

Improving Young Learners' Pronunciation Skill through Songs

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Abstract. One of the essential language aspects of English acquisition is pronunciation. Teaching pronunciation starts from younger age help the learners recognize the way to pronounce accurately. This article is based on classroom action research aiming at improving the young students' pronunciation through songs. The subjects of the research were 23 young learners, the students of grade IV. There were two cycles in this classroom action research in which the researchers used songs as the intervention. The students were introduced to some English songs related to their materials and were asked to practice singing in the class. A test was administered to know the current students' pronunciation skill before the intervention (pre-test), and also a post-test at the end of every cycle to find the difference before and after they were taught with songs. The mean score of the pre-test showed that the students' pronunciation skill was in the range of "fair". After that, the mean score of post-tests 1 and post-test 2 showed that the student's pronunciation skill was improved to the range of "good" and "very good". Moreover, during the observation, the researchers also found that the students got more motivated in learning English by the use of songs. Thus, it can be concluded that the students' pronunciation skill is improved through the use of songs in the learning process.

Keywords: action research, songs, pronunciation, young learners

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is one of the essential aspects of language learning, especially in speaking. Yates (2009) defines pronunciation as the way to produce sounds to make meaning when we speak. Hence, we need to be able to pronounce words correctly to make it easier for people to understand us. For this reason, many language learners regard pronunciation as the measure of mastering speaking skill well. Speaking is a highly crucial skill that everyone should be able to learn since it makes it easier to interact with others (Ardhiani et al., 2021). According to Cahyani et al. (2018), to be able to communicate in English, learners need to learn how to produce the language correctly. It will help the audience to be able to grasp the exact words and meanings of what the language learners convey. Kelly (2000) argues that wrong pronunciation may lead to misunderstanding between speakers.

Moreover, although this may not apply to many people, pronunciation plays an important role in English learners' first impression (Dalton-Puffer et al., 1997: 115). For example, is upon meeting a person who learns English as a second or foreign language, one will

unconsciously judge that the English learner is a good English speaker if he/she has a good pronunciation skill. Thus, it is important for English language teachers to pay attention to the pronunciation teaching process. The teacher should concentrate on using a strategy, technique, or approach while teaching English, but it should also be concerned with the resources (WL et al., 2019).

Researchers and language experts believe that it is an advantage to teach English skills, including pronunciation, since an early age. Zhang (2009), for example, states teaching pronunciation should be taught at primary level because children can effectively and quickly learn sound systems, while adults have difficulties during the learning process due to their age. Moreover, Patkowski (1980), who compared adult language to young learners, found that the latter had language intuitions more alike to the native speakers. This ability enables young learners to communicate using that language in a way that makes them sound more native-like compared to adult learners. Since the primary goal of learning pronunciation is to make the students native-like (Gilakjani, 2016: 1), hence, it is crucial to teach pronunciation to language learners since they were a child.

However, based on the preliminary observation conducted in one of 4th grade of elementary schools in Klaten, Central Java, Indonesia, the researchers found a significant problem regarding the students' pronunciation skill. This problem leads us to the fact that pronunciation is one of the most challenging skills in English language learning and teaching (Richards, 2015). Moreover, according to Schmitt (2000), if the language teacher does not correct the errors made by the language learners, it will lead to permanent errors, especially in the learners' speech. From this reason, we can see that it is essential for the teachers to correct the students' pronunciation since they were at a young age.

Another problem found during the preliminary observation and interview is regarding the language input. Most of the students are still passive learners, in which their participation during the learning processes depends on the teacher. Throughout the observation, it was found that the activities are done monotonously without any variation on the teaching method and media. The learning activity within the classroom only consists of doing the exercises or instructions in their workbooks. As a result, they lack practice and motivation in learning English. The activities that are conducted in the classroom should be able to engage them in the learning process. According to Brown (2000: 88), children will not be able to pay attention to materials that they consider to be "boring, useless, or too difficult", which often happen while learning a foreign language. When faced with such materials, they would lose their attention and start doing anything else that is more interesting to them. In this case, the monotonous activity carried out in the class has bored the students. They then prefer to do other activities during the teaching and learning process instead of paying attention to their teacher.

