of letters in the word *chocolate* (8). Next, how many syllables? When I say *chocolate*, it has three, *choc-o-late*. Students would need to find the correct Cuisenaire rod for the number of letters in each syllable:

- crimson (4 letters) - white (1 letter) – crimson (4 letters)

More examples:

- banana: red-light green-white
- house: yellow
- car: light green
- elephant: red-white-crimson
- brother: yellow-red
- library: red-crimson-white
- magician: red-red-crimson
- characteristic: crimson-red-light green-red-light green

Take it one step further... which syllable receives stress? If students are breaking down *brother*, there would be a yellow (5 cm) Cuisenaire rod for *broth* and a red (2 cm) Cuisenaire rod for *er*. To show stress, students would push the yellow Cuisenaire rod a few centimeters higher than the red:



b-r-o-t-h



e-r

Parts of Speech (Part 1): Sentence Structure

Materials: Cuisenaire rods and sentence strips

Start simple. Give groups of students a sentence strip with a simple sentence:

The girl plays soccer on the pitch.

Have students put a blue Cuisenaire rod on the nouns, the dark green Cuisenaire rods on the verb, the red Cuisenaire rods on the preposition, and, if they're able, the white Cuisenaire rods on the article.

Turn the sentence strip over. The group of students should make an original sentence with the same sentence structure: article, noun, verb, noun, preposition, article, noun.

List the colors on the board and the part of speech for each color, adding more advanced parts of speech as your students progress:

White	Article
Red	Preposition
Blue	Noun
Crimson	Pronoun
Dark green	Verb
Orange	Adjective
Brown	Adverb
Yellow	Conjunction
Black	Interjection

Arrange the colors in the order of a complex sentence, and have students complete the sentence:

Article	Adjective	Noun	Adverb	Verb	Noun	Preposition	Noun
White	Orange	Blue	Brown	Dark green	Blue	Red	Blue
The	happy	students	eagerly	practice	English	in	class.

Parts of Speech (Part 2): Sentence Stress

Materials: Cuisenaire rods

Have students take the sentence they created in Part 1 of the Part of Speech activity and push the most important word up a few centimeters to show stress. What's interesting about this activity is how students will have different opinions. For example, in the sentence, "The happy students eagerly practice English in class," some students might push up the blue "English" Cuisenaire

rod while other students might push the **orange** “happy” Cuisenaire rod. This is a great conversation starter! Ask students why they chose a particular Cuisenaire rod over another.

Storytelling

Materials: Cuisenaire rods

Ask students to build “your school and school yard” or “the school of your dreams” only using the Cuisenaire rods. It would be best if students could spread out on the floor and really take some space. It is essential that they work in groups for this project. As students are working, walk around the room, monitor their English use, and ask questions.

Once their perfect schools are made, have students tell stories of the students who attend the school, what classes they take, what activities they play, what food they eat, what they learn. You’d be amazed at the authentic language that comes out.

You can find past *TESOL Connection* lesson plans and activities in the [TESOL Connections archives](#), or you can visit the [TESOL Resource Center](#). From there, search Keywords “TESOL Connections,” and you will find about 20 resources with my name on it (Sahr, Sarah).

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