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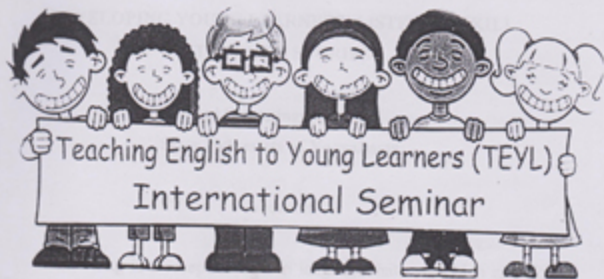
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# Opportunities and Challenges

## Proceeding

TEYL CENTER

The Graduate Program in English Language Studies  
Sanata Dharma University



## DEVELOPING YOUNG LEARNERS' LISTENING SKILL THROUGH STORIES

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### Abstract

Listening is a receptive skill in language that needs high attention from teachers especially in primary schools. Out of the four skills in language, listening is the most frequently used in daily activities. Young learners do not deal with written language first since they usually find it hard to read and write. They should start with listening to rich input in the target language that will lead them to produce the spoken language. Listening, unlike what people thought before, is an active skill. Although it seems that learners do not do anything while they are listening to a spoken text, there is an active process in their brain in decoding the sounds to get the message of the text. Due to this importance of listening, teachers should find an effective, simple and doable technique in teaching listening skill to young learners. Reading young learners stories is one technique that is within capabilities of everyone. Stories provide authentic language input and constant source of language experience for children. Stories are also fun and motivating that will be a good benefit for developing positive attitude towards the language learning. Listening to stories allows learners to learn new vocabulary from various familiar contexts given which will lead them to spoken language. Telling stories may go along with various activities teachers can create suiting the skill and the goal that want to be achieved. Young learners can fill in charts, draw pictures, and colour objects while they are listening. After listening to stories, learners can continue a story text, solve a problem, and retell the stories. In brief telling stories can be an alternative technique to teach young learners' listening skill.

## A. Introduction

In learning a language, listening comes first to children as they deal with spoken language earlier than the written one. Out of the two skills related to spoken language, listening is the first one that children acquire. Before they are able to produce their language, they listen to their mothers' and others' talk and try to internalize and construct what they heard and later on come out the words. In language classrooms, things happen similarly. Young learners listen to their teachers' explanation, instruction, questions, and answers which give them aural input in the target language. This input will help the young learners get used to the language itself. As the consequence, it will be easier for them to produce the language if they have been ready to.

Listening is definitely a skill that is hard to teach since there are many factors influence the success of it. Facilities may be one of the factors that contribute the difficulty of teaching listening. Schools with lack of facilities usually tend to ignore this skill. The difference between what is going on in the class and the real life also gives an influence in young learners' listening ability. It is easier to listen to their teachers since they usually adjust the speed of their speech to the learners' level. Meanwhile, in the real life, they can not control what the learners hear. Text also contributes an important factor in listening; the length of the text and whether the text is interesting for children or not. This paper tries to reveal how stories can bridge the teaching listening to young learners since stories have been familiar in their lives.

## Discussion

### 1. Listening

#### a. What is listening?

Learning a language covers the four skills in it: listening, reading, writing and speaking. Linse (2005) classifies them into oral skills that consist of listening and speaking and written skills with reading and writing. Based on their aims and focus, listening and reading are classified into receptive skills since the focus is on receiving input from an outside

source. Meanwhile, speaking and writing are productive skills that focus on producing information or output.

It is no doubt that listening is the first skill in a language that young learners acquire first. They use listening as one of the receptive skills before being able to produce the language. Young learners spend much of their time to listen to what people around say, formulate it in their mind till the time to utter it comes. Over 50% of the time that learners spend functioning in foreign language will go to listening (Nunan in Nation & Newton: 2009). In language classrooms, young learners listen to their teachers' speech, instruction, explanation, questions, and answers.

