

A Good Listener Is a Good Speaker: Three Multisensory Activities

by ANITA DEMITROFF and ANNE HAGGERSON

Have you heard the saying “A good listener is a good speaker”? It is found in Arabic and in other languages, and it reminds us that before we speak and respond, we have to listen and pay attention to our surroundings. This article will highlight practical, multisensory, and inclusive activities designed to enhance listening skills, ultimately improving the speaking ability and level of focus across ages and proficiency levels.

According to Gazioğlu and Karakuş, “Learning becomes more comprehensive, long-lasting, and meaningful when multiple senses are simultaneously activated for a common learning objective during the learning process” (2023, 2). Students become more involved in the learning process when various senses are engaged at the same time.

Moreover, Larsen-Freeman (1991) tells us to heed “states and traits.” The term *states* refers to how students are feeling. Schoolchildren may need something calming if they have just left a physical-education class, for example. Meanwhile, *traits* are personal characteristics. Some learners, including adults, simply have difficulty sitting still for a quiet activity or are wary of listening tasks.

SETTING THE SCENE

Developing listening skills takes time, especially if teachers are inculcating habits,

establishing routines, and changing attitudes. Those who feel uncomfortable with listening activities will need to grow in confidence. That is why we recommend building general listening skills before focusing on a specific language-learning activity.

For younger learners at school, teachers need to introduce routines that indicate that a focusing activity is about to start, across the languages and whatever the subject. In English, this routine could be in the form of a chant with hand gestures: “Quiet, quiet!” (*finger to lips*); “Listen, listen!” (*point to ear*); “Look, look!” (*point to eyes*); “Think, think!” (*point to head*); “Shhh!” (*finger to lips*). The chant can be repeated in silence, with lip movements and gestures.

Another routine for school, if students are familiar with the fictional detective Pink Panther, is to pull out a toy Pink Panther. This is an invitation to hum the cartoon’s theme tune, loudly and then quietly. Beforehand, perhaps in the first language, teachers should explain that it is sometimes necessary to be like a good detective: being observant and quiet, using all our senses, and thinking carefully before we speak. This routine can follow learners over the stages so that the teacher only needs to hum a few bars of the tune to invite them to go into “detective mode.”

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For older students, a simple body-percussion routine (tapping and moving the body to a rhythm) may get them ready for intensive listening. Here is an example that reviews grammar and captures the class's attention. The sequence of instructions is crucial: look; look and listen; and look, listen, and follow.

Look: First, the teacher taps her feet twice and, afterward, moves her hands back and then forth in front of her body. Second, the teacher taps her feet twice and, afterward, moves her hands back, forth, and then back again. Third, the teacher taps her feet twice and, afterward, moves her hands back and forth. Finally, the teacher jumps and quickly opens her hands wide and frames her head with them.

Look and listen: As the teacher does the movements, she says, "*In the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening, at night!*"

Look, listen, and follow: The teacher says the words while she does the movements, and the students imitate her.

Body percussion helps a class be more mindful and focused. Current research explores the importance of mindfulness training to build concentration in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom (Kuru Gönen 2022; Hammad Al-Rashidi and Aberash 2024; Hartigan 2017; Mortimore 2017). International projects on mindfulness have been gaining ground in Portugal and Türkiye (for more information, see <https://www.mindfulnessinelt.com/>).

ACTIVITY 1: THE CHAIN GAME

LEVEL: Beginner through advanced; all ages

ESTIMATED TIME REQUIRED: 15 to 20 minutes

MATERIALS: A prompt or topic suitable for the chain game

BACKGROUND: This activity, often done the first week of school to build rapport and help students get to know each other, is a classic game in schools and universities in the United States. It can be adapted easily for different ages, ranges, and levels. The game can reinforce students' speaking and memory skills.

PROCEDURE

1. *Introduction:* Start by introducing yourself with a simple sentence—for example, "My name is Anne, and I study medicine."
2. *Memory chain:* The next person repeats your sentence and adds their information—for example, "Her name is Anne, and she studies medicine. My name is Carmen, and I am doing a master's in education."
3. *Continued chain:* Each subsequent speaker repeats the previous information and adds their own personal or work details.

VARIATIONS

For young learners: Use simpler sentences and include fun details, like favorite colors or hobbies: "Her name is Esther, and she likes blue. My name is Joanna, and I like green." You could also have students throw a ball to the next person in the circle to indicate that it is their turn.

For advanced learners: With higher-level learners, you can incorporate content-specific or professional vocabulary into the game. For example, if the class is learning about

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genres in literature, the chain may look like this: “His name is Javier, and he likes horror books. My name is Elia, and I like historical fiction.”

