

STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS' ENGLISH SKILLS THROUGH LEARNING IN REAL-LIFE CONTEXTS

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Abstract

Early learning experiences are crucial to establish the foundation for the acquisition of knowledge and skills that will affect later learning and behaviour. As teaching English at the early age is very crucial, learning experiences should be thoughtfully planned and guided by the teacher. It is found out that there are still many kindergarten students who still find difficulties in learning English vocabularies for the strategies and teaching learning media that are conveyed by the the teachers are not sufficient to support the English class in kindergarten and the English teaching learning process is still teacher-centered with less interaction between teachers and students and also between students and students. The effects of those conditions make the students pay less attention on the English activities given by their teachers, respond passively to the questions and the instructions from the teachers, and give unhappy expression when joining the English activities. Having a look at those problems, the strategies in the process of teaching learning, will contribute to the output of students' learning. In this article, it will discuss six strategies to improve kindergarten students' English skills through learning in real-life contexts. Those strategies are knowing the early stages of learning, developing the activities of learning in real-life contexts, developing the activities of integrated learning, developing an effective literacy environment, developing the activities of learning early numeracy in real-life contexts, and creating a supportive learning Environment.

Key words: *Kindergarten students, English skills, learning in real-life contexts.*

INTRODUCTION

Children's early learning experiences have a profound effect on their development. These early interactions directly affect the way connections are made in the brain. Early learning experiences are crucial to the future well-being of children, and establish the foundation for the acquisition of knowledge and skills that will affect later learning and behaviour (Pam Schiller and Pat Phipps, 2002). Because of that, English teaching that is given in the early age gives great benefit for the students as they will develop their mastery of English not only good pronunciation that is almost native-like but also good experience in enhancing their vocabulary development. In teaching English for young learners, teachers should be able to provide activities that are fun and easy for the students to understand and to do the activities in the classroom. The teachers should be able to relate between the objects they are learning with the language; for example, the teacher can bring the students outside class or in the garden if the material they are learning are about trees, plants, or fruits. Those real objects will help students to enhance their vocabularies in English (Herr, Judy and Ivonne Libby, 1995) .

In guided instruction, learning experiences will be thoughtfully planned and guided by the teacher. While providing guidance, the teacher should be flexible in order to make the best use of alternatives and strategies that are generated by the children. Explicit instruction is used by the teacher to clarify steps, extend an idea in a particular direction, or demonstrate a skill that may be used in a broader context. The most appropriate teaching technique that can be used by the teacher to make the students understand their instruction in a language class is Total Physical Response (Cameron, L., 2003). This technique is appropriate for young learners as young learners are in the age where they like kinds of learning activities that require them to move from one place to the other places in a classroom or outside the classroom (California State Board of Education, 2002).

Having a look at the above consideration, it is very important for an English teacher to pay attention on some strategies that can be used to enhance the English skills of very young learners, in this case those learners who are still in kindergarten (Machado, J.M., 1995). Jamaris, Martini, and Fahrudin (2005) stated that there are still many kindergarten students who still find difficulties in learning English vocabularies and the cause of those problems is rooted from the strategies and teaching learning media that are conveyed by the the teachers are not sufficient to support the English class. Furthermore, the characteristics of the English teaching learning process that are applied in kindergarten are still teacher-centered where there is less interaction between teachers and students and also between students and students. This condition leads to the teaching and learning English process that does not look communicative between teachers and students. Hadi (2009) also commented that the lack of students' capability in learning English is influenced by the teaching methods that are not appropriate for kindergarten students. Because of that, the students pay less attention on the English activities given by their teachers, respond passively to the questions and the instructions from the teachers, and give unhappy expression when joining the English activities. The implementation of the strategies in the process of teaching learning, especially in a language class, will give great contribution to the output of students' learning. In this article, it will discuss six strategies that can give further ideas for kindergarten teachers in teaching English for very young learners. Those strategies are knowing the early stages of learning, developing the activities of learning in real-life contexts, developing the activities of integrated learning, developing an effective literacy environment, developing the activities of learning early numeracy in real-life contexts, and creating a supportive learning Environment.

