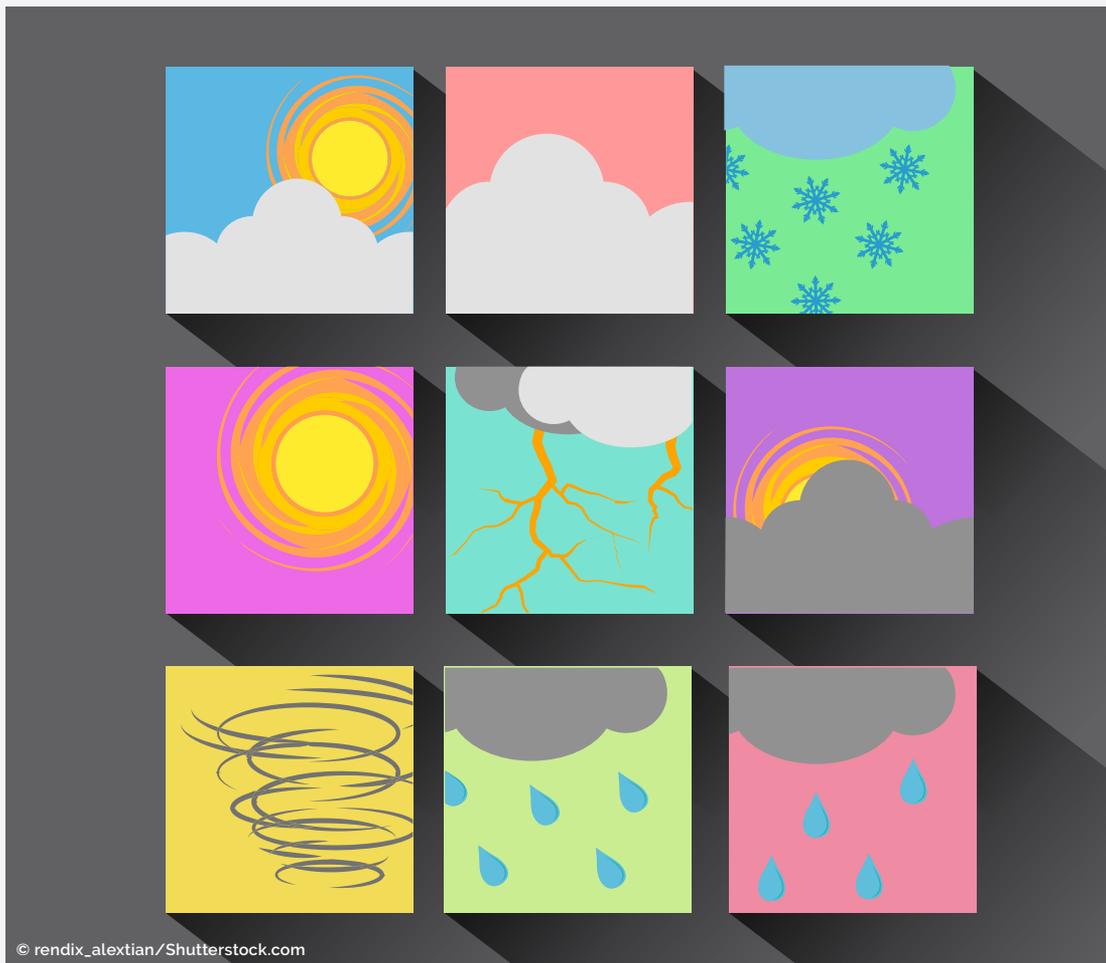


Physical Vocabulary in the Beginner-Level Classroom

by JONATHAN MAIULLO



After having success with this warm-up activity in my theater classes, I adapted it for my beginner-level English classes, knowing my students would appreciate the opportunity to move around. The activity allows students to create their own physical interpretation of a vocabulary word, which increases their ability to remember it (Asher

1996). I introduce the activity with a class and then use it frequently as a warm-up to review vocabulary. The activity requires little preparation and few materials: just something to play music with and cards for introducing vocabulary terms. Best of all, the activity incorporates movement in a way that is easy for students to understand.

