

# Teaching Listening and Speaking to Young Learners\*)

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## I. RATIONALE

*“English learners are getting younger. Across the world, .... English is being introduced in primary schools, with greater compulsion, and at a steadily lowering age.”* Graddol (2006: 88)

*“Educationalists all over the world have recognized the need for English language learning at primary level and are doing whatever they can to promote it....”* Brewster, et. al (2003: 1)

Two quotations above show the emerging trend in the world of English language learning and teaching, that is teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). The skill of communicating in English in the global world today is considered as one of the must-required life skills. This growing need might be the cause for parents to send their young children to schools which provide English program.

The implementation of TEYL in several countries is based on some rationales. Cameron (2001) proposes some advantages to starting young with foreign languages. She proposes that children who have an early start develop and maintain advantages in some areas of language skills. Listening comprehension mostly benefits from this early start, pronunciation also benefits in longer term. However, younger children learn the grammar of L2 more slowly than older learners, so that although starting earlier with language learning they make slower progress. Graddol (2006: 89) argues that one rationale for teaching languages to young learners is the idea that they find it easier to learn languages than older students. Though compared to adult learners, these young learners face obstacles that adult learners do not. They are still developing physically and intellectually; their emotional needs may be higher; and they are less able of take responsibility for their own learning. Brewster, et. al. (2003) add several other reasons for starting to learn a foreign language several years earlier. One reason was to increase the total number of years spent learning the language. The other reason, they claim as most commonly put forward, was the fact that children seem to have greater facility for understanding and imitating what they hear than secondary school pupils.

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However, the TEYL should not be done without careful planning and preparation. These young learners are socially, emotionally, cognitively, and physically different from adult learners. These differences affect the way they study and the way they view learning itself. Concerning this, Girard in Brewster et. al. (2003: 3) proposed six important conditions that should be taken into consideration in conducting TEYL; having appropriately trained teachers, proper timetabling with sufficient timing, appropriate methodology, continuity and liaison with secondary schools, provision of suitable resources and integrated monitoring and evaluation. In line with that, Graddol (2006: 89) states that EYL requires teachers who are proficient in English, have wider training in child development, and who are able to motivate young children.

One aspect of TEYL which should be taken into consideration is the teaching of Listening and Speaking to young learners. The paper below will discuss the necessity of a carefully planned program when teaching listening and speaking. The paper will also discuss the value of listening and speaking to YL and several activities specially designed to expose YL to listening and speaking in English.

## **II. Listening**

It is through listening that babies first learn the language. It is also believed that exposure to English should be first done through exposing students to verbal talks. Learners get many things through listening. When learners have the opportunity to listen to listening materials, then teachers should expose students to listening to English as much as possible.

Of the four skills in English, young learners make the most of the lesson through listening. They learn to understand the materials through listening, get the instruction and explanation through listening, learn to pronounce words through listening, and practice better through listening to teachers' praises and feedbacks. Therefore, listening skills become very crucial emphasis in the teaching of English to young learners.

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### a. Teachers or tapes first?

One of the most frequently asked questions teachers have is whether their learners should listen to them or the tapes first. When teachers focus on classroom interaction, teachers can use their talks to deliver the tasks and engage students to the designed activities. Teachers can present the new words and patterns in the form of puzzles. For example, teachers can ask *What kind of food do you like?*. When the students do not seem to understand what it means, we can encourage students to ask us the same questions then let them guess the meaning from our respond to the questions. If we answer by saying a certain food that they are familiar with, with a little smile or gesture to show that we like it, students can guess the meaning of the pattern from the context. Students can then start asking and answering the questions among themselves. By doing this, Paul (2003: 72), argues that students learn through sensing whole chunks of language, and through thinking and guessing.

When teachers put a lot of emphasis on teachers' talks, clear and accurate pronunciation plays a very important role. Wrong pronunciation is harder to mend when the model pronunciation is inaccurate from the beginning because students repeatedly do the same mistakes. Therefore teachers should make sure they know exactly how to pronounce the words to be presented in class.

