

**FUN LAB ACTIVITIES FOR IMPROVING ELEMENTARY
STUDENTS' LISTENING SKILLS**

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I. Introduction

Technology always interests everyone. In the era of its vast development, children are among those influenced by the development. The availability of numerous kinds of media available for children triggers this. It is no longer a surprising phenomenon to see how well children use mobile phones, computers, even the Internet.

For English teachers, this fact brings both positive and negative effects for children. One of the positive effects is the availability of abundant learning resources that can be used by both teachers and students. They are of course interesting for children since they are presented in multimedia forms. Nemtchinova (2007: 180) states that an important benefit of using technology as an instructional tool is the medium's potential to motivate children and to produce a positive attitude toward learning. She further states that another advantage of technology for language learners is authenticity, which is essential for providing language learning experiences.

Formerly, in English learning, technology was employed mostly in language laboratory. This was due to the fact that it was the only place that is supplied with technological equipment. However, nowadays technology is used in a wider scope and language laboratory improves as well. More activities are possible to be conducted in a language lab with more kinds of materials.

In relation to this, this short paper describes some fun activities that might be planned by English teachers when teaching elementary students in a language laboratory.

II. Teaching Listening to Elementary Students

The most common activity conducted in a language laboratory, no matter how sophisticated the equipment provided in a language lab is, is listening activity. Students are usually given a certain worksheet that they will work on

after they are listening to a certain passage of the same theme as the worksheet. However, teachers can employ various kinds of materials when they are teaching listening. The use of such materials is based on the learning objectives.

Based on the objectives, there are two perspectives of teaching listening as stated by Richards (2008: 3) in *Teaching Listening and Speaking: from Theory to Practice*, i.e. listening as comprehension and listening as acquisition. The first deals with the main function of listening in second language learning – to facilitate understanding of spoken discourse. The latter considers how listening can provide input that triggers the further development of second language proficiency.

Using each perspective, teachers can create materials that focus on different listening skills. In the perspective of listening as comprehension, comprehension is viewed as a process of decoding. Received data are analyzed in successive levels of organization – sounds, words, clauses, sentences, texts – until meaning is derived (Richards, 2008: 4). Therefore, some activities that are suggested are such as recognizing keywords, stress, and intonation to identify certain functions and anticipating questions related to the topic of situation of a listening passage.

In addition, Richards (2008: 16) states that noticing and restructuring activities probably are the most appropriate for a teacher who wants to give emphasis on listening as acquisition. In these types of activities, students are given tasks to:

- a. identify differences between what they hear and a printed version of a text,
- b. complete a cloze version of a text,
- c. complete sentences stems taken from a text,
- d. check off entries from a list of expressions that occurred in a text,
- e. read in pair the tape scripts in the case of conversational texts,
- f. complete sentences requiring use of expressions and other linguistic items that occurred in a text,
- g. practice a dialog that incorporates items from a text, and
- h. do role plays in which students are required to use key language from a text.

When teaching listening to elementary students, more attentions are given since children of this age have several characteristics that make their learning different from adults'. There are some DOs and DON'Ts in teaching listening to elementary students, as presented in the following table, which is adapted from Grugeon et al (2005: 9).

Table 1: Some DOs and DON'Ts in Teaching Listening to Children

DO	DON'T
Choose questions and topics that are likely to challenge children cognitively	Merely ask children to guess what you are thinking or to recall simple and predictable facts
Expect children to provide extended answers which will interest others in the class	Tolerate limited short answers which are of little interest to other children
Give children time to formulate their ideas and views	Hope for high quality answers without offering preparation and thinking time
Provide models of the patters of language and the subject vocabulary to be used	Expect children to formulate well thought out answers without the language to do so
Expect children to speak for all to hear	Routinely repeat or reformulate what children have said
Vary your responses to what children say; debate with children; tell and ask them things in order to extend the dialogue	Just ask questions
Signal whether you want children to offer to answer (hands up) or to prepare an answer in case you invite them to speak	Habitually use the competitive 'hands up' model of question and answer work
When children give wrong answers, ask them to explain their thinking and then resolve misunderstandings	Praise every answer whether it is right or wrong

III. Fun Lab Activities for Elementary Students

Haynes (2007: 73) mentions that highly skilled English teachers incorporate five essential practices into their works, i.e. (1) creating a thriving learning environment; (2) differentiating instruction for English language learners; (3) encouraging flexible grouping for students; (4) using diversity as a resource; and (5) developing alternative assessments for English language learners. To be able to provide these practices in their teaching, teachers need to use various materials that will make classroom interaction more interesting.

