



TEYLIN

Teaching English for Young Learners in Indonesia



Proceeding of the
1st International Conference
on TEYLIN:
*"Bringing Culture and
Indigenous Norms
to Classroom"*





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Muria Kudus University Publisher

ISBN 978-602-1180-06-8



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The Menara Kudus Mosque
or Al Aqsha Mosque
Kudus, Central Java
Indonesia

Proceeding of the 1st International Conference on Teaching English for Young Learners in Indonesia: “Bringing Culture and Indigenous Norms to Classroom”

1st printing: September 2014

Editors: Jonathan Moore, Fajar Kartika, Mutohhar

ISBN: 978-602-1180-06-8

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Publisher

Muria Kudus University

Gondang Manis, Bae PO BOX 53 Kudus 59352

Telp: (0291) 438229 Fax. (0291) 437198

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Exciting English for Young Learners¹

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ABSTRACT

The practice of teaching English for young learners has gone through many techniques and methods. Teachers are required to develop the most appropriate way of encouraging young learners of English. The clarity of instructions in classroom's activities determines the success of a teaching and learning process. Teachers or instructors need to understand the learning environment before they deliver the materials since English cannot be considered as a second language. It may be a third or a fourth language learnt by students in Indonesia. Therefore, it is important to be realistic towards the accomplishment of the teaching and learning process. Teachers shall consider more on the process of delivering materials rather than on the result of the teaching and learning process. Here, it is important to apply "a creative teaching" in order to develop exciting atmosphere in learning English for young learners. The use of songs, pictures, folktales and children literature will be the focus of this paper.

Keywords: creative teaching, fun environment, song, picture, folktales, children literature

INTRODUCTION

Our personal experience teaching English at Diponegoro University has shown us that in general our students' oral and literacy skills are quite low, as only a few of them who present good performance in English. This is frequently worsened by the fact that they—especially those from the non-English departments—show lack of motivation to learn English, which can be seen from, among other things, their reluctance to join class activities and to seriously work on their assignments or projects. For a large number of non-English department students, English is considered to be secondary to their major subjects, such as economy, medicine, or engineering.

Students' lack of drive to learn English and their inability to properly use English is unfortunate, since—despite strong objections towards its domination—English is still the most important language in the international world. It is a crucial language to learn if students want to perform better in their study and future careers. A large volume of research and numbers of qualified text-books for higher education, be they in science, arts, literature and humanities, are written in English, and reading the translated version of the articles or books may sometimes not as beneficial as reading the original ones. Further, together with the globalizing trend of the world, a number of foreign and more developed countries are competing to provide our students with opportunities to study or to participate in students' activities abroad. This experience is valuable, for it can enrich their knowledge and soft skills, which further can be an advantage for our nation.

On the other hand, the students' poor skills in communicative English are indications that there is "something wrong" with our teaching methods. They are worth questioning. Students who are currently studying at university are those who have learnt

English since they were in elementary schools, meaning that they have been learning English for more than twelve years. Yet, they are still unable to appropriately read and understand English, let alone speak English or write in English.

Concerning English teaching in elementary schools, Kasihani Suyanto (n/a) writes that there are several issues need to be addressed. First, the objectives of the study as stated in the regional/ local curricula are inappropriate for elementary students (6-12 years old). Unfortunately, she does not clarify which points of the study objectives she considers to be inappropriate for 6-12 year old students. Second, the English skills of our primary school teachers are poor, as many of them are not educated as foreign language teachers for young learners. For example, they cannot pronounce English words properly, and they do not master English grammar well. Also, they are unable to properly develop their teaching materials so as to meet their students' need.

Teaching English for young learners, as Kasihani (n/a) puts it, should take into consideration the learners' cognitive development and mental state. Giving students course materials that are in line with their cognitive and mental development will create a fun, exciting atmosphere of learning; consequently, students will find the process of learning English enjoyable and challenging, not tense or threatening. They will discover that English is not a hard or difficult subject, but an interesting and inspiring one.

Creating a fun environment or exciting atmosphere for primary-aged children (6-12 years old) to learn a foreign language is the focus of this paper. We chose 6-12 year old learners as our subjects because we believe that good foreign language teaching provided to very young learners will leave a strong positive impression for continuous learning. To create encouraging and conducive learning circumstances, three points are proposed. First, the study objectives of language teaching and learning are articulated in accordance with children's cognitive and emotional development. Second, the emphasis of the teaching and learning process is on the process per se, not on the transfer of information or the result. In other words, as Kasihani (n/a) puts it, students are encouraged to learn how to use English, rather than to learn about English. Finally, English is taught and learnt in context and by using various media. For example, new words are introduced through songs, rhymes, or folktales, while pictures and children literatures are used to introduce simple structures of English phrases and sentences. The fun and stimulating atmosphere of learning, in which children are encouraged to be active and creative, is expected to be able to evoke children's eagerness to keep on learning English.

