

Teacher-students' Competence in Teaching English to Young Learners

by

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When the decree of the Minister of Education and Culture number 060/U/1993 issued, a great number of English teachers for young learners were in demand. Since there is no Pre-service or in-service teacher's trainings for EYL teachers, the position are occupied by people from various background such as university students majoring in English Education. It is assumed that these teacher-students proficient in the target language, nevertheless this doesn't mean that they are capable of teaching the language to young learners. This research aims to identify whether or not these teacher-students capable of teaching young learners to the extent of general pedagogical knowledge and knowledge of the learners and characteristics (Shulman 1987; Brown 2001; Musthafa 2010). This research is designed using qualitative descriptive method, it was conducted at State Islamic University, participants are students from English department who are teaching English at elementary schools and they have passed all pedagogy subjects. Data was gathered through questionnaires and interview. Research reveals that these teacher-students are not fully comprehend the characteristics of young learners and its implication towards instruction. They consider fun as the basis of teaching English to young learners. Another finding shows that these teacher-students are having difficulties in managing and control classroom activities.

Keywords: *Young learners, Teacher-students, competence*

Background

As the minister of Education and Culture issued decree number 060/U/1993 a great number of English teachers for young learners are required. Unfortunately, there was no pre-service or in-service that prepares teachers with relevant competence. As a result, English teachers for young learners occupied by teachers with various background.

One of the features of English teachers for young learners is teacher-students –teacher whose status is students at university. They are teaching at elementary school or at least giving private coaching to elementary school students. It is assumed that since these teacher-students studying at English department they would be able to teach the language.

Nevertheless, teaching English needs more than just fluency in speaking or only to the level performance. Teachers are required to have competence –knowledge of how to teach. Teaching English to young learners is even more complicated task (Kamil 2005). Teachers should be able to construct appropriate instruction for young learners, thus it is important for teachers to be able to have competence in terms of pedagogy. As Shamin (2004) put it “(having the knowledge of) ...”how children learn language, what kind of intervention can teachers make in varies learning scenario and enhance opportunity for learning English”

Similarly, According to Moon (2004) it is optimal condition that would enable young learners to further their learning, and eventually the aim of teaching English to young learners would be achieved.

As mentioned previously, English teachers for young learners are commonly occupied by teacher-students, including students coming from English department at State Islamic University. Relating to the fact that the department does not include teaching English to young learners into its curriculum, they are aimed to teach at tsanawiyah or aliyah, it raises a question on whether or not these teacher-students competent to teach English to young learners.

Departing from this point, this research focused on identifying teacher-students' competence in teaching young learners. Since they are majoring in English.\, it is assumed that they are competent to the level of performance, therefore the term competence on this paper limited to the extent of pedagogical knowledge.

Literature Review

The aim of teaching English to young learners is to nurture students' interest towards the language that they would further their learning. It is expected students' outcome would be better compare as it is taught at an early age.

Nevertheless, age is not the sole factors that would determine the success of the teaching. According Richards (2001) to provide quality teaching a program should be supported by other factors such as institution, teachers, teaching process and learners. Further he said that among those factors, it is teachers who hold prominent role in teaching.

Considering English is a foreign language in our country, teachers' role in teaching young learners is even more important. First, they would become the model for learners, second and most important they are in the position to design instruction. Teachers for young learners should be able to provide learning which is able to accommodate students' characteristics and needs.

According to Schulman (1987 cited in Randal and Thornton 2001) there are several categories of knowledge for teaching, they are as follow

- Content knowledge
- General pedagogic knowledge
- Curriculum knowledge
- Pedagogical content knowledge
- knowledge of learners and their characteristics
- knowledge of educational contexts
- knowledge of educational ends purposes and the historical philosophical issues

To the extent of teaching English to young learners, Musthafa (2010) delineated five requirements that should be fulfilled by teaches for young learners, they are as follow:

1. Teachers of young learners should know who children are
It is important for teachers to know who young learners are, it should be born in mind that young learners are not adults miniature. Consequently, children should be treated relevant to their age. According to Slaterry and Willis (2001) young learners are children between 7-12 years old while below 7 years old categorized as very young learners. It means that young learners in Indonesia are students of elementary school

Students at that age own specific motor, linguistic, social and conceptual development that differentiates them from adults.

2. Teachers of young learners should know how children learn
As it is mentioned previously, young learners have distinct characteristics that affect the way children learn. Brown (2001) mentioned some approaches of teaching young learners such as concrete operations, they should learn on what is real for them. Grammatical rules and explanation should be avoided because children would not be able to comprehend the instruction. Another approach related to their short attention span. Young learners own short attention span, thus activities should be designed relevant to their ability to concentrate. However, according to Brewster (2002) children would lack of attention not because they have short attention, but because the activities are not interesting or too difficult. Children learn from direct experiences, it is related to their sensory input. Thus, learning should be designed to enable children see the immediate result of their learning. The last approach related to their affective domain. They are often considered to be less sensitive than adults. Therefore negative learning experience might affect them that they would stop learning.
3. Teachers of young learners should know how children learn language
Musthafa (2001) mentioned three dimensions of language learning they are exposure, engagement and support
4. Teachers of young learners should know how children learn foreign language
Since English is considered as foreign language in Indonesia, the language use limited to the classroom context (Brown 2001). It means that teachers become the source of children's exposure towards the language. Therefore it is important for teachers to be fluent in the language. Simple classroom instruction, communication during the lesson ideally conducted in the target language.
5. Teachers of young learners should be able to facilitate students' learning
According to Murcia (2001) a method is a set of procedures i.e., a system that guide how to teach second or foreign language. In teaching foreign language to young learners, Total Physical Response (TPR) becomes teachers' preferences since it is appropriate for teaching young learners (Klein 1993). Linse (2005) argues that TPR is good for children who developmentally have shorter attention span. Furthermore she said that TPR is suitable for children because children do not learn by thinking but by doing things. Frost (2000) elaborates reasons why TPR should be implemented in the classroom, they are as follow:
 - a. it is fun, applying it enable teachers to break the affective barriers
 - b. it can be memorized easily
 - c. it accommodates kinesthetic learners
 - d. it is suitable for large or small classes
 - e. it can be implemented in mixed-ability classes
 - f. it is easy to prepare
 - g. it caters learners' learning styles

