

Getting Into English Mode

Warm-up Activities to Create an English Atmosphere

Most English conversation classes meet once a week, and some as little as once every three months. Because of this time gap, English is not foremost in our students' minds when they enter the classroom. Therefore, it is important for them to switch from their native language to English as quickly as possible, in order to get the greatest benefit from the English lesson. Warm-up activities do just that. They help students recall previously learned material, whether it be vocabulary or structures, and prepare them for a new influx of language.

Setsuko Toyama, author of the *English Time* storybook series and co-author of the *English Time* series, writes about her Student Question Time: I want my students to initiate the lesson and also to switch into English mode when they walk into the classroom. So one of the things I explain to them and their parents when they enroll in my school is that they have to bring one question each time they come to their lesson.

They have to think of a question, and ask parents or someone to put it into English. Some children keep asking me, "Do you like XXXXXX?" for one whole year, which is fine because they have to get the English word for XXXXXX.

Some parents write up a question on a piece of paper, and children come into class clutching a crumpled piece. Oftentimes the English has mistakes. I do not correct these mistakes, but simply recast the question. Children, however, soon find out that their parents are not the best help, so they try to get a text like *Berabera Book* (Katori, 2002) or some resource books for junior high school students.

The wonderful thing about this question time is that the questions come from the children, and not from the grammar practice in the textbook. For example, my 4th and 5th graders

are now into "which" questions:

Which do you like better, skiing or skating?

Which do you like better, cars or trains?

Which do you like better, milk or juice?, etc.

My 6th graders have been asking me some really interesting questions as they are in their second year of learning with me. They know quite a bit about me, so they are moving on to deeper questions. Some recent samples:

Do you like your job?

Do you have a stressful life?

How many countries have you been to?

Have you ever been to Roppongi Hills? , etc.

Compared to the creativity of my primary children, junior high students ask me very ordinary questions, such as, "What time did you get up?" or "What did you do last Sunday?" This is mainly because they know more structures than younger children, and they want to use and practice them.

Each week I look forward to the students' questions, and we start the lesson in a very friendly atmosphere. Most of this is done in English, which is so important.

Janina Tubby of Maiko International Preschool says her favorite warm-up game is a version of "Spin the Bottle." It works with children as young as two years old, but can be used at all levels of English.

Everyone sits in a circle. As the teacher spins the bottle in the middle of the circle, she says:

Round and round is a game.

Round and round and what's your name?

When it stops, the child it points to

has to say their name. Then the teacher says, "Let's say hello to (Rika) in a (happy) voice," and everyone says "Hello, Rika!" in a happy voice. You can demonstrate other words, such as sad, noisy, quiet, funny, scary, ghostly, monster, excited, teacher, grown-up, doggy, slowly, quickly, baby, etc. Once the game gets going you can have children suggest words and have them demonstrate what they mean for the other children. It reviews/introduces children's names and lots of adjectives and adverbs, and lets the children be creative, too.

"*Janken Crash*" is what **Erinn LaMattery** of Magic Dragon English calls an excellent game for warming up with vocabulary. Place 20 or more medium- to large-sized flashcards on the floor in a straight line. Divide children into two teams and have them line up at opposite ends of the cards. When the teacher says "Go!" the first student at each end races to name the vocabulary on each card in order to meet in the middle. Upon meeting, they *janken*; the winner remains at the card where he or she stopped, and the loser returns to the end of his or her team's line. At the next "Go!" the winner starts from where he or she stopped and the new player starts at the beginning of his or her side. The game continues until everyone has had a chance to play.

This game has worked well with children from age 5 to 6th grade, and it can be used for both large groups and small classes. It can also be done with smaller cards on the table and using dice and markers, if space is a problem.

Kaj Schwermer uses props to make his warm-up time exciting and motivational. From time to time his kindergarten students get a surprise visit from "Reporter Bob," a character he created with the help of a toy microphone taped to the end of a big stick

(4-5 feet long), a toy camera around his neck, and an old hat that a reporter would wear. "Reporter Bob" sticks his mike obtrusively in everyone's face, asking various personal questions, like

"What's your name?", "How tall are you?", "When's your birthday?", "What vegetable do you like?", etc. In the end, he hands the mike to one of the children, and they continue asking

questions.

References

Katori, S. (2002). *Berabera Book (1 and 2)*. Tokyo: Magazine House.

Co-operative Corner

Large classes have different dynamics from small ones. One traditional tactic to maintain control is the old adage, "Divide and rule". Creating competitive teams is one way of creating interest, but it is not the best way, nor even necessary. It still remains true that the more a team wants to win, the more students with less confidence and/or ability tend to be excluded. And just as a student who perceives little chance of winning tends to lose interest so it is the same for a team.

The answer is simple. We need only to use games which have little or no emphasis on winning to create more fun and learning opportunities for more students. This time around I'd like to offer three examples that do just this:

"Sockit!"

This is an adaptation of "Hug and Hum" found in *The Second Co-operative Sports and Games Handbook* (Orlick, 1982). To play you need a clear space and some old socks. One or more players are given a sock each. They are the sockits and their aim is to tag the other players. When a sockit tags a player they swap roles. However a player may only be tagged when alone. Two players may join hands and make a pair. As a pair they are safe as long as they are using the target English. The target English might be a dialogue or singing a song or simply taking turns naming vocabulary in a group. Anything is OK, but as soon as the pair pause or finish they must split up and find new partners. Pairs should remain stationary. Sockits should refrain from throwing socks unless this is

agreed beforehand. Play to a time limit or until the group has had enough.

"One Step Forward!"

In the introductory version of this game the teacher becomes a monster. The monster stands at one end of the room with some flashcards and the players stand at the other in a "safe zone". The flashcards used depend upon the language structure being practiced. For example, suppose, "Do you have?" was the target structure. The teacher could take 4-5 flashcards of toys. The cards should be familiar, and the teacher can go through them once or twice with the students before starting. In the game the teacher shuffles the cards and takes one. In unison the students call out the question together and the teacher answers. For every "No!" answer the group must take one step forward. Upon getting a "Yes!" the group race for the safe zone and the teacher chases after. For example, following on with the, "Do you have" theme:

Students: Do you have a yo-yo?

Teacher: No, I don't. One step forward!

Students: Do you have a skateboard?

Teacher: No, I don't. One step forward!

Students: Do you have a teddy bear?

Teacher: Yes I do! Grrr!

I've done this game with toddlers and young children together and had a lot of fun. When doing it with young children, start off moving very slowly to give them all time to

escape. Older children are more robust and can play the game in earnest. Of course there are many possible variations, such as having a student take over the teacher's role. I'm sure you can find some of your own.

Mingle

This isn't exactly a game but is one of the first ideas I would teach to a large class. Upon the command, "Mingle!" students simply walk around the room as individuals exchanging the target language. The first time this can simply be, "hello!" but any statement will work. For example, "My name is..." "I like...." "I can..." etc. Mingling is a very important skill for students in large classes to acquire. Don't assume they can do this without practice. In fact it is worth practicing other physical patterns using a command game. Give a command, e.g. "Make two equal lines!" and see if the group can do it within a very short time limit (start with a minute for a new pattern and see how far under 30 seconds the group can get). If necessary mime or draw the pattern on the board but present it as a challenge to be worked out. This is fun in its own right but such patterns and shapes are often used in other games and by learning these patterns from the outset it becomes easier to learn the other games in English later on. Try it and see.

References

Orlick, T. (1992) *The Second Co-operative Sports and Games Handbook*. New York: Pantheon Books.