

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS

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Abstract

Teaching English to young learner is very different from teaching English to adolescent and adults. There are three learner groups in English language teaching (ELT). There are young children, adolescent and adult. The three learner groups have crucial differences in terms of language learning needs, language competence emphasized, and cognitive skill addressed. Understanding the ideas and strategies for teaching English to young learners is very urgently needed for English teachers to design and develop learning activities for children. This article tries to explain some practical strategies or ideas in teaching English to young learners (TEYL). The practical strategies that can be practiced in the teaching English to young learners are: teaching with pictures, visual and realia, teaching with movement and games, teaching with stories and teaching with music or song. Hopefully, these strategies can help teachers especially teachers of young learners in designing and developing learning activities in the classroom.

Abstrak

Mengajar bahasa Inggris untuk pelajar muda sangat berbeda dari mengajar bahasa Inggris untuk remaja dan orang dewasa. Ada tiga kelompok pelajar dalam pengajaran bahasa Inggris (ELT). Ada anak-anak, remaja dan dewasa. Tiga kelompok pelajar memiliki perbedaan penting dalam hal kebutuhan belajar bahasa, kompetensi bahasa menekankan, dan keterampilan kognitif ditangani. Memahami ide dan strategi untuk mengajar bahasa Inggris untuk pelajar muda sangat dibutuhkan bagi guru bahasa Inggris untuk merancang dan mengembangkan kegiatan belajar untuk anak-anak. Artikel ini mencoba untuk menjelaskan beberapa strategi praktis atau ide-ide dalam mengajar bahasa Inggris untuk pelajar muda (TEYL). Strategi praktis yang dapat dilakukan dalam bahasa Inggris mengajar untuk pelajar muda adalah: mengajar dengan gambar, visual dan realia, mengajar dengan gerakan dan permainan, mengajar dengan cerita dan mengajar dengan musik atau lagu. Mudah-mudahan, strategi ini dapat membantu para guru terutama guru pelajar muda dalam merancang dan mengembangkan kegiatan pembelajaran di kelas.

Key words: Practical, strategies, young learners

A. Preliminary

Who is young learner? It is very important question to be answered before discussing the practical strategies and ideas for teaching English to young learners (TEYL). According to Slatterly there are two classifications of young learners. The first is young learners (YL); they were 7-12 years old. The second is very young learners (VYL); they were under 7 years old.¹ Besides that, Scott and Yterberg divided the children into two main groups. The first level is children with 5-7 years old and the second is children with 8-10 years old.²

Based on the two definitions of young learner or children stated above we can take conclusion that the age of young learner is about 5-12 years old. Children under 5 years old categorized as very young learner and children more than 12 years old is categorized as adolescent. Therefore, when we talked about English language teaching and learning of young learners or children it means we are talking about learners with 5-12 years old. Simply, related to our national education level young learner or children is students of elementary school.

The important thing in discussing the concept of teaching English to young learner is about *age*. Age in teaching English to young learner concept plays crucial role concerning in what we teach and how we teach our young learners in the classroom. Young learner has special differences from adolescents and adults in terms of language learning needs, language competence emphasize and cognitive skill addressed. Therefore, understanding the concepts, principles, ideas and strategies in teaching English to young learner is very urgently needed for effective and joyful language learning in the classroom.

According to Harmer, there are three learner groups in English language teaching (ELT).³ Every learner groups have different characteristics and uniqueness so that these can be beneficial references for teachers in teaching English to young learner, adolescent and adult. After understanding and recognizing the characteristics of the learner groups teacher can determine the approaches and strategies in teaching English to young learners. The following are the general classification of learner groups in English language learning.

¹M Slatterly, and J. Willis. *English for primary teachers*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.

²W Scott, and L. H. Yetreberg. *Teaching English to children*. (London: Longman, 1990), 1.

³Jeremy Harmer, *The Practice of English language teaching (4th Ed.)*. (Essex: Pearson Longman, 2007)

B. Discussion

1. Young Children

- a. They respond although they do not understand
- b. They learn from everything around them: they learn indirectly rather than directly.
- c. They understand mostly when they see, hear, touch and interact rather than from explanations
- d. Abstract concepts are difficult to deal with.
- e. They generally display a curiosity about the world and an enthusiasm for learning a language
- f. They like talking about themselves and respond to learning that uses their lives as the main topic.
- g. They love discovering things, making or drawing things, using their imagination, moving from one place to another, solving puzzles.
- h. They have a short attention span; they can easily get bored after 5-10 minutes.
- i. Teachers should have a rich repertoire of activities to help young children receive information from a variety of sources and plan a range of activities for a given time period.
- j. Teachers should work with students individually or in groups
- k. Teachers need to be aware of the students' interests to motivate them.
- l. The classroom should be colorful and bright with enough room for different activities

2. Adolescent

- a. Despite their success in language learning, they are seen like problematic students.
- b. They commit passionately when they are engaged
- c. Most of them start to understand the need for learning.
- d. Attention span is longer as a result of intellectual development.
- e. They can talk about abstract issues to a certain point.
- f. They can use many different ways of studying and practicing language
- g. They search for identity and self- esteem; thus they need to feel good about themselves and valued.

