

TEACHER'S CORNER – JANUARY 2016

MAKING LEARNING FUN

To acquire a language, students need many opportunities to practice and apply what they have learned in class. The English language classroom often poses challenges in this area due to rote teaching methods, dull curricula, or limited opportunities to use the language outside of the classroom. Practicing a new language can also be intimidating, especially for students with a high affective filter or negative emotional factors that may interfere with language learning.

A great way to give students meaningful opportunities to apply their learning and lower their affective filter is to make learning fun! When teachers use activities that make learning engaging and fun, students are more willing to participate and take risks. Having fun while learning also helps students retain information better because the process is enjoyable and memorable.

In this month's Teacher's Corner, we will examine ways to make learning fun, accessible, and meaningful in the English language classroom. Each week, we will present activities to make learning fun in one of the domains of language learning: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

MAKING LISTENING FUN

English language learners spend a lot of time listening, whether in classroom scenarios or the real world. Teachers know that being able to listen and comprehend content is a very important skill for students learning English. This skill is necessary not only to follow classroom instructions, but also to grasp important messages and information from what they hear.

In spite of the importance of listening skills, they can sometimes be neglected in the language classroom. Activities to isolate listening skills can be dry and boring. This week in the Teacher's Corner we will take a look at some easy ideas for making listening fun in the English language classroom.

ACTIVITY ONE: LISTEN AND BUZZ!

In this activity, students are divided into teams. Teams listen for specific information in a text, radio broadcast, or podcast and compete to be the first to buzz in and state the information correctly. The team with the most points at the end of the game wins!

LEVEL

Intermediate and above

GOAL

To improve students' listening skills by having them listen for specific information in a text, radio broadcast, or podcast.

MATERIALS

- Any text or passage you want students to learn from (Radio programs or podcasts can also be used.)
- One 'buzzer' for each team (This can be anything for students to use to create a noise that signals that they are ready to answer. Ideas include party noisemakers, drums, whistles, empty water

bottles filled with beans or pebbles, bicycle horns, or bells. Alternatively, students can also yell 'buzz' or another designated word, or even clap to signal they are ready to answer.)

PROCEDURE

1. Prepare for the activity by reading or listening to the text you plan to use. As you examine the text, make a list of key information you want students to listen for during the exercise and use it to write questions. The questions should be about the main information or facts you want students to learn from the text. Here are some suggested questions for different types of texts.

If students will listen to a biographical passage, use questions such as:

- Where was the person born?
- What is his/her birthdate?
- Where did he/she attend university?
- What are two major accomplishments of this person?
- Why was this person important in history?

If the text is fiction, ask:

- Who is the main character?
- Where does the story take place?
- What is the character's problem?
- How is the problem solved?

2. Explain the activity to students. Tell them that they will hear you read a passage (or hear a radio broadcast/podcast) and need to listen for specific information. Note that they will be divided into teams.

3. Give students the questions you have created so that they know what information you want them to find. These can be presented orally or written on the board. To challenge advanced students, present the questions in a random order, not as they will be heard when the text is read. For beginner students, the questions can be presented one at a time before reading the section of the text that contains the answer (perhaps one paragraph at a time).
4. Divide the class into equal teams using any method you prefer. The game works best if the number of questions is close to the number of members on each team. Teams can line up in designated areas of the classroom. Be sure there is some space between the teams so that you can tell who is buzzing in during the activity. Teams should have a name for scorekeeping purposes.
5. Once the teams are in place, distribute the buzzers (or noisy objects) and/or explain to students how you expect them to signal that they have heard an answer to one of the questions about the text.
6. Tell students that only the person in the front of the line may buzz in. Explain that you will call on the first person that buzzes in to provide a response. Once they have attempted, they pass the buzzer to the next person in line and go to the end. If their response is correct, all teams must send the student at the front of the line to the back of the line. If their response is incorrect, other teams have a chance to buzz in and answer the question. This works best if you say “Incorrect!” to signal that other teams may buzz in. Teams earn a point for each correct response.
7. Continue to read the text aloud or play the audio until all questions have been answered. If students were unable to answer some questions, read the text or play the audio again and give teams another chance to buzz in.
8. Close the activity by reviewing the answers to all of the questions with students.

