

## MANAGING EYL TEACHING: MINIMIZING RISKS. OPIMIZING BENEFITS

oleh Adi Sutrisno  
Gadjah Mada University

### Abstrak

Pengajaran bahasa Inggris untuk anak bisa menguntungkan tetapi sebaliknya juga bisa beresiko bagi pembelajar, semua tergantung pada materi apa yang diberikan; siapa yang memberikan dan pendekatan apa yang digunakan. Pengajaran bahasa Inggris bisa bermanfaat bagi pembelajar jika penanganannya tepat sesuai dengan sifat ingin tahu anak yang besar, dan sifat anak yang masih mudah dibentuk. Sebaliknya pembelajaran itu akan bisa merugikan anak apabila penanganannya kurang tepat.

Paper ini mencoba untuk mengidentifikasi dan membahas kemungkinan adanya resiko, sekaligus kemungkinan diperolehnya keuntungan dari pembelajaran bahasa Inggris untuk anak. Pembahasan akan mencoba memberikan solusi guna meminimalkan adanya resiko lalu mengoptimalkan keuntungannya sehingga pembelajaran tersebut akan banyak keuntungannya daripada kerugiannya. Inti dari paper ini adalah menekankan betapa pentingnya pengajaran bahasa Inggris yang tepat agar pengajaran tersebut tidak merugikan anak tetapi lebih menguntungkannya.

**Kata kunci :** Pengajaran, Bahasa Inggris untuk anak, metode, mengoptimalkan pengajaran bahasa Inggris untuk anak.

### A. Introduction

The immediate pictures of whom you are dealing with when teaching English to young learners might be small beings with their unique characteristics, such as impish expression on their faces, open smiles, adorable outfit, or probably disruptive behavior. It might then lead you to think of young learners as either easy or difficult 'creatures' to

---

*Paper presented in the 5<sup>th</sup> National Conference on English as a Foreign Language Teaching, 17-19 February 2004, ITB Bandung, Indonesia*

teach. If you think that young learners are just little beings who can only learn something simple you may be fascinated by the idea that they can be taught by everybody without having appropriate training. But if you think that young learners are human beings who can learn complicated topics, then you may think of teachers who have adequate training only who can teach them.

As yet there has been a growing awareness acknowledging that teaching English to young learners is not as simple as we once thought. It is not a matter of teaching a list of simple vocabulary. It is rather an attempt to help young learners learn the language efficiently and effectively with the help of their environment, such as teachers, their peer-groups, parents, and their class situation. As such, teaching English to young learners needs skilled-teachers who are willing to always improve their teaching skills as they are facing complex beings with subtle attitude. The question is, do we have enough skilled-teachers to do that?

It is a pleasant thing to hear that there has been an upsurge of interest in the world of teaching English to young learners in Indonesia in line with the inclusion of English language as one of the local contents in primary school's curriculum. This growing interest can give a positive contribution to the development of English education to young learners as it might increase the number of English teachers needed for the teaching of the language. However, it can also create serious problems if it is not dealt with appropriately, as teaching English to young learners is often misunderstood by many, as an easy job to do and can be done by anybody without regard to his/her teaching background. If we determine that teaching English to young learners can be done by anybody without considering his/her teaching skills, we would create a loophole, so to speak, which might drag young learners to a risky situation. This is because young learners are easily driven. If teachers are not well prepared and do not know with whom they are dealing, they will only create detriments to learners. It is in light of this context that EYL

teachers must know whom they are teaching and how they have to deal with them.

