

# The Teaching of English for Young Learners in Indonesia

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The teaching of the English at elementary schools, the so-called English for Young Learners (EYL), in Indonesia which was introduced formally since 1994 through the Decree No.1702/104/M/1994 is interesting to discuss because English is a foreign language for elementary students. To teach English in that level a teacher who can teach well in teaching is badly required. This chapter reviews issues dealing with the teaching of EYL which include how children learn language; young learners and their characteristics; characteristics of good EYL teachers; and effective approaches for teaching EYL exemplified.

## HOW CHILDREN LEARN LANGUAGE

To make the teaching of EYL successful and effective, some consideration should be taken into account. The basic consideration to be the priority is related to the psychological aspects. In language learning, understanding the psychological development theories will help teachers develop teaching strategies appropriately. In addition, the psychological orientation is very effective to know how young children learn so that the understanding can lead to the better learning outcome.

The prominent psychologists whose big contributions on the understanding of the cognitive potential and capabilities children bring for learning are Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner. McCloskey (2002), clearly described his knowledge of these psychologists concerning with their view on children. The French psychologist Jean Piaget (1970) gave us a view of the child as a scientist, as the active learner accomplishing developmental milestones along a predictable continuum by conducting experiments on the

environment. He sees thought as deriving from action. Thought is assimilated and carried out in the mind of the learner. He also describes categories of cognitive development which are assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation refers to the way the child takes in new experiences without any transformation in the way the information is processed. On the other hand, accommodation refers to the way the child adjusts to features of the environment. Initially assimilation and accommodations occur as behavior, shown by what children do; but eventually assimilation and accommodation become thinking processes. Another important contribution of Piaget was his description of a series of stages through which children think and progress, from the sensori motor stage—in which an infant interacts physically with the environment, building a set of ideas about how things work in reality—through the formal operations stage, in which pre-adolescents and adolescents can think abstractly and logically.

Another psychologist is Lev Vygotsky (1962), the Russian theorist. He contributes a view that gives much more importance to language and to the role of others in the child's world and learning. He addresses the early speech of infants and its development into language, and discusses the differences between outward talk and what is actually happening in the child's mind. He sees the child's learning as developing through interaction with more knowledgeable others, who mediate learning by talking while playing, reading stories, and asking questions. With the help of adults, children can do more than they can do on their own. He developed a concept called the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), which is what the child can nearly do, but cannot do alone. Mediation gradually moves this ZPD outward as the learner is able to do more and more independently.

The other one is Jerome Bruner (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976, cited in McCloskey, 2002) who also places strong emphasis on the role language plays in children's cognitive growth and explores the nature of mediation. He offers the label of "scaffolding" for the all-important talk that adults use to mediate the world for children, and to support them in solving problems. In Bruner's research with North American mothers and children, parents who supported children by scaffolding tuned into the needs of children and adjusted to make tasks more difficult as the children became more capable. Bruner also places emphasis on the value of formats and routines, features of events that permit scaffolding to occur. He described the routine of parents reading bedtime stories to their children from babyhood onwards. At

that they share a large picture story and turn the pages together, turning

Understanding of the psychological stages of child proposed by the psychologists above is important for EYL teachers to handle the teaching and learning process. The EYL teachers with well understanding on the students' language development will find their teaching interesting and full of biology in the field of education philosophy makes teaching and learning effective.

## YOUNG LEARNERS AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

Experts who define young learners in different perspectives. The definition of young learner does not merely tell about the age-based grading but it is associated with the general characteristics and language development. According to Scott and Ytreberg (1990), young learners are between five and ten or eleven years old. In addition, they divide children into two main groups: from five to seven years old and from eight to ten years old. We are assuming that the five to seven year olds are all at level one, the beginner stage. The eight to ten years olds may also be beginners but they may have been learning the foreign language for some time.

In Indonesian context, however, the category of young learner is referred to the National System of Education Act No.20/2003 item (1) of Article 6. All Indonesian citizens between seven to fifteen years old are obliged to enter the basic education. Students who are between seven to twelve are classified into elementary school level. Meanwhile, those who are thirteen to fifteen are included in Junior High School level. For treating students of each level appropriately, teachers at this level need to know the characteristics of young learners.