- h. They need teacher and peer approval and are sensitive to criticism of their own age group.
- i. Teachers should link teaching to their everyday interests and experiences.

3. Adult

- a. They can engage with abstract thought
- b. They have a whole range of (positive or negative) life and learning experiences.
- c. They have expectations about the learning process and they have their own patterns of learning
- d. They are more disciplined than the other age groups and know how to struggle on despite boredom
- e. Unlike other groups, they know why they are learning and what they want to have at the end
- f. They sustain a level of motivation even for a distant goal, which is difficult for the other groups.
- g. They can be critical of teaching methods or they may feel uncomfortable with unfamiliar methods
- h. Older ones worry that their intellectual powers diminish by age.
- i. They have a longer concentration span to continue an activity than the other groups.
- j. Teachers should consider their (positive or negative) learning experiences

The three learner groups above gives us brand new understanding that young children, adolescent and adult have crucial differences in learning activities. For example, adolescent and adult have more concentration span than young children. It means that teacher of young learner must use various strategies in supplementing activities in the classroom because young learner is easily bored with monotonous strategies in the classroom. Creating fun and joyful activities are very recommended for teachers of young learner to have better and joyful classroom.

4. Principles for Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL)

Understanding the teaching principles of teaching English to young learner is very important. So teacher of young learners must comprehend language learning principles before teaching their students in the classroom. These principles can bring teachers to the success of language teaching and learning in the classroom. Vygotsky in Hudelson stated four principles in teaching English to young learners (TEYL):⁴

- a. Children learn through experiences by manipulating surrounding objects. Children are usually called the concrete operational stage of cognitive development. It means that children learn through hands –on experiences and manipulation objects in the environment. Therefore, it is important for teacher of *young learners* to use media or realia in presenting the activities or materials so that the materials are understandable easily,
- b. Children learn through social context, in groups in which they know with one another. Children learn in social context and in groups to make learners know one another. Therefore, English teachers should design the teaching process in social context situation or cooperative class to make the learners know each other,
- c. Acquisition takes place when learners comprehend how language is used. Acquisition occurs through learners figuring out how the language works, through learners making and testing out hypotheses about the language. Therefore, English teacher should use English correctly although they employ short sentences when teaching in the classroom,
- d. Acquisition takes place in social interaction. Language acquisition occurs through social interaction. It means that the teacher should use English in the class room naturally as if they were in their society.

The four principles above are the basic foundation for teachers in teaching English to young learners in the classroom. The process of language learning for young learner surely must be oriented to the mentioned principles. The mentioned principles above give us information about what we teach and how we teach young learners in the classroom.

⁴Sarah Hudelson, *EFL Teaching and Children: A Topic-Based Approach* (The English Teaching Forum). (Arizona State University, USA), 256 – 257.

5. Practical Strategies for Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL)

When our children's score is bad or poor we cannot judge them as stupid or idiot students. However, we must evaluate immediately the factors that make our students' score is bad. Nunan stated that the difficulties in learning English may be triggered by several factors. Those could be from the English language its self, the learners themselves, and the learning process itself. Obviously the role of the teacher also plays a crucial effect.⁵ According to Nunan teacher and learner plays crucial effect in the process of English language teaching and learning. So the use of appropriate approaches, strategies and methods are very urgent to be considered by English teachers as important aspect especially teachers of young learners.

The following are suggested and recommended strategies for teacher of young learners to be considered as solution and activities in teaching English to young learners (TEYL) in the classroom.

6. Teaching with Pictures, Visuals and Realia

One of the strategies and ideas in teaching English to young learners is supplementing activities with visuals and realia. Teachers of young learners are recommended to present activities in the classroom with lots of brightly colored visuals, toys, puppets or objects. It is intended to capture the young learners' attention and concentration in learning English because young learner has short concentration span and easily bored after 5-10 minutes.

Teaching English by using pictures or colored visuals can make young learners happy, joyful and fun. Young learners like learning to their surrounding and physical activities and tangible. Tangible means learning something by seeing the real object. Teaching with visual and realia can make the learners' language input comprehensible better. Therefore, the use of pictures, visuals and realia is very suggested in teaching English to young learners or young learners.