In the next sections of the paper, we present some foundations based on which we develop our argument and illustrate how the use of various media can be of assistance in producing enjoyable learning circumstances. In the last section we summarize the main points of the paper and offer some suggestions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In Semarang, English can be considered to be a foreign language because it is not used in both official or formal and informal (daily) communications. Thus, many, if not most, primary-aged children in Semarang learn English in unnatural settings, since it is not used as a means of instruction at school, and it is not used as a means of communication at home and in the community. Children learn English formally

schools or courses in very limited amount of time. At schools, for instance, English is taught for two hours per week. In private English courses, young children or learners may be exposed to English more intensively and in longer period of time, but, still, they use it within limited period of time. Most of the time, they communicate in *Bahasa Indonesia* or their local language (Javanese or else). As a result, young children or primary students learning English are rarely exposed to the language being learned.

Learners' limited exposure to English should become one consideration when we set our study objectives in teaching English for young learners, i.e. we need to set our study objectives within an achievable range. Kasihani Suyanto (n/a, p. 3), for example, holds that: "*bahasa asing di SD sebenarnya untuk memperkenalkan kepada siswa bahwa ada bahasa lain selain bahasa ibu*" (the purpose of foreign language teaching in elementary schools is actually to introduce students to a language other than that of their mother tongue). However, we believe that the purpose of teaching English to young learners should go beyond "introducing our children to a language other than their mother tongue". Since the very beginning, we do think that it is important to educate our young learners of the significance of English as a means of international communication and the language of science and technology although, of course, this needs to be done within the range of their cognitive and emotional development: "... *seyogyanya bahasa Inggris diperkenalkan melalui kegiatan yang sesuai dengan kegiatan di dunia anak. Misalnya, belajar kosakata dan kalimat sederhana tentang apa yang ada di sekitarnya atau belajar sambil menggambar, menyanyi, bermain, dan berceritera*"²(Suyanto, n/a, p. 3). In the words of the constructivist approach³ to language teaching, "to support children learning, teachers must 'fit the child's needs at the moment' and operate within the child's zone of proximal development (the range of activities that children can do with the help of others)" (Christie et al., 2003, p. 11).

Another point we need to keep in mind is that teaching English for young learners should consider what is so called the principles of humanism, meaning that the emphasis of teaching is on "respecting the integrity of the learners, allowing for personal growth and responsibility, taking psychological and affective factors into account, and representing 'whole person learning'" (Roberts in Johnson, 2001, p. 188). In the words of Gertrude Moskovitz (in Johnson, 2001, p. 188), the humanistic principles of learning include:

student achievement of their full potential, striving for personal as well as cognitive growth, recognition of the important role of feelings, understanding the significance of self-discovery for learning, a belief that humans want to actualize their potential, recognizing the importance of healthy relationships

²English should be introduced in a way relevant to activities in the children world, such as learning new words and simple sentences connected to their surroundings, or learning by drawing, singing, playing and story-telling.

³Constructivist approach to learning holds that children "actively construct meaning", and this is carried out by relating their new experience to their previous knowledge, "making and testing their own hypotheses", and "interacting with peers and more knowledgeable others" (Christie, Enz, & Vukeich, 2003, p. 2).

with classmates, acknowledging that important factors in motivation are learning about yourself and increasing self-esteem.

Based on the humanistic view of learning, we can infer that teaching English for young learners should be thought provoking or creativity stimulating, which can be reached, among which, by focusing more on the *process*, rather than on the *result*. The focal point of our teaching is our learners' own activity and inquiry, and not the transfer of information. What they need to learn is how to actually use English, not how to know a lot of information about English. This means that what they need to know is how to use, say, present progressive tense, in real situation, rather than knowing the pattern and rules of the use of present progressive tense. What they need to do is to actually say simple sentences in the present progressive tense within appropriate contexts.

This leads to our third point of language teaching and learning, i.e. "contextual" English. In terms of contextual teaching and learning, Cynthia Martin (2008, p. 36) argues:

The important thing here is that the language is being introduced not in a vacuum as separate words or lists of nouns, but within the framework of meaningful text. You can present a rhyme or sing yourself, or use a CD with a native speaker voice. This helps to familiarize children with the rhythms and sounds of the new language and gets them used to the intonation.