For large classes: An alternative for large classes is to go into smaller groups, then have a representative from each group summarize their members’ responses in front of the whole class.

VOCABULARY REINFORCEMENT

This vocabulary-chain game is ideal for students who tend to be shy, reluctant speakers. You give a cue card to each student based on a theme, such as geographical features: “When you hear _____, you say _____.” You should prepare cue cards (see Figure 1), one for each student in the class so that every student gets a turn. To make the preparation easier, you can write out the list of words on a piece of paper in advance so that you can check the order.

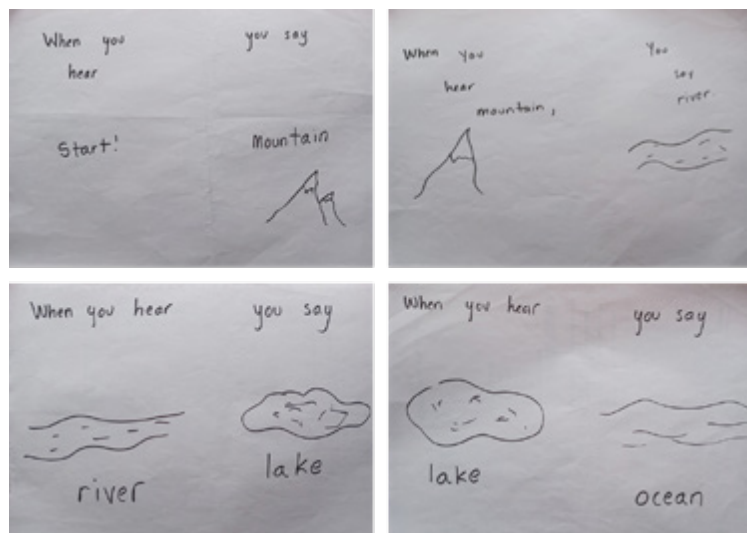


Figure 1. Cue cards for a game using basic vocabulary related to geography

Teacher’s Answer Key: Vocabulary Game on Geography

- When you hear *mountain* → You say *river*
- When you hear *river* → You say *lake*
- When you hear *lake* → You say *ocean*
- When you hear *ocean* → You say *beach*
- When you hear *beach* → You say *pond*
- ... (continue for four or more word pairs, depending on class size)

This activity is effective in building teamwork and a classroom community. Moreover, with practice, students tend to grow in confidence and enjoy the game more and more. If they can complete the sequence without an interruption, they feel a sense of accomplishment.

ACTIVITY 2: THE SECRET-OBJECT GAME

LEVEL: Depending on the drawing skills of the students, this activity can be done with children as young as six and with learners right up to teens and adults.

ESTIMATED TIME REQUIRED: Often, an entire 50-minute class!

MATERIALS: Four objects that make sounds (we used a reception-desk bell, a music box for babies, a toy tiger that roars when you press a button, and an old clock with a chime mechanism—see Figure 2); four napkins to cover the objects; paper for drawing (which the students will fold into quarters). Find objects that are available in your setting that make noises, that are made of various materials, and that vary in size and weight. You might consider

objects such as a chime, a drum, a stapler, a rattle, or a cylinder tube you could blow through like a flute. Also, consider involving the students by asking them to bring in secret objects that make noises from their own homes, hiding them in secret bags for the game.

BACKGROUND: In her article on listening games, Coulson (2019) uses the excitement of surprise to reveal hidden objects in a mystery bag. Our version of a mystery-object game also builds dialogue, interaction, a sense of mystery, and a touch of playfulness.

Secret-object games often come to an abrupt end because someone in the class blurts out the answer, identifying the object. This extended version forces learners to use their senses, including listening, intensively over a period of time. An added challenge is having to draw these objects even before they are completely revealed.

By having to focus on details, students observe the objects more carefully; as a result, they are in a better position to describe them and consider their design.

PROCEDURE

1. *Preparation:* Cover each of the four noise-making objects with a cloth. Carefully consider and prepare the clues you are going to give for each object. Hand out a piece of paper to each student. Have students fold the paper into quarters and label them with the numbers 1 through 4.
2. *Description:* Throughout the first part of the exercise, you are going to present the four objects, one by one, while they are still completely covered. However, you will give clues about the shape, parts, and texture. Here is an example of what teachers could say and do with a bell as the secret object:

Show the bell covered with a cloth napkin and hit it against a surface. Ask students,

“Is this object hard or soft? ... Is it made of metal or plastic?”