KNOWING THE EARLY STAGES OF LEARNING

If an English teacher wants to get the success of teaching English for very young learners, it is crucial to the early stages of learning so as to adjust both the materials and the activities of English based on their age level. Children move through a number of stages when learning English as a new language. Some go through these stages more quickly than others, and children will sometimes have the characteristics of more than one stage at the same time as they transition between stages. Understanding a child's stage of learning is important for planning appropriate activities. Early childhood professionals play a role in helping children progress to higher stages; however, each child's English development will follow its own timetable. Planning and programming should be based around each child's abilities and developmental level. There are five developmental stages for learning a new language (Cameron, L., 2003).

a. Beginning Stage

Home language use: Some children initially use their home language in educational settings because it is the only language they know. Most young children give up using their home language quickly, realizing that it is not an effective means of communication in that context. If a few children in a setting share the same home language, they may continue to use it amongst themselves.

Nonverbal period: In a new setting, young children may not use any language at all, or very little, for a few weeks or even months. They are listening and accumulating knowledge of English, but are sometimes hesitant to speak much. Children often use gestures to communicate with adults and other children. Sometimes they may rehearse phrases in English quietly to themselves.

b. Emerging Stage

Young children at the emerging stage typically use one- or two-word responses to questions like "What's that?" or "Do you want a turn?" Their English use is also not very original. These children use a lot of formulaic expressions (words or phrases they hear others say); e.g., "what's happening?", "wanna play with me?", "I dunno," "me first," "it's my turn," "no fair!", "so what?", "lookit this!" Formulaic sentences are important because they help open the door to social interaction with early childhood professionals and other children. With more social interaction comes more English learning.

c. Developing Stage

Children gradually move from memorized sentences to original, productive and spontaneous English conversation. When young children learning English can engage in conversational English, this does not mean that they have mastered the English language. In fact, their

English often has errors in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, and these errors may last a long time.

Transfer errors: Some children's errors are traceable to their first language, and these are called *transfer errors*. Pronunciation errors are a common type of transfer error because an accent is based on the sound system of the first language. Even very young children can have an accent in English.

Developmental errors: Most of the errors that young children make are *developmental errors*, which means they are common to all learners of English. For example, because they have little vocabulary to work with, they sometimes overuse general verbs like *do*: "he *do* a baseball" to mean "he threw a baseball" or "I *did* some loud" to mean "I blew (a horn)." This guide deals mainly with the three developmental stages listed above. There are also the later two developmental stages as Expanding and Bridging.

There is a commonly held belief that young children can learn to speak English in just a few months, unlike adults, who may take years. Research shows that this is not true; young children learning English can take years to become as competent in English as their peers whose first language is English.

It takes approximately *three to four years in school* for young children learning English to accumulate an English vocabulary size comparable to their English-speaking peers, and even longer for them to produce sentences free of grammatical errors.

It can take from *five to seven years in school* for young children learning English to master complex academic English skills, both spoken and written, that are the same as their peers who speak English as their first language.

This common misconception most likely comes from our low conversational expectations for children. When adults speak to young children, they often ask questions requiring *yes* or *no* answers, refer to things in the child's immediate environment and compensate for any communication problems. This means that a young child can know very little English and may still appear competent because she or he can easily guess how to respond.

Developing the activities of Learning In Real-Life Contexts

The next strategy that can be applied by EYL teacher is to correlate creativity with the real-life contexts so that very young learners will not find difficulty in understanding the objects that they are learning. Using real-life contexts in which to develop activities for the Kindergarten program is a highly effective way of motivating young learners. Children grasp ideas more easily and more effectively and maintain their interest in school when they have

