

TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS AND FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN DESIGNING THE MATERIALS

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Abstract

Teaching English to young learners at elementary school is different from that to adults. The English teachers to young learners in elementary school, therefore, need to comprehend and to apply the theories of language teaching-learning to young learners and language classroom management. Besides, the English teachers are not only required to be able to teach well but also to be able to design materials so that they can apply approaches, methods, and techniques of teaching-learning English appropriately.

This article discusses teaching English to young learners, the theories of teaching English to young learners at elementary school, English classroom management at elementary school, and what to consider in designing teaching-learning materials.

To reach the goal of the teaching and learning of English at elementary school, the English teachers at elementary school should know and apply the theories of teaching English to young learners. Besides, they should also know what to consider in designing teaching-learning materials in order that the materials given to the students are appropriate for the students' development in relation to languages.

Keywords: teaching and learning of English, English teachers, young learners, elementary school, teaching materials.

A. Introduction

In some regions, elementary schools have included English as among the alternatives local content of their school curriculum, school-based curriculum. The English teachers in elementary school, therefore, are not only to teach English to young learners (as one of the lessons) but also to become material designers. In accordance with this fact, the English teachers in elementary school need theoretical bases on teaching-learning English to young learners. Having theories on teaching-learning English to young learners, they will be able to design materials, to teach well, and to suggest what approaches, methods, and techniques to be used.

B. Discussion

1. English for Children in English Language Teaching

English is one of the international languages used as a means of communication in the international relationship and widely used in all branches of knowledge. Brown (2001: 118), furthermore, states that English is not frequently learned as a tool for understanding and teaching US or British cultural values. English, however, has become a tool for international communication in transportation, commerce, banking, tourism, technology, diplomacy, and scientific research. Based on the fact, it is appropriate that English is included in the local content of school-based curriculum in elementary school. Therefore, it is necessary to think system of teaching and learning of English to young learners (elementary school students) to gain an optimal result.

The teaching and learning of English in elementary school provides the students' English language competencies in the golden age –the age that children can learn anything easily. The two of those competencies are called *linguistic competence* and *linguistic performance*. It is in accordance with Chomsky in Clark and Clark (1977: 6) who states that linguistic competence is one's capacity to use a language, while linguistic performance is the actual application of this competence in speaking or listening. Furthermore, Brown, (1987: 24) states that competence refers to one's underlying knowledge of a system, event, or fact. It is the non-observable, idealized ability to do something, to perform something. Performance is the overtly observable and concrete manifestation or realization of competence. It is the actual doing of something: walking, singing, dancing, or speaking.

Rendering an English lesson to the students of elementary school is an appropriate decision viewed from the fact that the students of elementary school have a period called golden age and they have critical period, the period that children are able to learn anything easily. In this period, their brains are still flexible so that they are able to learn anything, including languages. Besides, children's attitudes to other languages and culture are open and these attitudes help the children learn the languages.

Children are able to learn anything at any stage as long as the learning material is presented in a comprehensible way. Therefore, the English teacher should follow a spiral curriculum model in developing competency standard and basic competency in their school-based curriculum, i.e., the one whose content is included in any units but in different levels. Furthermore, the teachers must

consider the four main characteristics in their instructions: input, the knowledge framework, the flow of presentation, and reward and punishment.

2. The Teaching of English to Young Learners

In teaching English to young learners, in this case, the students of elementary school, the teachers must comprehend the concept of acquisition and learning. Acquisition can be defined as a process of having language naturally or sub-consciously. On the other hand, learning is a process of having language consciously. Krashen and Terrell, (1983: 18) state that acquiring a language is 'picking it up', i.e., developing ability in language by using it in natural, communicative situations. Children acquire their first language, and most probably, second languages as well. Language learning is different from acquisition. Language learning is 'knowing the rules', i.e., having a conscious knowledge about grammar. According to recent research, it appears that formal language learning is not nearly as important in developing communicative ability in second languages as previously thought

In line with children's development and the two concepts above (acquisition and learning), the teaching of English to young learners at elementary school requires situations in which the students acquire language abilities by means of acquisition rather than learning. It means that the students acquire language naturally and communicatively.

