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## TIPS FOR TEACHERS

### Energizing Language Learners

**Kalehua Kamakawiwo‘ole**, Kalaheo High School, Kailua, Hawai‘i and  
Hawai‘i Pacific University, Honolulu, Hawai‘i

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#### Introduction

After teaching ESL, EFL, language arts, and teacher education courses for over 25 years, one might think that my professional responsibilities would have settled into a comfortable routine. However, it seems that every year brings new courses and new groups of students to adjust to. To save myself adjustment time, I need effective strategies that I know will work with any group of language learners or teachers. Fortunately, there are many.

I used to think of the activities below as “just” warm-up activities, but gradually, I have come to see them as energizing (or re-energizing) activities that can be used to build positive group dynamics at the beginning of a lesson, reinvigorate a tired class during a lesson, or bring a lesson to a satisfying close. All have benefits for language learners although they are more likely to be focused on the communicative value rather than on skills development. They range from relaxed and pleasurable listening to preparing for academic writing tasks. Typically, they can be completed in about ten minutes. The examples given are for the EFL context, both general English and English for specific purposes (ESP) courses, specifically at a nursing school. I believe readers will find them to be highly versatile and easily adaptable for other levels, settings, and subjects.

#### Roll Call Topics

Many EFL teachers call roll as a form of warm-up. In an EFL environment, it signals a formal beginning to class and helps students adjust to hearing English again. However, it requires little thought or meaningful communication on the part of students. Employing a roll call topic can serve the same functions as traditional

roll call but also engage students in a low-stress use of English, including a skill needed for academic success—paraphrasing.

1. Choose a topic for its fun, linguistic, or content area value, for example, name a game that you love (or used to love), name a country that you want to visit, or describe your preferred way of treating a cold.
2. As you close class one day, announce the roll call topic for the next day.
3. Tell students that they should prepare various ways to state their response, for example, suppose they want to visit Vietnam one day. Alternative ways of saying *Vietnam* could be *the country with capital city Hanoi* or *a country east of Laos*.
4. In the next class, as you prepare to call roll, remind everyone to listen carefully so that if they want to give the same response as a previously-called student, they are ready to say it in an alternative way.
5. Now, call the roll. Most students will remain attentive because they have a stake in the “conversation” and may need to use their paraphrased responses.
6. (Optional) Watch for responses that lead to interesting teachable moments.
7. In subsequent lessons, begin the roll call at different points in the roster so that different students get to respond sooner and others are (gently) forced to be paraphrasers.
8. (Caveat) If you have such a large class that roll call is time-consuming, divide into groups of about ten and appoint a roll taker for each group.

For a novel change in routine, try postponing roll call until the middle of class when students need a 5-10-minute brain break.

### Four Corners

This is an energizing activity that gets everyone moving. Blood flows, bodies relax, brains engage, and often, mouths open.

1. Compose several opinion statements related to your course content or student interests.
  - Examples for general English students: *Mobile phones are useful during class time* or *Studying English should be optional*.
  - Examples for nursing students: *Our [local place name] diet is healthy* or *Diabetes is a serious health issue in our country*.
2. Write these four words on the board: *Agree*, *Disagree*, *Neutral*, and *Questions*. Alternatively, prepare signs with the four words that can be saved for future use.

3. Designate one corner of the room for each of the four words.
4. (If possible) have everyone stand in the middle of the room to begin.
5. Write on the board, or state orally, one of your prepared statements.
6. Give students a moment to think about whether they agree with, disagree with, feel neutral (or uninformed) about, or have questions about the statement.
7. Then, tell everyone to go to the corner of the room that matches their opinion.
8. In their respective corners, they should talk among themselves for a minute or two about why they chose that corner.
9. Then, stop the conversation and get everyone's attention.
10. Explain that each corner should choose a representative to share the essence of their discussion with the class.
11. Have the *Agree*, *Disagree*, and *Neutral* group spokespersons report.
12. Ask the *Question* group whether all of their questions were addressed and, if not, to state their remaining questions.
13. Close the activity by giving students a chance to move to a different corner to show how their opinions have changed after listening to input from others.
14. Repeat with a new statement if time permits. I often find that so much discussion takes place that I can save my other starter statements for future use.

### Concentric Circles

This activity has the same general benefits as Four Corners. However, it also works well to prepare students for an upcoming writing activity, particularly if they perceive writing as difficult or even painful. It gives them a chance to develop their ideas and use their English in a relaxed oral environment before they have to put thoughts or words into writing.

1. Give students a minute to mentally prepare for the topic or question of the day. Better yet, give them the topic as easy “homework” in the previous class by saying, “For next time, please be prepared to talk about . . .” In fact, the topic will connect to their next writing assignment, but they do not need to know that yet.
  - Possible topics for general English students: Tell about your favorite musical group or summarize the plot in a movie you saw recently.

- For university students: Summarize a recent news story or to argue for or against a locally-relevant issue.
  - For nursing students: Describe the symptoms or treatment of a particular ailment or argue for or against a particular public health proposal.
2. Have students form two concentric circles. Students in the inner circle face outward; students in the outer circle face inward, opposite a classmate. If space does not allow for circles, they can stand beside their desks in rows facing each other.
  3. Tell students that their speaking goal is to make their personal ideas clear and to give reasons for their opinions. Tell them that their listening goals are to be curious listener, to understand their classmate, and to ask for clarification when they do not.
  4. Give directions regarding turn-taking and time limits. For example, each person has one minute to speak, the speaker in the inner circle begins, and dimming the lights will show that time is up.
  5. When both speakers have had their turn, have students in the outer circle move to the right (or left), so everyone has a new partner.
  6. Repeat the same routine several times.

