Teaching English to Young Learners

TEACHING SPEAKING AND PRONUNCIATION TO YOUNG LEARNERS

WEEK 5

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Lecture Outline

- What is “speaking”?
- The importance of teaching speaking to young learners.
- The development of speaking skills.
- Classroom Techniques and Activities.
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- 10 Rules of Speaking in Young Learner Classes.
- The best ways of getting young learners involved in speaking activities in an ELT classroom.
- What’s “pronunciation”?
- Teaching Pronunciation to young learners.
What is “speaking”? 

- **Speaking** is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts. Speaking is a crucial part of second language learning and teaching.

- Speaking, as it relates to young learners, is one way for them to play, in this case, playing with words and sounds.

- According to Cook (2000) in Linse (2005), there are many different ways that children play with words and language, beginning with the tickling rhymes that they hear as babies and continuing with other sorts of play which involve both the **form** and **meaning** of language.

- Play is vital and important aspect of child’s development and language is part of that play.
The importance of teaching speaking to young learners

- Speaking is equally important in children’s overall language development. It is the first output after the first input (Listening), long before they can write.

- Teachers who work with young learners recognize how important it is for children to develop strong speaking skills.

- Speaking is the way they communicate about what they feel or what they need, and also the way their adults, such as parents and teachers, to communicate what is good and what is bad.
The development of speaking skills

- Young learners, since they are “young” and their speaking equipment has not yet developed perfectly, will probably have limitations in speaking.

- Young children learning English as a foreign language do not develop English – Language skills more readily than older learners.

- However, they have a clear advantage when it comes to pronunciation if they begin learning English as a foreign or second language at an early age (Birdsong, 1999). Nevertheless, there are some phonemes which children have difficulty with.
There are many techniques and activities the teachers can choose for their young learners. The choice should be based on the **aims** of the program coupled with the learners’ **stage of development**.

Brown (2001) stated 7 **principles for designing speaking techniques**:

1- Use techniques that cover the spectrum of learners needs, from language-based focus on accuracy to message-based focus on interaction, meaning, and fluency.

2- Provide intrinsically motivating techniques.
3- Encourage the use of authentic language in meaningful contexts.

4- Provide appropriate feedback and correction.

5- Capitalize on the natural link between speaking and listening.

6- Give students opportunities to initiate oral communication.

7- Encourage the development of speaking strategies.
There are many techniques and activities that teachers can use for their speaking classroom. We live in, what Professor Kumaravadivelu describes as, post method era, where there is no such a thing as the best method.

It is the teachers’ decision to determine which kind of method that suits their students most. The teachers can take a little bit of Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) and combine it with a little bit of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and create a new method, such as describe below.
(A) Games

- Play is a purposeful activity and games are part of playing. Games are a very appropriate teaching technique in the young learner classroom. There are many kinds of games the teachers can create. The examples are **Memory games, This and That, Role play, Guess games, etc.**
I'm Going to the Supermarket (A language game)

- **Skills:** naming food items, listing items in alphabetical order, identifying initials sounds, recalling items in a series
- **Group Size:** 2 to 36
- **Prep Time:** none
- **Playing Time:** 5-15 minutes
- **Interest Level:** ages 3 to adult
- **Ability Level:** beginner to lower intermediate

Choose a student to begin. This student will say, "I'm going to the supermarket to buy [food item beginning with "a"]." The next student will then say, "I'm going to the supermarket to buy [food item beginning with "a" named by first student] and [food item beginning with "b"]."

Play continues, with each student recalling all previously mentioned items and adding another item in alphabetical sequence. If a student misses an item or cannot think of an item to add, he or she is out. The last remaining student wins.

If play continues after all letters have been exhausted, students repeat all previously named words, then add a new word beginning with "a" and continue through the alphabet once more. For example, "I'm going to the supermarket to buy apples and . . . zebra meat and apple juice . . . "

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Skills: Describing physical appearance; asking and responding to questions; visual discrimination

Group Size: 4 to 24
Prep Time: none
Playing Time: 5-20 minutes
Interest Level: ages 3 to adult
Ability Level: beginner to intermediate

Language used: "Look at ________." "Close your eyes!" colors, shapes, positions, articles of clothing

Game: Choose a student to begin. Tell the student, "Look at ________." Allow the student to examine the person or object for about five seconds, then direct the student, "Close your eyes!" After the student's eyes are closed ask him or her a question about the person or object examined. For example, you might ask, "What color is Andrew’s shirt?" or "Is there a box of crayons on my desk?" If the student responds incorrectly, direct him or her to open his or her eyes and inspect the object for five more seconds. Direct the student to close his or her eyes again and ask another question. Depending on class size, you may allow students up to three turns. If the student correctly answers the question, he or she chooses a player as well as a person or object and asks the next question.
The Talking and Writing Box is made of pictures that children have self-selected and are interesting to them.

When children are asked to talk about the pictures on their box, they talk about things that are of interest to them because they have selected the pictures.

When talking about their pictures, children become animated because they are talking about something of interest to them. By using Talking and Writing Box, children are able to personalize the information that they share.

Teachers can experiment with this kind of method. They can put the pictures or topics in the box and the students can choose one that is interesting to them, or teachers can do it like the example below:
What do you think the boy is doing?