Nevertheless, teaching English to young learners is quite different from teaching adult English learners. To teach English successfully to young learners, teachers need to be aware of their characteristics, which differentiate them from adult English learners. Ellis and Brewster (2002: 27-28) state that children "... have a lot of physical energy and often need

to be physically active, have a wide range of emotional needs, are emotionally excitable, are developing conceptually and are at an early stage of their schooling, are still developing literacy in their first language, learn more slowly and forget things quickly, tend to be self-oriented and preoccupied with their own world, get bored easily, are excellent mimics, can concentrate for a surprisingly long time if they are interested, and can be easily distracted but also very enthusiastic." Therefore, to be able to acquire their full attention, teachers need to master the techniques in teaching English to young learners. According to Brown (2000), teachers may successfully engage the students in the learning process by having activities that capture the students' interest, having a variety of activities to maintain their attention on the material, creating enthusiastic energy, and many others. If the teacher focuses his/her teaching process on those aspects, the students would likely put their whole attention on the teacher and material.

Dealing with the problems mentioned, and considering the characteristics of young learners cited in the previous paragraph, teaching pronunciation for young learners requires various teaching techniques. Thus far, many people and researchers have discussed the best ways to improve English learners' pronunciation skill. In 2009, Saran et al. conducted research on teaching pronunciation using mobile phones. At the end of their research, it was found that the students' pronunciation skill enhances after the implementation. However, this method cannot be applied to the students because the school does not allow them to bring mobile phones to school. Another research that addresses pronunciation is conducted by Mompean and Fouz-Gonzalez (2016) on using Twitter to improve the students' pronunciation skill. Students who participate in the research until the very end show an improvement in their pronunciation skill. Moreover, they also become more engaged in learning English. This method cannot be applied to the students as well because the school does not provide computers and an internet connection for the students.

Apart from the two researches mentioned, there is also research on teaching pronunciation using songs. Vocabulary is also regarded as the cornerstone of learning English, which English learners must acquire in order to facilitate total English proficiency (Nur Affini et al., 2019). For example, the research done by Shehadeh and Farrah (2016) that focuses on the effectiveness of using songs to develop the vocabulary and pronunciation of elementary graders in Jerusalem. After being taught English using songs, the students' vocabulary and pronunciation experience an improvement. The rhythm of the songs can create a friendly atmosphere within the classroom, which will lead the students into feeling relaxed throughout the lesson because they see songs as entertainment instead of studying (Millington, 2011: 136). If the students consider a subject as something that they can enjoy, they will become interested in learning, thus resulting in the mastery of the materials.

Ellis and Brewster (2002: 162) state that songs, rhymes, and chants are considered fun for children and will make them view the target language positively. There are many challenges in teaching children, such as classroom management (Linse, 2005). However, through using songs, they will be more enthusiastic in studying a new language that they never speak with or hear. Moreover, one of the many benefits of teaching using songs for pronunciation is the familiarization of the target culture (Salcedo, 2002). This familiarization makes it possible

for children to enjoy the new and foreign language that they are learning. From this enjoyment, as stated by Millington (2011: 136) cited previously, children will be interested in learning.

As long as the children are interested, the teachers may teach them the materials that they need to master a foreign language, including teaching them pronunciation. This is the reason why using songs is one of the alternatives to practice pronunciation. Many studies argue that songs can stimulate children into learning English and that songs make learning a second language easier (Defaz, 2011) for the students. All in all, songs can help the students learn a new language because the students' learning process becomes unconscious. The students will learn without feeling the burden of learning that students often face, which means that their anxiety level is lower. According to Liu (2006), the more proficient students are in an FL, the less anxious they tend to be. Thus, there will be an increase in their academic performance. Keeping in mind the advantages and the practicality of songs to be applied in the teaching and learning process, the researchers decided to teach pronunciation to 4th-grade students of the elementary school using songs.

A repetition of the songs accompanies the use of songs within this research. According to Johnstone (1994) in Silva & Santos (2011), repetition is one of the ways for our brain to process information. Moreover, repetition will create a relaxed atmosphere (Merritt, 1994, in Silva & Santos, 2011). Therefore, during the teaching and learning processes, the teacher applies this method along with songs. The songs will be played for several times until the students can sing along to the song. Then, if the students are able to sing by themselves, the teacher asked the students to sing together without the audio. Moreover, the students sang the song repeatedly.

Furthermore, the researchers took into consideration in addressing the characteristics of children mentioned by Brewster et al. (2004: 27-28) that children "... have a lot of physical energy and often need to be physically active". Also, Nunan (2010) stated that one of the characteristics of young learners is that they "... enjoy fantasy, imagination, and movement." Therefore, many teachers often complain about their students being overly active and that they do not know how to make them pay attention to the lesson. The researchers believe that these types of issues can be addressed using the TPR (Total Physical Response) method. Larsen-freeman (2000) stated that students would enjoy learning a foreign language when they are taught using this method. To them, not having to sit still and listen to their teacher explaining the material throughout the hour excites them. As a result, they will be encouraged to learn a foreign language. Thus, the researchers decided to include this method to support the application of songs in teaching pronunciation.

