

# Warm-up Exercises in Listening Classes

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Listening to English is more difficult for students who are not English majors. Many students have associated listening courses with pain and boredom and often complain that they benefit little from listening lessons. So, it is necessary for English teachers to realize the importance of how to make listening classes more interesting and to know how to motivate students so that they can make progress in listening comprehension.

## Introduction

We can see clearly that the present situation of the teaching of listening in most colleges in China is not encouraging. The traditional way of teaching, such as, introducing some new difficult words, listening to the tape again and again and then giving correct answers, still prevails. It is not difficult for us to see how detrimental such a listening class is to learners. Such an approach to "teaching" listening is more like "testing" listening, because listeners are simply exposed to a succession of listening texts on a tape, and then are tested how much they have understood in terms of a lot of comprehension exercises rather than being taught how to listen and how to cope with their listening problems in the class. (Brown, 1990; Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Field, 1998).

Many students complained that they became tired of listening to the tape from beginning to the end with some mechanical exercises. Without interest, motivation and variation in teaching and learning, students felt bored in listening classes. As a result, the passive attitude kept students from making much progress in listening comprehension. In this paper, what we want to discuss is how to make listening classes more interesting and how to develop students' listening ability.

Just as Broughton says, "motivation is a basic principle of all kinds of teaching--the language student is best motivated by practice in which he senses the language is truly communicative, that it is appropriate to its context, that his teacher's skills are moving him forward to a fuller competence in the foreign language." (1978:47) So, how to keep students' interest in learning must be focused. Unfortunately, some English teachers often pay more attention to 'filling' the students with many mechanical exercises, ignoring the interest and motivation in class.

## The Importance of Warm-up Exercises

In class, we must try to avoid boring or over-theoretical or mechanical subjects, using as far as possible warm-up exercises we think our students may be interested in, that seem of practical relevance, that may arouse or stimulate them. Sometimes, a picture or a humor story can do a great deal towards arousing interest among students. However, during the whole listening course, most teachers actually only have a 'while-listening' stage, neglecting the 'pre-listening or warm-up exercise step, which acts as an important role in arousing students' interest and as the preparation stage for the 'while-listening' stage.

As a matter of fact, we can say that how well students had done in class depends mostly on how well they had been warmed up. From this point of view, English teachers should start taking concrete measures to reconsider the methodology they can apply in their listening courses and try to improve their teaching of listening from a new approach. We should use some techniques that are effective and interesting in teaching listening courses, thinking as much as possible about the needs of students concerned.

## Warm-up Exercises in Practice

### 1. Reading Stories

Stories, if interesting and well-told, are readily listened to by most students, and are particularly popular with students whose listening abilities are lower than intermediate. Stories taken from 'Elemental stories for reproduction,' 'Once upon a time' by John Morgan and

Mario Rinvoluceri are usually interesting and easy to understand.

Before students listened to the tape, I often read a short story in normal speed one or two times, after that, students would be asked some questions or asked to retell the story in their own words. Sometimes, I left the end of the story for students to discuss, and they could finish the story according to their own ideas. Almost all the students liked the activity since they were interested in the stories and they got full benefit from the listening experience. Especially those who were very poor in English listening were surprised and happy to find that they could understand some English stories. Moreover, the introduction of stories into English listening courses can improve students' general morale, and show that the language is not just as a subject of study, but can be a source of enjoyment and recreation.

## **2. Question and Answer**

Some people might think that asking questions is a purely technical (i. e. grammatical) matter. But in my class, it is not. As a matter of fact, no matter how effective a technique is, listening comprehension should demand students' participation, and the immediate feedback helps keep interest and motivation. "Question Time" is the name I have given to those first five to ten minutes of a lesson. Before listening to a passage, I always asked some questions so that students would have some ideas about the topic before they listened. In this process of doing the warm-up activity, students could build on their prior knowledge and at the same time, use vocabulary and structures that are connected with a particular function.

For example:

- Then, what will you do?
- Do you often go to restaurant?
- Do you like cooking?
- What will make you unhappy when you are eating in the restaurant?
- Now, you are going to listen to a passage, which tells you why Tom is so angry about the restaurant.

In this way, students can be aware of the purpose of the exercise in general and the nature of the specific task in particular before they listen to the passage. The "Question Time" activity can do much in listening classes, such as creating a friendly atmosphere between the teacher and the students, building the students' confidence and having the thrill of something spontaneous. Above all, it makes students feel interested and gets them involved in the listening activities.

## **3. Using Pictures**

I often use pictures in listening class. Pictures have the advantage of being easy to prepare, easy to organize, being interesting, meaningful and authentic. Pictures can bring images of reality into the unnatural world of the language classroom. Pictures are useful in developing students' listening comprehension, particularly 'directed listening' They not only help to guide the student' listening, they can provide a general background and context. They especially contribute to interest and motivation. For example, try this "spot the similarity" activity.

- Ask the students to get into pairs, give each student or pair of students a picture that the other(s) must not see.
- Tell them that they have pictures that are very different from each other, and ask them to describe these pictures to each other with the aim of finding as many similarities as they can.
- After several minutes, ask them to look at the two pictures and see what other similarities they can find.

Sometimes, I read descriptions of faces, maps, diagrams for students to draw. No matter how well or badly they had done, students were so happy to have the chance to listen, speak, and do something interesting in the listening class which they once considered a 'sleeping course'.

The above activities can be used as warm-up exercises that cultivate students' interest and help students enjoy their listening course. The activities have a positive affect on students and make them want to listen and speak more. After one year's practice, the students in my class had better understanding and speaking ability. Above all, the students had the habit of listening to English after class, such as listening to radio, tapes and so on.

## **Conclusion**

Of course, listening comprehension is a complex activity involving a large number of different skills and activities. No small set of exercises can possibly satisfy the needs of most students. No one correct learning strategy will work for all students at all times. So, English teachers should have a large battery of different exercises designed to give practice in most of these various skills. Moreover, listening should be taught with motivation, interest and variation so students can keep their interest in it. As a result, students can make good progress in listening comprehension.

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