

TEACHING ENGLISH FOR YOUNG LEARNERS “ HOW THEY LEARN AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION “

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Abstract

There is now a growing tendency among Indonesian people to introduce English to children starting from the early age, through either formal or informal education. This can be seen from the mushrooming of bilingual and international schools where English is used as the language of instruction as well as the increasing number of English courses aimed especially for children. Sometimes people hold a misconception regarding teaching English for young learners, in which they believe that the earlier the kids learn a foreign language, the better it will be. As a matter of fact, this assumption is not completely true. Only when handled with care will the teaching of foreign language to young learners succeed as expected? Otherwise, this will not gain a significant effect on children's language development.

This paper will elaborate some principles on how young learners learn a foreign language, which should be the foundation of the way the teaching English to young learners is conducted. Some theories on how children learn will be drawn on, followed by a discussion on the pedagogical implications.

This paper is expected to give insights to English teachers in general and teachers of English for young learners in particular, about the importance of taking into account the aspects related to the way young learners learn in designing their teaching learning process.

Key words: *Teaching English for young learners, learning theories, pedagogical implication*

INTRODUCTION

There has been an “English- for-Young Learners-fever” among Indonesian people, especially those living in big cities. They ambitiously try to instill English into their children by sending them to play groups, kindergarten or courses offering English designed especially for children. Schools which offer bilingual classes are also of parents' favorite. Having children who are able to use English seems to be considered a necessity in this current age of globalization.

Most people think that English is taught best at the early stage. They believe that the earlier children learn English, and the more exposure to the language, the better it will be. This actually is a fallacy because the success of foreign language learning is not merely determined by the age and exposure factors. There are still many other factors that have to be considered to make sure that teaching English to Young Learners will be effective, such as the nature of language instruction

given, psychological and social factors, teaching materials, individual differences in cognitive and learning styles, and many other factors.

Harmer (2007) states that younger learners are not necessarily better learners compared to older learners. Younger children are indeed more likely to develop native-like English proficiency than adult learners, as suggested by Lynne Cameron (cited by Harmer, 2007) that children “reproduce the accent of their teacher with deadly accuracy”. Yet research in language acquisition has shown that older learner exhibit more learning gains than younger learners. Lightbown and Spada (1999) point to the various studies showing that older children and adolescents make more progress than younger learners. This may have been due to the children's increased cognitive abilities.

Teaching English for young learners, therefore, should be properly handled if it is to be successful. It needs highly skilled and dedicated teaching. Teachers of English for young learners

need to have a sound understanding of how students think and operate, that is how young learners learn a language. This will serve as the foundation for the implementation of teaching English to young learners.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

How do young learners learn?

Young learners will learn best if the people involved in the teaching learning process facilitate the learning and take into account the way they learn into the teaching practices. Piaget (1967 cited in McCloskey, 2002), suggested that children developed through specific stages, they are:

- 1) **Sensory-Motor Stage (from 0 – 2 years)** in which children seemed to learn through physical interaction with the world around them.
- 2) **Pre-operational stage (from 2 - 7 years)** when children need concrete situations to process ideas.
- 3) **Concrete Operational Stage (from 7 - 11 years)** in which children begin to conceptualize and do some abstract problem solving, though they still learn best by doing.
- 4) **Formal Operational Stage (from 1-15)** in which children are able to use abstract thinking.

Young learners can be included into those aged 7-11 years or within concrete operational stage, where they learn best from concrete things around them. Piaget believed that children went through the stages above and that they could only move onto the next stage when they had completed the stage before and were ready to do so.

Another expert, Vygotsky (1978, cited in Hughes, 2009) believed that language was central to the cognitive development of children, that it was instruction provided by an adult that helped children learn and develop. The distinction between Piaget's and Vygotsky's views was that while Piaget suggested that children work through different stages of learning on their own, Vygotsky (1978) maintained that there is a difference between what children could achieve (and how they could develop) on their own and what children could achieve (and how they could develop) when an adult was able to work with them which was described as the *zone of proximal development*. The support given by adults was described as scaffolding by Bruner (1983 cited in Hughes, 2009). With scaffolding children develop and grow because the adults give support to their

thinking and learning process. The term scaffolding is widely used in English language teaching when teachers provide support in the learning process to facilitate the learning either by providing the vocabulary or asking some guiding questions. Donaldson (1978, cited in Hughes, 2009) believed that children were able to cognitively develop by trying to *make sense* of the experiences that they had, and by asking questions and trying things out, or *hypothesizing*.

