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Teaching Tip #6

Teaching English to Young Learners

Teaching Listening to Young Learners

The following are suggestions for encouraging language learning through listening in your classroom.

- Create a calm and quiet atmosphere in the class when you want the learners to listen to something in particular.
- Use class rules. Make sure that when anyone is speaking (child or adult) that the rest of the students listen to that person, whether they are in pairs, groups or in a whole class discussion.
- As the teacher, avoid walking and talking at the same time, if possible. Young language learners need to see all aspects of your body, particularly your face and mouth, to see what you are saying.
- Get into the habit of supporting what you say in the target language with gestures, pictures, realia or flashcards, so that there is always additional support for the students' understanding of what you are saying.
- Make sure that you pronounce everything as clearly and as naturally as possible.
- Try not to rush what you say in English so that you allow *thinking time* for your learners.
- Encourage your listeners to predict what is going to come next. Help them do this through guided questions.
- If you are using audio or video recordings, make sure the language is clear. Ensure there is visual support in video or, if using audio, try to support the language yourself with gestures and facial expressions, or by using realia and pictures.
- Try to always think about introducing new language in a clear visual, auditory and kinesthetic way to allow for understanding by all learner types.
- Remember to recycle and reuse language introduced in earlier lessons so that children have a chance to hear it used in different situations.
- Recognize how important repetition of language is for young language learners. It is difficult for them to remember or learn things they have heard only once or twice.

Teaching Speaking to Young Learners

Here are some suggestions for encouraging the use of the spoken language in your young learner ESL/EFL classroom.

- Encourage learners to talk to each other as often as possible in fun and meaningful activities.

- Have learners engage in a range of speaking activities, such as telling jokes, asking for directions, providing information, carrying out surveys and making presentations.
- Encourage learners to use *intonation* and *expression* to support their spoken words. If they get stuck for a word or phrase, have them use *body gestures* or facial expressions to help get across their message.
- Help young learners develop confidence in speaking English. Let them know they should not worry if they make mistakes. Promote the idea that mistakes help us learn.
- Allow your students to hear many different English speaking voices in your classroom. Use video and audio tapes and, whenever possible, welcome visitors to the class. Give your students plenty of *models* to copy.
- Make sure that when anyone is speaking that the rest of the students listen to that person, whether they are working in pairs or groups or are involved in a whole class activity.

Encouraging 'real' communication

If our young language learners spend a lot of time in English class, then they will know their classmates well and will want to talk informally with each other. As a teacher, you can help encourage this kind of real communication in English class by keeping the atmosphere friendly and providing your students with a model of suitable language that they can use.

Talk with your students as they come into class (*You look happy today! Is that a new jacket?*) and as you give classroom instructions (*Write neatly! Take turns, please*). Through your comments, you can provide encouragement (*You can do it! That's great! Good idea! Good try! Excellent!*) as well as language that your students can use themselves in their conversations.

It is important to remember how valuable verbal praise and support is for our young language learners. They need to feel that their attempts at the target language are appreciated and that the teacher can see they are doing their best. After all, the motto is right when it says, *Nothing succeeds like success*. If our young learners feel they are being praised and supported, they will be motivated to keep moving ahead in their language learning.

Help students succeed in their classroom discussions and interactions by making them aware of chunks of language that can help them, such as:

- *Could you repeat that, please?*
- *What does (word) mean?*
- *Speak (clearly, loudly, slowly), please.*
- *Can you say that again, please?*

Teaching Reading to Young Learners

Supporting reading in the language classroom

In the language classroom, we need to model and provide a range of reading experiences. As the teacher, read to your students from books, and also from posters on the wall, from headlines in magazines, and from captions in comics.

Use the following techniques with your young learners to encourage the development of their reading skills:

Provide learners with achievable and motivating reading goals.

As everyday reading, give them short sentences to read and small chunks of information to find through their reading. (Make these tasks suitable for their age and English level.)

Build their confidence in reading step by step.

