

English speaking skills in non-native speaking children



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A Proposal of Effective Improvement of English Speaking Skills in Non-Native Speaking Children

In recent decades, English has become a worldwide language and plays an important role in many fields of education and employment. Because of the use of English as a Lingua Franca, people in non-English speaking countries have tried very hard to improve their English skills; listening, reading, writing and speaking.

Many of them have failed in this attempt even though they have tried intensively throughout their lives. Speaking fluently and effectively in English is the skill that non-native people want to achieve. On the other hand, it is also very difficult for non-native people to improve their speaking skills.

It is important, therefore, for English teachers to examine what difficulties that non-native people, especially children, have in speaking English as a foreign language and to help to enhance the proficiency of speaking English in children effectively.

According to Brown & Yule (1983), spoken language production, learning to talk in the foreign language, is often considered to be one of the most difficult aspects for the teacher to help the student with learning a second language. This is evident in the following practical areas. The most challenging aspect of spoken English is to be able to communicate with at least one other speaker via interaction.

This means that a variety of skills are necessary at the same time: understanding and observing other speakers, thinking about the contribution

of oneself, creating that contribution and monitoring its effect. Speaking occurs in 'real time', like listening, and usually the speakers do not have time to prepare and perform their careful utterances.

In this essay, different points of view on the effective improvement of English speaking skills for non-native children will be presented. The first section is about the difficulties faced by non-native children in speaking English. The second part explains how second language is learned. The third part is about how English teachers can help non-native children to improve their speaking skills in English. The last section presents suggestions for effective activities in the teaching of spoken English.

Difficulties for non-native children in speaking English

Learning a second language is difficult in terms of the requirement of time for processing and reacting with the new language. With regard to the language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, speaking skill is classified as a productive skill, as is writing, whereas listening and reading are receptive skills.

Davies & Pearse (2000) indicates that there are two common misconceptions of productive and receptive skills. Productive skills, usually, are considered to be more 'communicative' than the receptive skills. So, people often misunderstand that speaking is basis of the process of learning itself.

However, to some extent, these misconceptions are understandable, but in fact children begin to learn their mother language by listening before speaking, and it is the same for learning a second language of adult, such as immigrant or foreign resident. Thus, it is difficult for non-native children to

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develop their communicative skills by improve their speaking without improving their listening first.

Many non-native children find it hard to produce language in English since they lack adequate natural language acquisition provision. It is argued that they are often taught to memorize grammatically rules and English vocabulary in order to perform English speaking task. They are not adequately encouraged to produce natural English conversation. Those children, therefore, may feel uncomfortable and can feel guilty if they make grammatically mistakes when they produce a verbal task in English alone.

Harmer (1998) highlights that a constant interruption from teachers to correct mistakes every time the students speak will destroy the conversational flow and the purpose of the speaking activities. Furthermore, children will tend to be less confident in speaking English. However, his point of view of the correction of mistakes in children is not particularly to criticize individual students. The teacher should handle the mistakes they heard by general correction without mentioning who made the errors.

Moreover, a lack of practice in and interaction with the English language outside the classroom creates difficulties in performing in English. It can also obstruct speaking fluency.

Stage of second language acquisition: speaking

According to Haynes (2005), there are five stages in which children acquire a second language. All new learners of English develop through the same stages of language acquisition. However, the time length each student spends at a particular stage may be greatly different.

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Stage one: Pre-production

This stage is the silent period. Non-native children at this stage may have a receptive vocabulary of up to five hundred words but they are not yet producing language. They may only repeat everything they have heard, but they may still not speak.

These children will listen attentively and will be able to respond to the programme aids, such as pictures and other visuals. In addition, they can show comprehension by duplicating gestures and movements. They will work well with total Physical Response. Much repetition of English, therefore, is very necessary for these English language learners at this stage.

Stage two: Early production

This stage may remain of up to six months and the children will progress at about a thousand words of a receptive and active vocabulary. Children can usually produce one or two word phrases during this stage. Furthermore, they can use short groups of language that they have memorized although this language may not always be correctly used.