### **B. Whom Are The Teaching?**

In the history of language teaching there has been a number of important educationists offering their views about young learners or children as the subjects we are teaching, such as Locke with the idea of '*the child as blank slate*', Piaget '*the child as active learner*', and Vygotsky '*the child as social being*'. Locke, with his idea of *the child as blank slate*, holds that children are born with their great potential for learning. Their minds, he maintains, may be viewed as white paper and are filled (nurtured) by the environment. It means that children are ready to be given knowledge by teachers. Thus, their way of learning tends to be teacher oriented, as the learning process is 'controlled externally by the transmitting authority rather than by the learner' (Locke, 1936 cited in Krogh, 1994: 142). Unlike Locke, Piaget believes that in the learning process children do not passively assimilate knowledge transmitted by the teacher. They actively operate on it, instead. "Children help reconstruct their own intelligence through active exploration of their environment" (Krogh, 1994: 43). This explains the tendency of the learners to become active self-builders. Bearing this in mind, we can assume that the teacher needs to provide a stimulating environment and act as facilitator if s/he wants to give efficient lessons to young learners. Similar to Locke, Vygotsky (cited in Cameron, 2001) says that children are actively exploring themselves. The difference is, the children's exploration in Vygotsy's theory takes 'place in a social context, i.e. in a world full of other people, who interact with them (2001:6). They play a significant role in mediating the world for children and help them to solve problems.

My standpoint, in relation to which view to consider when teaching English to young learners, is that the views proposed by Locke, Piaget, and Vygotsky should not be understood as "either-or" options to

hold by teachers. They should be seen as three 'pieces' of views forming a mosaic, where the three views fit one another well if arranged properly. Thus, young learners can function as three different types of learners at once, depending on the situation they enter. When they are receiving the lesson from their teacher, they will be like blank slates, suggesting that they are ready to be fed by their teacher. Yet, in searching for understanding the knowledge, young learners may change their style, from blank slate to active learner style. After they have received enough input, they are ready to have a try. In the process of 'trial and error stage', they will again change their style. Now, they become social creature, which enable them to interact with the environment they enter. They will again become blank slates when receiving new knowledge; turn to active learners when trying to make sense of the words they hear; and become social creature when they associate themselves with others. In short, young learners can flexibly be blank slates, active learners, as well as social beings. This flexibility must be taken into consideration when we deal with them in teaching English to young learners.

### **C. Teaching English to Young Learners**

Cameron (2001) proposes a thought provoking question in relation to the idea of teaching a foreign language to young learners. She asks: "What is different about teaching a foreign language to children, in contrast to teaching adults or adolescents?" (2001: 1). When I read this question, I immediately thought that teaching a foreign language to young learners could be interesting and easy since young learners are curious about learning; while teaching a foreign language to adolescents could be a bit more serious and tough. My discussion with English teachers to young learners, however, have convinced me that teaching English to young learners is not that easy, though interesting. Teaching English to young learners needs good teaching skills, creativity, thorough preparation, and patience. We must have all these attributes in order to make young learners keep motivated.

In response to her question above, Cameron (2001) says that the differences between teaching a foreign language to young learners, in contrast to adults are obvious. Children are often more enthusiastic and lively as learners than adults; children will have a go at an activity even when they don't quite understand why or how; children often seem less embarrassed than adults at talking in a new language, and their lack of inhibition seems to help them get a more native like accent. Yet, Cameron (2001) warns us that those are generalizations, which need to be unpacked.

Apart from whether or not the generalizations are acceptable, it is important to have knowledge about children's learning in order to ensure our teaching to run effectively. In the case of teaching English to young learners in Indonesia, knowing how young learners learn the language may become a key point for the teachers whether to stick to the belief to their teaching method; or to try a different method, which is more sensible. As we know, there have been never-ending arguments either in seminars or publications convincing that 'learner-centered' teaching is better than 'teacher-oriented' method of teaching, though there are still many teachers in Indonesia, whether they realize it or not, who tend to be 'teacher-oriented' in nature.

As has been portrayed by Piaget (cited in Krogh, 1994; Cameron, 2001), and Vygotsky (cited in Cameron, 2001), 'learner-centered' teaching will be effective if it is tuned to the learning needs of the pupils. Thus, if we are consistent with the proposals of Piaget and Vygotsky, we would agree that 'learning-centered' perspective should be the key point in teaching English to young learners.