Therefore, after referring to several literatures on teaching pronunciation to young learners, it is found that the most applicable method to address this problem is using songs. Then, this method is also supported by TPR to help the students understand better and help them to be more engaged with the teaching and learning process. The goal of applying the methods is to help the teacher improve the students' pronunciation skill and confidence in a more fun and enjoyable way.

METHOD

This study belongs to classroom action research since it offers interference practice based on the problems found to improve students' particular skill. The strategy is useful in improving students' skills like as pronunciation, vocabulary, intonation, expressions, and grammar (Wiyaka et al., 2017). It is in line with what is stated by Wallace (1998) and Burns (1999): action research is a systematic process in collecting and analyzing data to investigate practical issues arising within a particular context in order to come to some decisions about what the future practice should be.

The study was conducted in one of elementary school located in Klaten, Central Java, Indonesia. The subjects involved in this research were 23 students of Grade IV. Furthermore, in this study, the researchers worked with the classroom teacher as the collaborator.

According to Elliot (1991), there are six main steps that need to be implemented in conducting action research. They are identifying initial ideas, reconnaissance, constructing a general plan, implementing action, observation, and reflection. Those six steps form a cycle that will move to form the next cycles continually. Therefore, in organizing this study, the researchers did some steps starting from observing the school for problem(s) identification. After that, the steps taken were reviewing the literature, developing instruments for applying the method proposed, collecting and analyzing the data through two cycles. The first cycle included a pre-test, material 1, material 2, and post-test 1. After that, the study was continued to the next cycle consisting of material 3, material 4, and post-test 2. Finally, the researchers drew a conclusion and wrote a report.

In collecting the data, the researchers use various techniques and instruments based on the techniques applied. For qualitative data, the researcher did direct observation in the classroom, interviewed the teachers and the students regarding the English teaching and learning. Therefore, the instruments used were observation checklist and interview guideline. Also, the researcher used video and audio recorder, camera, and field notes. Furthermore, in collecting quantitative data, the researchers conducted tests (pre-test, post-test 1, post-test 2). In the test, the students were asked to pronounce some words, and they were assessed using a rubric.

After being collected, the data were analyzed through some techniques. We used qualitative analysis to obtain data relating to the students' perspectives and arguments about their writing (Susanto et al., 2019). The qualitative data were analyzed and interpreted through steps adapted from Ary et al. (2010). Those are 1) coding the data; 2) reducing the irrelevant data; 3) classifying the data based on the purposes of the study; 4) describing the result of the data classification, and 5) drawing a conclusion. On the other hand, the quantitative data gathered from tests were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The result of the analysis is in the form of students' means score reflecting the interfered teaching and learning process to know the difference or the improvement of students' pronunciation skill before and after the cycle is done.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this research were gotten from the pre-test, post-test 1, post-test 2, as well as the observation from the researchers. Based on the two cycles done in this research, the researchers got some results, as described in the following paragraphs.

In the first cycle of this research, the researchers started by conducting a pre-test for the students. It was aimed to get the data of the students' current ability in pronunciation. The researchers used three segmental parts of pronunciation, which are vowel, consonant, and diphthong. There were ten words for each of the part. The words were taken from the materials in the second semester that given to the students from their workbooks. The researchers also used a rubric for assessing the students' ability. The researchers asked the students to pronounce the words and then checked the correct pronunciation.

Table 1 Mean Score of Pre-test

| Vocal | Consonant | Diphthong |
|-------|-----------|-----------|
| 2.434 | 2.304 | 2.608 |

Based on the table above, the researchers found that the students' average scores were 2.434, 2.04, and 2.608, which were in the range of "fair". It showed that the students need improvement in their English pronunciation.

After receiving the result of the pre-test, the researchers gave the first materials in cycle 1 which were "Days of the Week" and "Months of the Year". The researchers asked the students to recall the meaning of the days in English into Indonesia and vice versa. Then, the researchers gave an intervention by playing the "Days of the Week" and "Months of the Year" songs. The students listened to the song and sang along with the researchers. The researchers found that most of the students mispronounced words such as Monday /'mʌn.deɪ/ became /'mon.dai/, Friday /'fraɪ.deɪ/ got to be /fridai/, Saturday /'sæt.ə.deɪ/ turned into /saturdai/, day /deɪ/ came to be /dai/, April /'eɪ.prəl/ became /'april/ as they said it in Indonesia, and August /'ɔːgəst/ into /'agus/. The researchers gave the demonstration in pronouncing the words correctly then the students repeated after for the incorrect words. The students found it difficult for the first-time repetition. However, they started to follow the instruction and repeated properly. Afterward, the students sang the songs again without the music. They pronounced the words better than the first time they tried to sing the songs. The researchers gave rewards to the students who were able to answers the questions and sing the songs. Some of the students got more confidence to mention the name of the days and months in English. It was shown from their participation by raising their hand when the researchers asked them questions.