an educational program that enables them to connect their learning to their own lives and the world around them. Kindergarten programs should emphasize the interconnected learning that occurs when children are exposed to real-life situations and activities in the classroom, home, school, and neighbourhood. Learning English will be fun and easy for young learners if the English teacher is able to correlate between the students' learning activities with real-life situations. For example, a trip to the grocery store can develop literacy (e.g., reading signs and labels), numeracy (e.g., finding different ways numbers are used, looking for shapes), and social skills (e.g., listening to other people's ideas, taking turns), and can provide an opportunity to acquire nutritional information. Mathematics often becomes abstract too early for children. Developing concepts within a real-life context allows children to bridge the gap between the concrete and abstract. For example, children need many experiences of investigating the idea that three blocks and two more blocks make five blocks before they will understand $3 + 2 = 5$. In this case, students are never aware that they are learning numbers in English and also the computation of those numbers and of course these activities will enhance their knowledge development in Mathematics now and later in the future in their higher level of education.

DEVELOPING THE ACTIVITIES OF INTEGRATED LEARNING

Integrated learning is the other strategy that can be applied in teaching English for very young learners; kindergarten students. Using real-life contexts can lead to more effective integration of learning throughout the Kindergarten program. Integration can provide opportunities for children to explore concepts and to develop and apply skills. There are many models for integration. One model for integrated teaching involves the presentation of concepts to children in a variety of contexts. For example, the mathematical concept of pattern may be presented and developed in activities related to music, stories, fabrics, and natural objects.

Meaningful integration deepens children's understanding of the skills and concepts in each of the subjects that are involved. Through meaningful integration, children can be encouraged to generate new connections and to expand their existing understanding. Integration also helps children see how the knowledge and skills developed in one area can be relevant to other areas.

Effective integration of arts activities across the Kindergarten program helps support the learning styles, interests, and strengths of individual children. Integrating the arts with other areas of learning allows children to make meaningful connections between program

areas, and can be highly motivating. For example, important links can be made between music and language development. Children can gain an appreciation of the rhythm and flow of language through song. Musical instruments allow children to experience rhythm and beat and to feel the sounds in rhyming stories, songs, or poems. Drama offers children a variety of opportunities to retell stories using props, puppets, masks, and costumes. Drama also gives children the opportunity to respond in role and to take on roles in which they express different points of view, and thus supports the development of empathy. Creative movement and dance provide a vehicle for response and for interpretation of something children have heard, seen, or felt (Al-Senaidi, S.A., 2008).

Through sculpting, painting, constructing, and drawing, children not only express their thoughts and feelings, but may also articulate their learning about their community and place in the world. Participating in and responding to appropriate arts experiences gives children opportunities to reflect on their own experiences and those of others. These activities can enhance children's self-concept and increase their sense of accomplishment, and can help them develop their oral language ability and their ability to respond to others. The activities of sculpting, painting, constructing, and drawing will be loved by children who have great imagination and creativity. The creativity and the imagination of the young learners will develop better if they are given the freedom to explore their mind. In this case, the role of the teacher is to facilitate the young learners and not to interfere the creativity and the imagination of the young learners.

The outdoor world also provides an abundance of resources and materials for supporting learning through the arts. Children can discuss the lines, shapes, or textures that they have observed in a field, local park, or school yard. They can listen for different sounds in the environment and watch how animals move, and then imitate the sounds and movements in music and dance activities. They can create art works and musical instruments using found and recycled materials – for example, they can use leaf and shell rubbings in collages. These kinds of activities will improve students' awareness to develop materials that are not useful into the useful ones and the result of their art work can be used as the teaching aids in a language classroom.

Art galleries, theatres, museums, and concert venues (where available) provide rich environments for field trips and for exploration of the local community and its resources. Alternatively, local artists, musicians, or dancers could be invited into the school. A number of programs – such as inviting Artists in Education program – can assist teachers in more fully integrating arts and cultural programming into the classroom. Role playing is an

important point that can be developed to improve students' mastery in English speaking. By visiting some plays/drama can trigger students' ideas if later on they are assigned to do role playing based on that play/drama but the content is already simplified or in simplified versions.

DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE LITERACY ENVIRONMENT

If English for Young Learner (EYL) teacher would like to develop students' skills, especially speaking, writing, and reading, he or she must implement the effective literacy environment during the process of teaching learning. Oral language is the basis for literacy, thinking, and socialization in any language. All young children need learning experiences that help them understand, acquire, and build on oral language. The foundations of language development and literacy begin to be established at birth and continue to be built through interaction and communication with adults and other children at home, in child care, in the community, and at school. To foster the language development necessary for literacy, Kindergarten programs should be rich in language-oriented activities and resources that build on prior knowledge, that are relevant to the lives of young children, and that provide opportunities for thinking, problem solving, and experimenting.

Children come to school with vastly different experiences and levels of exposure to literacy. All children are able to learn, and can benefit from classroom experiences that emphasize literacy. On the basis of ongoing assessment and observation, teachers will recognize that some children will require additional support in the form of focused literacy instruction and experiences to develop literacy. It is important that teachers make adjustments to instructional strategies where necessary, and maintain high expectations for all children.

Learning to read and write is essential to enable a child to succeed in school and in later life. Teachers should become familiar with the stages in the process of learning to read and write, and should use this knowledge when planning literacy programs and when assessing children's acquisition of literacy skills. In the earliest stages of literacy development, children mimic the reading process. They begin to understand what reading is and how it works. They learn that what they say can be written down. As children progress, they learn to pay attention to the way print and books work, and they learn that printed letters and words represent the sounds and words of oral language. They become aware that some words rhyme or start or end in the same way, thus developing phonological awareness. They also begin to share their ideas and responses to texts in a variety of ways, learn that writing

can communicate a message, and begin to explore different purposes for writing. When they begin to write, they include pictures and symbols, and eventually familiar or high-frequency words. They also often use approximate spelling for words that is based on their ability to hear, identify, and manipulate sounds (phonemic awareness) and on their knowledge of letter-sound correspondence(phonics).

Children who are given frequent opportunities to listen and respond to stories, poems, songs, and rhymes in the classroom become motivated to learn the functions and features of print. Teachers should model beginning reading and writing strategies by “thinking aloud”. With encouragement and intentional instruction, children will begin to demonstrate such literacy skills as repeating words, naming characters, and identifying signs, labels, names, letters, and letter sounds (Elis, G. & J. Brewster, 1991). Some children will also begin to demonstrate their thinking and understanding on paper. Generic worksheets, however, should be used with caution; they are rarely effective because their focus is narrow and they provide only limited assessment information on the child’s level of understanding. Children will also write for a variety of purposes – for example, they may write brief notes to friends, make grocery lists, or write numbers to record the number of blocks they used.

Children also need many opportunities to pose and answer questions, participate in discussions, and classify information in order to develop their capacity for metacognition and their ability to use higher-order thinking skills involved in critical thinking. For example, after reading about a social issue that is important to children, the teacher may say “Someone wrote this text. Who is it written for? Let’s look at it from the point of view of...”. By engaging in such discussions, children will have an opportunity to question their understanding of issues that arise in the classroom, in a book, or among their classmates.

Children should be encouraged to do independent reading and writing. In planning all such activities, teachers should use their knowledge of the stages of development in oral language, reading, and writing. They should also provide children with appropriate materials when they are to be engaged in free exploration, focused exploration, and guided activities.

Kindergarten programs should provide opportunities for children to listen to poems, stories, and non-fiction texts for both enjoyment and information. Children should also have opportunities to respond to a variety of materials that are read aloud to them and to demonstrate awareness of written materials, print conventions (concepts of print), and language patterns. Teachers should provide children with many opportunities to explore texts independently, to retell stories, and to internalize new learning. Teachers can plan brief, focused, daily experiences that build on a particular concept or set of ideas. They also need to

plan intentional and engaging literacy instruction during the day. They can ensure that significant literacy learning is included in play, daily routines, and classroom experiences.

Teachers can also make use of drama, music, visual arts, and media texts to help children develop their communication and literacy skills. In so doing, teachers can create an effective environment to support young children's learning and development of literacy.