Tighten the cloth around the top and say,

“This object has a top ... ”

Then, tighten the cloth around the middle and say,

“ ... a middle ... ”

Then, point to the bottom and say,

“ ... and a bottom.”

While continuing to cover the object with the cloth, put one hand over the ringer to produce noise and ask,

“Is it loud or soft?”

Then, mime the act of drawing and say,

“Draw the object in box Number 1 on your paper.”

3. *Drawing:* Students draw what they think the objects are based on your



Figure 2. Objects that can be used for this secret-object activity include (clockwise from upper left) a bell, a baby's toy, an animal that makes a sound when squeezed, and a clock—but many other choices also work well.

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descriptions and what they have noticed. See Figure 3 for two examples.

4. *Pair-Share*: Students share their drawings with a classmate and discuss, explain, and describe how their drawings are similar and different.
5. *Reveal*: Uncover the objects. Have students compare their drawings with the actual objects. As a class or in pairs, students can comment on details they drew that match the object as well as details that do not match. Also, consider giving the class an opportunity to revise their drawings. This is especially important for learners who are still at school: resilience is boosted when learners have to revise a task, be it drawing, writing, or circuit building. For example, did the students leave a space between the middle and bottom sections of the bell for the sound to escape?

EXTENSIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

- *Higher-level thinking*: Ask students which object is most different from the other three or why certain materials are used to make each one.



Figure 3. Student sketches showing a xylophone (left) and a bell

- *Cultural relevance*: Select objects from the students' cultural contexts to make the activity more engaging.
- *Professional contexts*: Use objects relevant to adult learners' professional environments.
- *Online adaptation*: Use pre-recorded videos to avoid sound filters and ensure that sound sharing is enabled.

ACTIVITY 3: THE NUMBER GAME

(Note: This activity was inspired by Declan McCormack, an English language teaching professional.)

LEVEL: Middle- and high-school students, as well as adult learners, who are on intermediate to advanced levels

ESTIMATED TIME REQUIRED: Ten to 15 minutes (Yes, it is short and sweet.)

MATERIALS: It helps to have prompts written on the board or a poster, or visible on a screen, so that students can understand the targeted structure(s).

BACKGROUND: Students often have difficulty pronouncing numbers in English. This game helps students practice hearing and saying complex numbers and measurements, as well as estimating. Students have to listen to each other in order to make accurate guesses. The game is also suitable for adults to practice numbers used in their professions—for example, airport employees can practice saying the weights of suitcases.

PROCEDURE

1. *Introduction*: Present a sentence with a missing number, such as, "The Earth's

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diameter is _____ kilometers. It's between 1 and 20,000." For the blank space, you can say, "Blah blah blah," "Blank," or some other word or phrase that you and your students prefer.

2. *Estimation:* Students guess the missing number. The teacher responds with "Higher" or "Lower," and students guess again. This process continues until the correct number is found.
3. *Topics can vary.* In fashion, for instance, students can use the following example sentences to get ideas: "This dress costs _____ rupees. ... The clothing store is _____ kilometers away. ... The fabric is _____ meters long."

EXTENSIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

- *Pronunciation practice:* Focus on word stress for accuracy. For example, "Did you say four hundred and FORTY-five?" ... "No, I said four hundred and FIFTY-five."
- *Clarification structures:* Teach useful questions and comments like "What did you say?" and "I didn't catch that."
- *Online adaptation:* Tell students they will work in small groups in breakout rooms or, if there are only three to five students, in the main room. Appoint a leader for each group or have group members select one. Send a sentence with a blank replacing a number, as in the examples above, to group leaders in a private chat along with the answer key. The teacher can circulate through the breakout rooms to monitor. The leader will say the sentence and have others guess in turns. The leader either says or types in the chat, "Higher" or "Lower." After three to five minutes, bring students

back to the main room so they can share the correct sentence with the larger group. Then, change group leaders and share a different sentence with the answer key to the next group leader.

- *Students' sentences:* As students become more advanced and comfortable with the activity, they can create their own sentences, share them with the teacher to edit/revise, and then go into groups (or breakout rooms) with these sentences. Students then take turns getting their classmates to guess the correct number to complete their sentences.

CONCLUSION

Listening is more than a language skill; it's a fundamental educational skill that engages learners, helps them focus, and encourages the use of all senses. By incorporating multisensory and culturally relevant activities, EFL teachers can create fuller learning experiences that have a significant impact on students' overall language development.

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Note: The authors have conducted a webinar that covers these activities and more. Please see the AE Live Webinar 20.2 Series YouTube recording of “A Good Speaker is a Good Listener.”

Images courtesy of Anita Demitroff and Anne Haggerson