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THE ROLE OF LISTENING ACTIVITY PLANNING AT SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Listening is a crucial yet often overlooked skill in English as a Second Language (ESL) education. While reading, writing, and speaking receive primary focus in most curricula, listening is frequently reduced to repetitive, uninspiring exercises involving scripted audio recordings. This article challenges that status quo by introducing ten innovative, interactive listening activities designed specifically for intermediate ESL learners. The activities combine movement, competition, music, media, and peer interaction to stimulate learner engagement and reinforce listening comprehension. Additionally, the article is grounded in schema theory, emphasizing the role of cognitive structures in enhancing language acquisition and processing.

Keywords: *ESL Listening Skills, Schema Theory, Interactive Learning, Communicative Language Teaching, Authentic Listening Material*

Introduction

Listening seems like a passive activity. ESL teachers know better than anyone that's not exactly true. Language learners need to actively develop their listening skills.

Listening is every bit as vital to learning as reading, writing and speaking. But it often slips through the cracks in the classroom. Listening exercises are regularly brushed over, confined to the dreaded audio CD that accompanies the textbook. You yawn as you press play. And then you start listening

to the slow, staged dialogues involving Mario and Margaret's outing to the store. You know the ones, right?

One thing's for sure: if you're bored, your students definitely are. Whether you're using a range of audio resources or you're simply getting students to speak to each other, listening is a great opportunity to expose students to a variety of accents, as well as to have fun whilst learning. These ESL listening activities for intermediate students are game changers in the classroom.

Activities to Improve Intermediate ESL Students' Listening

1. Relay the message

This classic game, otherwise known as “running dictation,” is a great active ice breaker, as well as a natural way to introduce a topic.

The game plan:

Put students in pairs or groups of three, assigning one (or two) as a runner and one as a writer. Sit the writers at tables at one end of the room.

Stick pre-printed messages on the other side of the room, one for each group or pair. These messages can be the same or different, easy or difficult, long or short, depending on the level and goals of the class.

When you shout the word “go,” the runner runs to the message, reading and remembering what they can. This can be as much as a few sentences or as little as one word. The aim is to be able to relay it accurately to the writer.

The runner goes back to the writer to relay the part of the message that they memorized. The writer (you guessed it!) writes it down (Nuri, 2024).

Repeat until the message is complete. Teams score points for speed but more importantly for accuracy of spelling and punctuation.

2. Back-to-back interview

What better way to improve listening skills than to listen to each other? This is a great activity for practicing listening without relying on lip reading or actions. It also incorporates speaking practice, thus killing two birds with one stone. You can use this activity to introduce famous people you want to talk about during your lesson.

The game plan:

Pairs of students sit back-to-back, one as the interviewer with a list of questions.

The interviewee is given a famous person to role play, with a list of answers. This can also be done as an exercise to learn more about each other personally. For example, at the beginning of a course when students don't know each other well.

The interviewer asks the questions, writing down the answers as they go along.

The fastest interviewer to work out who they're talking to wins!

3. Follow the directions

This activity provides excellent English listening practice which will prepare students to ask for directions in a foreign country. It allows students to gain audio rather than visual practice with receiving directions, giving them the ability to understand step by step instructions.

The game plan:

Provide students with a street map, either a real one or something tailored to the activity and their level. You can even go crazy and create a big one for the classroom floor!

Split the students into teams, and have one person go at a time.

Read instructions for the student to follow, such as “go straight two blocks.” To win a point, the student must successfully navigate the map until they find the right store, the lost friend or the buried treasure (Ismayilli,2024).

4. Telephone

In this game, students are responsible for listening carefully to their peers as well as successfully relaying a message. It encourages students to determine similar sounding words from one another, and can be used as a starter activity to introduce any topic.

The game plan:

Create two teams of students and set up both teams in lines. The end of each team line should be on the whiteboard.

Whisper a word or sentence to the student farthest away from the whiteboard, and then have them whisper the message they heard to the next student. Each student whispers to the next until the end of the line.

The last student writes the message on the board. The winner is the team with the most accurate spelling, pronunciation and content, although bonus points for originality and hilarity may be awarded!

5. Minimal pairs card hold-up

Improve your students' knowledge of proper pronunciation with this quick-fire game, which is good for reinforcing phonics lessons (Vandergrift, 2016).

The game plan:

Give a set of pre-prepared word cards to each team (there can be as many teams as you want, depending on how many card sets you have). Go here for a useful list of minimal pairs.

Students spread the word cards out on a table.

Call a word out. For example: “Feet!” The students have to search their decks and hold up that word's card as fast as possible.

