

Teaching Performing Arts

Focus First

Ellis Van Maarseveen

This worksheet is a good starter! If you want the group to concentrate on the lesson you have prepared and get the most out of your material, then this is a great way to get them focused. You can use these exercises at the beginning of a lesson, but also when you feel that your students need calming down, or waking up! These exercises are good for classrooms with desks and chairs.

This activity can be modified to suit your learners' age and level of English. Reflections are an option for the lessons and can be written in workbooks or on computers, or communicated as discussions. As you are a teacher, you are a creative thinker – so you'll find that creative suggestions are given here, but you are the one who knows what's best for your students. Also, students will take these suggestions further and add great ideas to these tasks. The more they do, the more they're involved, the more fun they have and the more you are facilitating and able to observe students at work!

FOCUS FIRST

Starting a Performing Arts activity is like the beginning of a theatre performance or a film: you need to focus to create the right environment to enjoy the activity. Getting your group off to a good start is half the job done, as we all know. Latecomers should join in immediately without extra explanation, as this will distract the others already concentrating.

Sometimes students need to focus by concentration and a calm activity, but at other times you can focus their attention by a lively activity. Be flexible in your planning: when you see your students come in, you'll know which focus exercise they need!

Create a different space: ask you students to move tables and chairs out of the way, or put chairs in a circle, sit on top of the tables, put chairs as if you're on a bus. For little ones you can turn tables upside down to create boats or huts; let your environment inspire you to do something different. This in itself changes the atmosphere and gets your students ready for a different class. Moving furniture can be dangerous, so make sure your students are aware of this.

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CALM FOCUS

Ask your students to move their bags, their chairs etc., in slow motion. You can stimulate them by giving them a circumstance: you're on the moon – you're in a dream – this is slow motion generated in a television programme – or let them make up their own reasons for moving slowly. Remind them to reflect in their workbook on where their imagination took them!

After creating a different space in your classroom, ask your students to sit down (on the floor, on chairs, or on the tables) and slow down even further until the only thing that they're doing is breathing in and out: Inhale through the nose, exhale through the mouth.

Let them imagine that the air they breathe in has a specific colour and fills their bodies with that colour, before exhaling which changes the colour. As a reflection in their workbook or as a discussion point, you can ask them to explain why they chose that colour and what that colour means to different people. Once the class is focused on their breathing, welcome them and tell them what they are going to do in their lesson today.

ENERGETIC FOCUS

Again, you can ask your students to prepare the room for this lesson by moving furniture around. Give them a problem solving task that needs to be done within a certain time limit, depending on the size of your group, and the furniture that needs to be moved. For example: 'near the windows I want all tables in one big line, then 3 chairs to my right, and then 6 chairs stacked to my left', or 'I want half of the chairs stacked, a quarter of the chairs on their sides, and the other quarter in a circle'. You might want to write these requests on the whiteboard, so they can check the task.

After the place is empty enough for your lesson, ask them to make a circle quickly. Then give them energetic focus tasks like: 'I want groups of 5 feet' – 'groups of 16 fingers' – 'groups of people with the same colour hair/trousers/shoes' – 'groups of people who came here by bus', etc. Or you can ask them to line up quickly in the order of month of birth, height, length of hair, how many siblings they have, etc.

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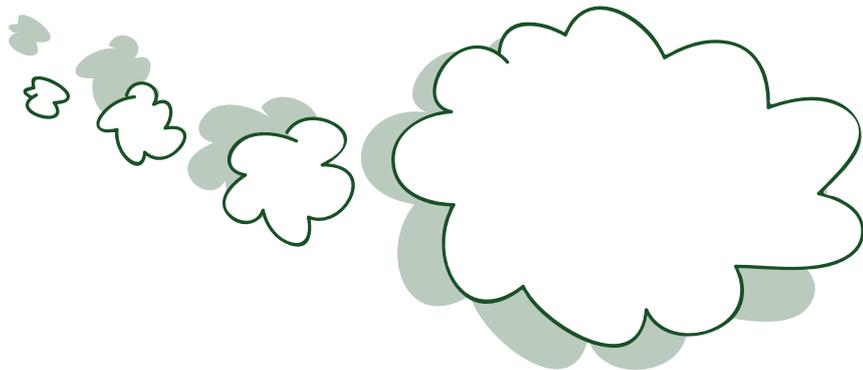
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Once you have your group excited and energised, you can sit them down and share the content of your lesson with them. As a reflection exercise you can ask them to write down the order of some of the lines, or who were in the groups.

Modifying the Exercises If you can't move furniture for whatever reason, sit your students down for a different **Calm Focus**

1. Ask your students to put their bags away and sit down on a chair; this can be at their desks or not, depending on your room. The rest of the exercise is done calmly as if in slow motion, or as if they're all very tired. Tell them push the chair back so that they sit on the edge of the chair. Ask them to focus on what that feels like when you're in this position. Do the same with other positions: sit all the way back, upright / slump / cross your legs / knees together / stretch out legs / sit like a floppy doll / sit like an old man or woman / any other way that you can think of.

2. Now sit the way that feels most comfortable for you, and close your eyes. Focus on what you had for breakfast or lunch, remember what your dream was like, concentrate on what you are going to do this weekend, etc. Try and see it all happen as if it was in a film that was played before you. Now, still with eyes closed, 'see' where all the other students are sitting, what they were wearing, and 'see' the items that you think are in the room. Now open your eyes, look around and see if you were right.



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ENERGETIC FOCUS

Again, when you can't move the furniture, this would be an alternative exercise.

1. Ask the students to have their bags open, as this needs to be a speedy exercise – so have your watch handy. Take pencils/pens and book out of the bag; with these 'tools' build a picture on your desk, e.g. a bridge, a car, a railway, anything they can think of, depending on what they have in their bags. Give them a minute or so (depending on age), call time.
2. Then they have to put everything back in their bags, zip/close the bag and everyone needs to put their bag neatly in the corner near the window or door, and move themselves to the opposite corner, as close together as they can be. Call time.
3. Make them pick up their bag again and go back to their desk. On command of 'Right', 'Left', 'Top' or 'Bottom' they have to put the bag to the right, the left, on top of, or underneath their desk. After a first round, you can specify that the bags need to be put 'Softly Right', or 'Slow motion Top', 'Super-heavy Left', 'Filled with Jelly Bottom', or whatever comes to mind.
4. Repeat actions as often as you think is necessary for the group to become energised.
5. At the end, ask them to take out their book and writing materials as if they were the most precious items ever (they can even show off their 'diamond encrusted' pencil to others if they want to), let them sit, and start your lesson.