

Engaging Students in the TOEFL PBT Test Preparation Listening Course through Games and Activities

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Abstract

Teaching listening skills in a test preparation course has been regarded as boring, challenging, daunting, and non-communicative. Games and activities proven pedagogically sound and effective were recommended to make the teaching of the test preparation listening skills courses more fun and engaging as well as integrated with other language skills. A review of studies on using games in teaching listening was made before specific games and activities were suggested. An attempt was made to divide the games and activities into three categories corresponding with the three parts of a typical TOEFL PBT listening section, and flexible application was highly recommended to suit a particular purpose.

Introduction

Listening is one of the most important skills that affect success or failure in communication. Widely known, better listening results in better communication. For students who are taking a test preparation course, effective listening helps them to achieve better scores. Important as it might be, listening has not given a priority if not neglected in teaching English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) in EFL classes in Vietnam. Teaching listening skills is, more often than not, regarded as dry, boring, and “hard-to-teach” for Vietnamese EFL teachers. That teachers have students listen to the tape and then give the latter answer key is a common activity in listening skills classes. Likewise, teaching listening skills in test preparation courses like the paper-based TOEFL test (TOEFL PBT) in most schools and language institutes in Vietnam rarely involves activities that help develop students’ language proficiency but emphasize on how to get a higher exam score. This concurs with Kaplan (2012) in that, for most standardized tests, listening comprehension is often assessed by having students listen to a text read aloud, and then asking students write down the answers. Therefore, it is not uncommon when “it never occurred to anyone that the students should have a chance to talk to each other using English; rather the class was totally teacher-centered...” (Kim, 2010, p. 39). Many students have “associated listening courses with pain and boredom and often complain that they benefit little from listening lessons” (Jun, 2000, p. 1). How can teaching listening skills be more fun, motivating and productive and simultaneously develop other language skills?

The purpose of this article is to highlight games and activities to get students involved in the teaching of listening process, improving their listening skills as well as developing other language skills. When talking about applying games in teaching listening, many studies (Dalton et al., 2009; Ferdiant, 2010; & Liu & Chu, 2010) have been found. However, very few papers are found to have addressed the teaching of listening in the TOEFL PBT test preparation course by using specific games and activities for specific listening skills. The following sections first summarize research on using games in teaching listening and then present games and activities organized by three sections corresponding with three parts

of the listening section of a typical TOEFL PBT test. Across the three areas, interest and engagement factors resulted from games and activities are addressed.

Literature Review

It has been suggested that games, one of the strategies, be incorporated in teaching listening classes as games are practicable method for “reinforcement, review, reward, relax, inhibition reduction, attentiveness, retention, and motivation” (Steinberg, 1988, p. 9, as cited in Ferdiant, 2010). Likewise, Richard and Amato (1988) believed games can lower learning anxiety, add fun to the regular classroom activities, break the ice, and introduce new ideas easily. Of many other games used to teach listening, Dalton et al. (2009) recommended twenty games including tic-tac-toe, how many things can you think of that, Chinese whispers, backs to the board, four corners, brainstorming vocabulary, crossword and word search, word snake, oral cloze, who-where-and what, oral reading, choral reading and speaking, interrupting the story, tongue twisters, chain story, running dictation, bingo, translation on the wall, translation on the wall-groups, and find your partner (pp. 20-32). Applying games in teaching test preparation listening courses has been increasingly researched. Ferdiant (2010) conducted a study to see how students’ listening skills improved when games were applied in teaching listening and what type of game was preferred. In the study, thirty students of Madura University took a pre-test of missing words and multiple choice questions before attending four class meetings with four listening games accordingly. The author found a significant increase between pre-test and post-test as well as positive impacts on the students’ listening skill. Among the games, Chinese Whisper game was reported to be the most enjoyable and challenging for students. The author suggested that listening teachers apply listening games to help students increase their listening capability. In line with the above findings, Liu and Chu (2010) investigated how using omnipresent games in an English listening and speaking course would affect students’ English learning achievement and motivation. The authors had two groups of students participate in the learning activities by using ubiquitous game-based learning environment called the Handheld English Language Learning Organization (HELLO) for one group – the experimental group,

and a non-gaming learning setting for the other - the control group. The authors found that incorporating games in learning English achieved a better learning outcomes and motivation than using non-gaming method.