As students practice the same information over and over with new partners, they become more fluent and confident, naturally adjust their delivery and content for different speakers, get to know each other, learn from each other, have fun, and see the value of repeated practice. When I use Concentric Circles as a pre-writing activity, I close by asking students if they now feel prepared to write about their topic. Nearly always, they say “yes.”

### **Sentence Build-up**

This activity works well as a stand-alone warm-up, but it can also fit a content-specific theme or course. It is a low stress way of helping students compose varied and interesting sentences.

1. To begin, write a simple sentence on the board, for example: The children are playing.
2. Tell everyone to copy it.
3. Then, ask students to add additional information, putting it in its proper place such as:
  - How many children are playing?

- Where are the children playing?
  - Whose children are they?
  - What are the children playing?
  - In what manner are the children playing?
  - What kind of children are they?
  - Add positive and/or negative describing words such as *beautiful*, *messy*, and *noisy*.
  - Add your own additional information.
4. (Optional) Ask students to draw their final sentence. While they see this step as just for fun, it serves as a check on comprehension.
  5. Ask for volunteers to read their sentences aloud or to several neighbors.

Students always produce interesting and creative sentences. More important, they see how the same structure can be used to express many different ideas, and without realizing it, they begin to give grammar patterns and punctuation rules more attention than before.

### Personal Stories

I find that telling short 2-3-minute stories about myself, my family, or my week helps my students see me as a normal human being, someone with a life outside of school just like they are, rather than the remote power figure they are sometimes conditioned to see in a teacher. Sometimes, I choose my stories to help them open up and tell their own, to break the ice for an upcoming reading or writing assignment, or to address a current fear or concern in our community. They provide a routine way to open each class but with novel content every time. Students are comfortable because they know that “all” they have to do is listen. Over the years, I have learned to choose my stories or the way I deliver them to fit the content or the language goals of the lesson we are about to start. For example, if we are going to examine the present perfect verb form, I choose a story about *how my life has changed since I came to live in their country*. If my EFL nursing students are preparing for a hospital field trip, I might share a story I heard from a nurse or tell about the time I spent a few days in the hospital.

In addition to building rapport, this activity offers language learner and student success benefits as well. Clearly the stories are for communication, not assessment, so students’ affective filters are low. They are also intrinsically interested in the

content of the story, so when they do not understand, they frequently ask for clarification or repetition, just as we hope they will do in an academic context. Over time, I have seen that they are also attentive to the words, phrases, and sentences in the stories because I hear and read them in student work later on.

### **Mini Mysteries**

Ironically, storytelling warm-ups, as described above, have helped me learn how to close my lessons smoothly. Although I understand the benefits of smooth, calm, closure, I often find myself in panic mode, behind schedule, desperately trying to rush through last-minute information before class ends. Mini mysteries have helped me break this negative pattern. The Silverthorne and Warner (2013) collection of one-minute mysteries is ideal because the stories are broken into three parts—the set up with a few clues, additional clues, and the solution. Because they are mysteries, students must pay careful attention to the words and details. Because they are short, a minute or two is all that is required for each of these steps.

1. As a warm-up activity, I read (or tell) the set up and give the initial clues. With some classes, I need to paraphrase or simplify the stories as I tell them. Some people want to guess a solution immediately, but I neither confirm nor deny any guesses at this point, just build suspense.
2. Midway through the lesson, when students need a break, I repeat the opening and add additional clues. Everyone understands more than they did at first.
3. In the final moments of class, I reread or retell the set-up and the additional clues and encourage students to call out their guesses.
4. Finally, I read the author's solution.

The mysteries foster critical thinking and attentive listening skills, and because students want the solution before they leave, I am “forced” to end class smoothly with something fun.

### **Role Reversal—Students as Teachers**

As busy, multi-tasking teachers, we can often use an extra minute or two to organize our materials and our thoughts for the upcoming lesson. This activity allows each student to have a voice in choosing course content, builds positive group dynamics, focuses on fluency, promotes student-to-student interaction, and gives

me a few precious minutes to clear my head as class begins. It is a role reversal because students take turns being the teacher, for just 5 minutes.

1. Choose a theme that can run throughout the course, a theme to fit student interests, your locale, or course content, for example, music, current events, or wellness.
2. Tell students that they will take turns being the teacher for a short 5-10-minute warm-up activity, one student each week or each lesson, depending on class size, duration, and frequency. The goal is to give each (able and willing) student at least one teaching experience. The task is to prepare something related to the class theme and show, tell, and briefly engage their classmates in a discussion about it. Given the example theme of music, “show” might mean showing an old CD case, a magazine picture, a website, a YouTube video, or playing and singing with their guitar. A nursing student might show classmates how to take their own pulse and explain why they might want to check it periodically.
3. Avoid assessment or keep it low key. For example, the “teacher” who is on time and prepared earns full credit. Listeners who are late, inattentive, or disrespectful, can “earn” penalty points.
4. (Optional) Look for opportunities to connect these mini lessons to class content.

I am confident that I have learned more from these student-led mini lessons than anyone else in the class. I learn about my students, about technology, and about the subject matter that they have chosen. In recent years, some students have asked a classmate to video-record their lessons, so they can review their delivery later on. This tells me they are developing a sense of audience and awareness of public speaking skills.

### **Reference**

Silverthorne, S. and Warner, J (2013). *The awesome book of one-minute mysteries and brain teasers*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers.