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TEACHING CRITICAL LISTENING TO YOUNG LEARNERS IN INDONESIAN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract: The teaching of English in Indonesia includes four skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and two language components—vocabulary and grammar. Listening is one of the four language skills that have an important role in teaching of English in our country. In the context of early childhood education—including the teaching of English in elementary school—there has been a persistent misconception about how children learn—including learning a foreign language. To ensure success in learning a foreign language, children should have a great deal of exposure to, engagement in, and support for the language they are learning. Therefore, the aims of the study are to know the response of the young learners in learning listening skill through storytelling and whether they can apply the critical listening into the other language skills—speaking, reading, and writing. The subjects in this study are students of level 3 in one of English course in Bandung-Indonesia. Their ages are around 9 -12 years old. The data are gathered from activities in the classroom, observation, and interviews. This research provides steps of critical listening activities. The results shows 1) the activities are successfully help the students to sharpen their listening skill and 2) most of the students can apply the listening skills to the other skills. In the end of this study, the pedagogical implications were provided.

Keywords: *critical listening, young learners, Indonesian EFL context.*

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of English in Indonesia includes four skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and two language components—vocabulary and grammar. Listening is one of the four language skills that have an important role in teaching of English in our country. What is listening? According to Howat and Dakin (1974), listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and grasping the meaning. Call (1985) refers to listening as one of the four skills that plays a very important role at the beginning stage of language acquisition.

The basic idea why we teach listening is that it is impossible the people to be able to speak without listening first. As people learning their mother tongue, children listen to other people around them. For example, their mother and father, before they begin to

speak. They begin to speak after a period of time called "silent period" (Krashen, 1983).

Meanwhile, Barker et al. (1980) as quoted by Bozik (1986) shows that 70 percent of our life waking day communicating; 14 percent of that time is spent writing, 17 percent reading, 16 percent speaking, and 53 percent listening. But actually, until now, listening has attracted the least attention among the four skills. This neglect may come from the fact that listening is considered a passive skill and from the belief that merely exposing students to the spoken language is adequate in developing the skill (Call, 1985). Another reason is that a teaching learning process often gives the impression that teachers are teaching listening when in fact they are teaching other skills, e.g. speaking (Persulesi: 1988). That is why, listening should be taught proportionally and have a place in the teaching of English in our country.

In actuality, as we have learned from research, children have their own world,

which is far different that of adults. More specifically, children have their own culture and learning preferences. That is, according to Musthafa (2002), children learn by way of physical activities (i.e. hands on experiences) in the context of doing things embedded in their daily lives, both individually and socially. Children have a relatively short attention span, and they learn with the motive of meeting goals. This uniquely child-like ways of doing things call for a certain methodological style, which emphasizes concrete activities, social interaction and series of little bits of action-based learning sessions packaged in various models of delivery.

To ensure success in learning a foreign language, children should have a great deal of exposure to, engagement in, and support for the language they are learning. This means that children should have ample opportunities to hear and see the English language being used for communicative purposes in their social environment. Additionally, children themselves must have opportunities to use English—especially in the context of learning the language—for some communicative purposes. To enhance their learning, children should also be given the necessary support so that they feel that what they are learning is useful and interesting.

Basically, listening has different meaning from hearing. The former needs to make an effort to hear somebody or something while the later perceives sounds with ears. “We listen carefully but heard nothing.” From the sentence, it seems that listening is always an active process, while hearing can be thought as passive condition (Underwood, 1989).

Listening is an active process in which the listener tries to identify the sound, decodes them, and understands the meaning of the words by means of context. Listening is not a passive skill since it requires full participation and the undivided attention of the listener (Morley, 1984). Therefore, when the nature of the skill is understood, the process becomes existing. In other words, listening involves an active participation on the part of the listener. The listener cannot understand well what is said to him unless he

first of all recognizes the sound, words, phrases, and the structure of the foreign language, and then selects the main points of the message. Moreover, listening is a creative skill. In order to comprehend the sounds falling on someone’s ears, he takes the raw material of words, arrangement of words, and the rise and fall of the voice, and from this material, he creates a significant. The significant which comes from the listener’s side is dependent on three factors. They are (1) linguistic factors, (2) situational context, and (3) intentions of the speaker (Rivers, 1981)

In the strategy of teaching listening, it is necessary for the teachers to consider some specific questions about listening in order to make the process of teaching listening runs well. Those questions are: What factors affect good listening? What are the characteristics of “real-life” listening? What are the many things listeners listen for? What are some principles of designing listening techniques? How can listening techniques be interactive? What are some common techniques for teaching listening?

Language learning is largely process of developing automatic cognitive processes, of learning procedural knowledge, and this also occurs in listening process. The success in language learning is to get students to activate the process and skills they use dealing with the complex world around them. What this all means is that there is a need for two different types of listening practice: (1) pre-communicative listening practice and (2) real communicative listening practice (Littlewood, 1981)

In the pre-communicative listening practice, there are some pre-listening activities that can be done. These pre-listening activities are intended to facilitate students with the background knowledge that may help them to comprehend the spoken text such as discussing the topic, brainstorming ideas, asking general ideas about the topic, or anything else to orient and prepare them for what they will hear, so they will be able to use their inference and predict skills to understand the spoken texts.

In communicative listening practice, students are engaged in communicative

practice. It is the most important listening activity. It is believed that learning language is learning to use it for meaningful communication, and this applies to all language skills, not just listening. Communication takes place when information is conveyed from one person who has it, to another person who doesn't. This means that communicative language practice, the emphasis is not on the language, but on the content of communication. Learners must listen carefully because they want to know what is being said.

In teaching listening, a teacher must be careful not to go to extremes, either by being concerned too exclusively with theories without thinking about their application to teaching, or by obstinately following frozen routines—opening text-book and explaining new words, playing the tape recorder, and asking/answering questions. It is essential for a teacher to have an overall understanding of what listening is, why it is difficult to foreign-language learners, and what some solutions may be (Yagang, 1993). The vital question is how to bridge the gap between an analysis of listening and actual classroom teaching.

Some teachers think that listening is the easiest skill to teach, whereas most students think it is the most difficult to improve. This contradiction tells that there are something about teaching listening that need to be explored. Perhaps those who say it is "the easiest to teach" means that it does not require much painstaking lesson preparation and all they need to do is play the tapes and test the students. But is there nothing more to teaching listening than testing? Teachers must find out all they can about how listening can be improved and what activities are useful to this end and then use this knowledge and these activities in their own classroom.

The importance of listening in language learning should by now be quite apparent. In the process of teaching and learning listening, teachers play an important role for their students' success. The success of teaching listening much depends on the teachers. Teachers are able to play a role as managers that organize the process of teaching.

If the goal of communicative language teaching (CLT) is to have students become communicative competence (Larsen-Freeman, 1986), then what role should the teacher play in enabling their students to become communicative competence in listening? In this case, Rubin (1990) acknowledges that a teacher may have a role of a mediator for the students in the classroom activities that help students grasp the understanding of the spoken text they hear. If the teacher fulfills this role in the listening class, students will become more efficient and critical listeners.

There are many activities that we can use to teach listening to young learners such as through stories, song, rhymes, finger plays etc. But in this research I only apply one of them that is by using stories. Stories for children exist in every country and every culture. Stories entertain children, educate them, and give them their cultural ability.

In the current literature, argument abound which encourage us to exploit the children's natural abilities for learning rather than to impose our own adult approach to learning. The thinking is based on the following assumptions: children's ability to grasp meaning; children's creative use of limited language resources; children's capacity for indirect learning; children's instinct for fun and play; the role of imagination. All these five elements are combined in the use of stories. Andrew Wright as quoted by Musthafa (2002), an expert on children's literature, once commented on children's 'hunger' for stories that *"We all need stories for our minds as we need food for our bodies... Stories are particularly important in the lives of our children: stories help children to understand their world and share it with others. Children's hunger for stories is constant. Every time they enter the classroom they enter with a need for stories."*

Additionally, in the context of early childhood education—including the teaching of English in elementary school—there has been a persistent misconception about how children learn—including learning a foreign language. That is, according to Musthafa (2002), there has been widely-held wrong assumption that children learn things

(including English) exactly the same way adult do. This misconception has resulted in a far-reaching set of problems. That is, teachers tend to approach the teaching-learning process and employ teaching methods and techniques for the teaching of English for young learners in an exactly the same way as they would teach adult learners. This mismatch can surely lead to failure.