In the teaching-learning process, the English teachers must know the kinds of language learning resources for young learners, as follows

- a. Learning resources are not additional materials for pleasure but main materials which are ordered and learned as interesting activities which children usually do in their daily lives.
- b. Learning resources for children must be appropriate for children's aptitude, will, world, and so forth. Therefore, ideal English teachers to young learners are those who are familiar with English songs and games in English. In addition, they are able to order those materials into becoming interesting ones.
- c. There must be a clear distinction between technique and resource. Songs, stories, poems, and games are resources.

In teaching English to children (young learners) at elementary school, the English teachers need to comprehend language learning principles, which, according to some experts, are as follows.

- a. Children learn through experiences by manipulating surrounding objects. Piaget in Hudelson (1991: 256) states that children in primary or elementary school are usually in what is called the concrete operational stage of cognitive development. This means that they learn through hands –on experiences and through manipulation of objects in the environment. Accordingly, it is important that the English teachers use media or realia in delivering the materials in order that the students are able to understand easily.
- b. Children learn through social context, in groups in which they know with one another. Vygotsky in Hudelson (1991: 257) states that children learn in social contexts, in groups where some group members know more than others. Therefore, the English teachers should make their teaching situations similar to social contexts.
- c. Acquisition takes place when learners comprehend how the language is used. Vygotsky in Hudelson (1991: 257) states that acquisition occurs through learners figuring out how the language works, through learners making and testing out hypotheses about the language. In this case, the English teacher should use English correctly although they employ short sentences.
- d. Acquisition takes place in social interaction. Vygotsky in Hudelson (1991: 257) states that 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.

To make situation of the teaching of English to children (young learners) communicative, the English teachers should comprehend the communicative principles which are proposed by John and Morrow (1983: 60-64) as follows.

- a. *Know what you are doing.*
- b. *The whole is more than the sum of the parts.*
- c. *The processes are as important as the forms.*
- d. *To learn it, do it.*
- e. *Mistakes are not always a mistake.*

Teaching English to young learners is not merely a matter of setting them loose on a plethora of authentic language tasks in the classroom. To successfully teach young learners a second or foreign language requires specific skills and intuitions that differ from those appropriate for adult teaching.

Therefore, It is important to consider the five categories which are proposed by Brown (2001: 87-90) in rendering some practical approaches to teaching young learners. Those are as follows.

- a. Intellectual Development
- b. It is closely related to what Piaget calls 'concrete opinion", i.e., young learners understand something concrete. Grammar and rules stated in abstract terms, therefore, should be avoided but certain patterns, examples, and repetitions, should be developed.
- c. Attention Span
- d. Considering that children have short attention spans, it is quite useful to make lessons become interesting, lively, and fun. Therefore, activities should be designed to capture children's immediate interest, a lesson needs a variety of activities, a teacher needs to be animated, lively, and enthusiastic about the subject matter, a lesson needs a sense of humor, and it is badly needed to consider that children have a lot of natural curiosity. Accordingly, the English teachers to young learners should make sure that they tap into that curiosity whenever possible, and he will thereby help to maintain attention and focus.
- e. Sensory Input
- f. In consideration of sensory input, activities should strive to go well beyond the visual and auditory modes that learners feel are usually sufficient for a classroom. It means that the lessons contain physical activities, projects and hands-on activities, sensory aids here and there, and non-verbal languages.
- g. Affective Factors
- h. Children are often innovative. They are extremely sensitive. Therefore, the English teachers should help their students to laugh with (not laugh at) each other at various mistakes that they all make, be patient and supportive to build self-esteem, be firm, and elicit as much oral participation as possible from students.
- i. Authentic, Meaningful Language

Children are focused on what the new language can actually be used for here and now. They are less willing to put up with a language that does not hold immediate rewards for them. Children are good at sensing language that is not *authentic*; therefore, "canned" or stilted language will likely be rejected. The language needs to be firmly *context-embedded* and not *context-reduced*. A *whole*

language approach is essential. It means that if language is broken into too many bits and pieces, students won't see the relationship to the whole.

In the process of teaching English to young learners, or, students of elementary school, there are three points that must be considered and done. Those are as follows.

a. Language chunks

In practicing speaking in English, the students need to use language chunks, i.e., phrases which have complete meaning. In this way, the students will be able to comprehend language function as a means of communication easily although at first they do not know the meaning of the phrases they use, such as, "Good morning", "Good afternoon", "Never mind", "Thank you", and so forth. Perhaps, at the beginning the students do not know the meaning of the intended phrases but they comprehend the usage of those expressions. For example, when they meet their friends in the morning they will say, "Good morning", at noon they will say, "Good afternoon", when they are given something by their friends, they will say, "Thank you", and so forth. This is in line with Abe (1991: 266) who the language teachers to treat language as a series of natural chunks.

b. Using media

Using media as a means of teaching English to young learners helps the teachers create classroom situations to be more alive. The media also help the teachers render materials and help the students comprehend the given materials.