On the other hand, in most listening activities, children simply listen carefully to the material. Activities and practices are postponed until students finish listening. Therefore when children listen to tapes first, they tend to guess and interact less. So it is better to do some kind of practice before listening. Students can arrange a set of jumbled pictures based on what is played on the recording. Listening activities can also be designed as an interactive activity in which students do what is stated in the recording. When listening to songs or chants, children can sing along or imitate what is played. Here is an example of a chant that would engage students in a more active listening activity:

*What time is it?  
What time is it?  
It's five o'clock.  
It's five o'clock.*

*What time is it?  
What time is it?  
It's six o'clock.  
It's six o'clock.*

Or,

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*Thanks a lot.*  
*Thanks a lot.*  
*Thanks a lot for everything.*  
*Don't mention it.*  
*I was happy to do it.*  
*Thanks a million.*  
*Thanks a lot.*  
*Thanks a lot for everything.*  
*You're welcome.*  
*I was happy to do it.*

*adapted from Graham, (1986: 66)*

## **b. Dictation**

Dictation exercise is always an important technique of teaching listening because it trains students' comprehension in differing English sounds. Dictation doesn't have to be dull and boring in which teachers simply state the words and students write the words in their notebooks, it can be so much fun and interesting if we apply it in language games. Some of the listening games that involved the principles of dictation are *Chopstick Spelling* and *Bingo*.

### 1. Chopstick Spelling

- Dictate letters or double-letter sounds and have all of the children write the letters on pieces of paper.
- Divide the children into teams (in small classes, there could be one child only in each team), and give one child from each team some chopsticks.
- Ask the children to tear or cut up their pieces of paper, separating each letter or double-letter sound, and all the children from the team mix their letters together.
- Place a long row of flash cards along the board ledge or in another clearly-seen position.
- Each team then races to spell the words on the cards, carrying one letter at a time with chopsticks to a place that is at an equal distance from each team.
- The game is played as a relay. When one child has carried a letter, she gives the chopsticks to the next child on the team who then carries the next letter.

### 2. Bingo

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- Each of the children is given or draws a bingo card. One of the children (or the teacher) dictates words and the children choose which square to write them in. Each of the words that were dictated is then put into a box or a hat. The child who dictated the letters, or the other children, draws the word from the box or hat one at a time, and the children mark them off on their cards. A child who gets a whole row, column, or diagonal, call out, *Bingo!*

This game can also be played this way:

- Pictures can be put in a place where the children can see them, such as along the board ledge. The children write the words or sentences that correspond to those pictures in the squares on their bingo card. There can be more pictures than squares so the children can choose which ones to write. All the pictures are then put in a box or hat, and drawn out in the same way as before.

Paul (2003: 187)

### c. Stories

It is a wonderful technique to teach, English through stories. Paul, (2003: 74) argues that stories can be a supplementary material when teaching English to young learners particularly when the stories can be integrated to the course. Teachers can read it to children from storybooks, memorize the stories then tell it to children, or play it on a tape.



*Figure 1. story-reading time*

Teachers tend to interact more with students when retelling a story after memorizing it from a storybook. However, when reading stories from storybooks, teachers can also interact with the students by varying the intonation or by changing the voice for each different characters of the story.

There are some activities that teachers can involve when they are telling stories. These activities are designed to engage students in the story telling time and to avoid a teacher-dominated classroom activity. The activities are:

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1. The children draw characters or scenes from the story.
2. Teachers tell the story with puppets, children then retell the story with their own puppets.
3. Children arrange pictures from the scene of the story, or touch/jump on the correct pictures as teachers tell the story. This activity can also be modified by asking students to guess what the story will be by arranging pictures from the scene before teachers tell them the story.
4. Each child has a word card. When her word is mentioned in the story, she has to do something about it, like raising her card, make funny noise, or put up her hand.
5. The teacher stops sometimes during the story to ask students what they think is going to happen next.

#### **d. Total Physical Response (TPR)**

TPR is another technique that teachers often used in classroom. In this, teachers give instruction like *stand up*, *sit down*, *walk slowly*, *point to the door*, *point to the windows*, and so on and students do as instructed. However, many teachers question the effectiveness of TPR in an English classroom because the idea of TPR is students respond to what is instructed by doing an action without speaking. This tends to give students very little chance to speak in the class. To overcome this problem, some teachers modify the instruction with those instructions which require verbal respond like *say hurray*, *say Good Morning*, *sing The Farmer in the Dell*, and the like; or the combination of action and verbal responses like when the teachers say *stand up* then students stand up and say *we're standing up*. However, the instructions in TPR should always be renewed and improved since in TPR students are very active but they depend so much on the teacher. This may lead to a teacher-centered classroom activity. For example when students are very familiar with *point to the door/windows*, teachers can add *point to the ceiling* as a new instruction. When children seem to be confused we can use our gesture to show what we mean. This way, although the activity is still teacher-driven activity, students get the chance to absorb and comprehend new instructions.

