

TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS THROUGH CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

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Abstract: Teaching English to young learners is not the same as teaching English to adults because they have different characteristics. By knowing their characteristics, teachers should create, adapt and use materials and activities that suit children. This paper discusses some theories about children and their learning and proposes some creative activities which are appropriate for young learners so that they can enjoy learning and practice using English.

Key words: Teaching English, Young Learners, Creative Activities

Introduction

English has become one of the international languages which is widely used all over the world for business, information technologies, education, foreign affair, entertainment, etc. Realizing the important role of English especially in this globalization era, in Indonesia English subject is taught not only at secondary education to tertiary education but also at elementary education. English now becomes a compulsory subject in Elementary schools started from the fourth grade. In many elementary schools, especially in big cities English is also taught from the first grade.

Different from *bahasa Indonesia* and regional languages such as Javanese or Sundanese, which are the first languages or mother tongue, English in Indonesia is considered as a foreign language, which means that it is not used in daily communication. Meanwhile the range and quality of exposure that a language learner receives within the teaching and learning situation will affect his /her ability to use the language. According to Musthafa (2006) children learning English as a foreign language in Indonesian elementary school contexts face many serious challenges. One challenge relates to lack of social uses of the English language in real life situations which would likely involve children in their daily life. This situation makes it difficult for children to see learning English as useful and relevant activity. Secondly, the problem relates to the way English words are written differently from the way they are pronounced. In addition, there are still many teachers who teach English to young learners employ the same techniques as they would teach adult learners. If this situation is not changed, children will think that

learning English is difficult and boring. They may bring negative attitude toward English when they learn English in higher education.

In fact children have their own world, which is different from that of adults. As young learners, elementary school students have their own characteristics: biological, cognitive, affective, personality and social. Children communicate a great sense of energy, curiosity and involvement. It is not surprising that children like doing physical activities. These positive sides of the children should be considered essential parts that bring success to their learning English.

As English teachers who teach young learners, they need to create activities that make children enjoy learning English and can keep their motivation in learning English. In this paper some theories about children and their learning are discussed and some creative activities that support children characteristics are presented so that English teachers for young learners may apply them in their teaching.

ENHANCING CHILDREN IN LEARNING ENGLISH

Almost all children acquire a language apparently without effort. In order for acquisition to take place, certain conditions are essential. Harmer (2008) suggests that children need to hear a lot of language and the ways the language is used are important too. Take for example, parents who talk to children simplify what they say and use the language which fits the situation. Children begin to realize that by using the language, they can be understood and get what they want. And through childhood and beyond, people have a great many opportunities to use the language for different purposes. It can be said that in order to acquire a language three conditions should be present: exposure to it, motivation to communicate with it and opportunities to use it.

Related to the statement above, Musthafa (2006) asserts that to be successful in learning a foreign language like learning a mother tongue, children should have a great deal of exposure to, engagement in, and support for the language they are learning. They need to have a lot of opportunities to hear and see the English language used for communicative purposes. To enhance their learning, children should also be given the necessary support so that they feel that what they are learning is useful and interesting.

In relation to the theories of learning, children have certain characteristics which can be used as a guide for ensuring optimal EFL learning for young learners. Musthafa (2006) mentions children have some following characteristics:

1. *Children learn naturally.* As part of their development children are always active, exploring their environment (physical, social, informational, ideological) and

accumulating knowledge and experiences, From this exploration children construct their understanding of how things work, including the language they use both as a system as well as a tool for communication.

