FACTORS CONSIDERED IN DEVELOPING MATERIALS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS

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Abstract

Teaching English to Young Learners (EYL) is different from teaching English to adult learners. This demands different sort of materials as well. Teacher's competence also plays an important role in determining whether the teaching materials are good or teachable for the learners or not. Besides, YL characteristics, age, cultural contexts, schools, syllabuses, and leaner cognitive level of development also important in deciding the materials appropriate of the teaching of EYL. This paper aims to discuss further on how and what kind of teaching materials; mostly textbooks, are appropriate for learning English to Young learners.

Keywords: *teaching English to young learners, young learners, teaching materials*

I. Introduction

Young learners (YL) of English need to have materials as their sources of learning the language. These materials can be used by both teacher and YLs to help them learn and develop the language better more easily. Numbers of considerations dealing with the appropriateness of the materials and the needs of the learners are essential to be taken into account; such as age, cultural context where the language (English) is used; non-English speaking countries or English – speaking countries, the level child cognitive development, the schools, the syllabus, and teachers; whether they are native speakers (NS) of English or non native speakers (NNS)of English. Considering the age, learning English at the early ages is seen as a password to global communication, and therefore in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Soviet Union has made a reformed in education by introducing EYL. There is a belief that "Younger is better", but there has not been any empirical evidences show that learning in the early ages will have better in learning outcome (Nunan, 1999). Different assumption stated that learning another language has value in itself, both in cognitive and in the personal development. Another belief is that starting to learn language (English) at secondary school level have not been satisfactory, so that learning it in the primary level (YL level) can be seen as offering a twice advantage: the length of time available for learning and YLs are seen as effective language learners (Rixon

1992 & 1999b; Moon & Nikolov 2000). These considerations, however, have become the basis for deciding the importance of setting English to be learned since the early ages.

The exposure of English determines the necessities of the English use in different context. YLs learn English in non-English speaking countries where English is seen as a foreign language of course different from YLs learn English as second language (Cummins 1984). Each requires different sort of materials for learning, for each also possesses different need on the use of English as a mean of communication. The EFL YLs requires materials related to Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) whereas ESL YLs requires materials related to Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Level of proficiencies or cognitive development is also a factor affected the materials used for EYL; this is related to the teachers as well, NS of English and NNS of English teachers will demand different kind of materials of the learners. It has to do with the teacher competence in teaching and also developing the material of EYL. The term 'suitable materials' is therefore often means materials are not only "child-friendly" with the capacity to scaffold or breakdown the early efforts of teachers who, in one way or another, are inexperienced in teaching EYL. Eventually, textbooks as 'agents change' has been a major role for EYL materials in the last 25 years. Related to the teaching and learning process, it is undeniably that public and private schools have their own portion of hours available for EYL. The public schools usually have fewer hours allocated for EYL compare to the private schools. They usually offer more hours to language learning and give it priority in their curriculum.

II. Discussion

Factors of Deciding the Materials for Teaching EYL

Young Learners Characteristics

Young learners (6 to 12 years-old) are at the level of concrete operational stage (Piaget, 1896 – 1980); the stage when children have enough experiences to begin to conceptualize some abstract problem solving, though they still learn best

by doing. They need a lot of illustrations, pictures, and activities to model a concept. At this stage of development, they possess numbers of characteristics (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990): have high curiosity, believe that the world is full of surprised, love playing, have short attention span, learn better through actions, use of their senses.

Children are active learners and thinkers; they construct knowledge from actively interacting with the physical world around them; they learn through their own individual actions and explorations (Vigotsky, 1962). He added that children are also learning through interactions with more knowledgeable others, who mediate learning by talking while playing, reading stories, and asking questions. And with the help form others; they can do more than they can do on their own (ZPD). The others, adults' role is to scaffold activities for them when learning (Piaget, 1896 – 1980; Vigotsky,1962; Bruner, 1960). Therefore the materials given to them should be appropriate with their capacity (Sabillah *et.al*., 2009). This means that the materials will not end in itself, they need the teachers as the mediator of learning to help YL to learn a language. Therefore, materials need to be assured that they are both 'children-friendly' and 'teacher-friendly'.

In addition, Donaldson (1978) states that young children are enormously good at deriving meaning and guessing people's intentions from context, but less to pay attention to the form of language. Therefore to facilitate YLs to learn, it is essential to make the repetition to be mechanical not drill like, in which they find the language use in naturally repeated action from songs or story (Garvie, 1990).

Age

There is a belief that "Younger is better" in learning. It is widely believed that starting the study of English as Foreign Language (EFL) before the critical period – 12 or 13 years old – will build more proficient spoken of English. However, there is no empirical evidence supporting the idea that an early start in English language learning in foreign language contexts produces better English speakers (Nunan, 1999). There is an assumption that learning another language has value in itself, both in cognitive and in the personal development. Another belief is that starting to learn language (English) at secondary school level have not been satisfactory, therefore, learning it in the primary level (YL level) can be

seen as offering a twice advantage: the length of time available for learning and YLs are seen as effective language learners (Rixon 1992 & 1999b; Moon & Nikolov 2000).