Traditionally, there have been four forms of language taught in the classroom: reading, writing, talking and listening. Children's listening skills make up 50 percent of their time spent communicating with others. These skills are a vital part of everyday communication, especially in an academic environment. Adequate development of these skills, through proven learning strategies and practice, will prepare children for success in school and future employment (Popke, 2010).

To enhance children's listening skills, there are some games that might be conducted in a language laboratory (Dunlop, 2010). Some of them are:

a. Story Chain

In this activity, one person begins a story with the sentence of his choice, and the next person adds a sentence that continues that thought. Teachers can set a limit ahead of time for how long the story should last, for example, 5 minutes or 10 sentences. The game helps develop listening skills because each participant concentrates on someone else's words so he can form a logical sequel.

b. Identify a Sound

To sharpen students' listening skills, teachers can use familiar household items in this activity. Blindfold a child, or ask her to close her eyes. Use a common item to make a noise, for instance, run the vacuum, chop carrots with a knife or fill a bowl with water from the sink. See whether she can identify the sound; if she can't, offer some help such as, "What do I do when Fido is thirsty?"

c. Reading Games

When reading to his students, a teacher can turn it into a listening game. Before starting reading, tell the students that they are going to zip their lips so they can listen but not talk. When they want to say something or ask a question, they can give a signal to the teacher to unzip their lips. When they read aloud to the teacher, reverse the roles and let them zip the teacher's lips. Teachers can also enhance students' listening skills by reading with expression and using a different voice for each character. Make it silly by using unexpected voices, such as a high, squeaky one for the big bad wolf.

d. Directions Games

In the lab, play games that include giving directions. Another listening game that starts with a two-direction command is also recommended. Tell a student to walk to a certain direction and run back to her chair. When she masters two steps, add more. For example, tell her to pick up a pencil, write her name and draw a circle around it.

Many other activities are possible to be used in a language lab, depending on the resources and needs of the class.

IV. Closing Remarks

Listening is one of the most important skills that children need to possess. To enhance their English listening skills, teachers need to generate materials and activities that focus on these skills. Some of the activities that are possible to be conducted in a language lab are creating a story chain, identifying a sound, reading games, and directions games.

V. References

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APPENDICES

Exercise 1

In this exercise, students listen to a song (ABC), do the listening exercise (filling in gaps), and then they pronounce the words in the song as well as sing it.

Fill in the blanks.

A is for A _ _ _ E

B is for B _ _ W _

C is for C _ _ D _

and D is for D _ _ N

E is for E _ _ _ H _ _ _

F is for F _ _ _ _ D

G is for G _ _ _ _ L _

and H is for H _ N

I is for I _ _ C _ _ _ M

J is for J _ G

K is for K _ _ _ _ R _ _

and L is for L _ G

M is for M _ _ K _ _

N is for N _ T

O is for O _ _ _ P _ _

and P is for P _ T

Q is for Q _ _ _ T _ _

R is for R _ _ N

S is S _ _ _ _ B _ _ _ _

and T is for T _ _ _ N

U is U _ _ _ _ L _ _

V is for V _ N

W is W _ _ _ R

and X is X _ _ _ P _ _ _ E

Y is for Y _ _ _ _ W




Z is for Z _ O

Now you've signed your ABCs

I'm so proud of you!

Exercise 2:

The teacher reads the story and asks students to answer questions following it.

<h2 style="text-align: center;">Turtles Day At The Beach</h2>  <p>One fine, sunny day, Turtle took a trip to the beach. He brought his blue and red beach umbrella and his rainbow beach ball.</p>  <p>1</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Turtle had a great day at the beach!</p> <p>1. What color was his beach umbrella? _____</p> <p>2. What color was his sand bucket? _____</p> <p>?</p> <p>the tree? _____</p> <p>haved? _____</p> <p>7</p>
<p>He built a sturdy little sand castle using his blue bucket and yellow shovel. He put a red flag on top.</p>  <p>2</p>	

Adapted from: <http://www.littlelearninglovies.com/wordpress/2012/06/20/happy-summer-one-day-freebiecatch-it-while-you-can/>

Exercise 3

Identify all the things mentioned by Jeff in the listening passage.



Adapted from: <http://homeschool4muslims.blogspot.com/2010/05/wednesday-weekly-website-mingoville.html>