.... In place of reading, we can use flash cards, pictures, and various objects and realia to make the classroom come alive and resemble more closely the outside world. Use of these tools can free the teacher to be more the observer and facilitator and free the children to learn to use the language and learn to love the potentially fabulous experience of being able to communicate in another language to other people from around our vast world (Abe, 1991: 266-267).

c. Topic-based activities

Topic-based activities are usually called The Topic Approach (Hudelson, 1991: 258) or Topic-Based Work (Krashen, 1983: 84). The topic-based activities begin with a subject appropriate for the students and then that subject is designed to involve the students in investigating the topic and using the language as an integral part and the core of investigation.

The topic approach begins with a subject that is of relevance and/or interest to the learners and then designs activities for learners that will involve them in investigating that topic and using language as an integral and central part

of that investigation. Advocates of the topic approach suggest that learners will be more likely to be motivated to use the new language if their attention is focused on a topic or subject that they have an interest in or care about ... (Hudelson, 199: 258).

The use of this topic supports the success of the teaching of English to young learners because the materials are based on students' experiences and interest on the topic. They can associate any word, function, and situation involved to the specific topic. The association helps the students in memorization so that learning language through context helps them in comprehension.

When you are concentrating on a particular topic, the content of the lessons automatically becomes more important than the language itself. This means that it is easier to relate the lessons to the experiences and interests of your pupils (Scott and Ytreberg, 1993: 84).

Working on topics can help the learning process. The children can associate words, functions, structures, and situations with a particular topic. Association helps memory, and learning language in context clearly helps both understanding and memory (Scott and Ytreberg, 1993: 84).

3. Management of the English Classroom and Atmosphere.

Classroom management and the classroom situation are parts of factors which determine the success of the teaching-learning process. Good classroom management and a conducive situation will lead to good results of the teaching-learning process. Classroom management needs special attention, especially in language classrooms in which the students are expected to communicate in the target language. Therefore, there must be such a situation available for the students to learn.

A good and conducive classroom will help the teachers make a classroom atmosphere (a classroom situation) which supports the success of the teaching of English to young learners at the elementary school. Therefore, the English teachers at elementary schools should have things that Scott and Ytreberg suggest as follows.

a. Abilities

The teachers of English to young learners should be able to sing songs, tell stories, and organize worksheet so that the classroom atmosphere seems interesting.

b. Attitudes

The teachers respect the students and appear to like all the students equally because they have very keen sense of fairness.

c. Helping the students feel secure

Feeling secure will help the students comprehend the materials optimally. These points below make the students feel secure.

- 1) The students know what is happening, and they need to feel that the teacher is in charge.
- 2) The teacher shows respect to the students.
- 3) The teacher listens to whatever the students say —mistakes as well.
- 4) The teacher does not mind the students' getting things wrong and tell them that everyone makes mistakes when he is learning a new language.
- 5) The teacher establishes routines by greeting the students at the beginning of classes, for example.
- 6) The teacher gives the students responsibility for doing either theoretical or practical jobs in the classroom.
- 7) The teacher avoids organizing the competition in the classroom.
- 8) The teacher avoids giving physical rewards or prizes that make the students be jealous with one another.
- 9) The teacher does not give the students English names.

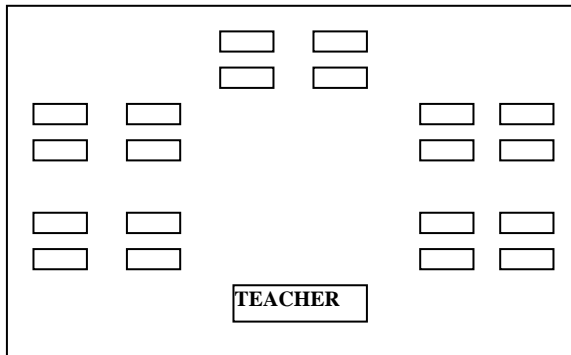
d. The physical surrounding

Young learners usually respond well to surroundings which are pleasant and familiar so that, if possible, on the wall had better be put things like pictures, calendars, posters, and so forth. Those visual aids should be given captions in order that the students could discover the English word for the objects in the pictures easily.

e. Arrangement of the desks and chairs

It is suggested that in the English class the desks and chairs are light so that they are movable and their arrangement is changeable. The purpose is to have different classroom atmosphere by changing the arrangement of the desks and chairs so that the students do not get bored by any static situation and condition. The model of the arrangement of desks and chairs is adjusted to the intended purpose and situation to facilitate the teaching-learning process. There are several models of the arrangement of desks and chairs according to their purposes. Here are some of the examples.