Admittedly, numerous games and activities dedicated to teaching listening skills are being created over time. However, the following games and activities for adult learners are recommended because they have been proven effective, motivated, and learning-provoking when applied in the intensive TOEFL PBT test preparation listening courses at Tan Tao University in Long An, Vietnam. The games and activities could be used with learners of different ages, languages, and proficiency levels. Before the games and activities are introduced, a brief description of Tan Tao University (TTU) and a quick review of the listening section of a TOEFL PBT test with its typical structure are addressed.

Games and Activities in TOEFL PBT Prep Listening Classes at Tan Tao University

Tan Tao University's Description

Tan Tao University (TTU) is conveniently located in Long An province, 30 km far from the center of Ho Chi Minh City. TTU is said to be different from other Vietnamese universities as all classes are delivered in English. In other words, English is used as a means of instruction and communication on campus. To deploy this, all the students are required to meet the English requirements by demonstrating their English ability with the institutional TOEFL PBT score of 520 out of 667 before taking academic courses in English of their respective disciplines. Those students who do not meet the requirements will be required to take the TOEFL ITP test prep courses that are designed based on the structure of the TOEFL PBT test administered by Educational Testing Service (ETS).

TOEFL PBT Overview

The paper-based TOEFL test (TOEFL PBT) that, according to ETS, is still being used in locations where testing via the Internet is not available. As known, a typical test has three main sections, namely listening, structure and written expressions, and reading. On a listening assessment, test-takers are asked

to listen to the recordings only one time, and they are not allowed to take notes but rely on their memory to answer 50 questions. The questions are divided into three parts, namely short conversations (30 questions), longer or extended conversations (7-8 questions), and mini-talks or mini-lectures (12-13 questions). There are many different TOEFL PBT books such as Longman's, Peterson's, Heinle & Heinle's, Delta's, and Barron's in the market and sample TOEFL tests by ETS are provided free online. These books and sample materials share the same skills expected in the listening section of a typical TOEFL test. Specifically, for short conversations, the expected listening skills include skills for listening for key words to find synonyms, listening for specialized vocabulary, listening for idioms and phrasal verbs, listening for conditionals, wishes, causatives, and modals, listening for negative expressions, listening to understand intonation or make inferences, and listening for language functions. The expected skills for extended conversations as well as mini-lectures often encompass skills for listening to identify the topics and main ideas as well as comprehending details.

According to many researchers and educators (Ferdiant, 2010; Liu & Chu, 2010; Steinberg, 1988), among many other techniques, games and activities should be incorporated in test preparation listening courses in order to engage students and help them develop other language skills namely writing and speaking. For ease and convenience, an attempt is made to divide the suggested games and activities into three categories corresponding with the three parts in the TOEFL listening section.

Games and activities for teaching listening skills in short conversations

1. ***Revised Taboo game*** is used for teaching skills to listen for synonyms

The teacher helped students improve a listening skill for choosing answers with synonyms by using the board game "Taboo" introduced by Hasbro (1989). The teacher first had the TOEFL PBT preparation class divided into two teams. The members of each team were expected to sit or stand close together. When things were ready, the team that went first had to select a member to be a word guesser, whose back would turn to the white board, trying to guess the word and then write it on the board thanks to his or her team members' descriptions of the guess word. The player –guesser who did not see the word

could shout out guesses about what the guess word was within a time limit. If the word was guessed successfully by the teammates and no taboo words were used, the team would get one point. Taboo words might include the use of the exact guess words, one part of the compound guess words, derivatives, and initial letters of the guess words. Also, no gestures or sound effects were used in description. If taboo words were used or any of the other rules were broken, the word was not counted. Alternatively, once the timer ran out, the team should stop guessing, and no point would be given to the team. Then, the second team then would take their go, and the same process would repeat itself.

