

Appreciation of the present moment: A new model of warm-up activities in English listening classes

Zeng Na

School of Foreign Languages,
China West Normal University,
Nanchong, Sichuan Province, China
Email: nanazeng2000@163.com

Abstract

The listening practice in class is usually reported as the most difficult task by English learners in China. Different kinds of warm-up exercises are used to stimulate students' interest and facilitate the development of their language learning. However, literature on warm-up activities based on the physical level in EFL education especially in the practice of English listening teaching is rare. With the employment of the techniques of breathing and feeling, this paper aims to develop a new model in warm-up activities to bring the students' attention to the present moment and sustain their focus in class. Although this new model of warm-up activities in English listening classes is not related to the course content, students' attention can be held after the practice, effectiveness of their class study can be enhanced enormously and their listening skills can be facilitated considerably.

Keywords: appreciation, the present moment, warm-up activities, English listening, breathing, feeling.

1. Introduction

Since students in China learn English as a foreign language by paper-and-pencil exercises much more than by listening and speaking practices, listening is more difficult than skills like reading and writing. Although the teaching methods for college students of English in China have changed somewhat, the traditional way of teaching English listening still prevails in most English classrooms. Introducing new words of the content, listening to the recording repeatedly and then giving students the correct answers are the teaching procedures of most listening classrooms.

True, warm-up exercises are involved in some classrooms, yet these exercises are mainly about the background information of the listening materials. These activities can stimulate students and arouse their interest to some degree, however, for students who are poor in English language learning and who are suffering from learning disorder, these exercises are no more different than the while-listening exercises. What's worse, the warm-up based on the mental input of the targeted listening material can intensify their sense of inferiority. Feeling uninterested, distracted, and depressed, these students may benefit little from class. According to Roberts (1998), language teaching should "represent the integrity of learners, allow for personal growth and responsibility, take psychological and affective factors into account, and represent 'whole person learning'" (p.158). As a "whole person", language learners should not be seen as full-time linguistic objects, but rather as human individuals with all kinds of emotions.

2. Traditional ways of warm-up activities

Linguists like Gardner and Broughton have attached importance of motivation to language learning process, pointing out that motivation is a basic principle of all kinds of teaching and the attitudes toward the target language and the speakers of the target language determined learners' success in language learning (Gardner and Lambert 1972, Broughton, 1978). Without having an interest in and a motivation for learning, students acquire a passive attitude in listening classes, feeling bored and reluctant to respond, just as Wei (1997) mentioned that only 20 to 25 percent of the students pay attention to the teachers' lectures in the traditional classroom. More and more Chinese teachers of English have realized the profound significance of stimulating students' interests and motivations in warm-up activities, which last only a few minutes but set the tone of involvement and enthusiasm for the whole period of class.

Warm-up activities might be divided into two large categories, those related to course content and those unrelated. The former category belongs to the traditional way of warming up a class, which requires more time for direction, discussion, and integration into the class. Stories, pictures, music, and even movies clips are employed by teachers to enliven the learning environment. These warm-ups out of the traditional point of view, however, provide only a partial solution to the complex pre-listening issues. It cannot be denied that these exercises provide students with interesting background information and thus familiarize them with the listening materials. The traditional model can somewhat help facilitate the development of English listening skills, but not all students can benefit from it. For students who are bringing to class lots of negative emotions and feelings, attention can hardly be sustained by mental input activities based on the while-listening materials.

A great flaw in the traditional model is that students are simply treated as linguistic objects of the lesson plan. And the teacher's goal in class is simply fulfilling the teaching objectives. Keeping the teaching objectives in mind, the teacher always feels like being chased by time, so it is natural that most language teachers are unable to be aware of the emotions of their students. As language teachers of a new age, we must realize that teaching in our troubled times has little to do with knowledge itself. Cramming students with facts and statistics may be no longer viable and sustainable.

As a new model of warming up the listening class, where students find the most difficult to stay focused, the practical techniques from the physical level can be introduced in this section to help solve the problem. Since these techniques are unrelated to the course content, they are rarely known by teachers. Anyhow, we

must admit that there are times when the course content is not paramount---- we must be able to respond to our students. There are times when the teachers and students do not have to get tied with the blackboard and lecture. As teachers of a new age, we have to guide students to bring their whole selves into the classroom and learn more about who they are.