- He is singing
- He is dancing
- He is crying
- What is your suggestion?

The teachers can show a funny picture, the funnier the better, and give students some multiple choices relating to the language focus and also give them choice to give their own opinion.
1. Although it is a productive skill, the children may not feel ready to produce oral language, so teachers and parents should be patient.

2. Short practice activities can help students build productive language to use in discourse. Speaking starts with practicing drills, set phrases (junks and formulaic expressions), repeating models, so it is important to use such activities to make them familiar with repetitive language. However, the language should be used meaningfully in the classroom, not just in isolated chunks.
3. Children need experience of a range of discourse types to increase their skills, so the tasks designed for in-class use should be varied.

4. The teachers should take into account the developmental stages in L1, those in L2, and students’ age to design the speaking activities.

5. Correcting each and every mistake is discouraging and they need help to acquire fluency. Before the speaking, we may teach them the necessary language and the vocabulary items to prepare them for the tasks.
6. Designing **authentic** activities, such as role-plays and dialogues based on real life conversations, motivates the students, so they willingly take the role of an imaginary person. However, the meaning and purpose of discourse needs to be made comprehensible to the learners.

7. The teachers should be aware of the **problems** young learners may have while articulating phonemes. It is important not to ignore the pronunciation, intonation and stress: Using tongue twisters, mirrors, imitating native speakers in movies can be some of the useful activities.
8. Speaking is not an individual skill; they need to be encouraged to **practice in pairs** and in groups.

9. A good speaking activity should involve **all** students not some of them.

10. When the class is **noisy** in a speaking activity, trying to shout over children is not a good idea: Using the lights, symbols or music may help.
In an ELT classroom, children are sometimes shy and unwilling to participate in speaking activities. Nixon and Tomlinson suggest that the best way of getting young learners involved in speaking activities is through use of songs, because musical activities (especially if they are accompanied with illustrations) can help children to feel relaxed and less anxious.

Moving freely around the classroom, dancing or pointing will also help students to memorise the words and their meaning.

While communication activities should be fun in order to engage young learners, they should also be highly structured to give younger learners enough confidence to speak and communicate in English. Working in pairs, for example, builds both student and correction autonomy: students can compare worksheets with minimal teacher interference and ask each other questions. It is important to keep activities personal, e.g. asking about favourite colour or past experience.
With the help of mixed activities, such as dialogues, choral revision, chants, songs, poems and rhymes; students’ speaking abilities grow, their pronunciation gets better and their awareness of the language improves.

Using songs, poems, rhymes and chants is a wonderful way of making students sing/talk and at the same time (unconsciously) work at their grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation.
What’s “pronunciation”?

- **Pronunciation** is an area of great difficulty for the untrained EFL teacher. But, with a little training and practice you can facilitate the improvement of your students’ pronunciation almost as well as the seasoned professional. For our purposes here, “pronunciation” will include the concepts of stress, rhythm and intonation.
Teaching Pronunciation to young learners

- **Rhymes, finger play, and chants**
  We can select rhymes and finger plays that focus on a specific phonemes or sound or set of sounds to help children learn how to pronounce words correctly.

- **Using mirrors**
  For helping the young learners learn about their pronunciation, we can use mirrors in the class. The children who have difficulty with certain sounds often do not know how to form their lips and mouths in such a way as to correctly articulate the sounds.
  And the mirrors probably work so well because they give children an awareness of how easily they can adjust their pronunciation.

- **Tongue twisters**
  They generally have the same phoneme repeated over and over again. It is hard to articulate the same sound over and over again. One of the tongue twisters is how many peppers did Peter pick. Children adore tongue twisters because they perceive saying the sounds as a game or challenge.
Alliteration, wordplay and repetition in this chant. Great for helping children to develop phonemic awareness

Cookies in the tin,
Cookies in the tin,
Shake 'em up, shake 'em up,
Cookies in the tin.

Candles on the cake,
Candles on the cake,
Blow 'em out, blow 'em out,
Candles on the cake.
Tongue Twisters

- This method can be used to teach pronunciation in a fun way. Children may have trouble pronouncing certain English language sounds. For example, children who speak some Asian language may have difficulty pronouncing the English – language /r/ and /l/ because of the way that they occur or their absences in their native languages. Sometimes, the difficulty also occurs because children often do not know how to form their lips and mouth in such a way as to correctly articulate the sounds.

- Children adore tongue twisters because they perceive saying the sounds as a game or challenge. Tongue twisters generally have the same phoneme repeated over and over again, which is quite hard.
The examples of tongue twisters are:

Sally sells seashells at the seashore.

If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers, where's the peck of pickled peppers that Peter Piper picked?
Conclusion

- Speaking, as it relates to children, is playing with words and utterances.
- Speaking is equally important in children’s overall language development, but they still have limitation in MLU and pronunciation.
- Every method has its own strengths and weaknesses. It is up to the teachers to choose the most suitable one to be applied in their classroom.
- It is a must to spend time correcting not only behavior but also our students’ error. But we need to select which one is more important.
- Speaking activities could lead to high noisy level, so teachers must have their unique way to manage their classroom.
Next session...

- Teaching Reading to young learners

  Use the “Activity Plan Sheet” to prepare an activity for teaching **Reading** to young EFL learners.
References