

A Listening-centric Approach to Teaching English in Korea

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Introduction

This paper will be divided into five parts. The first section will include a brief account of the author's academic and professional background as well as his basic philosophy concerning the teaching of listening. The second section will give a brief overview of Korean education. Part three will feature an in-depth look at several practical in-class activities, procedures, and materials. Part four will list 10 teaching techniques and procedures related to teaching in general. Finally, the paper will close with an overview of additional resources and information. All the information presented in this paper as well as supplementary materials and resources can be downloaded from: <http://walterforeman.com/epik>. The author can be reached for questions or comment via email at: walter@walterforeman.com

1. Background

1.1 Academic Background

In 1996 I graduated from the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan with a Bachelor of Secondary Education degree. My teaching areas were English and Human Geography (Social Studies). In 2005 I graduated, with merit, from the Faculty of Arts (Department of English) at the University of Sydney with a Master of Professional Communication degree.

1.2 Professional Background

I first came to Korea in March of 1998 and taught in, and later administered, an English language program at YBM/ELS. In 2000 I taught in an English language program at Daegu University. In 2002, I worked as the International Liaison for Daegu University's Institute of International Studies and Programs. Most recently, in March of 2005, I began teaching in the Intensive English Teacher Training Program at the Center for In-service Education here at the Korea National University of Education.

1.3 Philosophy on Listening

My approach to teaching listening centers on the idea that all meaning is negotiated. That is to say that words themselves do not carry any meaning. The meaning of a word is imparted by the listener of that word. As such, the teaching of listening should focus on collaborative tasks that allow students to build an understanding of what they have heard in relation to what others in the class have heard.

2. Education in Korea

2.1 Importance of Education

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss Korea's education system in detail, I will present some basic information that is designed to help newcomers orientate themselves to the classroom environment in Korea.

"Koreans have traditionally placed great importance on education as a means for self-fulfillment as well as for social advancement." These words come from Cheong Wa Dae, the Office of the President, in an overview of education in Korea.

"Koreans put an uncommon degree of emphasis on education." These are the words of Dr. Duk-Chung Kim, former Minister of Education for the Republic of Korea in the forward to the book, "Korean Education".

Nearly every publication that deals with education in Korea opens the same way. Education is of paramount importance in Korean culture and in Korean society. As such, teachers are held in very high regard by students and by members of the community. There is a Korean proverb which translates loosely as, "one dare not step on even the shadow of a teacher." As an EPIK ELI, chances are good that you will also be afforded that same level of respect. How you handle this respect and what you choose to do with the power it gives you will largely determine your degree of success in EPIK.

2.2 Facts & Figures

In 2006, the Korean government's annual budget proposed spending of approximately 28.5 billion USD for education. That amount represents an enormous 19.7% of the federal government's annual operating budget. In fact, education expenditures are the largest expenditure in the Korean budget. For comparison, in 2006 the government of Canada proposed spending of approximately 4.2 billion USD for education. That amount represents

a mere 2.4% of the federal government's annual operating budget and ranks as just the eighth highest spending item in the Canadian budget. The total annual operating budget for the Republic of Korea stood at 114.8 billion USD in 2006 while that of the government of Canada stood at 173.7 billion USD. Figure 1 shows a comparison between total budget and education spending between Canada and Korea.