The Taboo game expected the players to use different words such as synonyms, antonyms, explanations, and definitions to a guess word. It was using different words to express the same meaning that would help students develop a listening skill for choosing answers with synonyms.

2. *Whispering game* is used for teaching idiomatic language

The students were expected to enhance their listening skill using Whispering game that according to Wikipedia, originated from Chinese Whispers in which one person whispers a message to another successively until the last player says the message out loud. In the listening class, the teacher divided the class into two teams who stood in lines. To begin, the instructor whispered an idiom or a phrasal verb compiled from available TOEFL's books to the first person of both groups who played a role as their respective team's whisperers. (At some other times, the teacher showed a card containing an idiom, or a phrasal verb or a sentence to both the player-whisperers). The whisperers were asked to memorize the idiomatic language, went back to their respective groups and whispered what they had been whispered or read on the card to the person on their right. Each person in each group would whisper the idiomatic expression to the next person successively until the last player got the message. The last person would quickly run to the board and raced to write the idiom, the phrasal verb, or the sentence. If the idiomatic language was the same with the one whispered by the teacher or written on the card, that group would win one point. Then, the teacher did a follow-up by asking for the meaning, if any team knew the meaning, that team would also win one point. Then, the teacher would start the game over with the second student

of each group becoming the first one to write the message on the board. Subsequently, the teacher asked each group of four students to create a short conversation in which the newly learned idiomatic expression would be used and to write four answer choices for the short conversation in which there was one correct answer. The conversation and four options were checked by the teacher before the teacher had the class take a newly created TOEFL listening test.

Observingly, Whispering game was great fun for students especially during the process of whispering. Due to distraction during listening and “the cumulative listening errors of the players”, the message produced by the last player turned out to be different from the one whispered by the first. Thus, the Whispering game was believed to help train students’ listening, pronunciation, grammar, and memory.

3. ***Speech Act Hunt*** (adapted from Scavenger Hunt) and ***Debate*** to teach listening skill for language functions

The students were taught listening skills for language functions using Speech Act Hunt game adapted from Scavenger Hunt game by having students watch a video clip from *LinguaTV* and asking them to “hunt” speech acts if any were used in the clip. The Speech Acts included requesting, offering, suggesting, inviting, agreeing and disagreeing and apologizing. Video clips from *LinguaTV* were chosen as the clips facilitated students in addressing real-world situations, authentic language use and subtitles. The group that wrote down all the speech acts used in the video clip and named their functions won the game. The subsequent activity was that the teacher handed out a worksheet containing some other language forms to express the above-mentioned speech acts. The teacher then asked each group of four students put the language forms into respective categories. Next, the teacher had the class divided into two big groups to continue with a debate activity to practically use the learned language. The debate topic was related to the video clip in the Speech Act Hunt game. Students were asked to work in their groups to generate ideas to support or to oppose the issue. During the debate, students were expected to use the learned language forms to express some speech acts.

Games and activities for teaching listening skills in extended conversations

In order to teach listening skills for extended conversations, the teacher used the *Conversation Puzzle* game and “*Scripted*” *Rope Play*. The former was used to introduce and then analyze a typical structure of a conversation, and the latter was applied to help students use the language in real-world situations in different roles.

In the listening class sessions, the instructor used *Conversation Puzzle* game adapted from Music Puzzle game by Shard Workshop. This game was played individually. First, the teacher handed out each player one copy of the transcript of the conversation in which the lines or exchanges of the conversation were cut and asked students to listen to the tape and put the lines in order. The student who was able to rearrange the exchanges first and correctly was the winner. After that, the teacher elicited a typical structure of the conversation (that often includes greetings, body, pre-closing and closing) from the information in the conversation. The teacher then had students look at questions to see which pieces of information were asked. Also, the students were expected to identify the question types and how to answer them before they listened to the tape. As the students had an idea of a conversation’s typical format, they would know where to find answers from the conversation. Before moving on to the next activity, the teacher helped reinforce the pieces of information frequently asked in the test questions. This reflected Watkins and Wilkins’ (2011) findings in that “by pointing out specific discourse markers that indicate an important piece of information in a text, teachers can illustrate what students could look for in future encounters with similar texts” (p. 116). After this activity, the teacher had students practice role play.