INTRODUCING PHYSICAL VOCABULARY

The entire class walks in a circle throughout the activity. Each student changes the nature of his or her walk (rhythm, gait, pace, etc.) in response to vocabulary prompts.

The activity is best suited to beginner classes in which students are learning basic vocabulary, but both older and younger students enjoy the activity. And, while the activity is easiest to use in classes with fewer than 30 students, it can be adapted to larger classes by having one group walk at a time, with the other groups taking turns calling out the prompts.

Because this type of physical activity may be unusual for some students, allow them to acclimate to using movement in the classroom. I recommend using music. Moving to music comes naturally to most learners. Try to play four or five genres with different tempos; choices can range from somnolent background music to something more energetic, like punk rock or heavy metal. You don't need to play an entire song—just enough to allow the students to react to it. For this activity, lyrics are not important, as students will be responding only to the music.

The Free Music Archive (freemusicarchive.org) has music in nearly every genre imaginable, available for play or download.

PART 1: WALK, LISTEN, AND SHOW

Arrange the desks or chairs in a large circle, or, if the classroom is small, push them to the walls to make space in the middle of the classroom. Keep in mind that the students will have to return to their seats during the class, so the desks should be out of the way but still accessible.

Write the words *walk*, *listen*, and *show* on the board. Ask the students what *walk* and *listen* mean. If they can't explain, ask them to show each action by pointing to the word *show* on the board. If no one knows these words,

demonstrate each of them yourself while repeating the word. To check comprehension, repeat the word and ask students to demonstrate (that is, “show”) the meaning. Encourage students to “show” you the word rather than calling out a translation.

After students understand the concept, ask them to form a circle in the middle of the room. Say “Walk,” point to the word *walk* on the board, and motion for the students to walk in a circle. Then say “Listen,” point to the word *listen*, and play a relaxing song. Now, ask the students to “show.” Demonstrate by joining the circle and walking with the rhythm of the music, swaying, using your hands or doing anything you like, but continue to walk in a circle. Encourage the students to do the same. After they have found their rhythm, change the genre of music and encourage the students to move differently. Start from slower selections and move to faster tempos.

While there may be a little embarrassment at first, students should overcome their hesitation when they realize they are moving more as a group responding to the music than as individuals. Adolescents, in particular, may be reluctant to “show” the music. You can deal with this reluctance by asking students a few days before about their favorite music. Usually when they hear familiar selections, they are more inclined to “show” the music.

It is best to limit this activity to around five songs; about 30 seconds per song is sufficient. After students have “shown” you a sufficient variety of music, have them return to their seats.

PART 2: WALK, LISTEN, SHOW, AND SAY

One way to transition to the language function of this activity is by using weather-related adjectives (e.g., *hot*, *cold*, *windy*, *rainy*, *stormy*, *snowy*). Introduce these terms by using labeled pictures on cards. (If you are not a great artist, clip pictures out of a magazine and add your own labels.)

With students seated, show them a card, point to the picture, say the word (for example, “cold”), and then point to the word *show* on the board. Show “cold” to students by wrapping your arms around your body and shivering. Say the word while you show it. Present more cards, again saying each word and pantomiming an action; then go back to your card for *cold* and ask the students to show the word. Let them look at the picture and react. They don’t have to repeat the word yet. Continue in this way until the students have “shown” all the adjectives.

Return to the board and write *say*. Hold up the *cold* card again, say “Cold,” and then point to the word *say* and repeat “Cold.” Gesture for students to say it as well. Then point to *show* again and pantomime shivering. Gesture for students to do the same. Start from the beginning with the cards. Go through them one at a time. This time, students say the word and show it. If students forget to “say” or “show,” point to those words on the board.

Because one goal of this activity is to allow students to find their own physical understanding of the adjectives, encourage them to show the words in their own way. If you have a particularly expressive class, consider letting them show all the words without help after you provide the first example.