Scott and Ytreberg (1990) clearly explain that each level of students has different characteristics. General characteristics of five to seven year olds are that they can talk about what they are doing; tell about what they have done or heard; play activities; argue for something and tell you why they think what they think; use their logical reasoning; use their vivid imaginations; use a wide range intonation patterns in their mother tongue; and understand direct human interaction. In terms of their language development, they know that the world is governed by the rules; they understand situations more quickly than they understand the language used; their un-

understanding of the world comes through hands and eyes and ears; they are very logical; they have a very short attention and concentration span; they sometimes have difficulty in knowing what is fact and what is fiction; they do not always understand what adults are talking about and do not ask; they will seldom admit that they do not know something; they cannot decide for themselves what to learn; they love to play, and learn the best when they enjoy themselves; and they are enthusiastic and positive about learning.

For the students of eight to ten year olds, their general characteristics are that their basic concepts are formed; they have very decided views of the world; they can tell the different between fact and fiction; they ask questions all the time; they rely on the spoken word as well as the physical world to convey and understand meaning; they can make some decision about their own learning; they have definite views about what they like and do not like doing; they have developed sense of fairness about what happens in the classroom and begin to question the teacher's decision; and they are able to work with others and learn from others. In addition, their language has improved from the previous stage. At this level they can understand abstract things. They can also understand symbols (beginning with words) and generalize and systematize.

It has been clear enough for the teachers to understand the nature of young learners. In the teaching, EYL teachers should hold principle that young children do not come to the language classroom empty handed. They bring with them an all ready well establish set of instinct and character which will help them to learn language better (Halliwell, 1992). Therefore, EYL teachers should find the appropriate ways to match the teaching with what young learners want and need.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD EYL TEACHERS

The EYL teachers play an important role. They have to act not only as administrative teacher but as an exemplary figure. EYL Teachers are expected to perform the way of teaching different from adult orientation. There are several prerequisites to be EYL teachers. This section deals with the teachers' characteristics that support the achievement of learning outcomes.

There are twelve characteristics should be embedded to the teachers of EYL (Thompson, 2011). According to Thompson EYL teachers should have the following characteristics: having a positive outlook, being prepared

using a personal touch, possessing a sense of humor, possessing creativity, admitting mistakes, being forgiving, respecting students, maintaining high expectations, showing compassion, and developing a sense of belonging for students. When these characteristics are demonstrated by classroom teachers, our students remembered school in a positive way. These traits have proven to increase student achievement.

In Indonesian young learners context, English is still a foreign language. To teach English well a good teacher is required. It must also be remembered that all the good teachers cannot teach English in good manner at all stage. A teacher who can teach English the secondary or higher secondary level well may not teach at the primary level very satisfactorily (Patel & Jain, 2008). Therefore, to teach at the early levels, Patel and Jain strongly recommend a teacher to have qualities. Among the qualities they mentioned are that they should be lovers of English; knowledgeable of English language as well as literature; always take interest in their students and become soft toward their students; having good hand writing; and having the knowledge of different types of activities and how to organize all activities.

Although the characteristics of good teachers of EYL are stated differently, the messages are basically the same. Since teachers at the level of elementary schools are viewed as parents and educators, they have the responsibilities to serve students rights. They have to know well what the children want and real need. They should provide their time for satisfying the children's interests. As educators, they are not only knowledgeable in preparing and teaching, but must also be able to transfer the education value as well.

### EFFECTIVE APPROACHES FOR TEACHING EYL

By knowing the complexities of young learners' characteristics, teachers of EYL cannot depend on their traditional way of teaching. They have to find the appropriate teaching techniques for getting students' attention. They also have also to be selective in developing material which is suitable with the students' interest. In other words, they have to be able to create an effective teaching. This section describes the kinds of effective teaching models which can be followed by the teachers of EYL.