How do children learn language? Children all over the world acquire their native language without formal training and there are some theories regarding the language acquisition process. Chomsky (1959, cited in McCloskey, 2002) believed that learning was innate, in the sense that every child has an innate capability to learn a language. This idea of Chomsky's was followed by the term *Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)* suggested by Eric Lenneberg (1967 cited in Hughes, 2009) who thought that there was a critical period, up to about the age of eleven, in which children were able to learn language. He believed that if language was introduced to children after this age (or this critical period) then it was extremely difficult for them to learn it. This hypothesis has often been cited as one of the main reasons for starting the teaching of foreign languages early in a child's schooling.

On the other hand, Bruner (1983 cited Hughes, 2009) there is a *Language Acquisition Support System (LASS)* supplied by adults, or more able mentors, that helps children to develop such a language acquisition device and that this input and support is crucial to the success of language acquisition in children. Children also learn about their world in different ways, using their preferred learning styles. They may be characterized as visual, auditory or kinesthetic learners. A visual learner learns best if they see what is happening and links to their understanding. On the other hand, an auditory learner will need to hear the input, while a kinesthetic learner will learn best if the learning involves physical movement.

Considering children's preferred learning styles are important because some researchers (Berman (1998 in Ellis and Brewster, 2002) showed that there was a correlation between success in language learning and preferred learning styles. This is also supported by a research conducted by Rosemary Smeets in Switzerland in 2004, who looked at young language learners and

VAK learning styles and she found that the students *did* seem to be able to learn more words when using their preferred learning style (visual, auditory or kinesthetic).

TEACHING ENGLISH FOR YOUNG LEARNERS

How do we think children learn a foreign language? Courtney (1998) suggests several aspects to be considered to teach children the language especially English. They are:

- a) If a foreign language is introduced to young learners, do it in the same ways as any other subjects are introduced. Because young learners are taught anything, whether it is science, history, music, or any other subjects they study in their early education.
- b) Introduce a foreign language as any introduction to the interesting things that are all around them and are relevant to their lives
- c) Build the foundations of understanding in each subject in a very practical, hands on way so that the children can interact with the actual, physical, concrete aspects of each subject at the appropriate stage of their cognitive development.
- d) Do this through scaffolding their learning in each and every subject and in helping support their overall cognitive development
- e) The most important aspect of teaching young learners is recognize how we can develop their thinking and learning skills in each and every subject with a full understanding of what each age group of learner is cognitively able to do and understand, and can physically relate to and carry out.

Other aspect which also determines the successful of teaching English or foreign language to young learners is linking the language learning with everyday life. Teachers can do these activities to the children. They are:

1. Teachers need to show them how the new language can be remembered that the teachers are trying to provide opportunities for these learners to find out about and use the language
2. A link with their everyday lives and be fun
3. Teachers can also, depending on the age of the learners, introduce the idea that it is positive to speak another language and communicate more easily in a world that is becoming smaller
4. Language teachers also need to act as mentors and models of this target language

5. As mentors, they must support and scaffold the learning
6. As models, they must provide good examples of the language in use
7. They must also help young learners share their ideas about everyday things around them and expand their general knowledge while learning a new language.

DISCUSSION

Pedagogical Implication For Teaching English To Young Learners

Following Vygotsky's and Bruner's views, it is equally essential to support children learning by providing support or scaffolding. This can be done by simplifying the tasks, providing the vocabulary, giving guiding questions or phrases, etc.

Teachers should provide adequate support to the learners, but not excessive, because children's ability to hypothesize in the new language should not be underestimated. It is also advisable to remember that we are trying to provide opportunities for these learners to find out about and use the new language. The teaching and learning process should be connected with everyday life, and more importantly, should be fun. Children have a short attention span so teachers should be ready with a rich variety of learning activities. Language teachers also have roles as mentors - who must support and scaffold the learning, and as modelers -who must provide good examples of the language in use. As a good model, teachers should make sure that they use the correct forms of language and pronunciation, because children imitate their teachers with deadly accuracy. Providing incorrect model will lead children to fossilize the error until they are adults.

Children's learning styles must also be taken into account, so teachers should manage activities that accommodate the three main learning styles mentioned previously. For example, teachers can provide interesting pictures, photos, realia and other visual media to facilitate visual learners. The room can be colorfully decorated to attract their attention. Teachers can also give music, songs or audio stimuli for auditory learners and invite students to make physical movement (drawing, jumping, and dancing) for kinesthetic learners. The latter one might require a room large enough to move around. Teachers should be prepared with various activities and be flexible to move from one

another to prevent boredom, considering children's short attention span.

Taking into account factors related to young learners, which involve knowledge on how they learn as well as their characteristics into the teaching and learning process will continuously remind teachers to review whether their practices have been in accordance with the principles of teaching English to young learners. This will, in turn, result in a more effective learning.