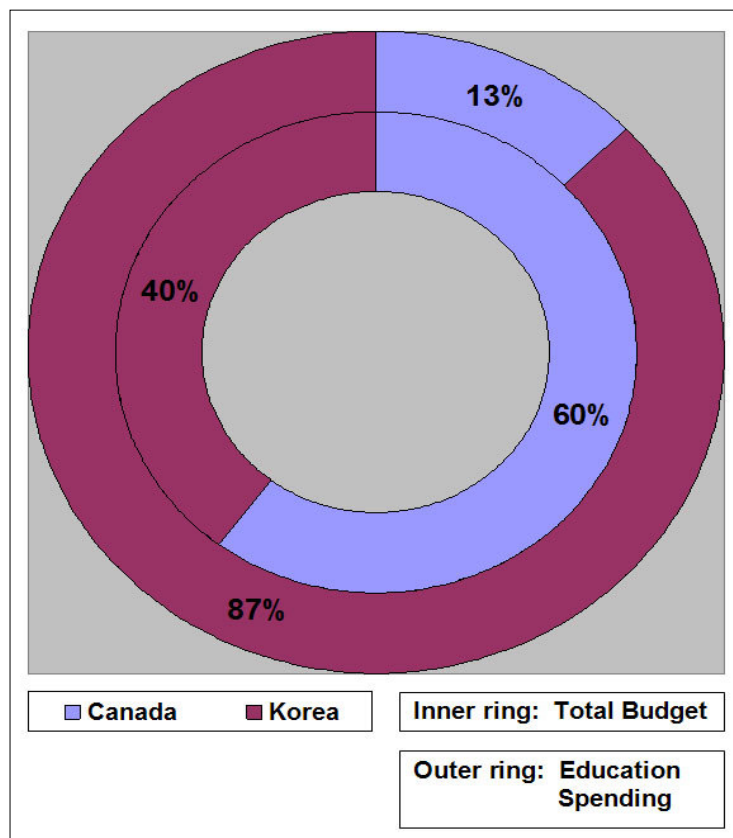


Figure 1

In 2005, there was a total of 10,583 schools in Korea, with a total of 7.8 million students enrolled, and a total of 375,874 teachers employed. Table 1 shows the number of schools, students, and teachers for elementary, middle, and high schools respectively.

Historically, between 1965 and 2005, the number of schools in Korea remained relatively constant while the number of students showed minor fluctuations. In that same period, the number of teachers increased greatly.

Table 2 shows detailed historical data for the number of schools, students, and teachers between 1965 and 2005.

Table 2

	1965	1975	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005
# of schools	7,034	9,486	10,492	10,492	10,285	9,995	10,509
# of students	6,119,217	8,748,914	9,791,727	9,428,077	8,544,891	7,951,998	7,796,298
# of teachers	112,339	190,798	265,884	319,202	337,367	336,940	369,621

These numbers are good news for everyone involved with education in Korea. With the number of schools remaining relatively constant (especially from 1985 to 2005), the number of students decreasing slightly, and the number of teachers increasing drastically, class sizes

and the average number of students per teacher have shown a proportionally dramatic reduction. Figure 2 shows the average number of students per class from 1965 to 2005, while Figure 3 shows the average number of students per teacher in the same period.