Adopting 'learning-centered' perspective to our teaching method does not mean that success is in our hand. It depends on our understanding about 'learning-centered' perspective of teaching. According to Cameron (2001), teaching never guarantees learning. If learning does not work out, teaching then is only a time-consuming activity. When learning cannot be generated in a teaching process

children may get bored easily with English. This in turn may affect their attitude toward the language. In order for teaching to generate learning, teachers have to construct opportunities for learning and help learners take advantages of them. It is the teachers' duty to create opportunities for learning to occur.

Teaching English to young learners then can be beneficial or detrimental to learners. If we can facilitate learning, enabling learners to bring to language learning their curiosity and eagerness to make sense of the world, we may help them tackle even the most demanding tasks with enthusiasm and willingness (Cameron, 2001). However, if we fail to provide them with pleasant learning situations we may drag young learners into feeling of hatred toward the language.

The following section will discuss some possible risks and benefits of teaching English to young learners. I assume that an ability to manage EYL teaching can help a teacher minimize the risks and maximize the benefits.

#### **D. Some Possible Risks**

If we think that teaching English to young learners can be done by anybody without considering his/her teaching skills or adequate training, we put the learners in a risky situation. Without undermining his/her English knowledge, we may question his/her ability to deal with problems such as his/her own pronunciation; the materials s/he gives, the assessment s/he makes; the encouragement s/he gives to their students to practice their discourse skills, the reports s/he writes to their parents, and the suitability of teaching approaches for young learners. We must remember that in EFL situation, teachers are usually the only resources that learners can model themselves on. What if the teachers themselves do not pronounce the words they introduce appropriately? What if the materials given are too simple or too difficult? What if the assessment does not assess what the learners have learnt?

If the learners copy the inappropriate pronunciation as

exemplified by teachers, learners run the risk of losing the opportunity to acquire pronunciation, which according to the *Critical Period Hypothesis* theory, is more easily achieved before they reach puberty. If the learners cannot bring to language learning their curiosity and eagerness to make sense of the world, their potential to acquire the language might go in vain; if the assessment made does not measure what learners have learned, learners' parents will be unable to help the young learners to anticipate the difficulty they are confronting. It is NOT wise to think that teaching English to young learners is a simple job to do and can be done by anybody without having enough training. Thus, when possible, it is better to only assign teachers with appropriate teaching skills or adequate training to teach English to young learners.

It is unfortunate, however, to hear the result of research conducted by Suyanto (2003), reporting that 71 % of more than 700 teachers of EYL who participated in regional workshop and in-service training do not have any English Education background. Only 24.9 % hold D3 and S1 English Education certificates, without any special education background for teaching young learners. From the research, she also reports that when they were assigned to teach English, they lacked in media, employed inappropriate teaching techniques, selected inappropriate instructional materials, made serious grammatical mistakes and inappropriate pronunciation. These unfortunate conditions might lead teaching English to young learners to detrimental ends.

Another risk, which might arise from TEYL, is the choice of instructional materials. As we know, there have been a huge number of English books for primary school available everywhere. Some are poorly written; some are very well designed. Should teachers not select the book needed for their students carefully, they may not give a good foundation for the learners. They may contribute problems in the process of learning, instead.

As I observe, there are a number of English books for young learners, which are not appropriately written as instructional materials.

Some of the examples of the inappropriateness can be seen in the way the instructional materials are presented, which are too simple in some books and too complicated in some others.

An example of a too simple book can be seen in the way the book presents the materials in each lesson, which only considers how to spell and how to write correctly. It seems to me that the writer of such a book thought that to learn English, a young learner has to undergo a very rigid process, from reading alphabet, to writing correct words in English. Learning is, thus, a matter of black and white. If young learners cannot spell correctly or write accurately, they are said to not have achieved the goals of learning. If learners make mistakes either in spelling and writing, they will be penalized. Ironically, such a book is often accompanied with the phonetic scripts, which are not appropriately written. If the purpose of the writing of the scripts is to help learners pronounce the words, why don't the book authors let the teachers do it orally for the learners? If it is meant to help teachers to pronounce the words for their students, in case the teachers do not have English education background, why it is not written in a standardized script? Is the author aware that the inclusion of the non-standard phonetic script only creates risks to the learners and even teachers? How will learners be able to pronounce **three** if it is written /tri/ in the script? What is the difference between three and tree then if it is written in the same characters?