Ann Vernon (2008) also discusses the best ways to teach English to young learners. She promotes several steps to follow.

1. Chop and change your game and activities every 5-10 minutes. This is very vital because children need variety as they get bored easily and have very short attention span.
2. Vary the pace during the lesson; mix up excitable games with quiet ones. You don't want your children get bored but you don't want them get over-excited either, so vary the pace according to the mood and keep the children on their toes but over the top
3. Repeat, review and revise. Use short game to review vocabulary and phrases you have taught earlier in the term and the year. If you neglect this, the children will have no recollection of the language you have covered
4. Make your lessons playful and full of physical movement. The children will enjoy them more. They become more motivated and remember the language better
5. Teach in a relax and friendly atmosphere with plenty of encouragement
6. Avoid competition among the children. It can be stressful and overwhelm them. Play the games where everyone wins, or where you do not single out the winner.
7. Encourage and support your learners. Never tell them they cannot do it, they are no good at it, or they have failed. You could put them off wanting to learn English for life
8. Bring in puppets, or teddy bears and have the puppets introduce the new vocabulary for the lesson. If you don't have a puppets, you can make one from a paper bag, or by sewing a couple of buttons on a sock
9. Use chants, rhyme and songs. These are great for movement and frequent repetition of vocabulary and phrases
10. Do not burden your children with reading and writing activities, leave those for them when the children are older. They are still learning to write in their own language (native). There is plenty of time for that later. Concentrate on listening and understanding building vocabulary and the acquisition of short phrases
11. Avoid abstract concepts and concentrate instead on concrete real items that the children understand and relate to. For example start with familiar topics such as colors, numbers, greetings, animals, fruit, food and drink, body parts, shapes, clothing, the weather, days of the week and short everyday sentences and phrases.

The previous explanation can be summarized into the chart proposed by Joan Kang (2012) in his article entailed Ten Helpful Ideas to Teach Young learners. It can be seen as below:

1. Supplement activities with visuals, realia, and movement.	
Young learners tend to have short attention spans and a lot of physical energy. In addition, children are very much linked to their surroundings and are more interested in the physical and the tangible. As Scott and Ytreberg (1990) describe, "Their own understanding comes through hands and eyes and ears. The physical world is dominant at all times."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use brightly colored visuals, toys, puppets or objects • Community donations for toys and objects • Create a "Visuals and Realia Bank" • Use Total Physical Response (TPR) by James Asher (1977) • Use TPR Storytelling by Blaine Ray http://www.blaineraytprs.com/
2. Involve students in making visuals and realia.	
Having children involved in creating the visuals that are related to the lesson helps engage students in the learning process by introducing them to the context as well as to relevant vocabulary items. Students are more likely to feel interested and invested in the lesson and will probably take better care of the materials (Moon 2000).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students draw different characters for a story or make puppets, masks, play-do sculptures • Collaborate with the art teacher to make the visuals you need for you activities • Students contribute their own toys for the lesson ("Show and tell")

3. Move from activity to activity.	
Young learners have short attention spans. For ages 5–7, Keep activities around 5 and 10 minutes long. For ages 8–10, keep activities 10 to 15 minutes long. Scott and Ytreberg (1990) suggest creating a balance between the activities in the column on the right side.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quiet/noisy exercises • Different skills: listening/talking/reading/writing • Individual/ pairwork/ groupwork/ whole class activities • Teacher-pupil/ pupil-pupil activities
4. Teach in themes.	
A thematic unit, a series of lessons on the same topic or subject, can create broader contexts in which to teach language, recycle language from lesson to lesson, and allow students to focus more on content and communication than on language structure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common themes for YLs: animals, friends, family, environment, citizenship, shopping, or units revolving around a storybooks, e websites, celebrities, or movies students like Themes based on curricula from students' other subjects are also effective (Haas 2000)

CONCLUSION

From the elaboration above, some conclusions can be drawn as follows:

1. Young learners are not necessarily better language learners compared to older ones
2. Teaching English to young learners is such a challenging task that needs to be handled properly by professional teachers if it is to be successful
3. Teachers of English to young learners have to understand the basic principles of TEYL, which include knowledge on how the kids learn
4. The teaching learning practices should consider the young learners' characteristics which are different from older learners
5. Children's preferred learning styles, which include visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning styles, must also be taken into account.

Followings are some recommendations for teaching English to young learners:

1. Provide as wide a range of opportunities as possible;
2. Provide vivid, first-hand, new experiences;
3. Relate the lessons to what the children already know in a meaningful context
4. Use variety of ways to introduce the same idea.

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