

Teaching the Four Language Skills in Primary EFL Classroom: Some Considerations

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Abstract

English teachers in Indonesian primary schools are often in doubt about the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ to teach because most English teachers training colleges do not provide them with specialized training in how to meet the needs of primary school students; TEYL is a new and highly dynamic field; the status of English in the curriculum of primary schools in Indonesia is a local content, and thus the National Education Ministry does not provide English syllabus for primary school. Since the objective of teaching English in primary school is to provide a good basis for communicative competence as a foundation to study it in secondary school; the development of the four language skills should be made the focus of all learning activities. This paper provides some guidelines, which are adapted from some publications and discussions concerning TEYL for teaching the four language skills in primary schools.

Keywords: primary school, language skills, young learner, listening, speaking, reading, writing

Introduction

English has undoubtedly become both the most prominent means of global communication and the most important means for acquiring access to the world's intellectual, cultural, and technical resources. Although it does not have the largest number of native speakers, English is far more worldwide in its distribution than all other spoken languages. In 2000, Mandarin Chinese has around 874 million native speakers; Hindi, 366 million; and English, 341 million. In addition to the 341 million native speakers, English also has as 150 to 300 million speakers who use it as a second language and 100 to 1,000 million speakers who use it as a foreign language (Crystal, 1997). In addition, English is now the major communication media among nations and parts of nations. By international treaty, English is the official language for aerial and maritime communications, as well as one of the official languages of the European Union, the United Nations, and most international athletic organizations, including the International Olympic Committee. Crystal (as cited in Graddol, 2000: 8) estimates that 85% of international organizations now use English as their working language. In short, it is the pre-eminent language of wider communication.

Its status as the most commonly used language for acquiring access to the world's intellectual, cultural, and technical resources is seen in the fact that it is used as a library language, as the medium of science, technology and international trade. Books, magazines, and newspapers written in English are available in many countries around the world. English is also the most commonly used language in the sciences. In 1997, the Science Citation Index reported that 95% of its articles were written in English, even though only half of them came from authors in English-speaking countries (Wikipedia, 2006).

Due to its increasing use as the first global language, English proficiency is not merely an advantage but also a must. In international context, Cooke (as cited in Pennycook, 2001), affirms that English serves as the main gate to get a better job, especially in multinational companies. In Indonesian context, almost all job advertisements in well-known newspapers like "Kompas" and "Suara Pembaruan" always include English proficiency is one of the major requirements. This indicates that, even in Indonesia, one's failure to master English will diminish one's opportunity to compete for better career. In relation to this, Indonesian government's permission to start the teaching of English in primary schools since 1994, which hopefully will heighten Indonesians' English proficiency, is a good step because it is hypothesized that the earlier one studies English the more time one can have to deal with it and the better one's proficiency will be.

Although the idea that an early start in English language learning in foreign language contexts produces better English speakers is not yet strongly supported by empirical evidence (Nunan, 1999, p. 3), it is widely believed that starting the study of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) before the critical period—12 or 13 years old—will facilitate better proficiency. An early start alone will admittedly not guaranty high proficiency. It should be supported by the use of suitable program and curriculum, allocation of proper number of hours spent in English class, provision of facilitative the learning conditions, and the employment of appropriate techniques and activities used (Rixon, 2000).

In addition to the belief that the earlier a child learns a foreign language, the better his/her opportunity to achieve high proficiency in the language, the teaching of English in Indonesian primary schools seem to have been in line with three other arguments. First, adolescent children in diverse regions in Indonesia need to speak English to meet the demands of tourism industries. Second, the longer an individual learns a language the higher the proficiency he/she will achieve. Finally, results of the current English teaching at the secondary level in Indonesia are unsatisfactory (Huda, 1999).

Despite the great potential advantages of starting the teaching of English in primary schools, the implementation in Indonesia has emerged some problems. First, the teachers graduated from the English department of the teacher training colleges in Indonesia were generally not provided with specialized training in how to meet the needs of primary school English classes. In general, these colleges' curriculum does not include particular subjects for teaching English to children. The second reason—which is closely related to the first—is the fact that the teaching of English to young learners is a new and highly dynamic field. Language educators, researchers, and linguists cannot yet formulate certain applicable ideas or suggestions that Indonesian teachers can adopt. Consequently, the teachers are often in doubt about the 'what' and the 'how' to teach. Thirdly, the status of English in the curriculum of primary schools is still a local content. Therefore, the National Education Ministry does not provide English syllabus for primary school. The syllabus is supposed to be designed by the regional or provincial curriculum board. As a consequence, the objective of English teaching greatly varies from one region to another (even from one school to another in the same region). Although the government has admittedly determined that the objective of teaching English in primary school is to provide a good basis for communicative competence so that the pupils will later find it easier to study in secondary school, the implementation is not yet trouble-free. In practice, some teachers still adopt the methods commonly used

in secondary school, e.g. by teaching grammar to the pupils or by asking them to memorize every single word they listen to or read.