Another book, by contrast, is filled with too many grammatical concerns. This kind of book does not give chance for the learners to explore discourse skills. If this is the book used in the classroom, how can teachers generate learning with regard to the communicative competence? A book that primarily focuses on grammar is better to be given to adult learners, whose path of learning is more concerned with cognitive domain. The risk, which may affect young learners if given the materials having grammar focus, is that they may have problems with their way of acquiring the discourse skills, as it is blocked by the



difficulty of understanding the concept of language. It is better to give opportunity to explore discourse skills first rather than to learn the concept of language.

Should teachers be unable to select the appropriate book as their instructional materials, they may block the nature of young learners, which demands opportunity to bring to their learning their curiosity and eagerness to make sense of the world. If such an opportunity does not exist, young learners may not learn what the teachers teach.

The third concern I would like to address is motivation. As Harmer (1991: 3) explains, 'motivation is some kind of internal drive that encourages somebody to pursue a course of action'. Motivation, thus, is one of many key factors in EYL teaching, which determines the success of learning on the part of the learners. It is essential for teachers to have an ability to keep motivating their students. If teachers of EYL do not maintain the motivation of their learners, they will put the learners at risk of losing their interest in English. Once young learners lose their interest in English, they need time to like it again. If this is to happen, it is a tragedy for the learners. To avoid this, teaching English to young learners needs teachers who can understand who young learners are; understand how to deal with them in and outside the classroom; know how to select appropriate instructional materials; and know how to keep the learners motivated. Yet, Teaching English to young learners does not merely create risks. If handled appropriately, it can also give benefits to the learners.

#### **E. Some Possible Benefits**

There are some possible benefits derived from EYL teaching. The obvious benefit is that young learners may retain pronunciation they have learned in the longer term. This means that they have a potential to be able to pronounce the words they learn until they grow older. The quality of their pronunciation, however, to a certain extent, depends on the input given by the teachers as their model. If teachers give good

examples of the pronunciation of the words they teach, the learners will have the capability of imitating them as perfectly as they exemplify.

Young learners also have an opportunity to acquire their listening skills if given enough appropriate exposure. As research studies in the North American regions have shown, children who begin learning from young age have the advantage of being better at developing in some areas of language skills, particularly in listening skills when they are exposed to the language they learn (see Harley and Swain, 1994; Lightbown and Spada 1994; and Harley *et al.* 1995; cited in Cameron 2001). This is an advantage of learning language at young age.

Other benefits in relation to TEYL include teachers' continuous guidance young learners might have as part of the learning process they encounter. Teachers' guidance is of paramount importance in helping young learners develop their language skills. The guidance can take the form of creating opportunities for meaningful interaction between peers; creating a comfortable learning environment; creating an interesting class situation, where the learning needs of the pupils are accommodated. If this is to happen, TEYL will give so much benefit to the learners.

The three benefits as written above will be hard to be grasped by adult learners, though such a possibility still may occur, provided that adult learners have a commitment to progress their learning and are willing to spend time practicing the language. Yet, adult learners will face hard time to undergo a gradual process of learning, since they prefer learning through logic, which is faster and easier.

Unlike adults, young learners are ready to be filled, if you agree with Locke's theory; or ready to construct their own knowledge from working with objects or ideas, if you follow Piaget's concept; or ready to interact with other peers in a social context, if you accept Vygotsky's contention. In short, teaching English to young learners can be beneficial to the learners if it is handled appropriately. The question is then how to minimize risks and optimize benefits so that teaching English to young



paper.