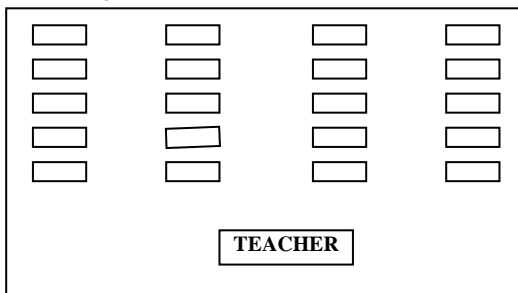
1). Arrangement Model A



The advantages of this model are as follows.

- a) The teachers are able to teach the whole class easily.
- b) The students are able to work in groups of four.
- c) The students are able to work in pairs easily.
- d) It makes it possible to have games in the middle space of the class.
- e) The students sit in groups so that they are able to talk with one another naturally although they work individually.

2). Arrangement Model B

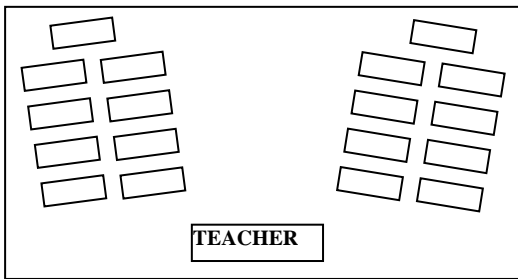


The advantages of this model are as follows.

- a) The students are able to work individually easily.
- b) It makes it possible to work in pairs with the classmates in front or behind them.

The weakness of this arrangement is that the students cannot communicate with one another naturally and the students who sit in the back just see the heads of their friends sitting in front of them.

3). Arrangement Model C



The arrangement of this model (C) has the same strength and weakness as model B but this model is more flexible because it has a space in the middle.

f. Grouping the students

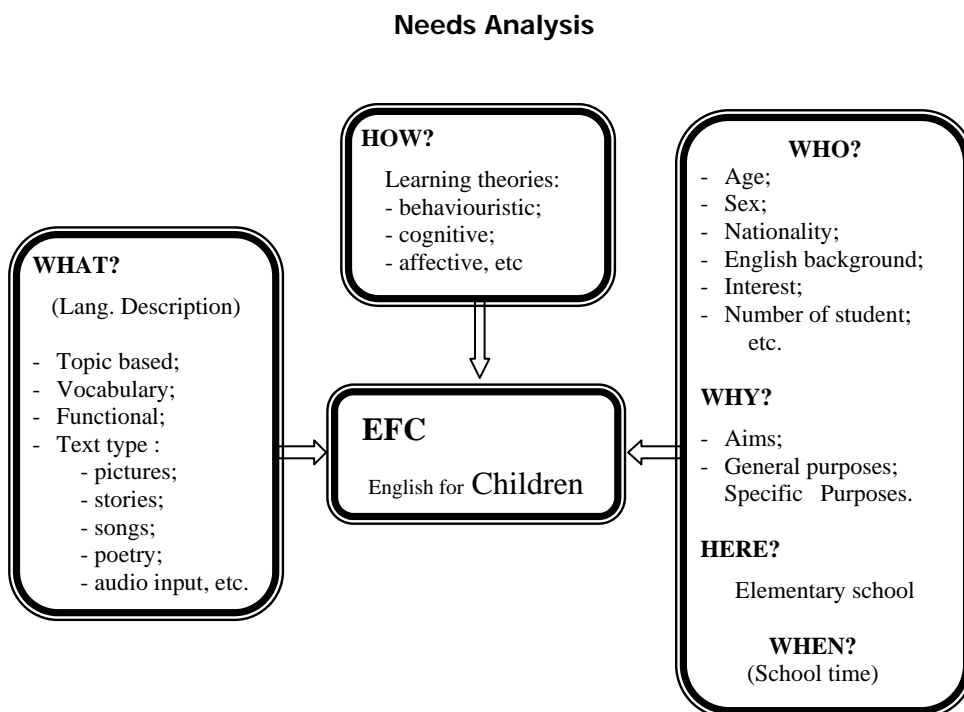
The students in the class have different characteristics so that in grouping them, the teacher needs to consider enough socialization among themselves. It can be done by arranging the desks as in model **A**. With the students occupying the arrangement model **A**, grouping can be done either in pairs or in groups. In making groups, the students are not allowed to choose the members of their groups themselves because it takes a long time. The clever students are spread into all groups in order that they can help those who are not so clever. The members of each group are three to five students.