Effective teaching is a real picture of professional teachers. If educators are people who take ideas seriously, who believe in inquiry, and who subscribe to the possibility of human progress, then our professional language

must label and respect practice that is at the leading edge of the field (Zemelman, et al., 2005). Effective teaching is often categorized as a best practice. The term *best practice* is as a shorthand emblem of serious, thoughtful, informed, responsible, state-of-the-art teaching. As it will be employed in the young learners' level, there is a strong consensus among the seemingly disparate subject-matter fields about how kids learn best. Virtually all the authoritative voices and documents in every teaching field are calling for schools that are more student-centered, active, experiential, authentic, democratic, collaborative, rigorous, and challenging.

The teaching of EYL is considered to be a complex activity in primary education. Hence, teachers' knowledge and their beliefs about what is important to teach, how students learn, and how to manage student behavior and meet external demands are very important. Teachers' daily experiences in their practice context also shape their understandings and their understandings shape their experiences.

In relating the model of teaching and what teachers need to do in EYL classroom, McCloskey (2002) proposes seven instructional principles for teaching EYL. These principles are effective to promote young learners' learning because teachers have to offer learners enjoyable, active roles in the learning experience. They also should help students develop and practice language through collaboration. A multi-dimensional, thematically organized activity is also part of their responsibility. Besides providing comprehensible input with scaffolding, teachers have to integrate language with content. The other principle teacher should meet is to validate and integrate home language and culture of the students. The last principle is providing clear goals and feedback on performance.

The discussion on principles of creating model of effective teaching EYL by correlating psychological theories and the teacher responsibilities and the students' characteristics is very significant. As educators, teachers of EYL must continually reflect on their teaching and update their practice to address the needs of students.

Children, as curious, active learners, are significantly reinforced when they construct and retain new knowledge which increases the likelihood they will remain actively engaged in their education (Good et al., 2009). Therefore, to achieve an effective teaching teachers need expertise in both behavioral and constructivist approaches. First, effective teaching requires the flexible implementation of a variety of methods depending on the in-

structional goal and the needs of the students. Good and Brophy (2008, in Good et al., 2009) have argued that any teaching method is useful in certain situations and that no one method is optimal for all purposes. Secondly, behavioral and constructivist theories complement each other. Maximizing the opportunities for children to construct knowledge requires careful attention to the antecedents and consequences in the general learning environment, in student-teacher interactions, and within curricula and instructional strategies.

Musthafa (2010) also recommended to the English teacher at elementary schools to teach their students by paying attention of the following conditions:

- Children should be treated and appreciated in their own right.
- Children learn from hands-on, physical activities.
- Children's thinking is embedded in here-and-now context of situation.
- Children learn by doing things in and with the language (e.g., participating in social activities involving the use of the language; being engaged in social interaction using the language being learned).
- Children find it easier to learn a language that they see as useful and respected socially.

In addition, according to Good and Brophy (2008, cited in Good et al., 2009), teachers of EFL at elementary schools should be able to select the following general aspects of effective teaching to achieve best practice.

**Appropriate expectations.** Teachers need to form accurate and appropriate expectations for student learning. Expectations that are too high or too low lessen student achievement. In addition to stating appropriate expectations for student performance, teachers must work to help students over time to exceed present expectations and help students realize the growth they have made.

**Proactive and supportive classrooms.** Students learn best in classrooms where academic and social goals are clear and where caring communities are afforded. Students need to know that wrong answers are no issue if we learn from our errors and misconceptions. Supportive classrooms allow students to take intellectual risks. In supportive classrooms focus is placed on learning, not simply on "knowing" or right and wrong answers.

**Opportunity to learn.** Classroom learning is best when most available time is used for academic work in which students are highly engaged. Stu-

dents cannot learn material that they do not study or develop skills they do not see or practice. Although this point seems obvious, in too many classrooms students do not get to read original documents, to explain their answers, to challenge the thinking of teachers and peers and so forth. What students are assigned to learn and their degree of involvement in work are the strongest known predictors of student achievement.

**Curriculum alignment.** Content is aligned to create a visible and coherent plan for achieving curriculum goals. Teachers carefully differentiate between more and less important content.