The teacher had students think about scenarios on campus in which potential conversations were likely to occur and wrote them on the board. Each group of four students was asked to choose one of the scenarios and write a conversation and four questions with four answer choices for each question. The conversation and the questions with four options each were checked by the teacher, and then the students acted out the roles according to the “scripted” conversation. In short, these activities were used in the listening class to introduce a conversation’s structure, help indicate which pieces of information

oftentimes asked and ways to answer the test questions. The subsequent role play activities aimed to help students practically use the language in different roles portraying fictional and real-life characters.

Games and activities for teaching listening skills in mini-lectures

The students were taught listening skills for mini-lectures by using *Mind-Mapping* game and *Podcast*. Mind-mapping, according to Wikipedia, is widely used to create a word web and visually outline information of a topic after brainstorming words and ideas related to the given topic placed in the center of a worksheet, which related information is added to. In the class, the instructor gave the topic “recycling” (Peterson’s TOEFL Success, 2000, p. 468) to students and asked each group of four students, using Mind-mapping to write down as many words related to the topic of “recycling” within 3 minutes. The group that wrote more words would win. The teachers also did pre-teach some key words from an imminent lecture that students failed to write them down, to facilitate students’ listening. The teacher then distributed worksheets about a lecture of “recycling” that contained some missing words functioning as signpost language. After the fill-in exercise, the teacher had students identify the structure of the lecture about “recycling” (that has greetings, a bridge connecting content from the previous class session and today’s lesson, body, and closing). Then the teacher had students look at questions to see which pieces of information were asked, identify the question types as well as find the answers. Before moving on to the Podcasting creating activity, the teacher helped reinforce the structure of a typical mini-lecture and the pieces of information frequently asked about the lecture.

The teacher then used the Podcast creating activity to help train students’ listening and pronunciation as well as have them experiment and develop computer skills through recording a mini-lecture. To do this, the teacher divided the class into groups of four students and asked them to choose a short text from *BreakingNewsEnglish* and Listening for Academic Purposes from *Randall’s ESL Cyber Listening Lab* sites. These two sites were chosen because the sources had a wide variety of themes like Environment, Health, Technology, Lifestyle, and Issue, and the text length was suitable to make a recording (about 2 to 3 minute long). Also, that the texts on the two sites had available audio files would

help students compare their recording in terms of pronunciation and intonation. Then the students collaboratively wrote four questions with four answer choices per question relating to the selected text within a time limit. After students finished writing questions being checked by the teacher, they were instructed to use to *Podomatic*, free software allowing recording online, to start making a podcast. The students were advised to rehearse reading the text until they felt comfortable to record the reading online. Finally, the class listened to their newly created TOEFL mini-lectures live on Podcast. In short, through these engaging and fun games and activities, students' participation in the class was significantly high. Additionally, students got higher test scores at the term end.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is possible to create a fun learning environment in the test preparation classes to engage students in order to help develop not only their listening skill but other language skills as well. As the goal of teaching test preparation courses is not just about how to help students get a good exam score, but about how to improve their overall language proficiency, using games and activities might enable students to acquire test knowledge in particular and linguistic knowledge in general engagingly and meaningfully. This might explain the introduction of the above-mentioned games and activities in teaching a test prep listening skills class. Although the suggested games and activities are just some of the available many games and activities, they capture some "change" that the teachers can do, apply and create a fun and motivating environment in the test preparation classes. An attempt was made to divide the suggested games and activities into three categories corresponding with the three parts in the TOEFL listening section, but no one single game was better suited for an activity. Therefore, flexibility in practical application was highly recommended. It was worth noting that games and activities would be increasingly created over time. Therefore, it was advisable for EFL/ESL teachers to keep searching and stay current with the available sources. By doing so, the teachers might create a more motivating and fun environment in EFL/ESL courses in general and test preparation listening skills classes in particular.

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