ACTIVITY TWO: SECRET MESSAGE

During this game, students line up in teams and whisper a secret message down the line. Each student must listen carefully in order to recall, and be able to repeat, what they hear.

LEVEL

Beginner and above

GOAL

To improve students' listening skills by having them listen closely to pronunciation and recall phrases/sentences.

MATERIALS

- A notepad or single sheet of paper for each team
- Pencils or pens

PROCEDURE

1. Divide the class into two equal teams and have students of each team line up in a row. If the class is very large, you can form more than two teams.
2. Assign each team a name and write the names on the board for scorekeeping purposes. At the same time, label each of the notepads or sheets of paper with a team name.
3. Explain that the first member of each team will think of a sentence and secretly write it on the paper or pad for their team. They must be careful to do so in a way that does not allow the rest of the team to see it. If needed, you can ask that they come up to the front of the room to write down the sentence.
4. The first person from each team (the student who thought of the sentence) must whisper the phrase or sentence into the ear of the next person in line, in a way so no one else hears. Then, the second person whispers it to the third. This continues until the sentence reaches the last person in line.

5. When the last person hears the sentence, they must repeat it to the teacher, who will check to see if it matches the sentence written on the team's paper.
6. If the final member of the team repeats the sentence as it is written, the team earns two points. If it is nearly correct, the team earns one point. If it is very different from the original sentence, no points are earned.
7. Once the score has been recorded, the first person in line goes to the end of the line, and the activity is repeated with the next team member. Continue until all members of each team have had a chance to create a sentence. The team with the most points wins!

VARIATIONS

- For beginner students, one word or a short phrase can be used instead of a sentence. The speaker can also whisper the word/phrase to the teacher instead of writing it down if needed.
- With a little preparation, this game can be played with vocabulary words/sentences or key information you want students to review from a lesson. For example, if students have been learning about weather, you can ask them to form sentences with weather words and provide a list on the board. Words can be crossed off as they are used. If there is information you want students to review, you can prepare the sentences yourself and show/whisper them to the speaker to be passed down the line.

MAKING SPEAKING FUN

Getting students to speak in English class is often a challenge. Many learners hesitate to talk in class because they have a lot of anxiety about making mistakes, especially in front of their peers. For this reason, it is important for teachers to plan activities that encourage learners to interact and relieve the pressure they often feel to speak perfectly. This week in the Teacher's Corner, we will examine some fun ideas to get students talking in the English language classroom.

ACTIVITY ONE: MYSTERY BOX

During this activity, students ask yes or no questions and compile information to try and determine what object is inside the mystery box. The activity can be completed in one session, until students guess correctly, or spread out over several class meetings.

LEVEL

High beginner and above

GOAL

To improve students' speaking skills by encouraging them to ask questions and seek information about an unknown object.

MATERIALS

- A box that can be closed securely or has a lid (such as a shoebox)
- A chalkboard/whiteboard and chalk/markers
- A mystery object (suggestions in procedure)

PROCEDURE

1. Prepare for the activity by choosing what you will place in the box. It should be something that is familiar to students, either at school or in their everyday lives. Ideas include classroom objects, popular packaged foods like candy or canned items, a mobile phone, a book the class has read, fruits or vegetables (that won't spoil too quickly), or objects that represent familiar places like a popular area of your town or city. Keep in mind that students will be able to pass the box around, shake it, listen to any noise it makes, as well as feel the weight of the object.
2. Place the object inside the box and secure the lid. You can make this activity more fun by decorating the box with question marks and labeling it as the mystery box. This also helps if you plan to repeat the activity frequently.
3. Explain to students that there is something inside the box and they must ask you *yes or no questions* to try and guess what it is. Tell the class that they will be able to shake the box, listen for noise, and feel how much the object weighs before the questioning starts.
4. Decide how you will keep track of the information during the activity. You will need to keep a list of the characteristics and other information that students learn about the object. You can either do this yourself on the board or chart paper, or assign a student to be the scribe for the duration of the questioning session.
5. Students can sit in a circle or at their desks and pass the box around so everyone has a chance to examine it, but they must not open it.
6. Once students have had a chance to hold the mystery box, the questioning can begin. You can either have students ask questions one at a time in a specific order, or allow them to raise their hands if they would like to ask something. Remember that the questions can only elicit a response of *yes* or *no*. Some examples of questions are:
 - Does one use the object at school/home?
 - Can a person eat it?
 - Is it round? (other shapes)