3. Introducing “appreciation of the present moment” into warm-up activities

3.1 The necessity of appreciating the present moment in class

The new generation who are exposed to knowledge explosion and Internet world should be treated with great awareness of their psychology. John Taylor Gatto (1992), a former New York State Teacher of the Year, stated in his book that young students tended to be “indifferent to the adult world and to the future, indifferent to almost everything except the diversion of toys and violence. Rich or poor, school children who face the twenty-first century cannot concentrate on anything for very long”(p.12). This was twenty years ago, and today’s young generation are getting more easily distracted by different kinds of electronic products and their attention in class is getting much more difficult to be sustained, especially in the class they feel difficult or do not like. However, the ability to sustain attention is the best predictor of college student grade point average (Weyandt and DuPaul, 2008). According to a study (Frazier et al., 2007), students with higher scores on the inattentiveness measure were more likely to have a lower grade point average. Eckhart Tolle (1999) elaborates on the importance of staying focused and being in the present moment from a deeper level. According to Tolle, there are at least two reasons why we must appreciate the Now----the present moment: “Firstly, because it is the only thing. ... The eternal present is the space within which your whole life unfolds, the one factor that remains constant. ... There was never a time when your life was not now, nor will there ever be. Secondly, the Now is the only point that can take you beyond the limited confines of the mind. It is your only point of access into the timeless and formless realm of Being”(p.40).

When it comes to English listening class, many students report that it is their biggest headache and it is really hard for them to be concentrated. Listening should involve a variety of techniques to motivate students and keep their interest high. In the warm-up section of listening class, the activities cannot be confined to those related to the course content. Two techniques from the physical level can be practiced with the guidance of the teacher in warm-up activities. I have applied all these practices to my listening classes and this has resulted in a way of presenting subjects from a place of compassion and heart, and with a depth that is not possible from traditional linear teaching models. These techniques aim to bring the students’ attention to the present moment and if they can learn how to appreciate the present, learning efficiency can be enhanced accordingly.

3.2 Practice of breathing

Tolle (2005) expounded on the relation between being in the present moment and the practice of breathing, contending that awareness of your breathing is key to getting into the present moment, because “being aware of your breath forces you into the present moment ---- the key to all inner transformation. Whenever you are conscious of the breath, you are absolutely present”(p.244). For students who are easily distracted or restless, their breath is unnaturally shallow.

In class, the teacher's guidance is of importance because it is a totally new way of getting the class started. The first step is to guide the students to shut their eyes and take deep breath. The key to this step is to breathe in and out as naturally as possible. Then all the students are instructed to notice the sensation of their breath. Feel the air move in and out of their body in slow motion. The key to this step is to feel the sensation as slowly as possible. Finally, the students are asked to integrate the two steps in a way they feel at ease.

When students are finished with the breathing practice, they can be free of time for a moment where they are in a deep peace of mind. They are able to have a glimpse of how the present moment can transform their perceptions. In traditional classrooms, most students can only know the facts or information about the listening materials with the teacher's explanation. Besides, they are adding labels, opinions and judgments to the listening content and thus missing the real meaning of it. However, when this practice is slowing down their breathing, students can grasp the essence of the learning materials very quickly and easily. With the teacher's explanation, they can understand the content more deeply. In fact, when students are in a state of relaxation, they learn something effortlessly. Students who have troubles in learning are always trapped in the past and future. No matter whatever is trapping them, they can break free from the old pattern of present-moment denial and present-moment resistance once they have learned this simple technique of breathing in and out.

3.3 Practice of feeling

Some students are attending the class unprepared and restless, usually with a lot of negative emotions surging within such as resentment, anger, fear, frustration and even despair. Their inner world is filled with more events and emotions than the most elaborate datebook can contain. And these emotions would have a profound impact on human health. The negative emotions, toxic to the body, interfere with its balance and harmonious functioning. Just as Tolle (2005) stated: "Fear, anxiety, anger, bearing a grudge, sadness, hatred or intense dislike, jealousy, envy ---- all disrupt the energy flow through the body, affect the heart, the immune system, digestion, production of hormones, and so on"(p.84). If the teacher shows a disregard for students' feelings and begins the class with the listening materials or something related to them, students probably harbor the negative feelings the whole class and get nothing out of it.