This phenomenon of course, demands us to have some sort of materials to be used in teaching the language to YLs. The materials should suit with their level of cognitive development in order to help them learn English more enjoyably.

Cultural Context

The location where a foreign language, in this case English, is learned determines the necessity of the language use as a mean of communication. In the English-speaking country (Europe, and Africa) and non English speaking countries (Middle Asia, Central Asia and Middle East) YLs will demand different needs in using the language for communication. The more exposure the YLs have in their environment will help them to learn English more naturally. This situation can be found in the English Speaking countries and this helps the materials to be more naturally used, therefore more authentic. Contrary to the English speaking countries, in the non- English speaking countries, the materials are tend to be artificial, the context used are not commonly found in their daily life. Culture and context can have diverse value including the pedagogic cultures (Brown 1994: 163). A particular teaching approach which suits in one place might not be applicable in other place or context (Alexander, 2000).

The aforementioned situations have come to the necessity of providing the materials to help YLs learn language in a more natural ways. As what have been stated that materials for language learning should be presented mechanically rather than drill- like activities to help YLs to learn the language within the contexts of where the language is used (Garvie, 1990).

Learning Approach to Teaching Young Learners and the Syllabus

Cameroon (2001) and Paul (2003) have much in common about the approaches for teaching languages to YLs, they are both influenced by humanistic and constructivists approaches; they both focus on the needs of the learners; and both are critical of teacher-center approaches. Cameroon (2001) calls it as a learning-approach, while Paul (2003) calls it as child-centered approach.

According to Paul (2003), child-centered approach does not circle around having children to do activities or project individually or in groups, or being as physically active as possible. It is 'more mental than physical' with the initial desire starting within each child (Paul, 2003:24). In this approach, while teachers choose a language target, they must assure that before the children learn the language that they also feel it is important and have genuine desire to learn it. Therefore, materials chosen need to be in the 'child's preference' in which they are more engaged.

In line with Paul (2003), in a learning-centered approach, successful lessons and activities are based on the learning needs of the students, rather than the demand of the next page of the textbook or the interests of the teacher (Cameron, 2001:1). However, she distinguishes a learning –centered approach from learner-centered approach. She claims that by focusing on the child ' we lose sight of what it is we are trying to do in schools, and of enormous potential that lies beyond the child' (Cameron, 2001:1). She believes that teachers need to do what the child may not be capable of doing, keep in sight the long-term view and direct the child towards increasingly demanding challenges so as not to waste any learning potential (Cameron, 2001: 2). This is also proposed in child's ZPD that they need to be challenged beyond their capacity to be increasingly progressing their development of learning, and this can be achieved by having them learning language through social context where the language learners comprehend how the language is used (Vigotsky, 1962). This requires teachers to use the language in the classroom naturally as if they were in their society.

Richard and Rodgers (1986:17) proposed functional and interactional approach to teaching English to YLs. The functional approach views language as a vehicle for the expression of functional meaning and pays attention to appropriacy and register has only to a minor extend appeared in YL materials and therefore has been minimal interest in making functions of English the Major Organizing Principles of syllabuses for children's courses. Another one is the interactional approach where language is seen as a vehicle for realization of interpersonal relations and for the performance of social transactions between

individuals, valuing communication for exchanging views and for social purposes. This is particularly child-friendly.

The aforementioned approaches reveal that the child-friendly materials are more preferable to have for teaching English to YL, for they are at the core of children life and natural cognitive development in learning languages.

How Language is Presented

There is the need to teach discourse skills as well as language items to YL, however, many EYL materials operate predominantly at the sentence level or single utterance level rather than the discourse level (Cameron, 2003). Weinert, 1995 adds that the use of short unanalyzed chunks of language or formulaic utterances is a well-known strategy of language learners of all ages when building up their fluency. In the materials, rarely are found that there is the use of stages where the use of chunks were helping children moved from the understanding or production of single chunks into the ability to produce substantial and coherent text on their own, either written or spoken. The recent practice nowadays is that listening is commonly used in presenting a new language feature before moving to the other skills. And what YLs experienced in listening is limited to hearing short utterances as models to be imitated in speaking.

Multiple Intelligences

Gardner's multiple intelligence (MI) theory suggests that there are seven different abilities, talents and mental skills used for problem solving. Those are intrapersonal, interpersonal, musical, bodily –kinesthetic, spatial, linguistic and logical mathematical (Gradner, 199: 41-3). Tomlinson (1998:17) adds up the styles of learning by adding up studial, experimental, analytical, global, dependent and independent, further implying that learner's preferred style might be variable depending on what is being learned, where it is being learned, who is being learned with and what it is being learned for.