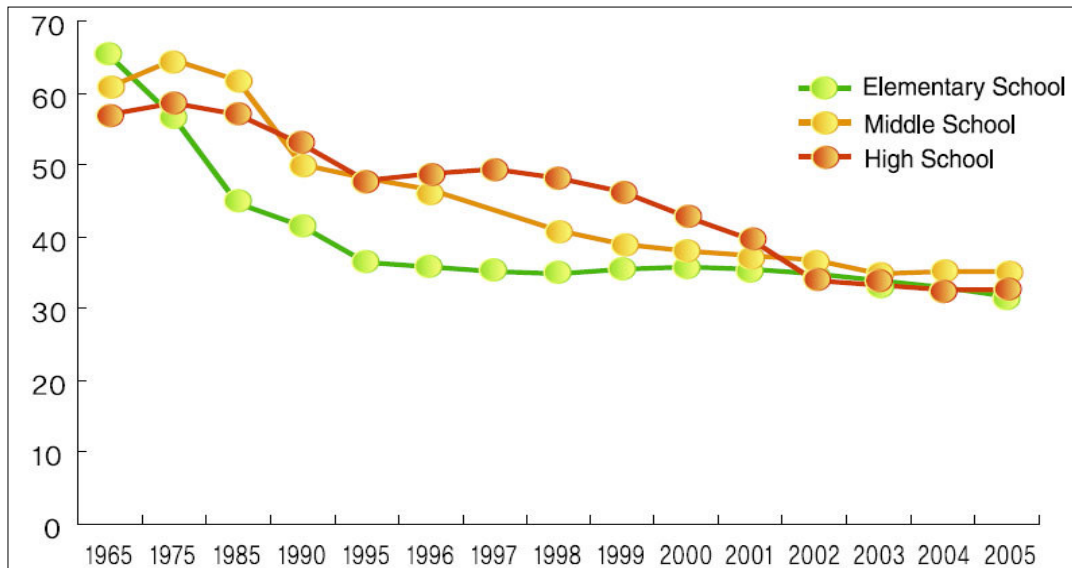


Figure 2

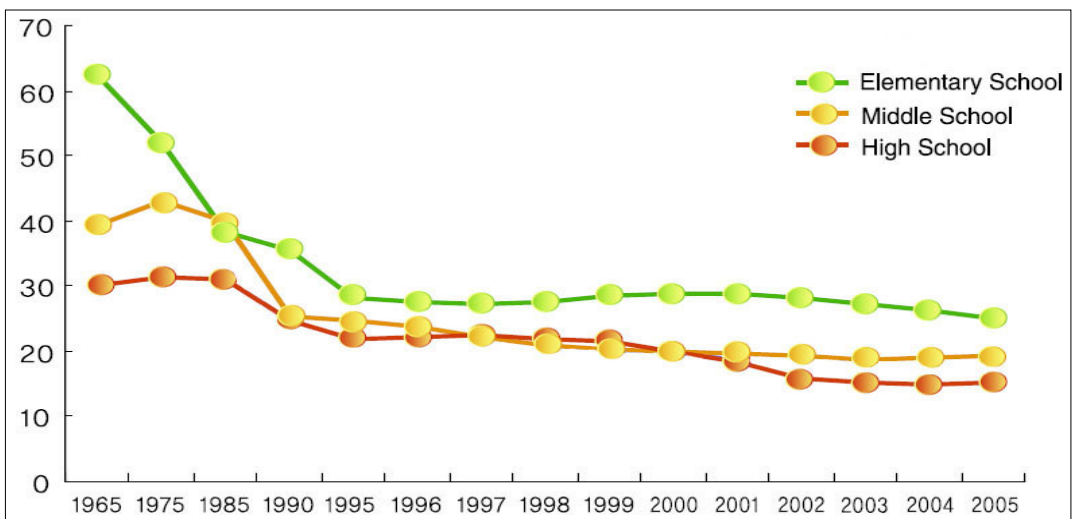


Figure 3

The byproduct of these smaller class sizes and smaller number of students per teacher is lower dropout rates and increased access to learning materials, especially computers. Figure 4 shows the dropout rate (in percent) from 1965 to 2005 while Figure 5 shows the average number of students per computer in 2005.