In the next action of cycle 1, the researchers gave the students the second material, which was "Hobbies". The researchers recalled the "Days of the Week" and "Months of the Year" songs. The students were excited to sing the songs together. Then, the researchers introduced the "What Do You Like to Do?" song. The song lyrics were written on the whiteboard, and the students copied it on their book. The researchers played the song, and the students listened

to the song carefully. After that, the researchers invited the students to sing together. After singing together, the researchers gave the students questions about the meaning of the list of words in the lyrics of the song. They showed their interest by raising their hand in answering the questions. The one who answered correctly would get a reward from the researchers. However, the students had difficulty in singing the song by themselves. They needed guidance from the researchers or the music. Also, some improvement in their pronunciation also appeared.

The last action on the first cycle was post-test. The researchers administered a post-test to know the students' improvement as the intervention had been given to them.

The students were asked to pronounce the words in English that the researchers had provided. The list of words consisted of three parts, which were the same as the pre-test such as vowel, consonant, and diphthong. Each part had 15 words. The words were taken from the workbook as well as from the COCA rank. The students were able to pronounce some words correctly. As a result of the correct answers based on the rubric the researchers had, the students' mean score presented below shows that the students were in the range of "good".

Table 2 Mean Score of Post-test 1

| Vocal | Consonant | Diphthong |
|--------------|------------------|------------------|
| 4.381 | 3.761 | 3.761 |

From the previous table, it can be seen that this result from cycle 1 indicated the improvement for the students' pronunciation skill. Therefore, the researchers found that songs could improve the students' enhancement and decided to continue using songs in cycle 2. However, the reflection for evaluation of cycle 1 showed that the use of songs with long lyrics could lower the students' interest, and it was difficult to be remembered. Thus, the songs applied for cycle 2 were chosen from those that have shorter lyrics. Moreover, not only considering the use of songs again, in cycle 2, the researchers also decided to add another complement technique.

The first activity in cycle 2 was giving the materials for the students by recalling the last topic of the songs and singing together. Afterward, the researchers played a song as the new topic of the day, which was "Time" entitled "O' Clock" as the first intervention. Then, the students were asked to stand up from the seat to follow the movement of the song as the researchers showed to them. The researchers imitated the long hand of the clock and the short hand by using their hands. The students copied the movement and sang together. The dance movement was an additional intervention. The students expressed more excitement than before. They were active in following the instructions. They asked for more and more to sing and dance. After singing together, the researchers gave the students questions about time in O' Clock mode. The researchers also gave reward to the students that were able to answer the questions as well as sing in front of the class. The movement of the song conveyed a different response (positively) from the students. Therefore, this additional technique would be used in the next meeting of cycle 2.

The next meeting of cycle 2 was started by recalling materials from the "Days of the Week", "Months of the Year", "What Do You Like to Do?", and "O'Clock". The students were able to sing together nicely. Although some of them still had a mistake in pronouncing some words, they were already more confident in singing and dancing together. Then, the researchers gave another material which was "Thirty". It was about the time and the half or "thirty" mode. The song was similar to "O'Clock" but the lyrics were changed into "Thirty". The students also needed to follow the movement for the song. Also, rewards would be given to the students when they actively answered the questions. Some of the students who never got the rewards were also asked to come in front of the class to get their turn in showing the movement of the song. At first, they were shy to perform in front of the class, but with the encouragement from other students, they were finally able to do it.

Finally, in the last meeting of the cycle 2, the researchers conducted a post-test. The researchers administered the second post-test by the same technique as the pre-test and post-test 1. There were 15 words divided into three parts that the students would have for the test. The students took the test, and the researchers found out that the students' ability in pronunciation was increasing. The result of post-test 2 presented in the table below shows that the students were within the range of "good" to "very good".