As we commonly understand it, teaching is an activity, which to a certain extent, is similar to conversation. Conversation is a process of sending and receiving messages between a speaker and a listener. In this process, listener's understanding to the messages is of paramount importance. In a conversation, our concern is not speaking quickly nor slowly. If a speaker speaks quickly and the listener cannot understand what s/he is saying, the conversation will be ineffective. The same is true when a speaker speaks too slowly and the listener is disturbed by the slow speed. Thus, in a conversation our concern is not speaking quickly or speaking slowly. What is most important is speaking clearly so that the listener can understand what is being communicated to him/her.

Similar to a conversation, teaching is an activity involving two parties, namely a teacher and students. In this activity a teacher is trying to deliver materials and the students are to receive them. In order for these materials to be transferred and received effectively, the teacher must be able to deliver them clearly and understandably. For that purpose, accommodating children's limited language ability is highly recommended as the following description might demonstrate.

When we have a conversation with children, we, as adults, often shift our speech styles to become more like that of those with whom we are interacting. By doing so, we have given children opportunity to understand what we are communicating. It also occurs when we speak in our language to a foreigner. In this case, we often accommodate their limited vocabulary by choosing words, which are familiar to them. In this case, our concern is, as long as they can understand our messages clearly, our mission is accomplished.

In order that we can deliver materials clearly and understandably, the idea of accommodation needs to be considered. One of the possible ways is by accommodating children's needs, which according to Harmer (1991) include: the needs to have activities which are exciting and stimulate their curiosity; the needs to be involved in something active;

and the needs to be appreciated by the teacher, an important figure for them.

The young learners' needs as outlined by Harmer (1991) are consistent with what Piaget (cited in Krogh, 1994) and Vygotsky (cited in Cameron, 2001) suggest, that young learners need to be involved in an active exploration to the environment they enter, either in school environment or family circle.

Accommodating young learners' needs, as discussed above, is analogous to providing young learners with environment in which they can bring to language learning their curiosity and eagerness to make sense of the world. This can be done by selecting books which are relevant the activity; and stimulate young learners to actively engage in the discourse created by the book.

In order that the learning activity is stimulating and exciting for children, we need to use various techniques to present the instructional materials as printed in the book, including games, role-playing, songs, puzzles, and the like. These techniques can be used to teach some aspects of English and most importantly, can help manage shy students to be active, enthusiastic, and motivated.

The discussion above implicitly suggests that accommodating young learners' needs may help optimize the benefits the learners may gain as the result of a teaching- process, which emphasizes learning as the center of the activity. Learning can function well when the learners find it exciting, amusing, and not threatening. As such, managing our teaching, in order to facilitate learning is the key to our success of teaching English to young learners.

The next step to manage EYL teaching is by planning what we are going to teach, such as selecting a book, which is appropriate for young learners. When selecting a book, it is necessary for a teacher to consider the book which gives rooms for learners to actively engage in discourse skills. What I mean by discourse skills in this context is similar to interaction; while a discourse itself differs from a text, which means

nothing more than a piece of language (see Cameron, 2001). Discourse is a text, which has context of use and is constructed by considering the users of text. An example of discourse in an English book for grade one of primary school might be shown by a lesson about greeting with the picture of situation representing certain time of the day, such as morning, afternoon, or evening. In the picture are boys or girls with their family at home, in the park, in a playground, etc. Such a discourse does not only generate real learning but also help teachers introduce new words consciously (learning) or unconsciously (road to acquisition). In this kind of situation, a comprehensible input as suggested by Krashen (1982) can also function well. A book, which only displays texts with too many words or grammar items, is not stimulating and only drags students to a situation where learning might be idle. Such a book is not appropriate for young learners.

Once the book is selected, a teacher can think of some possible techniques of presenting the materials to the learners, which is our next step of managing EYL teaching. When presenting the materials to the learners, a teacher needs to consider teaching aids so that the learning process can run as expected. These teaching aids, together with the appropriate techniques of presenting the materials, are equal to the discourse created by the book writer in terms of its importance in their contribution to the teaching and learning process.