Most people think that listening is a passive skill since they do not have to produce words while they are listening. It turns out that listening is not passive at all. In speaking and writing, it is obvious that we produce language either in spoken or written forms, so others can see the language activation in that activity. Language activation in listening takes place in our brain. While young learners are listening to spoken language, they focus on getting the sounds and decode the words, till they are able to comprehend the messages. Therefore, when teachers give young learners listening activities or tasks to do, they will be able to engage with them that proves the activeness of listening skill. Brewster (2002) says that it is not a good thing to always ask the young learners to simply 'listen and remember' since it will make them feel anxious, place great strain on their memory and tend not to develop listening skills. Listening activities and tasks to do will direct learners' attention to specific points that have to be listened for which later on will help learners' understanding on the listening text.

#### b. Listening Strategies

Listening strategies can be defined as techniques or activities that contribute directly to the comprehension of spoken language and recall of listening input. Listening strategies refer to how the listener processes the input. There are two ways in listening process.



1. Top-down processing

Top-down processing is evoked from "a bank of prior knowledge and global expectations" (Morley in Brown, 2001) and other background of knowledge (schemata) that the listener brings to text. Learners' background of knowledge of the topic, the setting and the text type plays important role in having appropriate understanding of the text. The strategies are listening for main ideas, predicting, inferring, summarizing, etc.

2. Bottom-up processing

In bottom-up processing, listeners focus more on the language of the spoken text starting from sounds, words, phrases, sentences and build up a whole understanding from them. The strategies include listening for specific details, recognizing word-order patterns, recognizing stresses and intonations etc.

In the real listening, it is necessary to combine top-down and bottom-up processing. Combining the individual's background of knowledge of the topic and individual's understanding of the details of the language will bring out the success of listening comprehension.

- c. Listening and Learning Channels

Knowing learning channels will help the teaching of listening skill to young learners. Linse (2005) states that learning channels are the preferred ways that learners receive and process information. It is in line with the fact that listening is a receptive skill that focuses on receiving information. There are three main learning channels: auditory, visual and tactile that differentiate the treatment teachers should give in the language teaching and learning process.

Auditory learners learn a language better when it is presented in an auditory format. Given a recording of a story or stories being read aloud will help auditory learners acquire the material a lot. Visual images or pictures such as drawings, sketches, graphs, maps, charts, posters etc will

trigger visual learners' understanding. On the other hand, recording and pictures will not satisfy tactile learners since they need to be physically involved with the information like using puppets of the characters in a story, toys and acting, to be able to get the message. As a good teacher, it is important to know learners' channel and try to accomplish their different needs by combining all the channels although they may have a preference for one over the others. Stories can be used to fulfill this need.

## 2. Stories

### a. Why Stories

Stories have been a part of humans' lives for ages. Since human began to communicate orally, there have been stories to tell from one generation to another. People told stories to their children to pass on real events or to entertain them before going to sleep. Stories carry values and norms from different generations to hand down. Stories have played roles in education and psychology's world that influence children's development. Since stories have been a part of people's everyday lives, it seems natural that young learners should have opportunities to share their own experiences with their friends and classmates and it is such an appropriate atmosphere in learning a language. Teachers can make use of it to stimulate learners to use the target language.

Teaching a foreign language to young learners is different from to adults. Young learners have different characteristics that demand different treatment from teachers. Harmer (2007) says that young learners, especially up to the ages of nine or ten, learn differently from adults in the following ways:

1. Young learners respond to meaning even if they do not understand individual words.
2. Young learners learn from everything around them rather than focusing on the precise topic they are being taught.
3. Their understanding comes not just from explanation, but also from what they see and experience
4. They find abstract concepts difficult to understand.

5. They generally display an enthusiasm for learning and a curiosity about anything.
6. They have a need for individual attention and approval from the teacher.
7. They are keen to talk about themselves.
8. They have a limited attention span.

Since young learners have special characteristics, it takes a very special way or method to make children acquire listening skill effectively, especially from the activities. There are many ways we can do with the activities given to them. The activities should be simple enough for the children to understand. The task should be within their abilities: it needs to be achievable but at the same time sufficiently stimulating for them to feel satisfied with their work. Stories are believed to be able to fulfill that need with their strength.

There are some advantages offered by stories in language learning:

1. Stories give motivation, fun and help develop positive attitude toward the target language.
2. Stories are creative since teachers can edit the stories as they want to make them more interesting.
3. Stories allow the teacher to introduce new vocabularies given by natural repetition.
4. Stories link fantasy and imagination with young learners' everyday life.
5. Stories can trigger responses through writing and speaking.
6. Stories invite different responses from the listeners that will build up the awareness of others.
7. Stories carry values and customs to hand down.
8. Stories help develop concentration, memory and coordination.

