

Overview English as a Second Language for Young Learners

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Abstract

Young learners have special characteristics hence the teachers of English as a Second language needs special strategy too. It is indicated that the increase of abilities to learn second language is started from the early age. We can imagine when the teachers do not use and apply appropriate teaching methods and strategy in teaching English for young learners. As a result, the students' achievement does not work well. Thus, except to be successful in teaching English for young learners, it is very necessary for teachers to understand the characteristics of young learners. Learning methods will influence how a teacher makes a lesson plan according to young learners' minds. This article tries to explain some methods of young learners in teaching English as a second language for young learners

Key words: *English, Second Language, and Young Learner.*

Introduction

English as a second language (ESL) is used by speakers with different native languages. Nowadays, English has great influence and this language has been taught all over the world especially in Indonesia. The academic curriculum focuses on all areas of language

acquisition: reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar/structure, and culture.

In Indonesia, English is growing rapidly and it is found in primary school. We often think of ESL students as the easiest to recognize among our special populations, picturing students who characteristically enter our classrooms without a word of English. These 'pure type' ESL students are, in fact, easily distinguishable: recent newcomers to the country and to the international school community, for a while they may remain silent in class as they adjust to a new school, environment and culture, unless there is a native language comrade to interact with.

Nevertheless, the students begin their English Education in early age, it is not important purpose to make good English speaker. For that reason, the teachers of English as a second language (ESL) have to know the learning strategy for young minds. In addition, the ESL teachers have to know the strategy to teach speaking skill for young tongues, as we know that English words have different pronunciation with the written words. However, this article will focus primarily on speaking and listening skills.

Factors Affecting Second Language Acquisition

Exactly how a second language is acquired is still uncertain, although individual students show varying patterns, rates and styles of acquisition. For example, some students seem to "take off" and become quickly conversant in English, while others continue to struggle even after lengthy periods of exposure to the target language.

Factors that affect second language acquisition have been divided into three basic categories. Their roles in second language acquisition are not fully understood at this time, although it is certain that they do influence student learning outcomes and success in school. These three categories are :

1. Learner characteristics or personal traits (Izzo, 1981; Kusuma-Powell, 1992; Ramirez, 1995; Sears, 1998);
2. Situational or environmental factors (Ramirez, 1995; Sears, 1998); and
3. Prior language development and competence (Cummins, 1979; Adamson, 1993).

Defining the young language learner

In different socio-educational contexts, the term young learners refers to different age ranges. The European Union member states working group has recently defined young learners as primary school pupils between the ages of seven and 12, and has introduced the term very young learners to refer to pre-scholars (age: three to six years). Still, in some contexts even learners older than 12 are often included in the young learners' age group, reflecting different national policies and practices in introducing children to foreign language (FL) learning.

Young Learners

Young Learners (YLS) refer to children from the ages of four to twelve. Increasingly, though, children as young as three are being formally introduced to English as a foreign language. According to Sarah Phillips (1993), young learners are children from the first year

of formal schooling (five or six years old) to eleven or twelve years of age. They can be divided into two groups, *Younger Group* (6-8 years old) and *Older Group* (9-12 years old). The adult world and the child's world are not the same. Children do not always understand what adults are talking about. Adults do not always understand what children are talking about.

The Characteristics of YLs

There are many factors that influence children's maturity: for example, their culture and environment (city or rural), sex, the expectations of their peers and parents. Young children do not come to the language classroom with empty hand. They bring a well-established set of instincts, skills and characteristics which will help them to learn another language. We need to identify those and make the most of them. For example, children characteristics are curious, outspoken, active, inquisitive nature, and like to move around.

They are skilled in being very good at interpreting meaning without necessarily understanding the individual words. Children have great ability in using limited language creatively and frequently learning indirectly rather than directly. They also taking great pleasure in finding and creating fun in which they do and a ready imagination.

How we think of the child as a language learner (Lynne Cameron: 2001)

a. Piagets

The child is as active learner. A child's thinking develops as gradual growth of knowledge and intellectual skills towards a final stage of formal, logical thinking. Moreover, the implications for language learning: the child as sense-maker which is limited by their experience.

b. Vigotsky

The child is social. Language provides the child with a new tool, opens up new opportunities for doing things and for organizing information through the use of words as symbols. The implications for language learning: the words are a recognizable linguistic unit, so they will notice words in the new language.

c. Bruner

Children are scaffolding and routines. Language is the most important tool for cognitive growth. In US, parents read bedtime stories to children as the routines, as the child gets older the type of book changes, but the basic format remains.

Learning a second language

Children learn a second language better than adults. The Critical Period Hypothesis: children can learn a second language before puberty because their brain is still able to use the mechanisms that assisted first language acquisition.

Presenting the grammatical structure in a child's context

Sometimes it's difficult to see how a grammatical topic can be made humorous. Visual stimuli can be very effective in teaching young children. Characters are extremely helpful when presenting points of grammar for the first time. You can create your own characters to suit the English you're teaching. Use a soft toy or a puppet as a character.

Cameron (2001) give example of conversation with a young learner which took place between a 7 year old boy and herself in Malta. There the students start learning English as a foreign language at year 5. She was visiting his English class, where the children mostly had been working on a dinosaur project, by showing her his drawing of a Tyrannosaurus Rex. The conversation was the following:

A : what is that?