g. Classroom Language

The English teachers to young learners in elementary school should communicate with the students in English as much as possible so that, gradually, the students are able to comprehend. While the teachers are communicating with the students, it is necessary to use language chunks, i.e., phrases having complete meaning (meaningful phrases) as what has been discussed above. The examples are "I'm sorry", "I don't know" or "I don't understand" (Scott and Ytreberg, 1993: 8–18).

4. Factors to Consider in Designing English teaching Materials for Young Learners

Designing teaching materials is not an easy job. The problems which are faced by those who are responsible for the teaching and learning are complicated, in this case the teaching-learning of English. It needs considerations to meet needs, wants, and lacks. These considerations are usually covered what is called *needs analysis*. One of the areas of the needs analysis is in general education which includes elementary school (Yalden, 1985: 91). The diagram of needs analysis, as Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 53-63) state, can be seen as follows.



In the teaching-learning process at elementary school, the needs analysis is useful for teachers as Burden and Byrd (1999: 31) state that needs analysis will help teachers make a number of planning decisions, group students, decide strategies and activities, and capitalize on students' strength and motivations.

Needs analysis involves questions with *who*, *why*, *where*, and *when*. The first two main important questions are those with *who* and *why* while others just follow them.

“Why does one need needs analysis in designing teaching-learning materials?” One needs analysis in order that he is able to work in line with the needs, wants, and lacks involved so that he is able to achieve the planned objectives.

It is important to know who the students are, and their characteristic backgrounds such as their age, sex, nationality, social background, economic background, and interest as Neil and Wiles (1990: 79) state “A good beginning for teachers is to find out some general information about their students (e.g., ethnic and family background, family status, parents’ level of schooling, religious orientations, and soon ...”. Therefore, in the first few days of school as Airisian (1990) proposes, the classroom teacher is responsible for

- a. observing about range of information about individual pupils and the class as a group,
- b. abstracting useful and relevant data from all the stimuli available,
- c. combining these with his or her own expectations, beliefs, and attitudes, and
- d. arriving at the judgment about individual pupils, the class, and approaches which will form the classroom society and allow instruction to begin.

Information of the students’ background gained through the question using *who* enables course designers to determine materials appropriate for the students because they have known the students’ capacity about the unit which will be given. The course designers, therefore, are able to choose the specific and appropriate materials according to the students’ level by deciding the answer to the question using *what*.

Before selecting content and instructional activities for a unit, it would be useful to find out what students already know about the content in the unit. If you were teaching a fourth grade social studies class and covering the electoral process in the state and federal government how would you assess your students’ current knowledge? What are some alternative assessment approaches that would bring some novelty and variety to the class? (Burden and Byrd, 1999: 31)

The topic approach begins with a subject that is of relevance and/or interest to the learners and then designs activities for learners that will involve them in investigating that topic and using language as an integral or central part of that investigation (Hadelson, 19:258).

Information about the students' background gained through the question using *who* also enables the course designers to next determine what approaches, methods, and techniques to be used in the teaching-learning process by deciding the answer to the question using *how*. From the answer to the question using *who*, problems related to students' characteristics such as a way of interaction can be solved. The way of interaction which is usually called contact is still a problem at elementary school as Hass and Parkay (1993: 344) state "A major problem for elementary school is to establish effective contact with each child."