DEVELOPING THE ACTIVITIES OF LEARNING EARLY NUMERACY IN REAL-LIFE CONTEXTS

Math is one of the most important things students should master in their school but teaching Math to kindergarten students should be adjusted to their age and their level of difficulty. Because of that, EYL teachers should be able to create strategies of teaching very young learners by developing the activities of learning Numeracy in real-life contexts. Most young children come to school already knowing a great deal about mathematics. Children bring with them an intuitive knowledge of mathematics, which they have developed through curiosity about their physical world and through real-life experiences. For example, they bring conceptual understanding from their daily experiences with manipulating objects (e.g., fitting different sizes and shapes of a construction toy together), making comparisons (e.g., "I'm taller than you"), making observations (e.g., "This bag is really heavy"), and asking questions (e.g., "Who is taller?" "Who has more cookies?" "How big is it?"). Teachers should use this prior knowledge as a starting point in developing the critical foundational learning of mathematical principles and concepts that supports achievement in mathematics in later years. It could also be said that, upon entering school, most children are interested in learning to persist, to try something new, and generally to engage in problem solving. The teacher plays a critical role in fostering a positive attitude towards mathematics by valuing a child's early attempts at problem solving, by sharing and celebrating the child's learning, and by encouraging in each child a love of mathematics.

Learning in mathematics is no different from learning in other areas of the program in that young children learn best through experiences that are connected and integrated. Children are more motivated to solve problems when the problems are the real-life problems of the classroom. Attempting to solve such problems engages children in posing their own questions and finding a variety of solutions. When the mathematical problems they are exploring are connected to real life, the problems provide a vehicle for children both to apply what they know and to develop new strategies. For example, as children measure the growth

of their plants, they begin to see the connections between mathematics and their everyday lives, and they strengthen their understanding in both mathematics and science.

Teachers should plan programs that build on children's intuitive knowledge of mathematics and make use of real-life contexts. The programs should allow children to explore mathematics and to communicate in meaningful ways with both the teacher and their peers. Teachers should select learning materials that are appropriate for the level of the children's understanding and the focus of the learning expectations. Children should be encouraged to identify, explore, and discuss mathematics in books that they read, in situations that occur in the classroom (e.g., finding ways of making sure that all children have a place to put their boots), and in situations outside the classroom (e.g., identifying shapes or numbers while on a walk). Teachers should continually help children clarify what they already know and what they need to do next. On a daily basis, teachers can model the formulation of mathematical problems, pose questions, and provide opportunities for children to pose questions, and then provide time for investigating possible answers and solutions.

When planning learning experiences, teachers should consider children's cognitive, linguistic, physical, social, and emotional development. The most successful learning takes place when the teacher plans mathematical experiences that are based on an understanding of the child's total development. The child needs to have the cognitive ability to do the mathematical activity; needs to be able to understand the language of instruction, including the mathematical vocabulary; needs to have sufficient fine-motor control to manipulate the materials; and needs to be emotionally mature enough to deal with the demands of the activity so that frustration does not set in.

Since all children will demonstrate a developmental progression in the understanding of foundational mathematical concepts, teachers need to assess the level of development of each child, plan activities that are appropriate for that child, and decide when and how to intervene if the child has difficulties solving a problem.

CREATING A SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The last teaching strategy for very young learners that is suggested to be applied in English classroom is creating a supportive learning environment. Creating safe and caring environments for children from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds involves establishing a tone of respect. This means that children, parents and community members should feel as though they are welcomed members of the learning community and that their diverse identities are valued.

a. Encourage children to play

Play is the cornerstone activity for social, cognitive and language development in children from two-and-a-half to five-years-old. Early childhood professionals should promote play as the leading activity for children (Budden, J., 2004).

The relationship between language development and play is two-way: Language makes it possible for children to adopt roles, and to negotiate the rules and goals of play. Dramatic or pretend play stimulates the development of language.

Play fuels development through imagination and *symbolic functions*. Symbolic functions are the ability to understand that objects, actions, words and people can stand for something else. Symbolic functions are at the core of pretend play and form the foundation for conceptual thinking, literacy and numeracy.