The research questions then are formulated as follows:

1. Do children feel more comfortable in learning listening through stories than only listen to the tape-recorder and then answer the question?
2. Can they apply the critical listening into the other language skills—speaking, reading, and writing?

METHOD

Subject of research

The subjects in this study are elementary students who take English Course in one of English course for children in Bandung Indonesia. There are 6 levels in the English Course, but I took student samples from level 3. I will take seven students (4 females and 3 males). Their ages are around 9 -12 years old. There are several reason for choosing this particular subjects. First, their prior knowledge of English is still average (their ability is not too fluent but they have learned and known English at their school). Second, because I expected to make a communicative classroom in teaching learning. The study will utilize a set of methods to get the data, relying on activities in the classroom, observation, and interviews.

Procedure

Usually, the listening activity in the class is 1) only playing the cassette, asking the students to listen to it carefully and at the end the students will be asked several question of what they have heard from the cassette; 2) teachers play the cassette, ask the students to pronounce the words that they heard from it, memorize the written form of the words, and the last they are given a test. It happens all the time.

For this research, I got the opportunity to substitute one of the teachers to teach in her

class for a month (4 meetings). I read a short stories for two meetings and longer stories for the next two meetings. Of course I have to be very expressive when I became a storyteller. The pictures in the storybook and my expression help the students to understand the vocabulary and the story. They can see and hear the English they have learned come alive through storybook characters. I reread the story often and each time I reread the story, I stop on a different page, talk about the picture, ask questions and encourage them to answer in their own words.

When I did these activities, I follow some suggestions: before, during, and after I read the story as proposed by Musthafa (2002) as follows:

Before the story

- I practiced reading the story before I read it to students
- I thought of a different voice that I could use for each character
- I practiced the intonation; for example: if the child in the story is sad, I make my voice sound sad.
- I used the cover of the storybook to help children learn to predict what the story would be about.
- As I read the title and run my finger under it, I asked them to think what the story would be about, I also asked their predictions and wrote their prediction on the board.

During the story

- I held the book so they can see the pictures on the pages.
- I read the story to them in a fun way, using different voices and showing that I was enjoying it. Then, I went back to check children's predictions.
- I talked about the pictures and showed them how looking at the pictures could help them understand what was happening.
- When I got to a part that said "He said" or "She said", I wanted the understood who was talking.

After the story

- I quickly reviewed what had happened in the story. Then I asked them questions about things that happened in the story to check their understanding.
- After I read the story the first time, I went back to check children's predictions.
- I invited children to show their understanding through drawing, acting out the story, or doing an art project.
- I gave them time to talk about their projects or drawing. I asked them if they ever did anything that was like something that happened in the story.

Observation

The observation process was carried before I started my research. I observed how the teacher taught the students, the facilities to support the students in learning English, the students' response to the teaching method conveyed by the teachers.

Interviews

Students will also be interviewed about how they feel in doing the activities, as these may be their first experience in learning EFL. Do they feel more comfortable in learning listening through stories than only listen to the tape-recorder and then answer the question? Which situation is more facilitating through stories or cassettes? And the strategies they use to apply the critical listening into the other language skills—speaking, reading, and writing.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on my observation about the regular teaching-learning activity at the English course, I made 4 categories:

Conducive classroom environment

Why I put this into one of the categories? According to Harmer (2001), young learners have very special characteristics, good teachers at this level need to provide a rich diet of learning experiences which encourages their students to get information from a variety of sources. They need to work with their students individually and in groups developing good relationships. They need to

plan a range of activities for a given time period, and be flexible enough to move on to the next exercise when they see their students getting bored.

Actually, what is an ideal and conducive classroom for young learners? First of all the classroom are supposed to be bright and colorful, with windows the children can see out of, and with enough room for different activities to be taking place. Teachers might expect them to be working in groups in different parts of the classroom, changing their activity every ten minutes or so. Halliwell (1992) as quoted by Harmer (2001) write, 'not talking about classrooms where children spend all their time sitting still in rows or talking only to the teacher'.

