



15 Warm-up Activities for English Learners

by [Margaret Patrick](#)

Including a warm-up activity can set the tone for lessons, engage students, and help students relax. The following are 15 easy warm-ups that have worked well in my classes as well as in the conversation club, English Corner, at my institution. The activities are intended to get students immediately moving and involved, using their bodies and skills reflexively. They require little to no preparation and very few materials, if any.

Though my context is with adult and higher education students, many of these activities can work well as they are, or with a little adaptation, for other contexts. I've included notes for scaffolding for developing learners where appropriate, and options for changing the games to best suit your students.

1. Hot Potato

A class favorite! Students pass around one or two balls or “conversation cubes” (cubes with questions on each side) while the teacher claps or plays music. Then, when the clapping or music stops, the students holding the balls or cubes complete a task, such as listening to and answering a question, choosing and answering a question from the cube, or choosing a question on the cube and asking a classmate. For large classes, add more balls or cubes to keep the whole class engaged.

Scaffolding: If you're using a ball, provide sentence frames on the board for students who might have trouble creating their own questions.

Options: Create your own conversation cubes or purchase premade ones from [Learning Resources](#).

2. Last Letter-First Letter

This warm-up gets students listening quickly to each other, thinking about spelling, and recalling words. One person says a word. The next person says a word that starts with the same letter as the last letter of the previous word. For example, if someone says “ball,” the next word would need to start with the letter *L*. The next student might say “light,” and so on until the timer rings. If a student doesn't have a new word because of uncertainty about how the previous word is

spelled, the student who said the word can spell it aloud. Also, other students can try to catch classmates who say a word that begins with an incorrect letter and then ask that student to say another word. The person holding the ball when the timer rings answers a question or does a task and then says a word to start the activity again.

Scaffolding: Limit students to a previously studied vocabulary unit so that they are familiar with the words, or limit the word choices to items in the room; the visibility of items will make it easier for them to think on their feet.

3. I've Never

Students sit in a circle with one chair for each student, except one student in the middle of the circle, who stands. That student says something he or she has never done (e.g., "I have never ridden in a hot air balloon"). Any students who *have* done the aforementioned thing must leave their chairs and find a new chair, including the original speaker. The person left without a chair then becomes the speaker in the middle, and the game continues.

Scaffolding: Write sentence frames and provide several ideas on the board to help students who might have difficulty coming up with something to say.

Options: The person in the middle can say something he or she can or cannot do, likes or dislikes, or wants or does not want to do. The other students can move if they match or don't match the person in the middle.

4. Simon Says

In this warm-up that even my college students love, a leader announces various tasks for the class to do. If the leader begins with the phrase "Simon Says," the students need to do the task (e.g., "Simon says raise your right hand" or "Simon says do jumping jacks"). Anyone who does a task when the leader omits "Simon Says," however, must sit down. The last student(s) left standing at the end of the allotted time wins.

5. Two Lines

This is a great activity for practicing small talk. Students stand in two parallel lines and talk with the person facing them. When the timer rings, the student at the beginning of line A moves to the end of line A, the rest of line A shifts down to fill the empty position at the beginning of line A, and then the students begin talking with the new person facing them.

Scaffolding: Provide students with a specific topic to discuss that was covered in a previous unit.

6. Four Corners

Four Corners gets students moving and talking. Choose a meaning for each corner of the room and explain it to students, and then have students go to the corner that best fits their opinion or

answer. For example, if each corner is designated as a different music genre, then the students would go to the corner that represents the genre they most enjoy (or most dislike). Finally, students discuss related questions with the other people in their corner.

7. Brainstorming

To introduce a topic as well as highlight what students already know, announce a topic and students or groups list related words or ideas. After the allotted time, each student (or group) shares their list with the class.

Options: Do this activity as a photo brainstorming for an easier alternative for students with limited vocabulary and a fun way to incorporate technology into class. Announce a topic and students or groups surf online to find related photos, which they share in a class group chat.

8. Rose, Bud, and Thorn

Take students beyond “How are you?” with this conversation starter. Pairs or small groups discuss something good that happened recently (rose), something they are looking forward to (bud), and something unpleasant that happened recently (thorn).

9. Explain the Connection

Distribute five noun/verb cards to each student. Then, announce an adjective. Students hold up one card that fits the adjective and then explain the connection between their cards and the adjective. For example, if the adjective is *tasty*, then any students with cards related to foods or drinks might hold up those cards (only one card per student) and explain why they think their particular food or drink best fits *tasty*. If a student doesn’t have an appropriate card, he or she waits until the next round. The student who gives the most convincing argument wins the round.