2. *Children learn a lot about literacy before schooling.* Children of today participate in literate activities in a wider social context. From traffic signs, traffic lights, and brand names of their favorite toys and foods, children see in their environment, they understand that signs carry meaning.
3. *All children can learn.* It has now been widely known that children can have much different intelligence with different levels of sophistication. This has led to a general consensus that every child can learn anything in her/his own pace provided that they have exposure to engagement in, and support for the things they learn from the culture they are a part.
4. *Children learn best when learning is kept whole, meaningful, interesting, and functional.* Children tend to learn things holistically, in the form of scripts (such as eating in a restaurant, going to school, etc). This tendency is reflected very well in children's play such as playing "school teachers and students", "sellers and buyers." For children, therefore, things are easy to learn when they are in their contextual totality. In addition, children will find things meaningful, interesting, and functional when they can relate these things with their needs and personal experiences.
5. *Children learn best when they make their own choices.* When children are given options, they will make choices and relate these choices with their personal wants and needs. When the decision making is related to their needs, the learning become meaningful for the children. Relating to this, children must be given different formats of learning activities so that they can choose based on what they think are important and useful.
6. *Children learn best as community of learners in a non-competitive environment.* Unlike adults who can benefit from the spirits of competition to increase their motivation for achievement, children tend to do things and relate to others in a cooperative way. The implication for this, rather than encouraging children to compete, it will be more productive if they work collaboratively towards the achievement of shared goals. This collaborative work will not only result better quality product but also promote a sense of belonging to the social group they are in and help them to develop a sense of social responsibility as part of the group.

However, Teachers can also use some competitive activities as long as children have fun with the activities.

7. *Children learn best by talking and doing in a social context.* The English language should be taken as a means of communication. So children should be encouraged to use the language for different social purposes by talking and doing things in social context using English. Teachers can use puppet, games, stories, role plays as contexts where children can meaningfully use the language being learned.

Knowing the characteristics of how children learn, English teachers should make use this knowledge to create activities which are clear, concrete and have a direct connection with the child world so that children will be more interested and motivated to learn English.

CREATING, ADAPTING AND EVALUATING ACTIVITIES FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

Materials are an important resource for teachers in assisting their students to learn English. What is called as materials according to Moon (2000) is anything which is used specifically with the intention of increasing students' knowledge and experience of the language. So materials could include textbooks, workbooks, story books, videos, cassettes, pictures, brochures, menus, and other real-life artifacts. Teachers need to select appropriate materials and plan carefully how they will use the materials to help their students learn English. Letting the students look at the attractive pictures in a story book is not enough. Teachers need to create activities that the students engage in with the book used, directly or indirectly, to provide experience of the target language so that our materials will assist language learning.

English teachers need to examine their teaching activities and demonstrate some ways of creating, adapting, and evaluating activities. By doing these things, English teachers develop their independence and have more control over what they do in the classroom.

Teachers' Views on creating their own materials

Teachers' situations vary widely with regard to materials. Some have access to a range of textbooks and supplementary materials to choose from, some have to follow one prescribed textbook. Most teachers, however, probably have access to at least one textbook, but textbooks are designed for general audience, and it may be that our textbook does not fully meet our students' specific needs. So teachers need to adapt or create their own materials.

According to Moon (2000) the reasons why teachers do not create their own materials are lack of time, cost involved, lack of handbooks or reference books, and lack of skills. She suggests that teachers involve their students to help them in cutting, sticking, copying. Pupils can get involved in creating activities for each other. It gives them a real reason for using language and yet at the same time, it helps teachers to make more materials.

To minimize cost, teachers can use old newspapers or magazines which have a lot of colorful pictures. These pictures are cut off and stuck on some tick papers taken from old calendars, old invitation cards, used boxes of mineral water, and laminated in order to make them last. Teachers will have a great deal of expertise as long as they have confidence and willingness to try.

However, teachers need to be realistic and consider what is possible as well as what is best for their learners. In some circumstances, it may be better to adapt activities from their textbooks or use materials from the textbook more creatively, rather than spending ours creating their own.

Analyzing and evaluating activities

To adapt or design an activity would not take up too much of a teacher's time, but done on a regular basis could gradually develop his/her confidence. Teachers need to consider the following criteria to decide a language learning activity they are going to use:

- Has a clear language-teaching goal
- Has a clear and meaningful purpose for learners
- Has a clear outcome (s) for learners
- Involves learners in work or activity which requires the use of English
- Facilitates language learning.

According to Nunan (1989) in order that an activity can be successful we need to analyze it by considering the followings:

- Goal: what is the teacher's purpose in using the activity
- Input: the material that children will work on, eq. text, oral instructions, etc
- Procedures: what children do with the input, eq. they read it or talk about it, etc
- Outcome: what children produce as a result of the activity, eq. a story book, an answer to a problem or a picture. The outcome might vary from child to child or group to group. We can also distinguish between product outcomes like a set of answers, a completed crossword, a composition and process outcomes, skills,

attitudes, etc which develop during learning process, eq. increased confidence, ability to work together.

- Teacher roles: the roles of the teacher depend on the activity. For example, in a drill a teacher directs and controls the children and in a communicative game a teacher needs to set up the task and then step back and monitor.
- Learner roles: the roles that the activity will need learners to perform depend on the activity. Some activities may require learners just to listen and respond; others may require learners to make decisions or choices.
- Organization: the way the learners are organized for learning, eq. as a whole class, in pairs, etc.

Selecting activities for language learning

Before selecting an activity for use in a class, a teacher probably has a number of questions or criteria in his/her mind which guide his/her decision whether to use particular activity, to reject or to adapt it. This activity helps teachers to make those criteria explicit. Here are some questions to consider when deciding an activity to use:

1. Will it be difficult for children to carry it out?
2. How long does it take?
3. Is the material expensive?
4. Is the language suitable for the level?
5. Will they use English or first language?
6. Will my students like it?
7. Does it make a lot of noise?
8. Which skill does it practice?
9. Does it take a lot of preparation?
10. Does it help develop children's imagination?
11. Does it create good atmosphere?
12. Is there enough space to do the activity?
13. Is it for the whole class, pairs, etc?

The above questions concern with different aspects of an activity: the purpose of using the activity, its suitability for the given learners, its management and whether it reflects appropriate language learning principles.

As it is mentioned in the previous part of the paper, teachers need to develop an environment suitable for language learning. The five points we need to keep in mind are the need to:

- Provide clear and meaningful purpose for using the language which capitalizes on young learners' desire to communicate, eq. activities which involve a game or puzzling something out or getting missing information from another person. All of these make sense and are meaningful for young learners.
- Challenge learners and make them think, so that they are more engaged and so process language more deeply.
- Provide activities which are enjoyable and interesting and which make children want to continue doing the activity so that they get more practice, eq. creating monsters, guessing games with a winner or prize, hands on or doing activities like making masks.
- Provide activities which create a need or pressure for children to use English. We can design an activity that requires children to use English at some stage, eq. making them record their answer in writing or getting them to report back to the class in English. This increases exposure to and use of the language.
- Provide activities which allow children to be creative with language, experiment and notice language. This will help them to test out their hypotheses about language and assist the development of their internal language system.

SOME IDEAS OF CREATIVE ACTIVITIES IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS

There are some activities that we can use in English class for young learners. We can use games, stories, information gap exercise, role play, drawing, making cards, etc. In this paper some examples of creative activities are suggested to be used in teaching English to young learners.

The bottle game

Number of players: the whole class or a smaller group

Materials: an empty bottle

Organization: children sit in a circle

Level: elementary

Language needed: commands, eq. sing a song, walk like an elephant, jump like a monkey, etc.

Skills: speaking, listening, understanding and acting out the commands

Procedure: 1. All children sit in a circle

2. The teacher gives the bottle “a spin” while it’s on the floor. When the bottle stops, the child who faces the top of the bottle gives command to the child who is sitting opposite.
3. If the child who is acting out the command fails to do it or doesn’t understand, then both the children are out or they have to act the command together. The child who is successful to do the command may spin the bottle.

Preparation: 1. Give the children instruction for the game

2. Teach them some commands.

(Taken from Moon, 2000:94)

Board or card game; guessing game

Aims: language: Is there...? Are there...? some/any; basic prepositions; in, on, under, next to; house and furniture vocabulary.

Level: elementary

Group size: 8-16

Time: 30-45 minutes

Materials: one card per child with pictures of the rooms of a house with furniture and other contents; a picture of a cross-section of a house showing all the rooms on the card; a copy of the cross-section for each child; one many sided dice; pencil and paper.

Procedure:

1. Show the children a picture of the cross-section of a house. They should be familiar with the names of the room and furniture, but you may want to revise the vocabulary quickly before starting to play
2. Give each child a copy of the house cross section
3. Give each child a copy of a grid like this, or get them to draw one

Room	Furniture	Name

4. Mix the room cards and give one to each child. This is where the child ‘is’. The object of the game is to discover which room the other children are in.

5. The children roll a many-sided dice to decide who starts. The highest number begins.
6. The first child looks at the picture of the house and asks any other child a question about his/her room, for example, *is there a (table/sink)? Are there (chairs/windows)?*
7. If the answer is yes, the child can ask another a question. He/she can ask the same child or another one.
8. If the answer is no, the child to the left asks the next question.
9. If a child thinks he or she has discovered who is in each room, he or she calls **full house!** And play stops. The child must then tell the group who is in each room, for example, *Anna is in the kitchen, Sam is in the bathroom.*
10. If the child is wrong, play continues, but not for very long, since the first player will certainly have revealed where most of the other children are.

(Taken from Lewis and Bedson, 1999: 94)

A class survey – favorite sports

Aims: question with what, names of sports, gathering and presenting information

Level: elementary

Organization: group of ten students

Time: 30-45 minutes

Materials: Copies of the questionnaire grid, squared paper for the graph colored pencils.

Procedure:

1. Ask the children to call out as many sports as they can think of in two minutes. Write them all on the board.
2. Ask one or two children *what's your favorite sport?* And when they have understood the question get the class to repeat it all together. Write the question on the board.
3. They now ask four or five of their classmates *what's your favorite sport?*
4. Now ask the class if everybody gave the same answer. Ask them if they know which the most favorite sport is.
5. Give out copies of a questionnaire grid like the one below and explain how to fill it in.

Sport	How many?	Total
Football	III	4

Basketball	II	2
Badminton	III	4
Etc		

6. The children move around the class, asking each other the questions. The class can be divided into groups of about 10 students.
7. When everybody has finished, ask them how they could display the information. You can introduce the idea of a bar chart by stacking up cubes, or drawing squares on the board.: stack per sport, one square or cube per person who likes that sport most.
8. Show them how to draw and complete the bar chart
9. When the bar charts are complete, stick them on a large piece of paper to make a poster.
10. Each group can present what the most favorite sport in its group.

(Taken from Phillips, 1993)

Using Story-telling

Since children like stories, a teacher can use them in their teaching. A story can provide context in which the language is used (Panggabean, 2006: 8-11). Mustafa (2008) supports the use of stories because they are motivating and fun, exercise the children's imagination, help the children link fantasy and the real world. When a teacher decides to use a story in teaching English, he/she should prepare it well using concrete instructions, visual aids, such as real object, realia or pictures and create various and interesting activities in which the students can practice using the target language. In the following some ideas of story-telling activities are adopted from Wright (1995).

Some activities in using stories

1. Muddled pictures
 - Prepare a series of pictures of key moments in the story. You can photocopy and cut up the pictures for each pair of children or display them on the board, each one with a letter.
 - Show separate pictures from the story
 - Ask the children to try put them into the correct sequence. The children put the pictures or letters in the sequence they think the story will be in.
 - Then listen to the story to see if they were correct.
2. Predicting

- If the children know the story in their mother tongue, tell them you are going to tell them in English. Ask them to write down all the English words they think they will hear on separate pieces of paper
- When you tell the story, they should put the pieces of paper into the order in which they hear them.
- For variation, give children the first line or paragraph of the story and ask them to write down all the words they predict they will hear.

Example: from 'Little Riding Hood'

mother, daughter, girl, grandma, wood, flower, bed, eat

3. Picture in the mind

When telling a story, you can ask the children to close their eyes and see if they can see a picture of the story in their mind. And let them share with other children. You can also ask them what they can hear, feel, taste and smell. Beginners can use their mother tongue, and the teacher provides the expression in English, and at higher levels they can use short phrases in English.

4. How would you feel?

You can also ask the students how they would feel or what they would do in the situation of the story. For example, for the story of 'Little Red Riding Hood', you can ask the students how they would feel walking alone in a wood at night.

5. Miming

The children mime an action, character, and feeling, and so on from the story. For example in a story 'Goldilock and the three bears', you can ask students to mime while eating hot porridge and say 'the porridge is very hot'

CONCLUSION

English teachers need to be creative in teaching English, especially when teaching young learners. English teachers for young learners should know and understand children characteristics so that they will be able to decide what materials and activities suitable for their young learners. They have to be able to use suitable materials and create meaningful, purposeful and interesting activities so that children will have fun when learning English. Through creative activities, children will be more motivated and enjoy learning English and at the same time they practice using English.

REFERENCES

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