Selecting a story to tell will influence the success of language learning. The first thing to consider is of course the storyteller has to like it and be able to tell it well. A good story has to be appropriate for the learners, right for the occasion, not too long, and rich of language input. It also has to engage them within the first lines and they will understand well



enough to enjoy. There are some popular stories that can be used in the language classroom such as Three Little Pigs, The Very Hungry Caterpillar, Little Red Riding Hood, Goldilocks, Town Mouse and Country Mouse and so on. We can also use traditional stories from our own country.

b. Reading Stories vs Telling Stories

Stories are interesting to young learners no matter how they are delivered. There are two popular ways in delivering stories: reading and telling stories. Those two have their own strength and weakness (Wright, 1995).

In reading stories, teachers do not have to learn them and worry about making the mistakes since everything is already in the text being read. Young learners will be able to predict what comes next since they will always hear exactly the same text. Reading stories also proves that books are a source of interesting ideas and so encourages young learners to love reading. Showing pictures in the book will help learners' understanding and interest which perhaps attract them to borrow the book. However, reading a story allows weak connection between the reader and listeners if the reader keeps looking down the book. This will bring the feeling of being neglected. When one reads a story, she/he tends to read it without emotion since she/he focuses on the written text.

When a teacher tells a story, the listeners will feel that she/he is giving them something very personal since the story comes from her/him. Telling a story brings out person's individuality and personality. Teachers may use intonation, gesture and body language that will make the stories more alive and interesting. Since there is no written text to face, it is more likely that a storyteller may make a mistake or forget the story. To avoid this, a storyteller has to know the story well.

3. Conducting Stories in Teaching Listening

Once teachers decide to use stories, it is best to choose a short story with familiar words, many repetitions, simple plot, and interesting theme. They have to set activities right away to maintain the learners' focus. As other skills, listening comes in

three main phases: a pre-listening, a while-listening and a post-listening.

a. Pre-listening phase

In this phase, the teacher should try to get learners' interest in the story they will listen to and help them to acquire the words that will be important during their listening. The teacher can also give a general introduction to the characters in the story or guideline of the story to allow young learners understand it easily. Before young learners listen to a story, it is better for the teacher to bring pictures which can illustrate objects, qualities and action verbs from the story. This will help them understand what they are about to listen. To introduce the general idea of a story, the teacher can use the title or the pictures come along with it and ask the young learners to guess what the story is about.

b. While-listening

This phase is the centre of the language learning. In using stories, a teacher can read them aloud, tell them, or use audio such as cassettes, CDs, and DVDs. Teachers may help learners' understanding by using gestures, body language, and facial expression while reading or telling the story. Providing young learners with simple activities during their listening to the story will help them focus on the content. However, have the young learners sit and enjoy in the first time listening and give the activities in the second or third time listening. Activities in this phase may vary as the following:

1) Drawing and coloring

This activity has been young learners' world. Having busy with pencils and colored pencils will excite them which in turn will allow them to acquire the purpose of the listening well. During their listening for the second or third time, let them draw and/ or color characters, animals, places or objects based on what they listen in the story.

2) Arranging pictures

Provide the learners with a set of pictures of the story and have the learners arrange or number them into the right

order to show the sequence of events from the story. It is better if they do it in pairs or group work to lessen their anxious feeling.

3) Labeling pictures

It is another way of maximizing pictures in listening to a story. The teacher writes down some key words on the whiteboard or provides flash cards with key words on them. Then, the learners can label the picture provided by the teacher or their own picture.

4) Miming

During young learners' listening to the story, they may mime an action, character, feeling, gesture from the story. This activity will bring them in more alive atmosphere and therefore will bring better understanding.

5) Identifying true or false

The teacher can give some statements and ask the learners to identify whether each statement is true or false based on the story.

6) Arranging jumble sentences

Given some separated sentences, learners are expected to rearrange them into the right order. Stories with lots of events will suit this activity.

