
TIPS FOR TEACHERS

Rethinking Listening and Speaking Homework

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Homework serves a valuable purpose because it extends students' experience beyond the limited time and opportunity for practice in the classroom. However, creating engaging and effective homework assignments for a listening and speaking course can be challenging. By rethinking my homework assignments and how I assess them, I have seen significant improvement in both student engagement and completion of English language activities outside of class. This teaching tip offers suggestions for assigning meaningful homework in listening and speaking classes, using oral logs to report on it, and making use of technology for both.

Rethinking Listening and Speaking Assignments

Students typically see homework as a burden on their time imposed by the teacher. Assignments are typically one-size-fits-all, designed to preview or reinforce classroom work. If homework could be tailored to individual needs or interests, students might perceive it as relevant to their personal interests or helpful in building their confidence and fluency in English. In other words, they might become more invested in completing it. Fortunately, with modest use of computers, mobile devices, and the Internet, teachers can shift homework assignments from textbook or teacher-directed exercises that everyone must complete to personalized, self-directed tasks that students choose to complete.

Redesigning homework in the manner described here begins with creating a list of level-appropriate listening and speaking activities that students can complete outside of class. Ideally, this list would include a mix of traditional tasks and experiential learning activities. Traditional here refers to the typical tasks of listening to a passage or watching a recording and responding to the information in a specified way. For example, teachers can curate a playlist of podcasts or YouTube videos or a list of speaking topics for a conversation practice with a classmate or peer tutor. Experiential learning might include a list of campus or community ac-

tivities that would provide opportunities for students to practice the target language in an engaging environment, for example by attending a community celebration and reporting on what they learned, culturally, linguistically, or both. While such activities are easier to access in an English-speaking setting, thanks to the growing community of global English users and availability of English language media worldwide, locally-relevant experiential options can be found in EFL contexts as well. For any given topic or unit of instruction, options might include listening to podcasts, watching videos, and attending campus or community events.

Providing students with a variety of options and the freedom to choose from them is the key. Some students will relish the opportunity to choose tasks targeting areas they want to improve. For example, a student who struggles to keep up with academic lectures may choose to listen to podcasts or watch TED talks of professionals lecturing about topics of personal or professional interest. Other students will choose to watch instructional or entertaining YouTube videos based on their personal interests, family life, or long-term goals. In any case, freedom to choose means shifting student perspective from thinking of homework as busy work they are doing for a teacher to seeing it as an opportunity to do something beneficial, or at least pleasurable, for themselves.

Rethinking Assessment of Listening and Speaking Assignments

Just as important as rethinking homework assignments is rethinking how they are assessed. Traditionally, students complete exercises that are checked in class or turned in to the teacher for assessment. Introducing an oral log means that students must use the skills that they are supposed to be practicing—speaking and listening—to show evidence of the homework they have completed. Simply put, an oral log consists of short, weekly audio or video summaries of students' target language use outside of class. Logs can follow a variety of formats but frequently include setting, amount of time spent, topic, content summary, vocabulary learned, a personal response to the activity, and, if desired, an accompanying written record. Because students have chosen their tasks and the words they use to report on them, their logs frequently include thoughtful reflection on their strengths, weaknesses, and general use of English outside of class.

After students complete the activities of their choice, they record a weekly summary of their work. The length and details required in this oral summary will

vary according to size of class and proficiency level. Advanced students might be able to reflect metacognitively about their goals and successes with the various tasks, while novice students typically describe or list what they did day by day. Recordings can be uploaded to a learning management system, sent as email attachments, shared via Google Drive, or recorded on a device in the classroom. If technological resources or computer literacy are limited, one-on-one interviews with a teacher or trained tutor can work as well. Using the same technology, teachers or tutors provide feedback, encouragement, comments, and (if needed) correction tailored to the level and needs of the particular class or student.

Benefits and Challenges

There are many benefits of rethinking listening and speaking homework assignments and considering oral logs as the mechanism for tracking them. Most important, redesigning homework in the manner described here helps students use the skills they are supposed to be learning—listening to and speaking English. Another benefit is seeing students take responsibility for their own learning and become self-regulated learners and users of English outside of the classroom. They learn how to reflect metacognitively about their experiences using English in authentic or authentic-like contexts. As the students become more self-regulated, their confidence increases and they begin reporting with higher frequency of their successes with these skills, rather than focusing on frustration with the language. Building options, flexibility, and adaptability into homework tasks creates greater buy-in because students feel free to use the target language on their own terms.

Additional benefits come as students connect with one another and with the global community of English language users. Students frequently take it upon themselves to organize small group activities to fulfill out-of-class homework requirements, such as an excursion to a museum or viewing an English movie. If options are directly connected to their majors or a topic covered in class, they are eager to share their own experiences with their peers. In an ESL environment, these tasks help students connect to the community where they are studying and feel less isolated during their experience studying abroad. Thanks to the Internet and the presence of English speakers in nearly every corner of the planet, EFL students can also connect to the global English-speaking community as well, even if in somewhat more limited fashion.

Finally, teachers benefit from listening to the students logs for three reasons. First, they hear how students are directly applying the lessons learned in the classroom. Second, they can evaluate students' progress in both listening comprehension and speaking comprehensibility in an informal, non-intrusive manner. Third, and possibly most important, teachers benefit from the opportunity to hear (and know) their students as individuals apart from what they can learn about them as members of a class.

Although the benefits of the homework design described here are many and significant, there are two potential challenges in implementation, one related to the assignment and another related to the oral logs. Some teachers, particularly in an EFL environment, will initially feel overwhelmed by the thought of creating lists of possible homework activities for students to choose from. The easiest way to counter this fear is to begin small with just one or two traditional tasks and a similar number of experiential tasks. Campus and community calendars, as well as existing playlists can save time; often teachers can simply provide a link to activities and events and allow students to choose on their own. It is also likely that students will begin providing their own suggestions that can be added to the list. Soon, teachers will be able to identify successful activities reported on by their students and create a master list of tried and true options.

The other perceived challenge from the teacher's perspective is the time needed to listen to oral logs especially in settings with large class sizes. This concern can be managed in a variety of ways. First, summaries can be limited by time and/or content. Teachers will be surprised to see how contentful and informative a 30-second clip can be, for example. Focusing comments and feedback on a specific feature, such as one recently studied in class, can reduce the time it takes teachers to respond to a log entry. Classes can be divided into groups with rotating submissions dates. Listening and speaking logs can alternate weekly with more controlled homework assignments, such as a textbook exercise. Finally, students can be asked to self-identify one feature they want their teacher to focus on for example, pronunciation, fluency, or sentence structure.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the combination of self-directed homework tasks and oral reports on them encourages students to practice English outside of the classroom

and helps both teachers and students feel more engaged and invested in the process. By tailoring the options to fit the level, interests and needs of a particular class or setting, teachers can help students see the relevance and usefulness of homework. Student recordings serve as informative resources for teachers as they prepare future lessons. and create ongoing individualized dialogs with their students about their progress and successes. With adaptations for context and teacher-learner interests, rethinking listening and speaking homework can revitalize listening and speaking classes.

About the Author

Karina Jackson is the Listening and Speaking Skill Area Supervisor at Brigham Young University's English Language Center. Her research interests include distance learning, teacher education, curriculum development, and listening.