

Developing Speaking Skills in the Young Learners Classroom

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Introduction

When teaching young learners we constantly have to keep in mind the fact that what we have in front of us is a mixed class with varied abilities, expectations, motivation level, knowledge and last but not least, different learning styles. Thus, we need to vary our approaches and offer as much opportunity as possible to make the whole class find a little something to hold on to, expand and grow. Developing speaking skills definitely deserves a closer look and the article provides a few guidelines to keep all the students involved and interested.

The Basics

Young learners are like sponges, they soak up everything we say and how we say it. Thus clear and correct pronunciation is of vital importance, since young learners repeat exactly what they hear. What has been learned at an early stage is difficult to change later on. One of the rules that applies here is: slowly and steadily, through constant revision and recycling. Furthermore, I always strive to achieve a positive and relaxed atmosphere in my young learners' classroom, as this proved a decisive factor in achieving maximum results. 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. When applying the above-mentioned tools into my teaching practice, I try to keep in mind that interaction is an important way of learning. Therefore, increased oral emphasis should be included in our teaching to give the students as much speaking time as possible.

Shadowing a Tape or a CD

Many textbooks for young learners offer shorter texts written as comics, introducing characters learners can relate to and through which they get to know the language, the culture and the people of a certain country. Instead of simply following the text (with books either open or closed), I often divide the class into various parts or teams (e.g. A and B, depending on the number of roles in the comics) and then the learners read with the tape. Choral reading has always proved a lot of fun and children are excellent at imitating, thus producing brilliant copies of the original. Do not forget to change roles after the text has been read a few times. Further on, as you see learners getting familiar with the topic and vocabulary, make them work in pairs. If they want to, they can also perform in front of the class – keep in mind that at an early age they are mostly extroverts and love showing off their English. However, there may be students who are terrified of being exposed, some are in the so-called silent phase – never force these students to speak in front of the whole class. Instead, give them some other role – e.g. they "act" as a ringing phone in the comics, appear as the voice of a dog or the like. I can tell from my own experience that this does bring results and eventually also these students come out of their shell and express themselves in English. Needless to say, each and every attempt should be accompanied by our approval and appraisal, the same being the case with other speaking activities the learners are involved into. Do encourage them constantly as this builds their motivation and self-awareness.

Note

A slow progression from choral shadowing to smaller-group shadowing and finally to pair-work is advisable as students gain confidence through each stage and providing them with a lot of opportunities widens our chances of success in trying to provide a stimulating environment for all – the courageous and the shy ones.

Learning the Dialogues

Textbooks are usually filled with situation dialogues, helping the students learn language in real-life situations, therefore offering them the tool which opens many doors to various subjects. But learning these dialogues by heart is a definite no-no. It is much better and far more useful to substitute the words so that they are true to students and their world. Thus each student uses his/her own variation, there is an obvious transition from pure imitation to conscious changing, which speeds up remembering and offers varied communicative opportunities. By imitating, sharing and discussing students benefit – modeling, understanding and picking it up seem to be natural. Through imitating, interacting and internalizing the process is later on understood explicitly on a higher level, by practising social phrases in everyday situations the learners are building a basis on top of which new information is to be added from lesson to lesson. Note: with young learners, grammatical points should be taught implicitly only, after they are 11 and up, the explicit approach can be used as well.

Songs, Poems, Rhymes and Chants

Throughout our English lessons students are learning to speak, express ideas, share opinions and exchange information. 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. Try to include the above-mentioned activities by providing learners with those that require total physical response, shortly known as "TPR". Year by year, children get highly enthusiastic about songs like: "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" and "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes") where (excessive) body movements are required. Confidence and motivation are built through the process. Sometimes new lyrics can be added to traditional songs, making things a bit different and out of the expected. e.g. "Row, row, row your boat" can easily be changed into "Fly, fly, fly your plane" the movements change accordingly and so does the rest of the lyrics. It is basically the teachers' call what and how to change the song, and it is always welcomed by the learners. After telling them the new lyrics is your own invention, maybe they can try and come up with another version as a part of their home assignment (trust me: even parents get involved in the process and the list of newly written songs has become endless and a true inspiration when a bit bored with the originals). Note: There never seems to be enough of the TPR-based activities in class – they are a great tool in satisfying different learner types: visual, aural and kinesthetic (the so-called VAK distinction), further expanding positive opportunities for the varied classroom.

Conclusion

Young learners in the communicative classroom should get as many speaking opportunities as possible and their speaking time should slowly but steadily rise so as to prepare them for various communicative situations. Keeping in mind that each classroom offers a wide range of learners differing in their abilities, knowledge, confidence, motivation and learning styles, a teacher should provide them with a proper environment that would help them develop their skills, independent of their basic characteristics and diversity.

Combining the approaches, varying the cognitive styles, mixing and matching various methods and tools – e.g. songs, games, chants, rhymes, dialogues, etc. – provide the students with maximum variety and (in turn) offers them plenty of opportunities to play an active part in communicative situations, ranging from simple imitation to conscious exchange and internalization of certain vocabulary items / pronunciation styles / grammatical points / communicative techniques, at the same time building strategies that will help them later on when their knowledge of English has advanced and moved to a higher level.