In the warm-up activities, the teacher can guide the students to "see" the feelings they bring to the class with a simple technique. In the first place, all the students are asked to close their eyes to be quiet. They do not need to feel calm and comfortable at first, and to be quiet is just enough. Sometimes pushing the students too much will intensify their negative emotions such as nervousness and awkwardness. Make sure that the whole practice will be done in a completely relaxing and comfortable atmosphere. When everyone is ready, the teacher then guides the students to feel their strongest emotions inside and go deep down to find out the possible place where the emotions emerge. For instance, if the strongest emotion can be felt in the chest, the teacher can guide students to become aware of the subtle feeling of aliveness inside the chest. Then stop in that place and try to feel the feelings of it. Try to put the attention on the physical perceptions of feelings. Students just have to go there with their attention to notice it. They may get a slight tingling sensation at first, then a feeling of energy or aliveness. If they are instructed to hold their attention in that place for a while, the sense of aliveness will intensify. Basically, three to five minutes will be taken when emotional upheavals fade away.

The practice of feeling can help these students appreciate the present moment and focus their attention because it provides an opportunity for them to let the negative emotions go without any resistance. After the practice of negative emotions releasing process, even students with learning disorder can benefit from it and have a peace of mind, which is a very positive emotion. Hanafin, Shevlin, Kenny, and Neela (2007) conducted a study to learn from individuals with learning disorder about their college learning environments and experiences. They found a student's attitude about learning and his or her behavioral characteristics significantly impact college experiences. Without negative emotions blocking their way, students will participate in class activities actively. As a result, they can be deeply involved with their study and thus self-confidence will be built. The more confidence they have, the more actively and positively they will behave. Over time, a virtuous circle will be developed in their study.

4. Conclusion

EFL teaching, especially English listening teaching, is complex and cannot be completed through a single method. There are many obstacles in our thinking to making the shift from a linear mode of teaching and learning to one in which the connections in students' inner world can be appreciated. As far as warm-up is concerned, activities must be designed that truly help facilitate the language learning process. Model for our students that learning happens is everywhere, and it's not always connected to a book. The techniques presented in this paper can help sustain students' attention because it is the practice of combining the mind with the body. It is true that our classrooms are not therapy sessions and our teachers not therapists, but ignorance of students' psychology and emphasis on teaching plans and facts will simply reduce our class to computer programming and our students robots. Engaging the whole person, this new model of warm-up activities will give the students and even the teacher a great chance to release the pressure and the emotional trash. Thus the peace of mind can be attained by every participant, which offers a win-win situation to the teacher and the students.

It cannot be denied that the teacher plays a different role from that of their counterparts in traditional classes. In fact, the teacher is a learner as well as an instructor. Moreover, the concept of "appreciation of the present moment" is not one that can be taught with only words or lectures. It must be experienced and felt in the body in order to be actualized. It is our sincere hope that educators of EFL in China could pay more attention to teaching students as a whole person and more and more teachers and students will benefit from this new model of warm-up activities in class.

References

- Broughton, G. and Brumfit, C. (1978). *Teaching English as a foreign language*. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Frazier, T. W., Youngstrom, E. A., Glutting, J. J. and Watkins, M. W. (2007). ADHD and achievement: Meta-analysis of the child, adolescent, and adult literatures and a concomitant study with college students. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 40: 49-65.
- Gardner, R. C. and Lambert, W. E. (1972). *Attitudes and motivation in second language learning*. Mass: Newbury House.
- Gatto, J. T. (1992). *Dumbing us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.
- Hanafin, J., Shevlin, M., Kenny, M. and Neela, E. (2007). Including young people with disabilities: Assessment challenges in higher education. *Higher Education*, 54: 435-448.
- Roberts, J. T. (1998). Humanistic approaches, In: Johnson, K. and Johnson H. (eds) *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Applied Linguistics*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Tolle, Eckhart. (1999). *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. Novato: New World Library
- Tolle, Eckhart. (2005). *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*. New York: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Wei, C. L. (1997). Collaboration in EFL classroom: An investigation of DFLL learners' perceptions of Jigsaw cooperative learning technique in freshmen English classes, Proceedings of the Fourteenth Conference on English Teaching and Learning in the Republic of China, pp. 223-238, Taipei, Taiwan: Crane.
- Weyandt, L. L. and DuPaul, G. J. (2008). ADHD in college students: Developmental Findings. *Developmental Disabilities Research Reviews*, 14: 311-319.