

Four Ears Hear More Than Two: A Competitive Team Approach to Listening Practice

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My teaching practice involves intensive preparation of second-year university students for their end-of-year exams, based on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). More than once, the group of students was too large for the size of the classroom, which hampered our listening practice enormously: due to the nature of the task, students could not be given different versions of it, and they were sitting so close to each other that focusing on individual work was difficult. The solution, which I share in this article, came as pure improvisation in one of my classes. The students appreciated the approach, and now, after several uses with various groups, the activity seems to have crystallized into a regular and established teaching technique. In what follows, I describe how it works and how it can be applied to many kinds of listening practice in the classroom.

THE PROCEDURE

Prepare the listening passage—either a recording or a script that you will read. Divide students into teams of two (you may appoint the pairs specifically, judging the level of each student and thus ensuring fair starting conditions for each pair; if the number of students in the class is odd, one particularly advanced student may work alone, or you can have one or more teams of three). Then give each team an answer sheet.

Tell students that your class will hold a friendly competition involving the listening passages and that teams have two ways to score points—by answering quickly and by answering correctly.

When the recording starts to play, each team works on the answers together; if one member mishears or does not catch the needed word, the other member might hear it and put down the answer. As soon as the answer sheet for one section (or for the whole test) is completely filled in and agreed upon, the team members raise

their hands. The number of points given for early completion depends on the number of teams participating: if there are six teams, then the first team ready gets 5 points, the second finisher gets 4, and so on.

When all the teams have finished the task, collect the answer sheets, check them, and calculate each team's total points. For example, suppose the team that raised hands first answered three questions correctly; that team will get 3 points (for answering three questions correctly) plus 5 bonus points (for finishing first), for a total of 8 points. Meanwhile, the last team to raise hands may edge the fastest team by giving 10 correct answers out of 10; even though that team gets no bonus points for finishing quickly, it gets 10 points overall—1 point for each correct answer.

A scoring chart might look something like the one in Table 1, although with large classes there would be many more teams.

Also with large classes, rather than checking the answers yourself, you can have teams exchange sheets and score each other's answers. Having students check answers can also make it easier to incorporate discussion of the answers into the class.

If there are more sections in the test or exercise, the competition continues with the next part. Update the teams' results after each section. The team with the most points at the end of the activity wins. Thus, the students practice the activity in an entertaining way, working quickly and collaboratively, and with each attempt they feel more confident about it.

ADVANTAGES

- The activity is entertaining and actually lots of fun. It livens up the course or the lesson and generally lightens the atmosphere. In my experience, even the least motivated students put forth effort.

- It is a fine way to practice the needed skills without pressure or stress—while the students actually train their ears on the task, the whole thing still feels like a game.
- I believe that competitiveness is not the least important quality in achieving the desired result in an exam, and the proposed activity develops competitiveness enormously.
- Doing a task together results in team building, which is important for encouraging students to work together for other class activities.

I would also suggest, albeit tentatively, that unexpected fun activity relieves and

relaxes the students, and they might listen to the recording in a reinvigorated way. Besides, the pressure for potential mistakes is reduced because it is divided between the members of the team; if the team does not do well, it is not any person's fault. Conversely, a lower-level student on a winning team can taste success and become more confident.

POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS

The students were critical only of the importance of raising their hands first. However, in a number of cases, a team that was ready last still went ahead in total points because many of their answers were correct. In other words, success in the activity relies on both time management

Teams	Section 1: Correct Answers + Bonus	Section 2: Correct Answers + Bonus	Section 3: Correct Answers + Bonus	Total
Crazy Fishes	5 + 3	6 + 3	6 + 2	25
Funky Noises	8 + 2	7 + 1	6 + 3	27
Fit and Fiddle	8 + 1	7 + 0	10 + 1	27
Team Spirit	9 + 0	9 + 2	10 + 0	30

Table 1. Scoring chart

and correctness. A team is rewarded for being quick, but the reward is squandered if the answers are wrong. Of course, sometimes the quickest team has only one or two wrong answers out of ten and thus tops the table, but this result only emphasizes the importance of further individual practice for each participant.

The scoring method can be a topic for discussion. After a winner is announced, you can ask students to discuss the advantages of answering quickly compared to answering relatively slowly but with possibly more correct answers. In any case, the structure of rewarding the team's quickness is entirely up to the teacher. This decision may also depend on the purpose of the class; if the students are preparing for a timed test, such as the IELTS, having them try to answer quickly could benefit them later when they take the test.

Having the teacher record the scores takes some of the lesson time, especially with a test that has multiple sections; after completing each section, the teams hand in their answer sheets, and the teacher counts the points accumulated. This is an argument for having the students exchange papers and check the answers.

Splitting the competition into several rounds is a universally accepted sporting practice; it adds the thrill of friendly rivalry to the process and thus boosts students' motivation.

CONCLUSION

The suggested technique can be used for almost any kind of classroom listening practice and with all kinds of classes. It seems to work well both in exam preparation and in regular textbook listening exercises. I would also like to emphasize that the technique is totally adjustable to the nature of the task and to the students' needs, especially in terms of determining the

number of bonus points. Overall, participants tend to enjoy the activity and come to perceive the challenges of listening tests in a more positive way.

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