7) Answering questions

This is one activity to know learners' understanding on the story. The number of the questions and the level of difficulty should concern the learners' ages.

c) Post-listening phase

These phase activities will bring learners into a more intensive phase of study. Post-listening activities can also usefully involve other skill integration through the development of the topic. They can be speaking, reading, or writing. There are some common types of post-listening activities: extending lists given in the main activity from students' own experiences/ knowledge, extending notes into full-fledged written assignments or a basis for speech, and using information obtained from listening for problem-solving (Chitravelu et al: 2002). In using stories to teach listening to young learners, the teacher can give some activities to

follow up the listening to show their understanding. Those activities can be:

- 1) Evaluating the story  
After listening to the story, the teacher can ask the learners to tell what they thought of the story, whether they like it or not, what they like best and least, or what the interesting part is.
- 2) Retelling the story  
When learners are able to retell the story using their own words, though simple ones, it shows that they have understood the message in the story. Learners do not need to use complete sentences in retelling the story; single words or short phrases in English are enough to show their understanding.
- 3) Drawing pictures  
Have learners draw a picture of one scene in the story that they like best or they do not like and ask them to write one simple sentence next to the picture.

There is an example of listening lesson using a story (The Very Hungry Caterpillar). This story can be used to introduce kinds of food to young learners.

a. Pre-listening

- show pictures of various food learners can find in the story
- introduce the vocabularies
- ask learners' favourite food
- show the picture of the caterpillar and ask the learners' opinion

b. While-listening

- Divide the learners into groups of five
- Cut out the pictures of the various food and give each set to each group
- Give a worksheet (a table of days from Monday to Sunday) to the group
- Read or tell the story and have the learners compete to glue the right food in the right days during their listening
- The group finishes first wins the competition

## c. Post-listening

- Ask the learners their best part of the story when the caterpillar eats certain food
- Have them draw the picture of the scene and write a sentence about it
- Have them talk about the picture

## C. CONCLUSION

The discussion shows that teachers can use stories in their listening classes since they offer learning resources that fit young learners' characteristics. Using stories may be one alternative technique for teachers to create learners' interest in the target language and in the end will give them opportunities to practice real communication easily and effectively. It is, of course, not the best method, but at least it can enrich teachers' knowledge on how to make teaching listening easier to do in language classes.

Story: The Very Hungry Caterpillar

## The Very Hungry Caterpillar

by Eric Carle

In the light of the moon a little egg lay on a leaf. One Sunday morning the warm sun came up....and POP, out of the egg came a tiny, very hungry caterpillar. He started looking for some food. On Monday he ate through one apple. But he was still hungry. On Tuesday he ate through two pears, but he was still hungry.

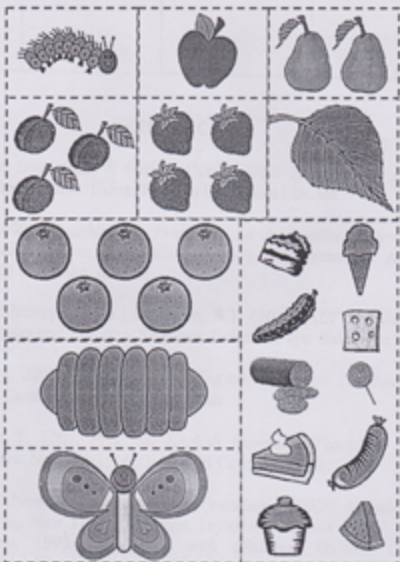
On Wednesday he ate through three plums, but he was still hungry. On Thursday he ate through four strawberries, but he was still hungry. On Friday he ate through five oranges, but he was still hungry.

On Saturday he ate through one piece of chocolate cake, one ice-cream cone, one pickle, one slice of Swiss cheese, one slice of salami, one lollipop, one piece of cherry pie, one sausage, one cupcake, and one slice of watermelon. That night he had a stomach



ache! The next day was Sunday again. The caterpillar ate through one nice leaf, and after that he felt better. Now he wasn't hungry anymore-and he wasn't a little caterpillar anymore. He was a big fat caterpillar. He built a small house, called a cocoon, around himself. He stayed inside for more than two weeks. Then he nibbled a hole in the cocoon, pushed his way out and...He became a beautiful butterfly!

Worksheet:



The Very Hungry Caterpillar sequencing cards

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
Friday	Saturday	Sunday	

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