#### **e. Songs**

Paul, (2003: 58), states that children love songs. Children keep songs in their heads, sing them after class, hum them on the way home, and sing them at home. They

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like the singing activity and songs provide many opportunities to get new words and to acquire the model pronunciation. Paul, (2008: 58-59), suggests the following ways of how teachers can use songs (and chants) in class:

1. Singing

The children sing songs that have catchy melodies and useful language content

2. Activities

The children combine actions with songs. This is usually the most effective way to use songs, especially with younger children. Any songs can be combined with actions.

3. Chants

Almost any sentence or expression can be put into a chant. If possible, chants should also be combined with actions.

4. Background

There are songs in the background when children play games. This can be an effective way for children to remember patterns without focusing on them too much, and to pick up chunks of language in songs.

5. Between lesson

We encourage parents to play English songs in the car and encourage both the parents and the children to play them at home between lessons.

They acquire these advantages through these very enjoyable activities.

### **III. Speaking**

Children in our Indonesian classes have very little opportunities in using English in communication. Therefore with this limitation each of them should have the opportunities to speak during our lesson. If the class is large, then we have to divide the class into several groups or place the students in pairs so that they can work and help each other.

#### **a. Preparing children to communicate**

Paul (2003: 77) lists several principles that teachers need to consider in preparing students to communicate in English:

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1. introducing and practicing patterns in ways that feel meaningful to the children, such as in games, in situations where the children genuinely want to express themselves, and through personalization.
2. practicing new patterns in combination with the other patterns the children have learned, so the children can internalize them more easily.
3. giving the children many opportunities to guess how to use the patterns flexibly in novel situations.
4. giving the children confidence to speak out in front of others by talking independently with other children and the whole class.
5. building the children's inner strength to deal with confusing and novel situations, by presenting them with puzzles to overcome and solve, and making sure they are finally successful.
6. focusing on the question forms of new patterns, so the children can ask about things they do not know. They can learn *Who is it?* before or at the same time as learning *It's a cat*, and, *What's she doing?* before or at the same time as learning *She's sleeping*.

#### **b. Teaching Kits**

New expressions are best taught through listening activities. That way, students will know exactly the pronunciation. To induce meaning to students, teachers can act out or use picture to describe the word. Translating the new word into students' native language is unnecessary. Teachers can provide themselves with puppets, pictures, cassettes, videos, and so forth. Puppets may bring certain feelings among children. Children can enjoy acting out scenes with puppets or toy animals. Students can develop their own characters and voices based on the puppets. Pictures can help students in understanding meaning, they can also be used in coloring activities, retelling stories, or language games. Cassettes and videos are also wonderful for introducing songs, pronunciation, and so on.

#### **c. Should the children only speak English?**

Teachers definitely want students to use English in most of class activities, therefore we need to design the task most appropriate to meet their level. If the task is clear and not too difficult, students may eagerly speak in the target language. However,

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there are times when students find it difficult to express something in English, in this kind of situation students may express something in their native language. Teachers can help them with the word they want to use.

#### **d. Classroom language**

One of the principles of the teaching of English is that students should be exposed to English as much as possible. Therefore teachers are encouraged to use English as the only classroom English. Several simple expressions that teachers can use as classroom instruction are as follows:

1. Simple expressions:

*Good Morning.*

*How are you today?*

*Thank you.*

*I'm sorry.*

*I don't know.*

*Goodbye.*

*See you next week.*

2. Asking for Help:

*Could you repeat that please?*

*What's this in English?*

*What's that in English?*

*How do you spell....?*

*I don't understand.*

*Please help me.*

*How do I say.....?*

3. Between the Children:

*Can I borrow your....., please?*

*Sure.*

*Here you are.*

*It's my turn.*

*It's your turn.*

*May I have a.....*

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4. From the Teacher:

*Guess.*

*Please stand up.*

*Please open your book.*

*Show me your work.*

*Be quiet, please.*

*Let's write / listen / go home.*

*Let's play...*

*It's time to write/go home.*

*Let's say our prayer, shall we?*

#### **IV. Conclusion**

It is often best not to consider listening and speaking as two independent skills. Listening is always considered as the receptive activity that leads to speaking as the productive activity. When one student speaks, the others will listen. And when we explain, the students listen carefully. We can always combine the two skills in all the activities in the classroom.

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