Table 3 Mean score of Post-test 2

| Vocal | Consonant | Diphthong |
|--------------|------------------|------------------|
| 4.739 | 4.173 | 3.913 |

As a wrap-up, the improvement of the student's pronunciation skill through the two cycles done is presented as follows:

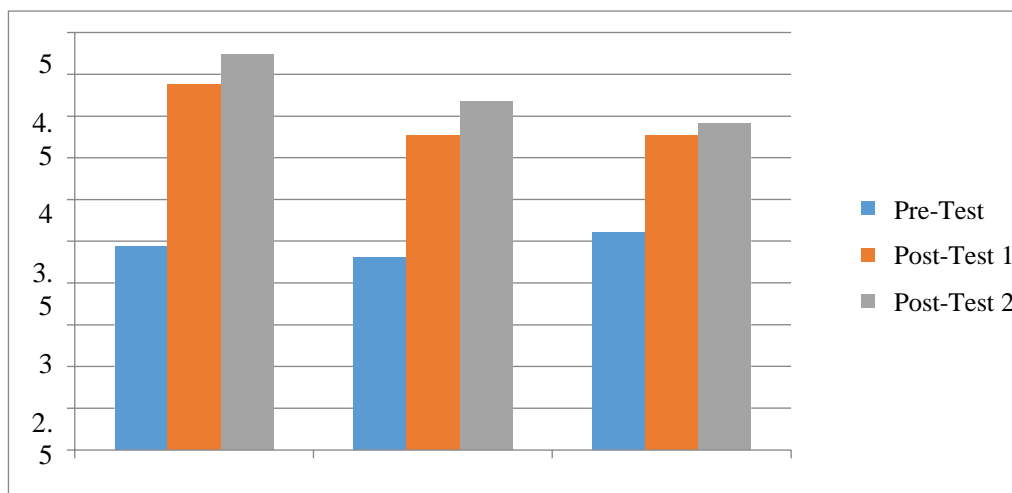


Figure 1 The Graphic of Student's Score Improvement

The bar shows that after the implementation of songs in two cycles, the students' score of pronunciation is continually increasing in all three groups of words. Furthermore, another result that can be found from cycle 2 was that additional movement or dancing applied in the song could also affect the students' confidence. Their confidence was improved indicated by their involvement in the class by answering questions or performing in front of the class.

Next, let's discuss the result presented above based on the existing theories. First, as the researchers reminded the students and demonstrated the correct pronunciation of some words that the students said it wrong, it was found that the students finally avoid the mistakes again when saying the words. This is in line with what Schmitt (2000) said about the error that the students make, which is not corrected by the teachers will lead to a permanent error. Thus, the correction from the teacher is essential to avoid such a thing.

Furthermore, based on the result of observation during this research being conducted, the students showed their interest in learning English through songs. The students' interest is shown by their excitement in listening to the songs carefully and singing together with the researcher. As Brown (2000) said, teachers may successfully engage the students in the learning process by having activities that capture the students' interest, having a variety of activities to maintain their attention on the material, creating enthusiastic energy, and many others. Hence, the activity of singing together makes the students more engaged in the teaching and learning activity.

Another result that needs to be discussed is that the students start to pronounce the words correctly and request to sing the songs from the first meeting. This phenomenon indicates that the students want to know more how to pronounce the words in English correctly. As Millington (2011: 136) said about the enjoyment because of familiarization, the students in the class show their enjoyment as they request to sing the song more often. They become

more familiar with the English songs, as Salcedo (2002) stated that teaching using songs for pronunciation helps the familiarization on the target culture.

Moreover, in the second cycle, the researchers added movement as the improvisation along with the songs. The movement involved is simple and easy to follow. The implementation of the movement considered as one of the Total Physical Response method's activities believed in making the students enjoy learning a foreign language (Larsen-freeman, 2000). The theory was proven in the research as the students were showing their interest and improvement in their confidence. Their involvement in the class is improved shown by their participation in answering questions or performing in front of the entire class.

Another result found based on the observation during the research is that the students sing and repeat the song after they are given the demonstration of correct pronunciation from the researchers correctly. It means that repetition helps the students remember the pronunciation of the words. It is in line with what Johnstone (1994) in Silva & Santos (2011) stated that repetition is one of the ways for our brain to process information. Moreover, the repetition of the songs also gives a relaxed atmosphere as Merritt (1994, in Silva & Santos, 2011) said. Finally, the result of the students' improvement in pronunciation skill through the implementation of songs in the classroom is in line with what is said by Brewster and Ellis (2005). They said that songs and rhymes are one of the ways to make the students aware of English sounds. Moreover, as the researchers conducted a research on young learners, the theory proposed by Zhang (2009) stated that teaching pronunciation should start from the primary school because of the ability of the students in learning sound systems quickly and effectively can be applied directly.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data found and its relation to some theories mentioned in the previous section, it can be concluded that the students' pronunciation skill is improved through the use of songs in the learning process. Moreover, the students' motivation and confidence are also increased after some additional movements within the songs are implemented in the class. The students become motivated and start to be interested in learning English. Therefore, the students start to speak in English by using correct pronunciation.

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