TPR was coined by Dr. James J Asher. It is based upon the way children learn their mother tongue. Language-body conversation underlies this method. It is when parents speak and an infant response with a physical response such as looking, smiling, reaching, etc. although the infant is not yet speaking, the child is imprinting a

linguistic map of how the language works. Silently, the child would internalize the patterns and sounds of the target language.

The experiment was begun in 1960's but it was in 1977 it was widely discussed in language learning field. The basic principle of this method is that learning L1 is the same as learning L2, it starts with comprehension then production. Another principle is people learn best when they are actively involved and understand the language they hear.

Teachers not only should be familiar with the approach and the method of teaching young learners, but also with the techniques commonly employed in teaching young learners. According to Harmer (2002) stories telling, games and song are three activities that are suitable young language learners.

Research Methodology

The aim of this research is to identify teacher-students' competence in teaching young learners. Consequently, it is designed using qualitative and descriptive method, as Lynch (1996) says that qualitative paradigm emphasizes on observing, describing, interpreting and understanding how events take place in the real world.

Participants of the research are students from English Department at State Islamic University. They are chosen because they are teaching young learners and they are considered to be fluent in the language to the extent of having taken all four language skills subjects. Moreover, they represent the characteristics of teacher-students –begin their teaching career on the fourth semester and consider it as an experience.

Data for the research was collected through questionnaires and interview. Questions on the questionnaire focused on teacher-students' attitudes, belief and difficulties in teaching young learners. Interview functioned to clarify their answer on questionnaires. The data were then codified, classified, analyzed and interpreted

Discussion

This research aims to identify teacher-students' competence in teaching young learners. Data from questionnaires and interview reveals that all participants are aware that young learners have different characteristics from adult learners. Nevertheless, knowing this does not mean that they can apply instruction relevant to young learners' characteristics.

In other words, respondents realize that young learners own unique characteristics that differentiate them from adult learners. However they fail to understand that there are a set of learning theories and principles due to the difference. This reflected as respondents were asked about the principle of teaching young learners. Further, all respondents did not mention specific qualification for teachers of young learners. According to them, the requirements for English teachers for young learners are limited to the extent of personality. For example teachers of young learners should be fun, good motivator, humorous, creative, and having good appearance.

As it has mentioned on previous paragraph, most respondents are lack of pedagogical knowledge in teaching English to young learners. For example, among seven respondents, none of them understand the basic character of the children. They characterize young learners as children who are difficult to manage and like to play. Further they said that children are

moody, tired easily and cannot control their emotions. On the contrary, Brewster(2002) stressed that the lack of attention or a short attention of children because the activities are not interesting or too difficult. Therefore, teachers of young learners should be able to engage learners with interesting activities.

In terms of language skills, it is suggested that teacher should emphasize on listening and speaking in teaching young learners (Cameron 2001). However, all respondents fail to know this. For example respondent 5, 6 and 7 said that the skill focus that they emphasize in teaching young learners are reading and speaking. Other respondent said that they emphasize on the four language skills reading, speaking, listening and writing.

Moreover, respondent 2 and 4 emphasis on teaching grammar. This of course does not match with children's cognitive development. As Piaget said that children age 7-11 are still on the level of concrete operational stage, they are not on the formal operation stage. Thus, it would be very difficult for children to comprehend the abstract grammatical rules. This is also in contrast with the aim of teaching young learners, to introduce children to foreign language; therefore teachers should focus on vocabulary building not grammatical rules.

Data from interview reveals that all respondents focused on developing the four language skills and understanding grammar (respondents 1, 2, 3, and 4). For that, they select Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and the rest use CLT. Klein (1993) stated that the best method in teaching foreign languages to children is Total Physical Response (TPR) method. This is suitable for children as they learn something by doing rather than by thinking.

Since respondents apply Grammar Translation Method, it is not surprising that the techniques that they use in teaching young learners are not relevant to young learners' characteristics. Harmer (2000) young learners should be taught through story, games and song. Among seven respondents, three respondents (2, 5 and 7) chose this technique. But the rest prefer using drilling techniques. It can be assumed that the lack of proper teaching methods will ultimately could affect the lack of proper learning techniques as well, so it produce an less conducive class.

On the assessment stage, all respondents said that they use test to assess young learners' achievement. Using test is incompatible for assessing young learners. It would put great pressure on learners that they may stop learning; consequently, assessment would be counterproductive for young learners' language development. Young learners should be taught using performance based assessment; they should be measured from multiple perspective not only from test.

Conclusion

Teaching English to young learners is a complicated task, it takes qualified teachers to conduct successful instruction in young learners' class. This research focused on identifying teacher-students' competence in teaching young learners. Since these teacher-students are learning English as their major, they are assumed to be capable of teaching young learners. Participants of this research were a group of students of English department at State Islamic University who are teaching young learners. Research reveals that it takes further training (or credit semester) for these teacher-students in order to become competent teacher for young learners. Therefore, it is highly recommended for the department to include Teaching English for Young learners (TEYL) into its curriculum.

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