P : it's T Rex

A :is it big or small?

P : big

A :how big?

((silence))

A :this big? ((demonstrating small size with hand a few inches off the floor))

((child shakes his head to indicate 'no'))

A :this big? ((demonstrating a waist-high size with hand))

((child shakes his head to indicate 'no'))

A : this big? ((demonstrating a human size with hand))

((child shakes his head to indicate 'no'))

- A : THIS big? ((demonstrating as high as ceiling with hand stretched up))
((child nods his head to indicate 'yes'))
- A :yes, it was VERY big!

By the end of the conversation between Cameron and the child, then the size of T-Rex is agreed, by introducing simple phrase –it was very big- which may seem more like vocabulary than grammar. But it creates meaning through its use.

Traditional exercises in the form of mechanical drills, gap-fills, and sentence transformations all have a part to play in practicing grammar. They are useful at times when you need to calm your students down, and in the early stages of practice when you need to familiarize the children with the structure taught.

Cameron (2001) proposes dialogues between a student and a teacher about T-Rex, has illustrated several starting points for thinking about grammar and young learners; (1) grammar is necessary to express precise meanings in discourse, (2) grammar ties closely into vocabulary in learning and using foreign language, (3) grammar learning can evolve from the learning of chunks of language, (4) talking about something meaningful with the child can be a useful way to introduce new grammar, (5) grammar can be taught without technical labels.

Several techniques for teaching English to young learner Drawing and writing on the board

The board is a wonderful resource, then we can use it for all sorts of things. Try playing hangman to practice specific points – ing forms. Crosswords can be used for practicing countable and uncountable nouns, plurals, irregular verbs.

Learning through Stories

Story telling is much under-used in grammar practice. We all know that children love stories. They'll even listen to the same story over and over again. One of the best ways to introduce the past simple is through a story – you can use well-known traditional tales.

Cameron (2001) proposes the language use when planning the use of a story, she makes three groupings: (1) language that children have met, (2) new language that will be useful for all children to learn from the story, (3) new language that may or may not be learnt, depending on individual children's interest.

According to White, teaching children through stories is important because stories rely so much on words, offer a major and constant source of language experiences. Children will also listen and read to find the meaning in stories. Stories help children become aware of the general feel and sound of the foreign language. He added that stories introduce children to language items and sentence constructions without their necessarily having to use their productivity. The experiences of the story encourage responses through speaking and writing. It is natural to express our likes or dislikes and to

exchange ideas and associations related to stories we hear or read. By listening, reading, writing the stories is also learning to communicate.

Learning Language through Theme-Based Teaching

Cameron (2001) stated that children's language learning can be learning discourse skills. She focuses on using information texts, on paper and on computer. In this study she classifies texts that can be used in theme-based teaching will include relevant songs, rhymes, videos, stories, and non-fiction informational texts, including sources accessed through the internet or on CD-Rom, catalogues, leaflets and magazines and educational materials written for native speaker children.

a. Songs and chants

Every playground the world over rings out with the sound of children singing or chanting rhymes. What better way to practice grammar than allow the children to do what they do for pleasure? There are so many songs that you can use to practice grammatical structures, such as Old MacDonald had a farm.

b. Games

A game is an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun. There two kinds of games: *competitive games*, in which player or teams race to be the first to reach the goal, and *co-operative games*, in which players or teams work together towards a common goal. Games help and encourage many learners to sustain their interest and work.

Games can be found to give practice in all the skill (reading, writing, listening and speaking), in all the stages of the teaching / learning.

Some suggested games which may be used to make the learning activities get more fun are:

1. Story games: silly stories, fantasy stories, bits and pieces, domino story.
2. Word games: bingo, the odd man out, missing words, dash it and hang it.
3. Question and answer games: half the class nose, twenty questions, who are you, guessing and speculating games, hiding and finding, feel and think, box, picture out of focus.

c. Rhymes & Poems

Rhymes and poems can both entertain and inform. Here's a traditional rhyme you could use to introduce children to the past simple:

*Incy wincy spider climbed up the spout.
Down came the rain and washed poor Incy out.
Out came the sun and dried up all the rain.
Incy wincy spider climbed up the spout again.*

Here is a poem for prepositional practice:

*Mice!
Mice, mice – they're everywhere!
They're on the table and under my chair.
Mice, mice – at half past two
I saw one sitting in my shoe.
Mice, mice – running along*

*My garden wall, singing a song.
Mice, mice – just last week
I found them playing hide and seek.
Mice, mice – on Tuesday morning,
I saw one in my cupboard, yawning.
Mice, mice – beside my bed
I felt one jump over my head!
Mice, mice – oh, why don't you
Go and live in North Peru?*

Conclusion

Based on the explanation above, Lynne Cameron (2003) argues that the continuing growth of teaching English to young learners brings a number of challenges. Starting to learn English at an earlier age may not bring automatic improvements to proficiency levels, unless teacher education and secondary language teaching both adapt to meet the challenges of the new situation. According to Cameron, amongst other knowledge and skills, teachers of young learners need an awareness of how children think and learn skills and knowledge in spoken English to conduct whole lessons orally, an ability to identify children's interests and use them for language teaching, and to be equipped to teach initial literacy in English.

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