The uses of such approaches are inadequate to achieve the objective—communicative competence. To learn a language in order to use it as a means of communication, the pupils need to deal with the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing—and the language system—sound structure and vocabulary. By mastering these elements, they are expected to be able to integrate them in communication acts. The main purpose of this paper is to provide some guidelines for teaching the four language skills in primary schools. These ideas were based on the combination of the present writer's some years experience in teaching English to primary school students and insights from some publications and discussions concerning the teaching of English as a foreign language to young learners.

Although discussions on the teaching of the four language skills below are placed in four different sections, it does not mean that the four language skills are isolated process. In reality, each language process enhances students' ability to use the others. Listening to other people use language enhances children's ability to speak. Reading helps students develop skills for communicating through writing. Through reading they have incidental contact with the rules of grammar. Reading also enables students to develop a sense for the structure of the language and grammar and increase their vocabulary. Writing helps in developing phonic knowledge and enhances reading fluency, because young children always associate written language with oral language they have mastered. Thus, the separation of the four language skills in the following sections is only for the sake of easiness for discussion.

Listening

Although speaking is the most common form of communication, due to several reasons, listening is the first skill to master in order to be proficient in a language. First, no one can say a word before listening to it. Thus, the teacher must take into account that the level of language input (listening) must be higher than the level of language production (speaking). Smith (1975, pp. 98-99) emphasizes: "... good listeners often speak more exactly and more creatively than poor listeners; they have more words at their command." Second, in a conversation, one can respond accurately only after listening precisely. Our daily interactions prove that poor listening can lead to unnecessary arguments and problems. Third, listening constitutes half of the communication process. Fourth, children get the majority information through listening. Finally, children spend more than half the time they are in the

classrooms by listening (Smith, 1975, p. 65). Realizing these reasons, we can see how important it is for the learners.

Despite its importance, listening to a foreign language sounds is possibly the skill which learners usually find the most difficult. This is quite natural since the sounds they hear, at least in initial stages, are unfamiliar. Thus, to get the message sent through an expression, they always feel under unnecessary pressure to understand every word. Another prominent cause that makes listening to a foreign language sounds difficult for children is the fact that children, whether in or out of the classrooms, are subjected to endless number of sounds. To a higher extent, these sounds do not belong to the foreign language they are learning. As a consequence, the learners cannot concentrate on comprehending the sounds of the foreign language they are learning.

It is even worsened by the tendency of presenting listening activities in EFL classes as simply opportunities for students to practice listening to English (Field 1998). The default method used in listening class usually begins with some kinds of pre-teaching of the context of the listening material combined with an introduction to some of the vocabulary included in the text. What comes next is often simply listening to the text, listening again, and finally answering some sort of comprehension questions. What is obvious in this default method, which is referred to by Field (1998) as focusing on product rather than process, is that the learners merely practice to listen but do not learn to discriminate the phonological features of the speech they are hearing. Such procedure is of course not necessarily a bad activity. However, if it is employed as the only way for students to learn listening, we cannot expect the learners learn listening effectively. (Rost, 1990) explains that the teaching of listening needs to be focused on discriminating sounds in words, especially phonemic contrasts, in addition to deducing the meaning of unfamiliar words, predicting content, noting contradictions, inadequate information, ambiguities, and differentiating between fact and opinion.

To achieve the aims related to listening, the teacher plays an important role that is defined in the following steps.

1. Make sure the physical conditions are properly set up. All the distractions—unrelated materials, noise and movement—should be removed. The teacher must also be sure that chairs face the right direction so that the eye strain and uncomfortable sitting conditions are erased.
2. It is important to help pupils prepare for the listening task well before they hear the text itself. First of all the teacher must ensure that the children understand the language they need to complete the task and are fully aware

of exactly what is expected of them. Mendelsohn (1994) asserts that learners should know what they are listening for and why.