Stage three: Speech Emergence

Children at this stage have developed about three thousands words of receptive vocabulary; they may also be able to communicate with simple phrases, sentences and questions, which may not always be grammatically correct. These learners will also start holding short conversations with classmates. In addition, they can follow well with easy stories with the support of pictures.

Stage four: Intermediate Fluency

At the intermediate fluency stage, children will have six thousands active words of vocabulary. They are beginning to use sentences which are more complex when speaking and they are more likely to share opinions and express their thoughts. At this stage, children will use strategies from their mother language as a tool to communicate and learn content in English. Many children may translate assignments from their mother language into English. Teachers, therefore, should pay more attention on studying strategies in order to help them understand more complex concepts without excessive translation.

Stage five: Advanced fluency

To achieve cognitive academic language proficiency in a second or foreign language, takes about four to ten years for learners. At this stage, children will have the ability to perform in subject areas close to those of native speakers. Most learners at this stage will feel confident to operate alone in English; however, the beginning of this stage they may still need support from their classroom teachers.

Role of the teachers to enhance speaking of the children

In the teaching of spoken English, teachers play the most important role in supporting and enhancing the ability of children to speak English. These English teachers, therefore, should understand the fundamental needs of a learner in speaking and listening to the language and how children acquire language. As a result, children will be taught in the most effective way.

According to Davies & Pearse (2000) there are some obvious implications for teachers in teaching spoken English:
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Create and provide a relaxing atmosphere and welcoming environment in the classes so that the children are not afraid of speaking in front of the rest of the class. In addition, teachers should provide as many speaking activities as possible in class both in pairs and in groups; the children, therefore, can speak English without being too nervous that the rest of the class will be listening to them.

Expose the children as much as possible to pronounce speech naturally, and try to integrate some pronunciation assignments into the classes. The children will not be able to learn intelligible pronunciation or develop speaking skills in general without hearing enough natural speech.

Make the children become familiar with combining listening and speaking, in natural interaction, in real time. The general use of English particularly in the classroom may be the most beneficial opportunity for children to practise natural English interaction.

Speaking activities

In teaching speaking skills, teachers need to be particularly skilful in organising activities in the classroom that are motivating, authentic and diverse. The use of authentic and engaging interesting materials should be the foundation for classroom activities. It is also very beneficial and enjoyable for children to listen to native speaker speech from the showing of films or television programmes as well as audiotapes and songs, so that the children can attune their voices with the sounds of the native speech that they hear.

Additionally, Celce-Murcia (2001) states that the teacher can also assign outside classroom activities, such as watching and listening to English language films, television programmes and radio channels. This learning activity can become the input for following classroom activities: discussions, debates, oral presentation or oral examinations. Students should be encouraged or assigned to go English-speaking places or areas, for example going to travelling places or hotels to find native speakers to interact with.

Furthermore, inviting native speakers to the classroom to give speeches, talks, or presentations is another good opportunity for children to be able to interact with the real native guest speakers. Children can also be assigned to ask some questions or interact with native speakers in order to improve their communication skills. Teachers can also encourage children to participate in an English club or to be a member of the English group in the school or to find an English speaking conversation partner.

In terms of communication, speaking is classified as a productive skill. Due to the fact that we communicate because we need to exchange information, focusing on content, not the language or the use of a variety of vocabulary and grammar, to promote real productive ability, teachers should, therefore, use interesting topics and fun activities to stimulate and support the efforts of the children to communicate and focus on information and ideas. They should avoid correcting grammatical mistakes all the time since it risks the creation of a lack of confidence in speaking English.

To summarise, the improvement of English speaking skills requires understanding of the difficulties encountered by non-native children in

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speaking English, the stages of language acquisition, strategies and effective activities from English teachers. As stated above, speaking conversation takes place in 'real time' and involves many skills. So, it is inevitable that children will make mistakes.

For all these reasons, teachers, therefore, should create a relaxing environment and atmosphere, accustom natural interaction in listening and speaking for the children, encourage incidental classroom conversation activities as well as giving the children the opportunity to express their needs. To enhance English speaking skills in non-native children, teachers need to be aware of the communicative purpose of the language, not linguistic objectives.

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