Start with familiar things that are easy to read, such as words and phrases that sound the same (or similar) in their native language. These could include global words, such as *football, hamburger, computer*, as well as logos or advertisements from famous international companies, names of well-known actors or sports stars, or words and acronyms that may sound similar.

Provide visual and contextual support for reading.

Use lots of visual support through pictures, flashcards or gestures. Also, support your students' understanding of the text by using everyday objects like newspapers, comics, magazines, posters and brochures. However, remember to only use a small section of these materials as too large a sample could overwhelm students.

Support the physical aspect of reading.

Help learners recognize visual and technical cues when reading by using these approaches:

- Get students used to seeing English writing all around them by using clear lettering (in lower case print) to label items in the classroom (such as *door, window, cupboard, drawer, board, desk, chair*). This is especially important if the English script is new to the students. They will notice and think about these words on a regular basis, especially if they are linked to real things or pictures, and will start to recognize the shapes of letters and words.
- As noted earlier, create a rich literate environment in your class by displaying lots of text in your classroom through a variety of materials such as posters, books, comics, and so on. Have students refer to weather charts, timetables and calendars as part of their regular routine.

Teach specific strategies for effective reading.

Consider the many ways you can get your students to develop their reading skills, especially as they begin to read more complex text.

- Pre-teach key words and phrases before asking students to read a text.
- Encourage students to guess new meaning from the context and accompanying pictures by asking questions that help the learners focus specifically on certain aspects of the text.
- Paraphrase difficult ideas or expressions to help them understand the text. For example, in *Chicken Licken* (introduced in the lesson, *Using Stories When Teaching English to Young Learners*), part of the text says, *Chicken Licken was walking in the woods when, 'Plop!' An acorn fell on his head!* After reading this, we could point at the picture in the story (or make gestures) and say, *Look! That is an acorn! It's falling! Ow! It fell on his head!*

- Scaffold learners' reading by asking questions that help them understand the main points of the story. (*What happened when...?*) As well, help prepare them for reading by making predictions. (*What will she do now?*) Encourage them to consolidate their understanding of the story and reflect on its meaning. (*How did he feel? Why?*)

Teaching Writing to Young Learners

We can help our young language learners write in the target language if we support their learning in the following ways.

Assist children in learning the technical skills.

Young children need to recognize how text appears on paper and develop the physical skills involved in writing.

- Help them see how text appears on the page. This is especially necessary if the alphabet in the target language is different from the learners' first language and is written in a different direction or form.
- Teach handwriting skills. If the English script is new to your learners, physically show them how to form the letters and put them together to form words and sentences. Model this writing on the board and assign them writing practice. Review these skills regularly.

Model the type of writing needed.

Model what you would like learners to write, such as a message on a postcard, labels for a picture, or instructions for a recipe. By providing clear examples, learners will understand what is required.

- Focus attention on spelling and punctuation. These two areas are particularly important in helping students become successful writers. Lots of models are needed for young learners to look at and emulate.

Encourage creative aspects of writing.

Motivate learners by creating meaningful and purposeful reasons for their writing. For example, ask learners to write the instructions for a new game so that students in another class can understand how to play it.

- Help learners feel confident in their writing.
- Give examples and support so they do not feel confused or *at sea* when writing in English.

Have students think about the audience for their written work.

Help learners recognize that their words are written for others and that they communicate meaning.

- Encourage students to think about who they are writing for and to try to express themselves in their writing for that particular audience. For example, their writing will be different if they are writing an invitation for friends to come to a party or if they are writing notes about how to do something. Give them many models and strategies for writing in different ways.

- Help learners realize why they are writing something. Language learners should never write just because they need to have writing practice. Writing should have a purpose.

Demonstrate the actual process of writing.

Show how writing is a stage by stage process and is rarely a *write it once and it's finished* activity. Explain that even experienced writers plan, structure, draft, review, revise, edit and rewrite until they are satisfied that their writing has achieved its objective.

- Demonstrate how to take notes, how to create structure for a piece of writing, and so on.
- Give children lots of models to use for their own writing.
- Talk through how to review and edit a piece of writing. Do examples together.