3. Select, explain, and demonstrate the use of the phonological features (ellipsis, assimilation, prominence, etc.) used in the text you think important for the students to notice in order to decode the text they are going to listen. Don't forget that the student's degree of comprehension largely depends on their ability to discriminate phonemes, to recognize stress and intonation pattern and to retain what they have heard.
4. Use materials based on a wide range of authentic texts, including both monologues and dialogues.
5. The teacher should speak in animated and interesting manner, so that the pupils have a deep interest in the activity.
6. The teacher should also be sure that her speaking speed does not exceed the pupils' listening speed.
7. The next important step the teacher should do is to encourage pupils to anticipate what they are going to hear. In everyday life, the speaker, the situation, and visual clues all help us to decode oral messages. The teacher can help the pupils by presenting the listening activity within the context of the topic of a teaching unit. (In relation to this, using videos in listening classes is also advantageous). This will help the young learners predict what the answers might be. The teacher can also help them further by asking questions and using the illustrations to encourage pupils to guess the answers even before they hear the text. Ask such question as, "Do you think Joko will agree with Tono?"; "Will Tina help her younger brother clean his bedroom?"
8. During the listening the pupils should be able to focus on understanding the message. So, it is imperative to make certain they are not trying to read or write at the same time. It is also necessary to give a second chance to listen to the text to provide a new opportunity to those who were not able to do the task. Mendelsohn (1994) stresses that learners should be given opportunities to progressively structure their listening by listening to a text several times and by working through increasingly challenging listening tasks.
9. When the pupils have completed the activity, encourage the whole class to answer. Try not to put individual pupils under unnecessary pressure. Rather than validating whether an answer is correct or not, replay the cassette or video and let the pupils listen again for confirmation.
10. If the class gives you a variety of answers, list them all on the board and replay the cassette or video, so that the pupils can listen and choose the correct one. Even if they all appear to have completed the task successfully, always motivate them to listen to the text once more and check their answers for themselves.

11. The teacher needs to stimulate the pupils to appreciate good listening by praising their achievement. For instance, when someone could answer her questions, it is important for her to say, “Very good. You did such a good job! It proves that you listened very well.”

Speaking

First of all, as it has been stated in the previous section, in language learning the learners are expected to have higher level of language input (listening) than the level of language production (speaking). Thus, the majority of speaking activities used in the first levels should be designed to enable pupils to participate with a minimal verbal response. However, in the last levels, e.g. grade six, pupils are encouraged to begin to manipulate language and express themselves in a much more personal way.

Based on my experience, there are three main types of speaking activities we can suitably use in primary schools. The first type is songs, chants, and poems—which are very effective to encourage young learners to mimic the model they hear on the cassette or video. This helps pupils to master the sounds, rhythms, and intonation of the English language through simple reproduction. Steiner (as cited in Jaffke, 2004) emphasizes the importance of using poetic language in the first three classes. Based on the experiences of teachers who have [been] teaching young learners for a long time, he explains that poetic language, based on rhythm and rhyme, is learned far more easily by children than is prose language. Along with songs, poetic language introduces the children to the flow of the new language and familiarizes them with its prosodic elements: emphasis, intonation, pitches, etc. In addition, a great number of songs or poems also contain certain grammatical points. Well selected songs or poems can be integrated into lessons for reinforcing grammar points.

The second type of speaking activities used in primary schools is the games and pair work activities. They are commonly based on a given model; they do encourage young learners to begin to manipulate the language by presenting them with a certain amount of choice, albeit within a fairly controlled situation. In addition, using games is also advantageous because by doing games and pair work activities, the pupils (though they are totally unaware of this at the time) also develop a rich store of grammatical forms and structures. However, since games and pair work necessitate much energy, they are more suitable to use in the upper classes, i.e. in grade four to six.

The third type of speaking activities used in primary schools is oral report and discussions on books the students have finished reading. Children

need to talk to each other about what they're reading and share their ideas and insights with others. In this way, the stories come to life, students gain insight and ideas from others, and language learning is enhanced. Zang (2009, p. 34) shows that integrating speaking and reading skills deepens students' understanding of the reading material, reveals any problem they have understanding a text, and, most importantly, lets them apply the information they have read into authentic speaking practice that improves their fluency. Kauchak & Eggen (1998) asserts that talking and social interaction enhances learning of any kind.

To succeed any speaking activity, children need to acknowledge that there is a real reason for asking a question or giving a piece of information. Therefore, the teacher should make sure the activities she presents to the pupils provide a reason for speaking, whether this is to play a game or to find out real information about friends in the class.

When the activity begins, make sure that the pupils are speaking as much English as possible without interfering to correct the mistakes that they will probably make. Try to treat errors casually by praising the utterance and simply repeating it correctly without necessarily highlighting the errors. Finally, always offer praise for effort regardless of the accuracy of the English produced.

Reading

Although reading is generally after listening and speaking in the hierarchy of communication abilities to be developed, the teaching of English in Indonesian primary school should make reading one of the first priorities to develop. This is not only because reading enables learners to access information from many written texts but also because reading proficiency contributes to one's self realization and the development of his personal-social adjustment. And since "reading is a very complicated process involving a variety of factors that interact with one another" (Kim, 2002), it should be developed in graded and sequential phases. The factors involved in reading include sub-reading skills (such as word recognition, skimming, scanning, sentence comprehension, getting the topic, etc.) and background knowledge. Brindley (1994) emphasizes the essence of background knowledge factor in reading by saying:

Texts are not entirely self-contained; they refer to the world. Texts assume knowledge on the part of the reader. Sometimes the knowledge is factually based and refers to objects, events and people. There are

many references in texts which depend not on a grasp of facts but on an understanding of cultural institutions and practices (p. 82).