**Coherent content.** Content is organized and explained in sufficient depth to allow student to learn meaningfully.

**Thoughtful discourse.** Questions are planned and allowed that involve students in sustained discussion and exploration of key ideas. Thoughtful discourse allows for various opinions to be raised and to explore alternative explanations for historical and contemporary events. Thoughtful discussion goes beyond defining what “is” to explaining “why”, addressing issues of value, and considering future implications.

**Scaffolding students’ ideas and task involvement.** The teacher actively supports student learning activities and strives to help students understand concepts more fully. In many classrooms, discussions focus mainly on what we know or just found. Just as teacher scaffolding can help students to understand at a higher level, good scaffolding can help students to move from the present to the future – “So we know what we found in the experiment, how can we use this information?”

**Practice/application.** Students need ample opportunity to apply and practice new learning. Distributed practice with concepts in diverse contexts enhances long-term retention of learning. Critics of current teaching methods often scorn the fact that teaching in schools, at best, prepares students for acts of “near transfer.” That is, students can use extant knowledge to solve problems that are similar to what they have studied.

**Goal-oriented assessments.** Test, quizzes, and papers need to focus on important curriculum goals. Such assessments help students to focus upon important content and allow them to practice applying important information. Oddly, teachers sometimes believe that preparing students for the test is unfair or wrong. Students need to know that their daily activities are important and that they serve as advance organizers for showing what they

edge teachers think is important and how students can best display that knowledge.

The nine principles of effective teaching outlined above pertain to all grades. However, the ways in which each principle is applied, the relative importance, and the potential impact of each often varies for students of different ages. For example, *proactive and supportive classrooms* are beneficial to both kindergarteners and high school seniors. But the lack of a supportive classroom environment in kindergarten may have more detrimental effects than in higher grades. Young children are just establishing their relationship with school as a social institution, and how they view themselves as learners. An unsupportive environment may significantly undermine five-year-olds’ developing self-concept, whereas older students have more mature coping skills and, hopefully, a more solidified self-concept. In addition to the initial entry to schooling, the relative importance of a proactive and supportive classroom is also higher for transition periods such as the first year of middle school or high school, or when children move to new schools. Even though students are older, transitioning to a new school, new social structures and (when moving up to middle or high school) more rigorous cognitive demands means students are particularly vulnerable and benefit from clear expectations and readily available support to help them meet expectations.

In another example, *thoughtful discourse* is an essential component of effective teaching for all students, but the discourse is different at different grade levels. In early childhood and primary classrooms, teachers often scaffold correct grammatical sentence structures and help children elaborate ideas. For example, if a preschooler says, “The truck runned over my toe.” the teacher may respond, “I see that the truck ran over your toe. How did that feel?” In the upper elementary and middle school years, effective classroom discourse requires teachers to gradually turn over responsibility for thinking and the structuring of ideas to the learner. If a sixth-grade student, for example, says, “I don’t understand how to divide these fractions” a teacher may respond, “Ask me a question that will help you understand.” In high school, thoughtful discourse includes respectful consideration of a variety of ideas and perspectives. Effective teaching includes questions that provoke debate and allow for discussions of controversial issues which challenge students to authentically consider ideas that differ from their own.

*Practice and application* also looks different and has varying relative importance at different grade levels. In the early grades, children develop essential cognitive processes (like the ability to intentionally focus their attention or intentionally remember something), foundational academic skills, and the routines of school life.

These skills are critical to school success. Yet at the time they are developing these skills both the capacity of their attention span and the fluency of their recall is limited. Thus, younger children need considerably more repetitions and more frequent opportunity to practice than older students. In the older grades, students need less practice on material that draws on mastered skill, but still need increased opportunity for practice when they encounter new information or skills that either draw on prerequisite skills or knowledge that they have not previously learned, or that needs refreshing or refinement.