For young children learning a new language, play provides a safe space to try out new words. Even if they do not know the exact word for something, children do not feel embarrassed by using a different name for it since, as in play, everything can become anything—a stick can be a horse or a pen.

b. Model language use

To maximise the exposure of young English language learners to the English language, use the following strategies.

- Use simple but explicit language to “label” your own actions as you carry them out. Saying, “First, I am putting this big, red block here. What should I put next?”, for example, can transform a “building” activity into a language-enhancing activity.
- Label children’s actions as they carry them out the same way you label your own actions.
- Ask children to participate actively in an activity by giving them specific instructions. Saying, “Hand me the tiny brush” while pointing to it, for example, helps young children pay attention to what you are doing while building their vocabulary.
- Verbalize your thinking and the strategies you use to solve a problem. Saying, “Let’s see why this tower is falling down. It is too tall? I wonder what would happen if we took the top block off?” helps involve children in the process of problem solving and brainstorming possible solutions.
- Use language along with demonstration when introducing a new skill or concept. For example, if you are teaching a child to build a tall tower, saying “You put the biggest block first, then a smaller one on top, then another even smaller one on top ...” while

doing it, connects the words with the action and helps children remember the sequence when building on their own.

c. What do I do if children do not understand what I am saying?

Young children learning English, especially in the beginning and emerging stages, will not understand everything an adult is saying in English. Here are some suggestions for improving communication (Berrand, J., 2010).

- Supplement verbal communication with gestures like pointing, touching an object, making motions with your hand like the verb you are describing (e.g., swimming in water).
- Use objects and pictures to support explanations and event descriptions.
- Repeat the same idea or instruction more than once, the second time using shorter sentences, easier vocabulary and speaking more slowly.
- To check for comprehension, try to ask questions where the response is not just a “yes” or a “no.”
- Tell and talk about the story in a book rather than reading it directly. Written language is harder for young children to understand than spoken language because sentences are often longer and have more difficult words in them.
- Choose books with simpler language and/or repetition books that are interesting to the children. Encourage children to “chime in” during the parts of the story they are familiar with.

d. Language Learning Activities

Young children learn about the world as they experience it. This means that their learning is holistic and related to particular events in their lives. Thematic and project-based approaches are two effective ways to offer children relevant and hands-on learning experiences (Rixon, S., 1991). Consider developing an overall thematic or project-based approach with language functions embedded in it. Themes and functions should be related to children’s everyday lives, surroundings and routines. Media and popular culture-based themes are often effective because they are what young children learning a new language have in common with their peers. Access to peer group culture is important so that children can make friends and learn to play together, no matter what their cultural and linguistic background is.

e. Focusing on language functions

Language functions are phrases associated with a specific purpose; e.g., expressing a wish, apologizing, asking for help. A focus on function-based language embeds

vocabulary in sentences and is a more effective strategy for learning a new language than teaching lists of single words. A focus on function-based language also models grammar in real-life contexts, rather than teaching isolated grammar rules. Most young children do not yet have the maturity to benefit from explicit grammar instruction.

f. Encourage interaction

Involve children in dialogue with peers and adults who will model more advanced language use. Develop activities that encourage real dialogue between child–child and adult–child rather than relying on activities that just require children to respond by either nodding their heads or pointing to a picture (Suyanto, Kasihani E., 2008). Encourage interaction between children in pairs or small groups.

CONCLUSION

English teaching learning that is given to English language learners in the early age can give positive impacts as the introduction of using the foreign language before they continue their education to elementary school or the higher levels of their education. In the process of English teaching learning activities, the English teachers can make many kinds of English teaching methods such as whole language method, communicative method, or even process skills. The strategies for developing an effective English teaching for young learners should be applied to make the output of learning much more satisfying. The English teacher can engage the materials of English teaching with real-life context, create a kind of integrated learning, apply the strategies for developing an Effective literacy Environment, develop Early Numeracy in real life contexts, and create a supportive learning environment.

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