To develop pupils' reading skill in English, the teacher might need to consider the following points.

1. In order to make reading an interesting challenge, not a tedious task, it is important that pupils not labor over every word, whether they are skimming the text for general meaning or scanning it to pick out specific information.
2. When choosing texts consider not only their difficulty level, but also their interest or their humor so that children will want to read for the same reasons they read in their own language: to be entertained or to find out something they do not already know.
3. As with listening activities, it is important to spend time preparing for the task by using the illustrations (a usual feature in reading activities for children), pupils' own knowledge about the subject matter, and key vocabulary to help the pupils to predict the general content of the text. Discuss the subject and ask questions to elicit language and to stimulate the pupils' interest in the text before they begin reading. Also make sure that the pupils understand the essential vocabulary they need to complete the task before they begin to read.
4. While the children are reading the text, move around the class providing support if pupils need it. Where possible, encourage pupils to work out the meaning of vocabulary as they come across it, using the context and the supporting illustrations.
5. If the reading activity is directed for comprehension, pupils should be discouraged to read texts aloud. Reading aloud inhibits most pupils and forces them to concentrate on what they are saying as opposed to what they are reading and the meaning is very often lost. Reading aloud should be employed only as an activity to improve pronunciation, to recognize the relationship of the written symbols and the sounds, to learn a play, or to recite a poem.
6. Last but not least, help the pupils fall in love with books. Reading is an enjoyable act. There are wonderful stories and interesting characters one can meet in books. Through reading, one can experience magic, adventure, success, failure, moral dilemmas, triumph, comedy, or tragedy. In good books one can also learn about interesting things or travel to many fascinating places.
7. Since a teacher's most important job is to help her students fall in love with books, it is imperative to provide the pupils with a variety of texts which meet their language proficiency and interest. It is a very good idea to

provide ten or more minutes of silent uninterrupted reading time in every English class. According to Allington (2006), recent studies show that primary age children spend as little as ten minutes a day engaged in authentic reading experiences. Johnson (2008) claims that limiting opportunities to engage in real reading experiences is one of the surest way to retard children's reading progress and limit their intellectual development (p. 12).

Writing

In a first language situation, children rarely write what they do not say or read. Young children listen for sounds as they attempt to use letters to record their ideas on paper (Johnson, 2008: 7). Thus, a writing program in such setting is always preceded by rich, broad and meaningful program in oral expression and sensible and interesting reading activities. In contrast, since writing is less threatening than speaking in that children need not be afraid of mispronouncing an unfamiliar word, in a second or foreign language learning children can have their first experiences of producing written statements in English well before they start speaking in the language. According to Gordon (2007), "Second language literacy experts recommend that literacy instruction should start early in the ESL classroom, before children develop full proficiency in a second language" (p. 96).

In primary schools, EFL pupils progress from writing isolated words and phrases, to short paragraphs about themselves or about very familiar topics (family, home, hobbies, friends, food, etc.) Since many pupils at this level are not yet capable either linguistically or intellectually of creating a piece of written text from scratch, it is important that time be spent building up the language they will need and providing a model on which they can then base their own efforts. The writing activities should therefore be based on a parallel text and guide the pupils, using simple cues. These writing activities generally appear towards the end of a unit so that pupils have had plenty of exposure to the language and practice of the main structures and vocabulary they need.

The writing of primary school pupils, whether done in class or at home, will invariably contain mistakes. Again, the teacher should try to be sensitive in his/her correction and not necessarily insist on every error being highlighted. A piece of written work covered in red pen is demoralizing and generally counter-productive. Where possible, encourage pupils to correct their own mistakes as they work. If there is time, encourage pupils to decorate their written work and where feasible display their efforts in the classroom.

Conclusion

The trend of lowering the age of students to learn English in Indonesia and around the world as well has made the field of teaching English to young learners flourish. However, since the field of is relatively new, it is very dynamic. Therefore, it is very important for those involved in the field to find more helpful ideas for teaching English to young learners.

The discussion in this paper reveals that since the objective of teaching English to elementary school pupil is to enable the learners to use it as a means of communication, the program needs to be focused the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing. To achieve the goal, it is imperative for teacher to suit the materials, activities, and teaching techniques with the students' interest, needs, and language skills levels. In addition, the four language skills should be taught as separated things, because each language skill process enhances students' ability to use the others.

The ideas presented in this paper are actually not a magic potion for solving all problems for teaching English to young learners. Some points of the ideas may work well for some students, and some other points work better for others. Thus, English teachers must continue their trials to discover ideas that suit their students' needs.

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