To have contact with students effectively, especially elementary school students of the fourth to sixth grade, English teachers must know their students' characteristics in general. Scott and Ytreberg (1993: 3-4) propose some general young language learners' characteristics (elementary school students) as follows

- a. Their basic concepts are formed. They have decided views of the world.
- b. They can tell the difference between fact and fiction.
- c. They ask questions all the time.
- d. They rely on the spoken word as well as the physical world to convey and understand meaning.
- e. They are able to make some decisions about their own learning.
- f. They have definite views about what they like and don't like doing.
- g. They have developed sense of fairness about what happens in the classroom and begin to question the teacher's decisions.
- h. They are able to work with others and learn from others.

Other characteristics related to young language learners (such as, elementary school) students that Scott and Ytreberg (1993: 2) state are as follows.

- a. They know that the world is governed by rules. They may not always understand the rules but they know that they are there to be obeyed and the rules help to nurture a feeling of security.
- b. They understand situations more quickly than they understand the language used.
- c. They use language skills long before they are aware of them.
- d. Their own understanding comes through hands, eyes, and ears.
- e. They are very logical –what the teachers say first happens first.
- f. They have very short attention and concentration span.
- g. Children do not always understand what adults are talking about.
- h. Young children cannot decide for themselves what to learn.
- i. Young children love to play.
- j. Young children are enthusiastic and positive about learning.

From those characteristics above, it can be known that young language learners (in this case, elementary school students) are able to understand abstract ideas, understand symbols (beginning with words), generalize, and systematize.

Although the students' background has been known, it is not wise to make a decision in a hurry. Information must be carefully taken into consideration. The course designers should know what purposes the learners have by taking the intended course (English). The learners' purposes of taking the course can be known by deciding the answer to the question using *why*.

The question using *why* is important for the course designers to make the students' purposes and materials of the course fit each other. From the question using *why*, they could know the purposes why they learn English, for what purposes they learn English, for what specific purposes they learn English, and so forth.

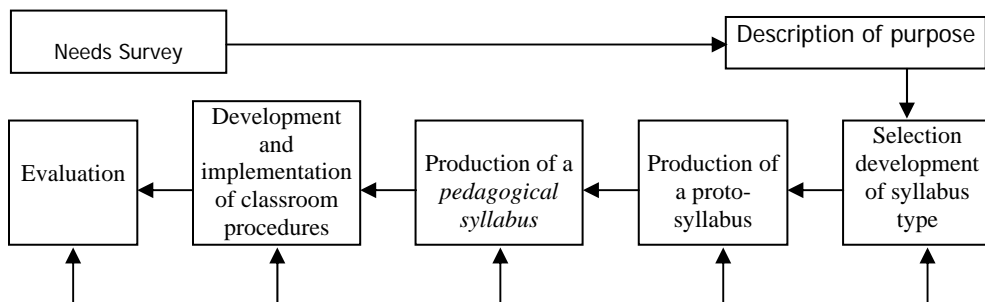
A society establishes and supports schools for certain purposes; it seeks to achieve certain ends or desired outcomes. Efforts of adults to direct the experiences of young people in formal institutions such as the school constitutes preferences for certain human ends and values ... schooling is a moral venture, one that necessitates choosing values among innumerable possibilities (Neil and Wiles, 1990: 58).

However, since children (students of elementary school) do not yet know their needs, it is appropriate to adopt the needs from the competency standard and basic competence in the school-based curriculum.

Corder (1973) states that the best result in language teaching is likely to be achieved when the linguistic content of the course most closely approximates to the learner's functional needs.

The question using *when* and *why* are flexible. Those questions only follow the two above explained questions of the needs analysis.

In short, the English teaching-learning material design can be drawn as a diagram as follows:



C. Conclusion

To arrive at the intended goal of the teaching-learning of English at elementary school, there are several factors which need to be considered. Those factors are the theories of the teaching of language to young learners (in this case, elementary school students), the management of English classroom and atmosphere, and factors to consider in designing materials.

Having comprehended the theories of teaching language to young learners in general, the teachers of English could determine how English is to be taught to young learners –learning English through activities in social contexts. Meanwhile, the management of the English classroom and atmosphere during the teaching-learning process depends on the activities which are done so that the students (children), instead of getting bored, will become interested in participating the class.

However, to meet the goal of the teaching-learning of English at elementary school, the English teachers must know not only the students' development related to language ability in general but also their students' background and wants –especially the students' characteristics. They could then teach appropriately because they teach at a certain elementary school. In short, the teachers need to consider who their students are and why they learn English. Therefore, they are able to design materials and teach their students naturally on the basis of a social and economic environment; as a result, the students (children) master English through acquisition rather than learning.

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