

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

Get It Right from the Start: Giving Attention to Warm-up Activities

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Introduction

Using warm-ups in the classroom is not widely discussed in the literature or in teacher education programs, possibly because it is assumed that teachers, even novice teachers, know that every lesson needs one. However, too often, in our experience, warm-up time is used for routine housekeeping chores like roll call or collecting homework rather than an opportunity to engage and involve students. Sometimes these chores are conducted in the students' first language. When they are conducted in English, they often become little more than a routinized greeting ritual. Hampel and Hauck (2004) define warm-ups as short tasks at the beginning of an EFL/ESL lesson that require minimal linguistic competence and are used to help students get to know each other, to promote teamwork, to minimize student inhibitions, or to lay the foundation for the activities and/or the topics that will follow. There are additional benefits to having well-planned warm-up activities in English classes. These include:

- Improving motivation and fostering a positive attitude toward English
- Building interest in and background knowledge for a new lesson
- Linking previously taught information to new
- Reviewing and recycling previously-taught vocabulary, sentence frames, or content
- Engaging multiple intelligences, various learning styles, and strategies
- Re-energizing students in anticipation of the new lesson
- Maximizing instructional time

- Motivating students to arrive on time, prepared to engage
- Enhancing willingness to participate and a sense of accomplishment

Perhaps the greatest advantage of giving attention to planning effective warm-ups in the EFL classroom is that they help students get into English mode, thinking, and possibly speaking, immediately in the target language, which is often a challenge in environments where English exposure is generally limited to English class.

Below, we present some examples of warm-ups activities that can be easily adapted to a range of levels topics, and purposes in EFL/ESL classrooms.

Repurposing Familiar Games

Students are enthusiastic about games, as they are engaging and motivating. Repurposing games that our students already know means we do not need to spend time teaching a new activity. For example, the popular game of Noughts and Crosses (or Tic-Tac-Toe) can be adapted for language or content review and to gently introduce new structures.

1. Prepare nine language or content review items or tasks, each on a different sheet of A4 sized paper. Examples might include correcting errors in a sentence, rearranging words in correct order, or filling in gaps in a text with target vocabulary words and phrases.
2. Hang or affix the tasks to the board in a 3x3 array.
3. Cover each task with a blank sheet of paper.
4. Divide the class into two teams, the X team and the O team.
5. Have the teams take turns selecting a box and trying the corresponding activity behind it.
6. If they perform the task correctly, they claim the box with their X or O.
7. The first team to get three in a row, column, or diagonal is the winner.

This game can be expanded into an entire review lesson if each of the nine tasks has multiple items. For example, if there are 10 sentences to correct rather than one, and both teams try the task, then the X or O goes to the team with the most correct answers. For content-based or literature lessons, the tasks can be designed to review important information rather than language-focused points. Similar adaptations can be made using other familiar games such as BINGO and Twenty Questions.

Game Show Adaptations

Another way to work with games is adapting popular TV game show formats for classroom purposes. For example, *Family Feud* is popular where we live. It pits two teams against each other as they try to guess the most frequently-given responses to six questions that have been answered in surveys of 100 people. Example questions include *What sports involve jumping?* or *What words rhyme with last?* In our classroom adaptation, two teams compete to see which can guess more of the frequent responses in the Family Feud surveys which are freely available online. Sometimes we choose survey questions just for their fun value; other times, we choose questions that relate to current or recent course content. Teachers can use similar strategies to adapt locally popular game shows for their student audience and program goals.

Why do birds suddenly appear?

Why do birds suddenly appear? is a warm-up task that works well to review a particular sentence pattern. It utilizes humor to create a positive learning environment but also engages learners in reading, writing, and sentence analysis.

1. Give each student two slips of paper.
2. On one, they write a question that begins with *why*; on the other, they write an answer to their question starting with *because*.
3. Collect all of the questions in one box and the answers in a different box.
4. Have students randomly choose a question and an answer.
5. Have them read the resulting sentences out loud. Because of the random nature of the selection, the results are funny. At the same time, by hearing many sentences with the same pattern, students begin to internalize it.

In a content-based or specific purposes classroom, students can create *why* and *because* sentences to review previously-discussed information. In a general English course, they could focus on topics of interest such as current events or pop culture. Finally, sentence structures other than *why* and *because* can also be used to generate equally useful but humorous statements.

Say Something

This activity begins as a low-stress guided speaking task but quickly becomes an interactive conversation requiring quick and creative thinking. It can be used

to review both language and content-specific objectives. Suppose, for example that your class has recently worked with adjectives such as *exciting*, *boring*, *surprising*, *frightening*, *touching*, *funny*, and *disappointing*.