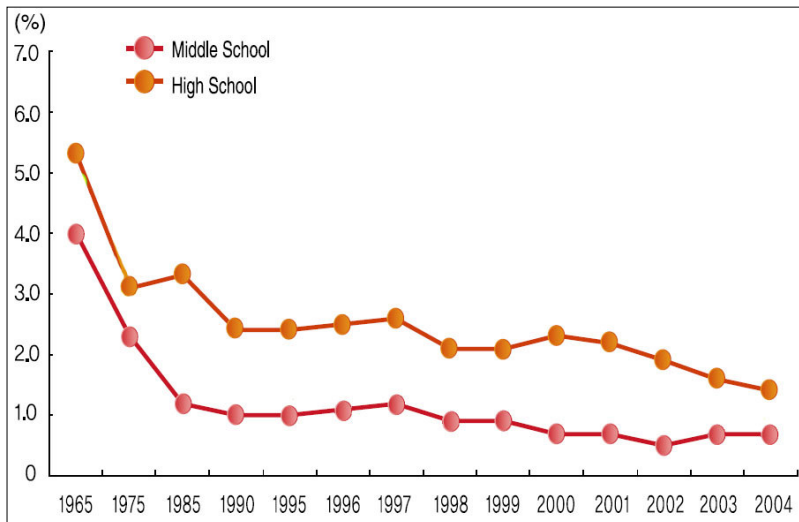


Figure 4

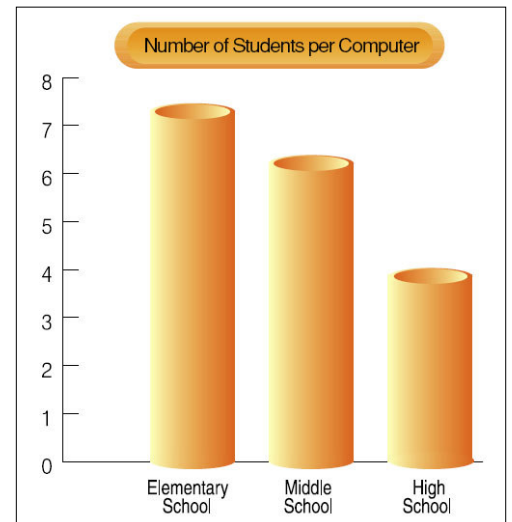


Figure 5

3. Practical In-class Activities, Procedures, and Materials

3.1 Setting the stage

"A good teacher is an entertainer and I mean that in a positive sense, not a negative sense."

Harmer (2005) quotes a response to the question, "What makes a good teacher?" Teaching requires some degree of showmanship and public speaking ability and, according to the wellknown public speaking organization Toastmasters, one important tenet of public speaking is, "Know the room".

One issue with which EPIK ELIs will need to contend is the lack of a permanent classroom. Instead of students moving from room to room for their various classes, teachers, including EPIK ELIs, move from room to room. The upside to this method is that there is less chance of students being late as they do not have to move during the day. The downside is, that in not having a permanent classroom, it is difficult to establish a sense of identity for yourself and for the students in the classroom.

Current research suggests that students are motivated by classroom environments that are rich in visual stimuli (Ur, 1996). With this thought in mind, it is desirable to do whatever can be done to add a touch of personality and a sense of identity to the classroom for both the teacher and the students.

3.2 A rose by any other name

"A good teacher is ... someone who knows our names." (Harmer, 2005)

One technique that is useful in establishing both a sense of identity and a touch of personality in the classroom is to have the students create nametags. After a couple of

weeks of students keeping their nametags on their desks, the nametags are collected and posted in the classroom. When the students see their English names (or Korean names written in English) on their desks and later posted in the classroom, it helps to reinforce their English identity. These nametags also help the teacher to remember the students' names.

This nametag activity is an extension of the traditional first-day-of-class partner interview and introduction activity. Students are put into pairs and given a few minutes to interview their partner. Depending on the linguistic proficiency of the class, interview questions may need to be pre-taught. After interviewing their partners, students then spend the remainder of the class making a nametag for their partners based on the information learned during the interviews. It is a good idea to have a sample nametag in the classroom so that students can see what they will be making. Ideally, the students' nametags will display their names, and at least four other pieces of information such as hobbies, favorites (numbers, colors, foods, movies, sports, etc.), family information, travel experience, birthday, or any other information relevant to the students.

This activity is much more tangible and long-lasting (not to mention less stressful) than just interviewing a classmate and then standing up to introduce that classmate to the rest of the class. When done as a first day (or first week) activity, making nametags gives students opportunities to use English in a non-threatening, yet productive way.

While on the subject of names, EPIK ELIs will have to decide if they want their students to adopt English names. There is much literature both for and against this practice and the choice, unless there is a policy in your placement school, is yours. If you do choose to have students adopt English names, provide them with a handout of common and/or popular English names and their meanings. Several of these lists are available free-of-charge on the Internet.

3.3 Who goes there?

"[A good teacher] has his own personality and doesn't hide it from the students" (Harmer, 2005)

Without a doubt, your students will be very curious about you and very excited to meet you. You will almost certainly be the only native English speaker in your school, and, although it is becoming rarer, you may be the first native English speaker your students have ever met. You can use this excitement and curiosity to give your first listening activity; have your students listen to you introducing yourself and then answer questions based on that introduction. This activity can be combined with the nametag activity or

even serve as an introduction to it.