Therefore, looking at the fact that children learn more readily when engaged in physical movements, teachers should use activity-based teaching-learning techniques such as Total Physical Response, games, and projects. Also to be noted here is that teachers should focus on functional English for vocabulary development, and for immediate fulfillment of communicative needs of the young learners. As children have relatively short attention spans, teachers of EYL should use various techniques for short periods of time to maintain the interest level of the children in engaging the English lessons. Normally young children learn language through their everyday environment. To teach a foreign language to young children, however, takes a little more effort. If you're teaching a child between 2 and 8, you'll need to collect kid-friendly teaching material and get an understanding of how children learn languages (Miriam, 2011). To realize her idea on the world of teaching of English young learner, Miriam tried to propose the way of giving instruction to her students as the following:

*Focus on activity and interaction, rather than memorization and rules.* The Total Physical Response method, in which students learn by doing, works well with little kids. For vocabulary, use real communication instead of repetitive reading or writing. For example, to review the word for "nurse," you could ask "What does a nurse do?" in the foreign language.

*Collect foreign language material for young children.* Language textbooks for older kids are usually too complex (and too boring) for youngsters, so these and use age-appropriate material that's relevant to children's lives

Instead of textbooks, try story books, poems, songs, comics, puppet shows, games and any other activity that uses language. You can also incorporate arts and crafts projects into your language teaching.

*Interact in the foreign language.* Using the foreign language for everyday activities brings it alive and teaches kids basic vocabulary in context. Mealtime, bath time and drive time all present learning opportunities. If you're teaching at home, start by saying a word or phrase in the child's mother tongue, then repeat it in the foreign language. Do this for a month, and then switch to the foreign language followed by the native language. After a few weeks, you can use just the foreign language.

*Find extra learning and cultural material.* Help young children experience the culture of those who speak the language they are learning. Stories and movies about the lives and adventures of kids in other countries hold young children's attention well. Even if you do not understand the language, you can still get something out of the pictures and your child will be proud to explain things to you.

*Introduce the children to native speakers.* If you speak the language you are teaching with an accent, make sure your child talks to native speakers. Young children can learn a language with no foreign accent, but it gets a lot harder by around age 12. Children need to interact to develop a good accent, so try to find native speaking children they can play with.

The models of the teaching of EYL that have been proposed seem to be challenging and interesting both for the novice and experienced teachers. They can modify or even simplify the chosen model by considering the context of students and the schools atmosphere. Teachers have a freedom to develop ideas to create best teaching. They also have a chance to bring the theories of language teaching in the context of young learners into reality. There is no word for the teachers of EYL to give up in the attempts to professionalize themselves. With this knowledge, teachers of EYL in Indonesia can diminish their pessimistic view on teaching practice. It is also useful to cut down the some people's worrying on the application of EYL in Indonesia. While decisions to teach English to elementary school pupils have been made as a local content, the concept is still not very clear to many people because the decision seems to be based more on fashion or prestige than on real needs of the students (Saukah, 2009). Moreover, the requirements for teachers to be able to teach English well at this level are seldom discussed in public forum (Musthafa, 2010).

## CONCLUSION

The discussion in this chapter suggests that teachers of EYL have much responsibility to equip the learner with simple strategies that go beyond the task-on-hand. Besides increasing thier teaching contents, teachers of EYL should provide techniques to reach the learners' motivational level and confidence. It must be remembered that teaching young learners is different from teaching adults; the teacher has to be inventive in selecting interesting activities, and must provide a great variety of them. One of the ways to master young learner teaching methods is by selecting and modeling best teachings practiced by EYL teachers from various places.

Parents who scaffolded effectively should create interest in the task; break the task down into smaller steps; model the task, including different ways to do the task; keep child "on task" by reminding him or her of the purpose or goal; point out the important parts of the task; control the child's frustration during the task. When children need help to learn language, teachera should make their strategies enjoyable, supported, social oriented, meaningful, purposeful, and full of practice as Confucius says "I hear, and I forget. I see, and I remember. I do, and I understand."

Finally teachers for EYL are expected to have ability to teach their students by imitating the first language environment. They have to teach language in context. The grammar should not be taught explicitly. They also have to create an English speaking environment in their class and try to make English fun through songs and chants, storytelling, drama, and games.

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ELF AND TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT