

Teaching English to Young Learners: How They Learn and the Pedagogical Implication

Rojab Siti Rodliyah

(rojab.siti@gmail.com)

UPI Bandung

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 implications

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 learners 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.

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. **Sensori-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 is important because some research (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).

THE IMPLICATIONS ON TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS

Relating the theories above, come implications on TEYL can be drawn on. Firstly, knowing that children learn from the world around them, it is necessary that teachers provide conducive environment for children to learn. Teachers should also make sure that the subject is taught in a very practical, hand-on way that they can interact with actual, physical and here and now or concrete aspects, which is appropriate with their concrete operational stage as suggested by Piaget.

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, 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.

CONCLUSIONS

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:

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

- Organise tasks to stimulate mental activity
- Provide opportunities for self-expression: when children have learnt something new, give them a chance to apply it on their own
- Provide opportunities for meaningful conversations

References:

Harmer, Jeremy. 2007. *The practice of English language Teaching*. Pearson Education Ltd.

Hughes, Annie. 2009. *An Introduction to Teaching English to Young Learners*. http://www.ed2go.com/elt_demo/3te_demo/L02.htm, accessed September 10, 2009.

Lightbown, P.M. & Spada, N. 1999. *How languages are Learned*. New York: Oxford.

McCloske, Mary Lou. 2002. **Seven Instructional Principles for Teaching Young Learners of English**. TESOL Symposium, San Diego. Available http://home.comcast.net/~educatlanta/Handouts05/McCloskey_TESOL_Symposium02.pdf accessed on 29 September 2009

Sollars, Valerie. 2001. *Working with Young Learners*.