Scaffolding: Limit the words on the cards and the adjectives to a previously studied vocabulary unit so that students are familiar with the words. Use very specific adjectives to limit available answers (e.g., *sour* or *yellow*) and aid students in finding appropriate words.

Options: To shorten the time and add some excitement, limit the amount of students who can explain their cards each round (e.g., the first three students who hold up their cards) or change the activity to a race where the first student to hold up an appropriate card and explain the connection wins the round. This could also be done in groups rather than as a whole class to allow more students to speak at one time. The groups would play independently from each other with the group members taking turns being the judge who determines the best argument.

10. Matching Cards

This warm-up is a fun way to pair or group students. Give each student a word or number card. Then, the students mingle to find the student(s) with cards that match theirs in some way, such as the same word or number, a synonym or antonym, or a definition.

Options: After finding their match, the pairs or groups discuss a set of questions or a specific topic.

11. Guess the Word

Individual

This is a long-time favorite of my students that gets students thinking quickly, defining words, using alternative ways of expressing ideas, listening to each other, and recalling words. Prepare a stack of word cards. Each round, a student tries to get his or her teammates to say as many of the words on the cards as possible before the timer rings. Finally, the team with the most correctly guessed words wins.

Circle

Distribute five word cards to each student. Students stand in a circle and the first student holds a ball and describes the word on one of his/her cards. When someone says the word, the student passes the ball to the person on his right who then describes one of his/her words. This continues until a timer rings and the person holding the ball answers a question. You can do this activity as a whole class or in small groups to get more students talking.

Matching

For a noncompetitive alternative or a group “race against the time,” try this matching activity. Distribute five word cards to each student. The first student describes a word on one of his or her cards. Everyone looks at their cards to see if they have a word that fits the description. If someone thinks he or she has a matching card, he or she says the word. If no match is immediately made, the speaking student should continue to add more information and eventually give hints (e.g., the first letter or the number of letters) until someone says the correct word. When the correct word is found, the teacher takes the pair of cards and the person who matched the card then describes one of his or her words. The game continues until all the pairs have been found or the time limit ends.

Scaffolding: Limit the words to a recently studied vocabulary unit so that the students are familiar with the words. Provide a word list to aid students in guessing. Add key words or a short description to each word card to help students accurately describe the words on their cards.

12. I Spy

One student describes something visible in the classroom and the other students guess what it is.

13. Twenty Questions

A student thinks of a person, place, or thing and announces the category. Then, the students ask 20 yes/no questions to determine the answer. If time allows, students can keep asking as many questions as necessary.

Scaffolding: Provide sentence frames for questions, or provide descriptive vocabulary or categories to help students think of characteristics questions.

14. Voice Exercises

Singing

To warm-up students' voices and emphasize intonation, lead students in singing short sentences, such as "What shall we do-oo to-day," "What shall we say-ay to-day," and "How are you do-ing to-day." Each syllable progressively rises in pitch until "do," "say," and "do," respectively, and then lowers back down. The teacher models each sentence and the students repeat.

Chants

As with singing, model each line and have the students repeat. To add variety, assign parts to different sections of the class. For example, the right side of the class says the odd-numbered lines and the left side says the even-numbered lines. These could be actual chants or the lyrics from jingles or choruses. "Hospital Chant" from Carolyn Graham's [*Jazz Chants Old and New, 2nd edition*](#) (2000) is a great introduction or review for a health unit, for example.

15. Tongue Twisters

To highlight certain sounds, but also to introduce or reinforce vocabulary, lead students in tongue twisters by modeling each line for students to repeat. An exercise-related unit, for example, could use "Kind Kathy can do kickboxing and calisthenics" or "Jolly Jerry just did a jillion jumping jacks."

Warm-up activities are essential to ease students into class, enhance student attention and focus, and decrease student anxiety before diving into the core lesson material. These 15 warm-up activities can provide a great start to implementing warm-up activities in class or useful additions to bring variety to your current warm-up activity roster.

Margaret Patrick received an MA in TESOL from Azusa Pacific University. She has taught EFL at Shandong Vocational and Technical University of International Studies in China since 2009. In addition to teaching, she has regularly organized English Corner (conversation club) twice a week and other extracurricular activities for the majority of her years there. Her research interests include student motivation, vocabulary acquisition, and using technology in the classroom.