Learning a new "element" of a foreign language in isolation will likely make it harder. We can, for instance, reflect on our own experience of learning English grammar or teaching English grammar to adult learners. Some old English grammar books did not provide us with context from which we could discern the larger picture of how to use, say, present perfect tense and how to differ it from other tenses. They usually displayed the grammatical pattern first, followed by some made-up sentences as examples. The sentences did not relate one another and did not really show how they appeared in real situations. As the sentences were made up and out of context, we could not really have a clear idea as to how to produce sentences using such a rule in real life. The situation would have been different if the sentences had been presented as part of a larger text, such as a report or a letter. By reading a report, we could have seen in practice how different tenses had been used to narrate a situation; thus, we could have had a clearer idea how to use present perfect tense in real situation.

A similar difficulty will be experienced by our young learners if they are to learn a new language in isolation. The situation may become even harder for them, as their state of mind is not as advanced or as developed as the adult's. For children, "learning is a social act", meaning that they "learn by watching, practicing, mimicking and absorbing what those around them do" (Christie et al., 2003, p. 11). Lively and colorful pictures of animals and their names in English will attract children's attention, and this assists in children learning better because they do not just hear the sounds, but they also see the visualizations. Similarly, such a simple song as "Are you sleeping, Brother John?" will last longer in our children's mind; they can always recall it as an example of the application of present progressive tense.

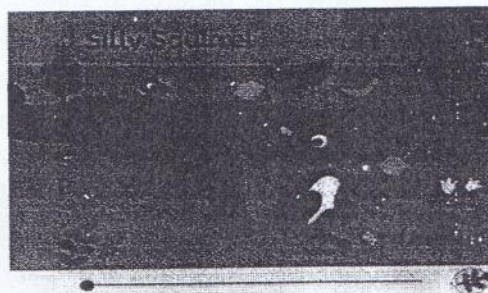
ILLUSTRATION

There is an intriguing joke on language acquisition among parents. Five young mothers were talking about English while they were waiting for their children. I remembered it was Friday and the children were in the classroom listening stories read by their kindergarten teacher. One of the five young mothers suddenly said that it was a brilliant idea marrying a foreigner so that the children would automatically have the ability to speak English. The other mothers burst out laughing and looked one to another. They kept talking about the need of mastering English for the betterment of their children's future. I stopped reading the old magazine and began to think whether I had taught my son English. Many things lingered my mind and none was giving a good judgment on the way I raised my son. Have I done something wrong by letting my son learn English from someone else but his father? I am an English teacher. I should teach my son English. Yet, I also have to teach my son his mother language. The dilemma of preserving the mother language and teaching English as an international language haunts me. Children must be encouraged to recognize their potential in order to like the language they are going to learn. It has been stated previously in the introduction that the lack of drive to learn English comes from the parents, the environment and the policy putting English to be secondary to their major subjects. Therefore, an exciting English is needed to teach English for young learners.

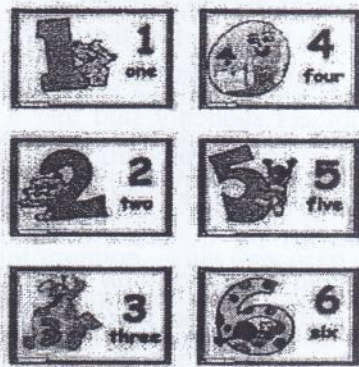
Based on the humanistic principles of learning, several methods of teaching English for young learners are provided to enhance the potential of the students. First, we use picture as the medium to introduce greetings, numbers and nouns in daily activities. This is not a new technique in teaching English for young learners. However, several modifications are required to make the learning atmosphere more exciting. Young learners are free to use their imagination since "it elaborates and develops the power of human's mind to go beyond senses" (Laksono, 2013, p.4). Teachers on the other hand are required to have broad mind and abundant creative ideas. The samples of using pictures as the media to encourage young learners learning English are provided below.



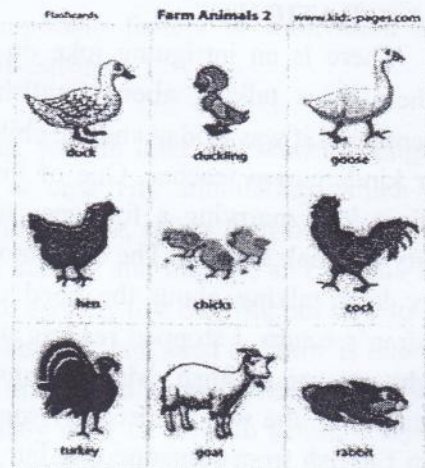
(Gogo's Adventures with English/www.engkids.com)