The procedure for this activity is quite basic, although it may require some computer skills. Whenever I do this activity I make a recording of my introduction so that it can be repeated several times if necessary without me having to read each time. There are several good recording programs available online but one of my favorites is Audacity. It is available free-of-charge from: <http://audacity.sourceforge.net> After installing Audacity, record a one to two minute introduction of yourself. Give your students a sheet of questions related to the content in your introduction. Play the introduction once and give the students some time to answer the questions. Play the introduction a second time and allow the students to answer any questions they missed from the first listening. Finally, give the students a fill-in-the-blank activity based on the script of your introduction. Before playing the introduction a third time, give the students some time to read through the script to recall any information that they may remember from the previous two listenings. Play the introduction a third time and have the students fill in the blanks.

To tie this activity in with the nametag activity, have the students make a nametag for you based on the information in your introduction. This can be done individually, in partners, or in small groups, however the latter is probably most desirable. This listening activity can also serve as an introduction to the nametag activity. Students first make a nametag for the teacher, then make nametags for their partners.

3.4 What you talkin' about Willis?

Despite being a very old-fashioned instructional method, there are some good arguments for the use of dictation in the English classroom. First among these arguments is its immediacy. Giving dictation will allow you to see immediately what the students do and do not understand. You can then tailor your lessons (and even your speech patterns) based on this information. In addition, if done in groups, dictation can help to bring students closer together and to reduce anxiety as they have to determine and negotiate meaning collectively rather than individually. Finally, dictation can expose students to 'authentic material' and authentic material itself has a host of instructional advantages, not the least of which is motivation.

I start each listening class with dictation. The procedure is very simple. I read four sentences at a normal pace and each sentence is read twice. Students write down as much as they hear. After listening to the dictation, the students are asked to "share and compare" their sentences with their neighbors. After a few minutes of discussion between

students, four groups are chosen to write one sentence each on the whiteboard. I allow a few moments for the other groups to compare their sentences with those on the whiteboard before finally reading each sentence once more and making any necessary corrections.

The content for your dictation can serve as an introduction to the day's main lesson, a review of a previous lesson, an expansion of a previous lesson, or can be unrelated to any of your lessons. If unrelated to any previous or future lessons, the sentences themselves should have some common theme (tense, structure, usage, vocabulary, meaning, etc.). You can also use material from the textbook as dictation material. As you progress through the semester you can gradually increase the length of the sentences, but it is best to start with short simple sentences.

3.5 Hey Mr. DJ put a record on

Because of their repetition and rhythm, songs can be an effective tool for teaching listening. Naturally you will have to choose a song that is appropriate for your students both in terms of its level of difficulty and its content. The problem with most lessons using songs is that while the songs themselves are interesting, the listening tasks tend to be boring. Most listening tasks for songs are simple fill-in-the-blank (cloze) activities. A more interesting activity is to have the students reconstruct the song using lyric cards that the teacher has prepared in advance.

As a warm-up task, have students listen to the song once with no other task than to listen, enjoy, and try to think of a title for the song. Some students may already know the song and will know the actual title and that is fine. Many students will not, and will have to think about what they have heard in order to come up with a good title. After sharing the students' titles, you may want to give them the actual title as this will maintain their interest in the song and in the lesson.

Next, divide the song up into stanzas and listen to each stanza one by one. Give each group of students a set of about 18 cards that contains words and phrases from that stanza. Include some cards that do not occur in that stanza but that sound similar to words that do. This will force students to discriminate between individual words and sounds. Tell the students to choose any nine of the cards at random without looking at the rest. The students then listen and try to reconstruct the stanza using the cards. Each time you listen to the stanza again, tell the students to choose three more cards. Continue this until all the cards have been selected and used. For added support, give each group an empty grid that they can use to organize their cards or to jot down words and/or

phrases as they listen. Further, you can tell the groups how many of the total number of cards they will need to use to complete the task. At the end of the lesson, provide the students with the full lyrics as well as some background information about the song and/or the band and a link to where they can learn more.

3.6 Carrots are my favorite fruit

This is an exceptional activity as it combines listening, speaking, pronunciation, reading, and even writing. The basic premise of the activity is that the students will identify and then correct incorrect information.