- Is it hard/soft?
 - Does it smell?
 - Is it red? (other colors)
 - Is it a fruit/vegetable?
 - Does one usually buy it?
 - Is it used for _____?
7. As the class asks questions, write down what is learned about the object on a list or monitor the student scribe you have assigned. This list will help students, especially those who need visual support, to synthesize the information and make better guesses about what is in the box.
8. After the allotted amount of time for questioning has passed, students can try to guess what the object is. They may solve the mystery quickly, or it may take several days of questioning to figure out what is inside the mystery box.

VARIATIONS

- Use the mystery box activity as a review of a text that students have been studying. For instance, if your class has been reading a novel, put something in the box that represents a character or part of the plot. Students then have to ask questions related to the story to figure out what is in the box and/or what it represents.
- This activity can also be used to review informational topics in different subjects, such as science. If students have been learning about different characteristics of animals, you can put a small toy version, figurine, or photo of an animal into the box. Students then have to ask questions about the animal's habitat, diet, or characteristics to guess what is in the box.
- Make the mystery box activity completely student-led. Once you have repeated the whole process a few times with your class, you can get the students more involved by allowing each one to take turns placing a mystery object into the box. Then, the student who chose the object can

lead the activity by answering questions from his/her classmates. You can even take a turn to ask a question yourself! Another variation on this same procedure is to have students complete the activity in small groups. Both of these are a great way to give students a chance to take on a different role, and to build a consistent discussion-based activity into your classroom schedule.

ACTIVITY TWO: "FIND SOMEONE WHO..." BINGO

During this activity, students mingle and ask questions to determine if their classmates have had certain experiences or possess characteristics listed in spaces on a bingo board. The winner is the first person to complete a row on their card, shout bingo, and be able to verbally tell the class how their spaces were completed. This is an excellent activity to get students talking to each other at the start of a new school year or term.

LEVEL

Intermediate and above

GOAL

To improve students' speaking skills by encouraging them to ask each other questions and find out information about their classmates.

MATERIALS

- A list of characteristics or experiences relevant to your class (see ideas below)
- Blank bingo cards
- Pencils/pens

PROCEDURE

1. Prepare for the activity by brainstorming a list of characteristics and/or experiences you will include on the bingo card. It helps to have more ideas than spaces, so that the cards will all be

different. Students can also help with the brainstorming if you explain the activity to them beforehand. Here are some ideas to include on the bingo card:

Find someone who...

- is an only child
- plays soccer/cricket/tennis/etc.
- has flown on an airplane
- was born in another country
- is a vegetarian
- has a job
- has more than five siblings
- likes to dance
- has a pet
- walks to school
- has traveled to another continent
- likes spicy food
- rides a motorcycle
- speaks more than 3 languages
- has a computer at home
- likes to wake up early/stay up late
- has been to a concert
- loves/hates to eat _____
- reads comic books
- is the youngest/oldest child in their family
- has been to an amusement park
- knows how to swim