6. Movie clip quiz

You can incorporate movies into just about any lesson, giving students a welcome moment of relaxation and respite from learning (or so they think!). Movies and TV shows provide a more authentic speed of real world speech.

Need inspiration for videos to use in class? Check out Fluent U's ever-growing collection of English language videos taken from real-world sources like children's shows, Disney movies, music videos, funny YouTube videos, inspiring talks and more. We've got plenty of bite-sized clips which are perfect for in-class listening exercises.

Using Fluent U, students will be more engaged in this activity and they'll learn the material even better. Not only does Fluent U offer video, but it offers scaffolding that isn't available anywhere else; students will find authentic content approachable, interesting and totally within reach (Anderson,1977). Plus, with such a diversity of great content you're guaranteed to find something that your class will love.

The game plan:

Give students a question to answer, dividing them into teams.

Begin watching the clip. To play, students must pay close attention and stand up when they hear the answer to the question. Pause the movie and see if the first person who stood up knows the correct answer.

Ask the second question. Repeat. Alternatively, you can give the students a list of questions to answer and allow the clip to play

through entirely. Then you see who has the most correct answers at the end.

7. Song gap-fill

Songs are a great way to engage reluctant listeners, as they can be tailored perfectly to fit the preferences of the students. Why not use the latest pop song? Lyric repetition is welcomed here!

The game plan:

Give each student/pair the song lyrics with some words missing. To make it easier you can put the missing words in a box at the top of the page.

Play the song, pausing if necessary. The aim is for the students to fill in the missing words.

Once at the end, go through the answers to see which student/pair got the most correct.

8. Order-the-lyrics

This activity is a variation on the above, giving students practice in noticing the subtle differences between lyrics in music.

The game plan:

Pairs get a set of the song lyrics cut up into lines.

As they listen to the chosen song, they have to put the lyrics in the right order on the table. Repeat the song if necessary. You can always have a sing-along after the activity is completed!

9. Listen and throw

Of course, there's no reason why you shouldn't go back to your trusty textbook audio CD. Go ahead, and spice up the accompanying listening exercises to make this CD even more valuable as a learning tool. In this exercise, students are listening for a specific answer to a question in an audio dialogue.

The game plan:

Sit the students in a circle and split them into three or four teams.

Give each individual a piece of paper that's their team color. Have them scrunch the paper into a ball.

Place three baskets in the middle of the circle, each with a possible answer written on it.

Ask a question relating to the listening exercise — this should preferably be something that appears near the end of the dialogue. For example, "Whose birthday, is it?"

Students listen to the dialogue and throw their paper ball when they know the answer. Count the colors in the correct basket to determine the winner.

10. Slap the picture

This activity uses friendly competition to encourage sharp listening and quick reaction times. A good activity for when students are getting tired or losing concentration.

The game plan:

Students sit opposite each other in pairs, with pre-prepared words in between them. There should be no more than eight words, and students should look at them first to familiarize themselves.

As they listen to a chosen dialogue, they have to slap the correct word when they hear it. The fastest slap wins a point! They can keep a tally as they go along to see who the winner is.

Whatever the activity, whatever the age or level, the most important thing is for your students to stay engaged by being challenged, doing something new and having fun.

Searching for fun, authentic videos to boost your students' English listening skills? FluentU is the best site for developing listening skills. FluentU takes real-world videos—like music videos, cartoons, documentaries and more—and turns them into personalized language learning lessons for you and your students. It's got a huge collection of authentic English videos that people in the English-speaking world actually watch on the regular. There are tons of great choices there when you're looking for songs for in-class activities. You'll find music videos, musical numbers from cinema and theater, kids' singalongs, commercial jingles and much, much more.

Cognitive psycholinguists argue that both language schema and knowledge schema are crucial for enhancing comprehension. Put specifically, schemata are found significant in six aspects according to Anderson [1]:

- a. An ideational scaffolding for assimilating text information;
- b. Helpful for attention distribution;
- c. Helpful for inferential elaboration;
- d. Enabling listener to search information from memory in an orderly way;
- e. Useful for editing and summarizing;
- f. Helpful for inferential reconstruction.

Conclusion

Listening should not be relegated to a passive skill within the ESL classroom. Instead, it can and should be taught dynamically, with a focus on authentic interaction and cognitive engagement. The ten activities outlined from *Relay the Message* to *Slap the Picture* demonstrate that listening practice can be fun, interactive, and effective when designed with learner motivation and real-world application in mind. Furthermore, drawing on schema theory as outlined by Anderson, the article underscores the importance of activating both linguistic and knowledge schemata to deepen comprehension. By combining movement, competition, music, and multimedia, teachers can transform listening into one of the most powerful tools for language acquisition.

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