The students are given a set of cards. The cards are placed faced down in the center of the table. Each card is divided in half. The upper half is black with white text and the lower half is white with black text. The top half of the card contains information that is factually or contextually wrong. The bottom half of the card contains a suggested answer. One student picks one card from the top of the deck and reads the upper portion to the rest of the group. The rest of the group have to listen closely and identify the incorrect information and formulate a correction. The first person who can correctly identify and correct the misinformation is awarded the card. The person who has the most cards at the end of the game is the winner.

For example: Student A chooses a card and reads it to her group, "Carrots are my favorite fruit." Student D recognizes that the word fruit should be replaced by the word vegetable and answers, "Don't you mean carrots are your favorite *vegetable*?" Student A would then give that card to Student D. Next Student B chooses a new card from the deck and reads it to the group and the process continues.

The main pronunciation component of this activity comes from the word stress needed on the changed word (vegetable in the above example). There are also a few secondary pronunciation components related to certain phonemes in English that have no equivalent in Korean. There is also a strong focus on pronouns in this activity as some responses require the pronoun to be changed from first person to second person. To expand this activity to include writing, have the students write their own cards. Collect the students' cards and use them in subsequent lessons. You can have students make cards on any topic(s) of their choosing, or have them write review cards based on the content of a particular lesson or unit from the textbook.

This lesson is best started with the teacher reading cards to the whole class as a large group before giving cards to individual smaller groups. Doing this ensures that

everyone can see what is expected of them.

3.7 Where in the world is Carmen Sandiego?

At times it is necessary to move away from collaborative listening tasks to focus more on structure and content. One such time is when teaching directions and prepositions.

An effective listening activity that deals with directions and prepositions involves students listening to descriptions of simple geometric images and replicating these images themselves based on what they have heard. These images are on a set of cards numbered one through nine. As with *Carrots are my favorite fruit*, this activity is best started with the teacher giving descriptions to the class as a whole. The activity can then be done with students giving descriptions in small groups. To expand the activity, have students make their own drawings for other groups to describe.

To start this activity, students are each given a handout that has been divided into nine sections. Each section, one through nine, has at least one geometric figure already drawn in the section to be used as a starting point. The teacher draws a card at random from the nine cards and tells the students the number of that card. The teacher then goes on to describe the image shown on the card. Students listen to the teacher's description, following his or her directions, and try to replicate the original image card. If you notice that there is one particular area where a majority of the students made the same mistake, then you should take time to explain your description in detail so that students can understand exactly what they have misunderstood.

After the teacher has described all (or most) of the cards, the students can then be given the chance to describe. The teacher has the option of having the student groups describe exactly the same cards or describe a slightly different set of cards. After the students have described all (or most) of their cards, the teacher can have the students make their own cards that can later be exchanged with other groups and the process can be repeated.

3.8 Forty-eight thousand million

If you ask a Korean learner of English, even a high-level learner, 'how many people are there in South Korea?' the answer you get will often be quite confusing. The reason for this confusion is that there is a fundamental difference between the way English describes numbers and the way Korean describes numbers larger than 9,999. Because of this difference, any lesson that focuses on large numbers is beneficial to both low-level and

high-level students.

To give students practice listening to large numbers, make a set of population cards. Make an equal number of cards that show the population of cities and cards that show the population of countries. Give each student in the class one card. Also give the students a blank handout that is divided into two columns, one column for cities and one for countries. Then have the students move about the classroom filling in their handout. The object of the task is to find the population for every city and country on the handout.

This lesson can also be used to introduce or review comparative and superlative adjectives. You can ask the students, "Which city has a larger/bigger/higher population, X or Y?", "Which city has a smaller/lower population, A or B?", "Which country has the highest population?", etc.

3.9 Oh, you said 'ping pong balls'

As there are certain sounds in English that have no equivalent in Korean, I like to focus on these sounds in my listening classes to help learners become accustomed to them. While there are several of these differences one good example is the English /ɔ:/ sound in words like law, ball, and bald. Korean L2 learners of English tend to pronounce this sound as /oʊ/ like low, bowl, and bold (a rather unfortunate linguistic phenomenon for my colleague Colin).