2. Explain to students that they will choose twenty-five items from the list of characteristics and experiences and randomly write them in spaces on their bingo card. Tell them that during the activity, everyone will mingle throughout the classroom and ask each other questions using the bingo card. For example “Do you like to eat fish? Are you an only child? Do you play soccer? Are you the youngest in your family?” The goal is to find one person who meets the criteria in each space, write the person’s name, and be the first student to complete a row vertically, horizontally, or diagonally. It is important to inform students that they may not tell other classmates in which space to write their name. Instead, they must only respond to their classmates’ questions with *yes* or *no*.
3. Tell students they must yell “Bingo!” to signal that they have completed a row. In order to win, a student has to share with the class the information from the completed row on the card. For instance, “Juana has flown on an airplane. Li likes to dance. Nur reads comic books.”
4. Give students time to fill their bingo cards with items from the list. If you choose, you allow students to include a free space on their cards.
5. Once students have finished creating their bingo cards, instruct them to stand up and get ready to mingle. Remind the class that they must ask each other questions in order to complete their cards. Give students a signal to begin talking to each other. Circulate around the room and monitor students’ discussions during the activity.
6. When the first student yells “Bingo!” ask the rest of the class to pause and listen. The student with a completed row must explain which of their classmates met the criteria on his/her bingo board. If the student has in fact completed a row, they are designated the first place winner. The game can continue until there are second and third place winners, so that students can get more practice speaking to each other.
7. To wrap up the activity, ask students to share something new that they learned about a classmate. If needed, provide a sentence frame such as “I learned that _____ likes to eat

_____” or “I learned that _____ has _____.” You can call on students individually or ask for volunteers.

VARIATIONS

- This game can be used to review vocabulary or information about a topic that students have been studying. The activity works well at the end of a unit or when preparing for an exam because you will have a lot of vocabulary to use. First, compile a list of definitions or information that you want students to review during the game. You will need to make a small card with the vocabulary word for each of the definitions you choose. The definitions should be relatively short, as they will fill the boxes on the bingo board. For instance, if you are reviewing vocabulary associated with polygons, the definitions could be *has eight equal sides and angles* or *the prefix meaning six*. The activity can be completed exactly as in the procedure outlined above, except that students will write definitions on their bingo board. Additionally, you will need to distribute a word card to each student. This will be their assigned word during the game. When people ask “Does your word mean *has eight equal sides and angles*?” the students must answer *yes* or *no*. When the student finds a match, they should write down the word and the name of the student who had the card. Remind students that they may not tell their classmates the vocabulary word they have been assigned, or give information other than yes or no answers. If you have more students than words, you can make multiples of some of the word cards. When someone gets bingo, they can explain how they completed a row by saying “(Name of student) had the word _____ which means _____.” You can also make the review more comprehensive by requiring students to complete the whole card instead of a single row to earn bingo.

MAKING READING FUN

Students learning English can have differing reading abilities. Strong readers are more likely to enjoy reading in class, but those who find reading more difficult may not enjoy it as much or may even dread it. Planning activities that incorporate peer support and interactive tasks, and that can be adjusted for different reading levels, can help make reading enjoyable for all learners in your English classes. This week in the Teacher's Corner, we will explore activities that can help make reading fun for all of your students.

ACTIVITY: READING RELAY

In this activity, teams of students will race to read a text and answer a set of questions about it. The first team to complete the questions correctly wins!

LEVEL

Beginner and above

GOAL

To improve students' reading skills by having them answer comprehension questions and refer back to the text.

MATERIALS

- Containers (a paper bag or shoebox) for each team
- Pencils and writing paper for students
- Text (previously studied or not)
- Questions about the text

PREPARATION

1. Choose a text that you want students to use for the activity. This can be something they have been studying (such as a novel or part of a textbook) or a completely new passage.

2. Prepare the questions you will ask students about the text. Keep in mind that students need to be able to answer all of the questions in the time available to play the game. You can write questions similar to those in the *Listen and Buzz!* activity from Week 1 of this month's Teacher's Corner. Depending on the level of your students, the answers to the questions can be things the students can locate within the text, or more challenging ones that require them to draw conclusions or use context clues.
3. Once you have determined all of the questions you want students to answer, create one set of all of the questions for each team. For example, if your class will have ten teams, you need to create ten sets of all the questions. Cut out each of the questions and fold them up individually. Place each set of questions into a separate container for each team to use during the activity.
4. If you have a lot of variation in reading levels in your classroom, group students into teams ahead of time. This way you can ensure that students who struggle can be on teams with strong readers. Teams with five or fewer members are best for this activity.