PART 3: BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

After students have demonstrated their understanding, have them return to the middle of the classroom. Point to the word *walk* on the board and pantomime the action so students will know to walk in a circle. Now, instead of playing music, you can hold the cards up and call out each word while pointing to *show* on the board. As students walk in a circle, they must “show” the adjective. Most of them will naturally incorporate this into their walk, but if they are having a difficult time, demonstrate how their walk would adjust to the adjective. If you feel comfortable, give a theatrical

performance of someone walking in a frigid blizzard for *cold*, but allow students to interpret the other adjectives on their own. Instruct students to say the words as they show them by pointing to *say* on the board again if necessary. Remember to reorder your cards so you are not reading them in the same order every time.

After students feel comfortable with the activity, you can change the length of the pause between cards so that students have to quickly change the way they are walking. You could also call out two adjectives at once so that the students have to try to show them simultaneously (which is always funny).

CONTINUING PHYSICAL VOCABULARY

Initially, this activity can be limited by students’ experience. That is why I recommend starting with the simple weather vocabulary. Students may have never experienced cold weather, but they usually know how to show it. They may not have any idea how to show concepts such as “humid” even if they understand them. In exploring these concepts by relating them to known vocabulary, students find ways to respond to vocabulary that is more complex. *Humid*, for example, could be shown as a combination of *wet* and *hot*, once those terms are understood.

After the initial class, I continue to use this activity as a warm-up to review the previous lesson’s vocabulary. If the class learns other weather adjectives, the students find ways to show the new words like *misty* or *icy*.

The activity helps students explore and personalize many beginner vocabulary sets. For example, “feelings” vocabulary sets are also easily shown. The reason I don’t start with feelings is that the whole body reacts to weather, but when I have started with feelings, students have had a hard time giving more than facial expressions. For “rooms in the house” vocabulary, students can show what they do in each room, and the same approach can be used for “places around

town.” Rather than physically reacting to a command (“Stand up,” “Sit down,” etc.), students are reacting to their *interpretation* of a concept. As a result, vocabulary sets related to family members, food items, clothing, and even colors can be used (see the suggestions below).

As a warm-up, this activity serves the functions of refreshing students’ knowledge of a word and allowing them to have fun interacting with it. Encourage them to interpret each term for themselves when they “show” it. If students feel that they are only copying the teacher or other students, the activity ceases to be enjoyable. As long as students feel free to react personally to the word, they will continue to enjoy the activity.

SELECTED PHYSICAL VOCABULARY TOPICS

1. *Clothing.* Sweaters are heavy; formal clothes are stiff; casual clothes are loose; footwear changes the way students walk (everyone loves showing high heels or a “slippers shuffle”). With less obvious articles of clothing like hats and socks, students can pantomime putting them on or adjusting them.
2. *Family members.* Students usually agree on universals such as mothers hold babies, sons jump around, daughters skip, fathers have a dignified walk, grandparents hobble, and aunts and uncles take on idiosyncratic actions (ask students about their aunts and uncles to discover these characteristics).
3. *Rooms in a house.* This topic is usually appropriate to include after students have learned common action terms such as *eat, sleep, drink, read, and watch TV*. Students pantomime each action depending on what they usually do in each room: they watch TV in the living room, eat in the dining room, and sleep in their bedroom. The garage usually suggests a driving pantomime; for

basements, students start at full height and “walk downstairs,” bending their knees as they go.

4. *Colors.* It is important to have already studied feelings before using colors in this activity because the two are linked. Students determine for themselves how certain colors make them feel. I ask them this and write feelings on the board next to each color in a mind-map cloud. After we have explored the emotional range of each color, students walk and show these colors.
5. *Food.* Students respond to food items usually by showing a pleased or disgusted overall appearance, varying in terms of severity. I introduce the scale of preference (hate, dislike, like, love, etc.) as part of this lesson, and students explore in advance ways of showing varying degrees of preference for food items.

REFERENCE

Asher, J. 1996. *Learning another language through actions*. 5th ed. Los Gatos, CA: Sky Oak Productions.

Jonathan Maiullo began teaching English to Sudanese and Afghan refugees while an undergraduate at Michigan State University. As a Master’s International student, he volunteered as an English teacher-trainer in Yeghegnadzor, Armenia, with the Peace Corps. He has since worked as an actor for an international EFL theater troupe based in Buenos Aires, and most recently, he was an English Language Fellow in Asunción, Paraguay.