To give students practice in distinguishing between these two sounds, assign each particular sound a number: 1 for /ɔ:/ (law) and 2 for /oʊ/ (low). The teacher then calls out a set of three words, for example 'bald, saw, bold'. The students should write one, one, two, based on the sounds they hear. Later as they become more proficient at distinguishing between the sounds, you can have the students practice the same activity in pairs or small groups with the students themselves calling out the word sets; this extension gives the students an opportunity to listen to their fellow classmates and to practice their pronunciation.

To extend this activity further you can write a short text that incorporates several different sounds (see Figure 6). Students circle which of the words they hear as the teacher reads the text. This activity gives students the added benefit and challenge of having to listen for specific sounds in the context of a sentence. Again, once they have become more proficient at this activity students can practice in pairs or small groups with the same benefits as discussed above.

Alice asked her friend [A. John / B. Joan], “Would you please [A. wash / B. watch] my [A. cups / B. caps] for me?” Then Alice went home and saw her brothers playing with their [A. cards / B. cars]. Alice asked her brothers, “What did you do today?” They told her that they had seen some pretty [A. girls / B. gulls]. Later, Alice asked her brothers to [A. wash / B. watch] her [A. birds / B. buds] for her.

Figure 6. Minimal Pairs in Context

4. General Teaching Tips

The following are some tips related to teaching in general, not necessary to teaching listening.

1. Develop structures and routines within your classroom so that learners know what to expect. Make sure to have some variety within your lessons however so as to avoid monotony and boredom.
2. Know your audience. This is another tenet of public speaking that applies to teaching, especially to teaching in a foreign country. What do your students like? What do they dislike? Who are they as people? What are their (learning) needs?
3. Know your goal and let the students know too. When planning lessons make sure to have a clear learning objective and tell the students what it is. TWSBAT is a useful acronym when planning lessons. It stands for, "The Students Will Be Able To" Also, let the students know what you expect of them in the class. Tell them that you expect them to speak English and to participate actively and enthusiastically in class.
4. Let students work for you. Have students read instructions and/or examples. Make this a listening task. Have students close their books while they listen to the instructions being read by another student. Have a materials bank that has that day's handouts in it. As part of your routines, have a 'captain' from each group collect and distribute the materials.
5. Plan active and interactive lessons. Active lessons require that the students have tasks to complete. Interactive lessons give students opportunities to use the language from that day's lesson.
6. Use the student book as a teacher's book. Start activities with books closed. This will help all students to focus on you or on the assigned task. Then after some discussion, students can open their books to see if their answers were correct.

7. Make materials fit you, your style, your environment, and your learners. I have yet to find a lesson or an activity that can be used directly without any modification. Make the material your own and you will feel much more confident when working with it.
8. Teach to your learners as if you were teaching to yourself. When you plan a lesson or an activity, ask yourself, "If I were a student in this class, would I enjoy this?" If the answer is "No", then perhaps re-think your lesson.
9. Whenever possible bring objects into the class. Real life objects can help students to make connections between the classroom environment and the real world.
10. Reach each you teach.

5. Additional Resources and Information

About English and about Teaching

Books

- How to Teach English by Jeremy Harmer (Longman)
- Analysing English in a Global Context by Anne Burns (Routledge)
- Principles of Language Learning and Teaching by H. Douglas Brown (Prentice Hall)

Websites

- KEDI -- The Korean Educational Development Institute (<http://eng.kedi.re.kr/>)
- BBC British Council -- Teaching English (<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/>)
- Teachers pay Teachers -- <http://www.teacherspayteachers.com/>

About Korea

Books

- Island of Fantasy: A Memoir of an English Teach in Korea by Shawn Matthews
- The Koreans: Who They Are, What They Want, Where Their Future Lies by Michael Breen (St. Martin's Griffin)

Websites

- The Official Homepage of the Korean government: www.korea.net
- The FatMan Seoul (archives only): <http://fatman-seoul.blogspot.com/>
- 1stopKorea: <http://1stopkorea.com>

Conclusion

As an EPIK participant you have an unsurpassed opportunity to affect English education in Korea. The learners in your classroom today will become the English speakers of tomorrow. It is my hope that you take full advantage of this wonderful opportunity and that while doing so you come to learn more about Korea, about education, about the English language, and about yourself.

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