This suggests that materials are in need of supplementing YL materials to be appreciated with their differences of learning styles. YL needs more than just thoughts that materials are good enough when they are having good appearance (e.g. characters, visuals, colors, relevance and humor) in their presentation.

Teacher Role

A teacher's belief system is based on their goals and values (Richards and Lockhart 1996:30-2) in relation to content and process of teaching and their understanding in which they work and their roles within it, implying that teacher's role in the implementation of a syllabus influences its success. Once teachers are able to play their roles appropriately when teaching, the classroom will be well-managed. This comprises how teachers use the materials in the classroom; how they can apply the appropriate activities form the materials to be taught to learners. Not necessarily the native speaker teachers but non-native speaker teachers are also be advantageous when they are able to affect the skills, attitudes to learners and willingness to take risks that they bring into their classroom.

To help the teachers to do so, it is demanded that the materials should be teacher-friendly as well. Good materials should be completed or supplemented with the teacher's manual or teacher's guide of how to use it, so that even a not very professional teacher can help himself to cope with the given materials.

Evaluating Materials for Young Learners

Tomlinson (2003) defines materials evaluation as a procedure of measuring the value (or potential value) of a set of learning materials. An evaluation focuses mainly on the needs of the users of the materials and makes subjective judgments about their effects. Evaluation can be carried out pre-use, in-use or post use. The main goal of evaluating materials pre-use is to measure the potential of what teachers and learners can do with them in the classroom (Rubdy, 2003). In-use and post use evaluations are important in establishing how successful learning materials are (McDonough & Shaw, 2003).

With the widespread acceptance of commercially produced textbooks as core teaching materials a greater focus began to be positioned on materials evaluation in the early 1980s. Initially, the role of textbooks within English language teaching was explored (e.g. in Swales, 1980; Allwright, 1981; and O'Neill, 1982). The need for a more systematic approach to materials evaluation appeared during this time as it became obvious that any sets of commercially produced teaching materials would be unlikely to be completely suitable for a

particular group of learners (McGrath, 2002; McDonough & Shaw, 2003). A number of theoretical evaluative frameworks have since been published (e.g. in Williams, 1983; Breen & Candlin, 1987; Sheldon, 1988; McDonough & Shaw, 2003; Cunningsworth, 1995; and McGrath, 2002). These have mostly been checklist-based, usually in the form of questions to be answered to determine the extent to which the materials fulfil a set of criteria. While there is a insufficiency of evaluation formats specifically designed for young learner materials, Halliwell (1992) provides a checklist for evaluating and comparing young learner course books.

The advantages and disadvantages of checklists have been pointed out by several writers. Not only can checklists be systematic and comprehensive, they are also cost and time effective and the results are easy to understand, replicate and compare (McGrath, 2002: 26–27). On the other hand, pre-existing checklists can become dated and the criteria used may not be transparent or based on assumptions shared by everyone (McGrath, 2002). Sheldon (1988: 242) has also written how considerable modification of any set of culturally restricted criteria is necessary to make them applicable to most local contexts.

Implications towards English for Young Learners Materials

Deciding the most suitable materials for young learners are not to be very simple, there is not particular materials which completely appropriate with for young learners. A lot of considerations and factors influence the determination of 'good materials' for young learners. Teachers, learners, content, culture, context, ages are amongst the factors affected the adoption of materials for young learners. Some other factors are syllabus and schools. These two factors determine the time allotment and the importance of English to be adopted as one of the subjects ruled in a school syllabus. Each school in each different area requires different kind of approach to be implemented which will also determine the kind of materials suitable with the approach the schools are being implemented.

Numbers of implications have emerged related to the materials for teaching English to Young Learners. (1) There is a need to build bridges between what happens in primary school and secondary school English. Teachers of

secondary school need to find out about the YLs coming to their school to build on early language learning so there will be connections of what they have learned before to what they are about to learn in the secondary school (Cameron, 2003). (2) Teachers need to have principles of what they should do with the materials. Therefore, textbooks as one of the materials for teaching EYL need to supplemented with teacher's guide to help teachers cope with how they should have the materials for the YL. (3) There is a need to have education for teachers in using and choosing the EYL materials. The availability for independent education for teachers in adopting and choosing the materials will help them to better use the chosen materials more effectively for the learners. Having enough training and independent education will benefit teachers as well as learners. (4) There is a need of consideration for appropriate language models and goals. What language skills should be introduced as the initial skill in presenting a new language to young learners of different age groups is crucial, for they may have different language background of English. In addition, multi-media resources should be used to extend and enrich YL methodology of constructing a better language capacity. The assessment should be in line with the teaching and should develop teacher assessment method that is more child-friendly approach. Sort of materials use as the learning resource should support the big moral and intellectual theme and promote educational values appropriate to the age and context of the children concerned.

In short, it is not only the appearance of the materials that is of the importance motivating and facilitating factors, but also the essence to which the materials are able to be at the core of what children need in order to learn at all.

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