PROCEDURE

1. Introduce the activity to students by saying, "You are about to take part in a reading relay race. During the relay, you will have to read a text and work with your teammates to answer questions about the text. You will need to write the answers down on a piece of paper for your group." At this point, you can put students into their teams and distribute paper and pencils if needed. Have each team choose a name or assign each team a number.
2. Continue giving students instructions by showing the containers with the questions and saying, "All of the questions you need to answer for the race are in this box/bag. Each team has its own container. Only one person from your team can take a question at a time. They can take only one question. They must return to the group, read the question aloud, and you all must work together

to find the answer and write it down. When you finish writing, another group member may come get a new question.”

3. Place the containers in a central location, such as a table in the front of the room or your desk. It is helpful to put each team’s name or number on the containers to avoid confusion during the race.
4. Tell students, “The first team to write down the correct answers to each of the questions is the winner. If you believe you have done this, send one person from your team to me with your written work. I will check it and announce when a team has won the race.”
5. Answer any questions students may have about the relay activity. Be sure that they know which member of their team will go get a question first and what order will follow after that. If you prefer, you can tell students to go alphabetically by first name, by height, or by birthdate.
6. Once the students are ready, yell “Go!” Monitor the teams as they complete the activity to be sure all members participate and that everyone takes only one question at a time.
7. When a team has finished and you have checked their work, you can announce the winner. To wrap up, the whole class can review the answers to the questions as well as where they found them in the text.

VARIATIONS

- This activity can be adapted for students with different reading abilities or levels of English proficiency. Instead of dispersing strong readers and struggling readers, you can create homogenous (unmixed) groups by placing strong readers/advanced students on one team, intermediate students on another, and struggling readers/lower level students together. The tasks can be adjusted according to the needs of each group. Keep in mind that since the activity is a race, you will need to create tasks that will take groups about the same amount of time to complete. Ideas for differentiation include:
 - Beginner students:

- Create a cloze passage for the text and cut it up instead of using questions in the grab bag. Students must locate the corresponding section of the text and work together to fill in the blanks in the cloze.
 - Give students tasks to complete such as locating text features (headings, titles, captions, charts, etc.), finding dates or names, or counting how many times a specific vocabulary word is used in the text.
 - If students are just learning how to read, you can place words with a specific spelling pattern or sound that you want them to practice in the grab bag for their team. Instead of a text, give them a set of pictures. Then they can take one word at a time from the bag, work together to decode it and match it to the correct picture. This can also be done with vocabulary words or simple sentences and a set of corresponding pictures.
- Intermediate students:
 - You can modify the relay for intermediate students by making the questions multiple-choice instead of open-ended. To make questions more accessible, make them multiple-choice or provide only two options for answer choices.
 - Cloze passages can also be used with intermediate students. Eliminating more words or using longer sections of the text can make them more challenging.
- Advanced students:
 - Ask students to provide expanded responses to questions. For instance, if they are reading a persuasive essay, ask them to restate the author's position and the three reasons used as justification. If they read a fictional text, ask for multiple

examples of a specific literary element such as foreshadowing, symbolism, or metaphors.

- Create questions that challenge students to use information in the text to make inferences or draw conclusions about things that are not directly stated by the author.
- Have students use context clues to determine the meaning of unfamiliar or difficult words from the text.

MAKING WRITING FUN

For students learning English, writing can be a great way to express oneself, explore interests, and communicate opinions. However, writing can also cause anxiety about grammar, spelling, or making mistakes. Some students enjoy writing and some find it challenging or have difficulty thinking of topics to write about. This week's activity, and its variations, can help inspire students who need fresh ideas or have concerns about creating perfect pieces of writing.

ACTIVITY: GRAB BAG WRITING

In this activity, students will choose story elements from grab bags and then write a creative story containing all of them. Stories can be revised and published, and students can share their writing with the class.

LEVEL

High beginner and above

GOAL

To improve students' creative writing skills by having them incorporate random elements into a cohesive story.

MATERIALS

- Grab bags/containers for each of the story elements you plan to use
- Paper cut into small slips
- Pencils and writing paper for students

PROCEDURE

1. Decide which story elements you want students to choose at random. This could include characters, setting, and a problem/conflict, or any other elements you would like to include.