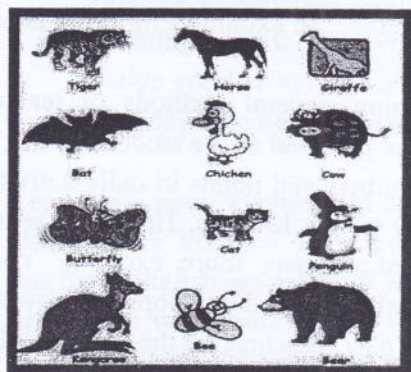
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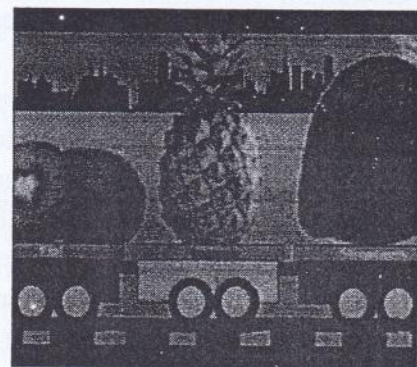
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(Learn Wild Animals Drawing
 /theanimals.pics)

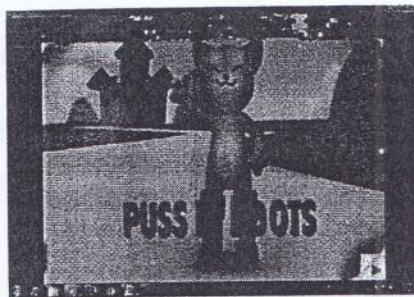
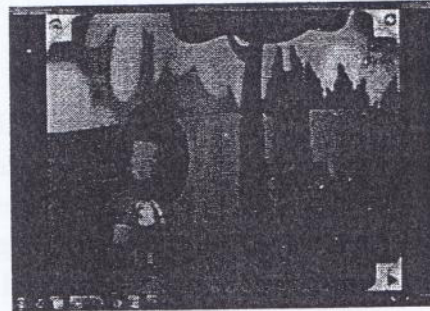
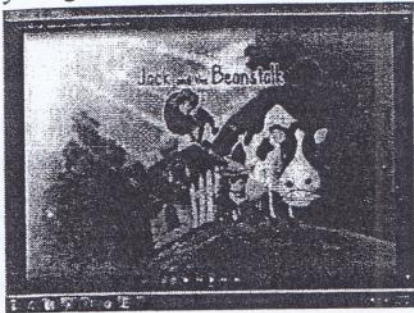


(Kids English poem song - Fruits
 names/cartoonsvids.blogspot.com)

Teacher shows the pictures to students and let them say anything they want. The class will be crowded for several minutes. This is the process of “go beyond senses”. Students analyze the pictures and try to give comment. It will not be surprising if some students use their mother language. The point here is to “catch” their attention. Then, the teacher asks students to write one letter that denotes the object shown in the class. Before the teacher tells students the name of the object in English, it is important to ask them to say aloud the letter they have been written down in their books. After that, students are asked to mention other words beginning with the same letter they have in their books. This process helps young learners to enhance their cognitive abilities.

The second technique to create exciting atmosphere for teaching English for young learners is using stories. The idea is based on the fact that children love stories. Story is the perfect medium to develop students’ imagination. The advancement of technology has created a new way of enjoying stories. Internet has provided thousands of children stories that can be downloaded free. Besides, it is also part of introducing the

benefit of technology to students. The main problem is probably the availability of the instruments. It is our concern and awareness that infrastructures vary among schools in Indonesia. Yet, the idea of applying technology in classroom's activities will help develop the quality of our students. Below are samples of stories for teaching English for young learners:



The second technique requires a creative and well-motivated teacher in order to deliver the material as attractive as possible. Teacher must play the short movie first and give opportunities for students to comprehend the story. Students may find it difficult to understand the dialogues but they may be able to understand the messages through the plots and settings of the story. The duty of a teacher here is to give assistance for every student in explaining every single aspect of the story. "The discussion may go beyond expectancy but students will remember this process and find out that learning English is fun.

The third technique in teaching exciting English for young learners is using song. Song will invite students to express their feeling. They will use not only verbal but also non-verbal language. At this point, "contextual" English is achieved. Students will learn the "rhythms and sounds of the new language" (Cynthia Martin, 2008, p.36).



Teacher should ask all students to stand up and sing together. The voice of the native speaker will give clear knowledge of pronouncing words in English. Again, the main objective of this method is mainly on the process of enhancing students' motivation and fondness towards English. The technique may take time but students will have great impressions on how exciting and fun learning English is.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have dealt with teaching English for primary-aged children or those learning English in elementary schools. As primary-aged learning provides foundation based on which children build their first impression of English, we hold that it is important to address their foreign language teaching and learning seriously because a good experience of learning will provide a strong base for the next stages of their learning.

Therefore, primary language teachers or instructors need to create fun and exciting atmosphere of learning. The points we put forward in the paper in order to create thought-provoking learning for young children are that teaching and learning English for young learners should be in accordance with their cognitive and mental development, that the central point of teaching and learning is the process, not the product or the result, and that English should be taught in context.

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