Even though, the explanation above shows an ideal and conducive classroom, it does not mean that every course can fulfill that because it needs extra budget to make the class like that. Unfortunately, I could not find a description of a conducive classroom in this English Course. The class is sometimes too small to accommodate students. In several classes, there are no window, do not have enough ventilation, and lack of sunlight.

Interaction between teacher and students

According to Brown (2001), interaction is the collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings, or ideas between two or more people, resulting in reciprocal effect on each other. Theories of communicative competence emphasize the importance of interaction as human beings use language in various context to "negotiate" meaning, or simply stated, to get an idea out of one person's head and into the head of another person and vice versa.

From the very beginning of language study, classroom should be interactive. Rivers (1987) as quoted by Brown (2001) puts it this way:

Through interaction, students can increase their language store as they listen to or read authentic linguistic material, or even the output of their fellow students in discussions, skits, joint problem-solving tasks, or dialogue journals. In interaction, students can use all they possess of the language—all they have learned or casually absorbed—in real-life

exchanges. ...Even at an elementary stage, they learn in this way to exploit the elasticity of language.

To make an interaction happens in the classroom, teacher should play as a controller, director, manager, facilitator, and resource. Because the learners still felt unsatisfactory when they learned English especially learning listening, I concluded that the teachers in the English Course were still unable to play role of interactive teacher.

Students' strategies in learning listening

Learning strategies are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning (Oxford, 1990), while Wenden (1987) defines that learning strategies are specific mental steps or operations learners implement to learn. Strategies are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence. Appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence. It is also happened when students use the strategies in listening.

From my observation, I concluded that with an attractive way of teaching, students could get their self-confidence when they learn EFL. In fact, they admitted that they feel bored when they learned listening. They just listened to the cassette and then answered the question but they felt interested when they were given another activities.

Students' response to the story

A response-based view of the role of children's literature in the elementary classroom has recently been brought to the attention of educators (Galda, 1988 as quoted by Hancock, 1992). Rosenblatt (1991) has introduced us to an *aesthetic* and an *effluent* reading. When our students' emotion is involved in appreciating literature and then they enjoy it, it means that they have an aesthetic response.

In my observation, when they were given a story the students were very responsive and could cooperate in making interaction through the activities. In my opinion, this activity can be applied in the classroom by the teachers at The English

Course. The research activity that I conducted there is just to give other option of teaching in the classroom.

Through the using story activity, students were successful in following the instruction. I conclude that: They understand what was the story about. When I asked them for feedback, they always gave a positive response. They were also able to retell the story with their own words. It shows their ability in speaking. They can recognize the characters in the story. They enjoy the excitement in the story. They can memorize the vocabularies on the story easily. They can records and the words and able to write them in a written text. It shows their ability to write. They can absorb the moral messages from the story. It shows their ability to give an aesthetic response. In discussing the story, they can make an interaction with me as a facilitator in the class

CONCLUSION

From my observation and findings I found in the classroom, I can conclude that listening activity through story improve and help the students to learn English in fun way. The students can apply what they have listened into other skills such as reading, writing, and speaking. There are several suggestions that I can share based on my observation and findings: It is important to provide the students with many storybooks, songs, and games for students. I think through these activities, EFL learning in Indonesia will be successful; English teachers should be provided with training, seminar or workshop in order to improve their teaching method especially for teaching children.

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Misunderstanding about gift giving

Once, at a conference, I met an Australian lecturer who I really admired. He was very kind, warm, and I got many valuable things from him. In our culture, we are always very keen to give something to a special guest and I thought very hard about what I could give him to express my appreciation. Finally I decided to give him some special jackfruit crackers. But what happened when I gave my gift to this Australian lecturer? He gave it straight back to me and said in front of many people: "Thanks, but I can't take them with me and anyway I can find these easily in Australia". I was totally shocked by his response and felt very confused. This is because in our culture even though we don't like something given by someone, we always say thanks and praise them for their thoughtfulness, even if later we give their gift to someone else. My thoughts were, this lecturer is very honest but he didn't really consider other people's feelings. (Sitti Maesuri, source: <http://www.ialf.edu/dpdf/april05page2.html#Misunderstanding>)