2. For each element, create a grab bag using any containers available that are large enough for students to reach into. Label each of the containers with one of the elements.
3. Record ideas for each element on the slips of paper (one idea per slip), fold them, and put them into the corresponding grab bags. The ideas should be creative and out of the ordinary in order to encourage students to write unusual stories. Below are some ideas for what to include in the grab bags:

| Characters | Setting | Problem/Conflict |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| an alien from Mars | the school cafeteria | someone is chasing the main character |
| an octopus | a shopping mall | the main character has lost something important |
| a famous actor | a very quiet library | the main character is accused of a crime |
| a person from a country very different from ours | a crowded beach | everyone's hands have disappeared |
| a police officer | a busy hospital | there is an overflowing river of green slime taking over the city |
| a snowman | a child's birthday party | the main character has suddenly become invisible to everyone else |
| a government official | a farm | |
| a famous singer | a large city | |

4. Once the grab bags are created, explain the activity to students. Tell the students that they will be writing a story, but that some parts of the story will be things they choose from the grab bags. Show them the grab bags and explain that each has different slips of paper with creative ideas for characters, setting, and problems that they will need to include in their writing.
5. If your students need explicit instructions, you can model choosing items from the grab bags and creating a short story on the board or chart paper to show them how to complete the activity.
6. Here are some options for how to use the grab bags:
 - Have each student choose an item from each of the grab bags and individually write a story.

- Allow students to choose only one element from the grab bag. For example, they may choose a random setting but create their own characters and problem in the story.
 - Choose one slip from each of the grab bags and write them on the board for the whole class to use in writing individual stories. In this instance, every student will have the same character, problem, and setting, but their ideas for how the story progresses will be different.
 - Group students and have each group select elements from the grab bags to use in individual stories. This way there will be several stories with the same elements, but different plots.
7. After students have finished writing their stories, they can share them with the rest of the class or in small groups. The best part of this activity is hearing the creative ways that students have incorporated the different elements they chose!
8. If it is appropriate for your class, you can continue the activity by allowing students to work in groups or pairs to revise and edit their stories. Have them create a final copy and even add illustrations of a scene from their writing. These can be displayed in the classroom or shared in a class book for others to read.

VARIATIONS

- Instead of having individual students choose one element from each of the grab bags, you can conduct this activity in other ways. One way is to choose characters, a setting, and a problem that the entire class must use in their writing. In this instance, every student will have the same character, problem, and setting, but their ideas for how the story progresses will be different. Alternatively, choose one of the elements, such as a set of random characters, for the whole class. Additionally, you can group students and have each group select elements from the grab bags to use in individual stories. This way there will be several stories with the same elements but

different plots. Groups can also work together to write one story. All of these ideas create interesting pieces for students to share and compare after their writing is complete.

- Have students choose pictures or photographs instead of story elements. Students can find their own pictures in magazines or on the internet and then use them to write a fictional story based on what they see happening in the image. A grab bag of pictures can also be prepared ahead of time and students can randomly choose a picture to use for their writing.
- Place a random assortment of objects in a grab bag instead of story elements. Have students choose one object to inspire their story or a set of objects to incorporate into their story. As an added challenge, you can choose a setting where students' object-based stories must take place.
- This activity can also be used for advanced students to practice argumentative writing. In this variation, prepare two grab bags. One contains community members/roles and the other contains questions about specific issues. This is challenging to students because they must consider the point of view the community member might have based on the question they choose from the second grab bag. Students must use their ideas to formulate an essay. Before students begin writing, allow them to meet in small groups to brainstorm their ideas with classmates. Some ideas for community members and questions are:

| Community Members/Roles | Questions |
|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| a teacher | Do you think social media is helpful or harmful? |
| a secondary school or university student | Do you think recycling should be mandatory? |
| a recent immigrant | Do standardized tests show students' abilities? |
| a police officer | Should university education be free? |
| a government official | Are online classes as effective as learning in a classroom? |
| a parent | Do violent TV shows cause violence in real life? |
| a school headmaster or principal | Should healthcare be free? |
| a farmer | Should cell phones be allowed in classrooms? |

| | |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| a religious official | Should the school day be longer? |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|