It must be remembered that since the teacher is probably the only model the young learners may be exposed to, s/he should actively improve her/his pronunciation if s/he has problem with it. S/he can manage it by way of uttering the important words printed in the book. Where a native speaker is available in your school, you may ask them to read it for you and you may tape it so that it can give you double benefits. One is for the purpose of yourself, and another one is for the sake of students' exposure to the language they learn.

The three steps of managing EYL teaching above can be enhanced by watching out the learning process whether it helps learners

achieve the stated objectives or not. To evaluate whether the teaching process yields a success on the part of the learners, an assessment is to be carried out to measure the achievement made by the learners. The assessment can be in the form of class observation, oral production, or a written test.

It is important to note that EYL class often creates noises and disturbs other classes, which need quiet situation such as Math, Exact Sciences, and other lessons. If we do not allow our students to talk loudly, then English class will lose opportunities to practice the language. If we let our students speak up when practicing their English, we may bother other classes. Should this problem happen, we can think of reserving a special room for English classes. If a sports lesson has its own place; and music lesson has its own room; why does English lesson not have its own building?

The last thing I would like to address is the way a teacher writes a student report to the learners' parents. Commonly teachers only write 6,7,8, or maybe 9 in student report. This does not help parents in understanding what their children have learned. Score 8 or 9 does not tell much to the parents, except "my daughter's English is good". As a matter of fact, they do not know how good it is. We must remember that children's parents are the potential environments the learners may enter in their learning outside their school. It is better for us to inform the parents in such a way that they know how far their children have learned their English, and know how they can be of help to their children. Therefore, instead of writing numbers or scores of 6, 7, 8, or 9, a teacher can write students' achievement in a descriptive manner. In this way, a teacher does not only manage his/her teaching, but also students' learning inside and outside classroom. Inside the classroom, s/he manages the teaching him/herself; while outside the classroom, by recommending the parents to do this and that, s/he can manage students' learning process at home within his/her family circle.

### **G. Conclusion**

Teaching English to young learners may create risks or give benefits to learners, depending on how teachers deal with them. The risks the learners might inherit from the learning include the inability to pronounce words properly, distress of following English classes, and the feeling of hatred toward the language. These risks may occur, especially if EYL teaching is seen as an easy job to do and can be done by anybody without having enough preparation, teaching experiences, and commitment to improve their teaching skills. We must remember that teachers are normally the only models the learners are exposed to. Therefore, if teachers cannot pronounce words correctly, learners will be unable to pronounce the words appropriately as well. If teachers select instructional materials, which are too high for learners, learners will feel discouraged, as they will be unable to follow the lesson well. This in turn might affect the feeling of hatred toward the language they learn. These risks must be minimized so that teaching English to young learners can be effective.

Teaching English to young learners, however, may also give benefits to learners. The benefits may include the possibility to acquire pronunciation, especially if the teachers give them good examples of pronouncing words; to acquire discourse skills if they are exposed to them adequately; and to explore the environments they enter if given opportunity by the teacher to interact with peer students inside and outside the classroom. These in turn may help learners be motivated to keep learning the language though they have finished their study in school. These benefits must be optimized.

To minimize risks and to optimize benefits, teachers can manage their teaching in such a way that they can help young learners to avoid risks and to gain benefits. To do so, teachers need to make a thorough plan of what they have to do when teaching. They can think of the instructional materials they are to give, prepare the necessary teaching aids to support; apply the appropriate methods; design the assessment



system. Teachers have to improve their pronunciation skills; create good rapport with learners in order that they can keep them motivated. Last but not least, teachers can make use of parents' help, by way of giving them comprehensive report about the students' progress, to make young learners always interested in the language they learn.

### REFERENCES

- Cameron, L., 2001. *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge University Press, United Kingdom.
- Harmer, J. 1991. *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Longman. London and New York.
- Krashen, S. 1982. *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon
- Krogh, S.L. 1994. *Educating Young Children*. McGraw-Hill, Inc. USA
- Suyanto, K. K.E. 2003, 'Qualification of EYL Teachers in Some Regions in Indonesia'. *The 51<sup>st</sup> TEFLIN International Conference*, STBA ABA-Yapari, Bandung.