7. Teaching with Movements and Games

Games and movements are very favorite joyful activities for young learners. Teaching by using games is very effective in English language

⁵David Nunan. *Language Teaching Methodology*. (Prentice Hall: Great Britian, 1993), 93.

learning. Children are very happy with physical or movement. Indoor or outdoor classroom by using movements and games are very suggested for teachers of young learner. According to Scott and Ytreberg young learner learns and understands the language from their hands, eyes, and ears. The physical world is dominant at all time.⁶ It means that the use of physical activities and games are very important in teaching English to young learner.

One of the favorite and effective methods in using movement is Total Physical Response (TPR). Total Physical Response (TPR) is considered as a very popular method among teachers of young learners in the world today. It is very effective and relevant to be applied in the classroom or outside the classroom of young learners. Children can listen and physically respond to a series of instructions from the teachers.⁷

8. Teaching by using *Stories*

Ur argued that story is one of the very important sources of interest for children in the classroom.⁸ Teaching English by using story is very effective for young learners' classroom because most of children like story. Story has significant role in helping the students' mastery in language learning. Dealing with the advantage and the role of story in teaching English to young learner, Ellis and Brewster stated that:⁹

- a. Stories are motivating and fun; they can create a deep interest and a desire to continue learning.
- b. Listening to stories is a shared social experience; it provokes a shared response of laughter, sadness, excitement and anticipation.
- c. Stories exercise the imagination; children can become personally involved in a story as they identify with the characters and try to interpret the narrative and illustrations.
- d. Stories are a useful tool in linking fantasy and the imagination with the child's real world; they provide a way of enabling children to make sense of

⁶W Scott, and L. H. Ytreberg. *Teaching English to children*. (London: Longman, 1990), 2.

⁷Asher, J. *Learning another language through actions: The complete teacher's guidebook*. (Los Gatos, CA: Sky Oaks Productions, 1977)

⁸Penny Ur. *A course in language teaching: Theory and Practice*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 288.

⁹G Ellis and J Brewster. *Handbook for primary teachers*. (Penguin Books, 1991, ISBN 0-014-081016-1), 1.

their everyday life.

- e. Listening to stories allows the teacher to introduce or revise new vocabulary and sentence structures by exposing the children to language.
- f. Stories help students of all levels to understand literature, they carry ideological messages.
- g. Children books offer universal truths, moral appeals to one generation after another.

9. Teaching with *Music or Songs*

As stated before that children have short concentration span. Teaching by using various strategies are very suggested for teachers in the classroom. One of the strategies that can practically be practiced in young learner classroom is teaching with music and songs. This strategy can capture the young learners' attention in language learning so that young learner is not easily bored with the learning activities in the classroom.

Music and song can help students in understanding English language by listening and pronouncing the word of English. By using music and song the children can be fun and familiar with the words and sounds of English. Through fun and joyful activities children can have high spirit to learn English. Therefore, it is a good chance for English teachers to use this strategy in teaching English for children to engage their motivation and spirit in learning English. Teacher can supplement the material with songs such as days of the week, months the year, colors, numbers, etc. Many research proved that teaching by using music and song can improve and increase the young learners' interest and motivation in English language learning.

C. Conclusion

The conclusion of this article is teaching English to young learner (TEYL) is not as easy as teaching English to adolescent and adult. There are many differences between young learners and adolescent even adult. For example, young learner has short concentration and attention span in learning. English teacher of young learner must know this different characteristic before teaching English to young learner so that teacher of young learner is able to manage the time effectively and efficiently in the classroom.

As stated before, young learners have short attention and concentration spans. Therefore, English teacher of young learner must be rich of various strategies and ideas in teaching English to young learners. For example, young learners from ages 5 to 10 is suggested for teacher to move quickly from one activity to another activities. It is very important to avoid spending more than 10 or 15 minutes on a single activity because children will tend to become bored easily. For young learner ages 5–7, is suggested for teacher to keep activities between 5 and 10 minutes long. Then, students ages 8–10 can handle activities that are 10 to 15 minutes long.

Finally, this article has a single aim. It is aim at describing and explaining the strategies or ideas for teaching English to young learners. There are four favorite strategies considered as effective solution and activities for teachers of young learners to be practiced in the classroom. Those are: teaching with pictures, visual or realia, teaching with movement or games, teaching with story, and teaching with music or songs. These hopefully not only become strategies but also ideas for teachers in designing other activities for young learner in the classroom.

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