1. Make slips with the recently-taught adjectives. Depending on the level of your students, consider adding some they have not seen before as well.
2. Put the slips in a basket.
3. Write a story starter sentence on the board, for example, *A/An thing happened to me recently.*
4. Have students take turns drawing slips from the basket and reading the resulting sentence with their word.
5. Have classmates ask information questions to elicit details about the incident.
6. The speaker must think quickly to answer the question and can add or embellish ideas as s/he is comfortable.
7. Put a one-minute limit on each student's turn to maximize participation and keep the energy level high.

In classes with many reluctant speakers, it is best to call for volunteers or do this activity in small groups rather than in front of the whole class.

Collaborative Composition

This activity is a form of cooperative writing. It requires some advanced preparation that can be done, little-by-little, over time.

1. Set aside a box, basket, or bag that will hold many small slips of paper or pictures.
2. Gradually collect printed English phrases and interesting images collected from magazines newspapers, empty food packages, junk mail, and so forth. If you are teaching low level learners, you may want to focus on high frequency phrases; for advanced learners, you may select unusual, subject-specific, or complex expressions. Pictures may be chosen because they are familiar, locally relevant, funny, or content-specific. You will need at least as many items as you have students in your class and possibly more.
3. Divide students into teams of three or four and give each team a blank sheet of paper.
4. Tell them to write their names and the story starter expression *Once upon a time at the top of the page.*

5. Have teams choose a member of their group to draw one item from the bag of paper slips return to their group.
6. Tell them they have two minutes in which to add a sentence or two to the *Once upon a time* story starter but they must incorporate the chosen words or image into it.
7. Provide a means to tape or glue the required words or images to the story.
8. At the two-minute mark, give a signal for teams to exchange papers.
9. Now, they must quickly read the story as it is so far, pick a new slip from the bag, and, again, add a sentence or two incorporating the new words or image into the story. To the extent possible, they must preserve the integrity of the story.
10. Repeat the process until each group has added a sentence or two to each story, if the class is of modest size, or until they have had five or six turns, if the class is large.
11. Returned the stories to their original authors.
12. Ask for one or two volunteers to read their completed story aloud.

If space permits, use large poster sized sheets of paper mounted on the wall and have teams move systematically around the classroom every two minutes as they compose. This collaborative warm-up has the potential to engage students' interpersonal, kinaesthetic, linguistic, and visual intelligences, as well as to, through the surprise element, foster creativity, negotiate meaning, and examine text structure. If time is insufficient to hear all the completed stories, they can be posted or saved for subsequent warm-up sessions.

Connect the Dots

This warm-up works well for content-focused classes, helps students recall their previous lesson, and prepares them for the new one. It also "buys" the teacher a few minutes of transition, set-up, or conference time with students who have particular needs while the rest of the class is getting settled and prepared. Once introduced, it can be completed without any guidance or instruction from the teacher. Before students arrive, write or post on the board several open-ended sentence starters related to or reviewing the previous lesson, for example:

1. In our last class, we talked about...
2. In that lesson, Maria told us about her personal experience with ...
3. We completed pp. in our textbook which were about...

4. Our homework assignment for today was to...

As students arrive, they read the questions, get out their notes and text, ask each other for help, compare notes, and get ready for the lesson.

Low Stress Quiz

This warm-up helps students review past and anticipate the upcoming lesson whether it is language or content-focused. In environments where student tardiness is a problem, it also helps students arrive on time and be prepared to engage. It looks like a quiz but works like a cooperative learning experience.

1. Before students arrive, develop a short, 5-item, quiz to review the content of your recent lessons. The items should be realistic in that they “test” information that you might want to examine in more formal assessments later in the course.
2. Add 1-2 items that students are not likely to be able to answer because they will be taught in today’s lesson.
3. Write or post the quiz on the board.
4. When the first students arrive, tell them that they have five minutes to complete the quiz using any means at their disposal. They will quickly see that asking each other for help is more efficient than looking through their books and notes.
5. As other students arrive, they will see busy classmates and quickly set to work.
6. At the five-minute mark, stop everyone, and encourage student volunteers write in their responses to the review questions.
7. Help the class identify the new or preview items.
8. Erase the quiz so that late-arriving students do not see it.
9. Later in the lesson remind all students that the questions they saw in the warm-up may appear on their future quizzes or exams. The students who arrived late will realize they missed something valuable.

Conclusion

These are just some of the warm-up activities that we have used with success in our own classrooms, particularly to create positive group dynamics, activate students’ background knowledge, and get them “into” target language mode. Our examples are described so as to be appropriate for modest sized classes in low tech

environments; readers working with large classes or in high tech or virtual environments will, no doubt, need to adapt them for their purposes, student levels, content areas, and linguistic goals. For example, all of these activities could be used, and may be more effective, with groups rather than the whole class. We encourage all teachers, not only language teachers, to begin every lesson on the right foot, by giving greater attention to warm-up activities.

About the Authors

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Reference

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