



How do teachers develop Young Learners' speaking skills?

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considers this important question.

For young language learners particularly, speaking is an essential skill. The ability to communicate well enables them to participate in discussions with their teachers and peers. It is the main means through which they highlight misconceptions, clarify their doubts and develop their mastery of the curriculum. They raise queries and respond to questions to demonstrate their understanding and, in so doing, deepen their comprehension of the curriculum.

This article shares reflections from observations of experienced teachers'

practices to develop Young Learners' speaking competence. The findings are drawn from EFL and bilingual ELL primary school teachers' practices. The article highlights how teachers created conducive contexts to promote class talk and engage learners in small group discussions. To enable learners to participate in speaking right away, teachers pre-taught vocabulary and provided ideas for them to construct their content. Finally, teachers provided feedback and guided learners to self-evaluate their utterances to build on their strengths and address the areas for improvement.

Teachers' practices to develop speaking

The teachers' practices were examined using Collins and Burns' (2012)

methodological framework for teaching speaking in the following areas:

- accuracy and fluency
- content and language
- skills and strategies.

Accuracy and fluency

Some of the practices the teachers used to develop students' speaking accuracy and fluency included:

- drawing attention to language use and meaning;
- using examples to raise awareness of grammatical accuracy; and
- repeating tasks with slight variation.

To heighten students' awareness of the language for speaking, teachers explicitly

drew their focus to the grammatical structures and vocabulary. They role modelled accurate and fluent speaking in whole-class discussions to provide students with a structure they could emulate. As they depicted effective speaking, they were intentional in developing learners' skills in noticing the pronunciation of words. For example, they demonstrated the movement of the mouth, teeth and tongue placement to help learners with the articulation of the sounds. In this connection, they used examples of language errors and guided students in identifying the issues to deepen their awareness of the features of speaking.

Content and language

The teachers typically started the lessons with whole-class discussions, in which they provided the content and modelled ways of asking and responding to questions to keep interactions moving smoothly. After the whole class discussion, learners proceeded to their small groups to participate in interactions with their peers with some slight variation in the topics. Because some of the vocabulary had been pre-taught and ideas they could use were already introduced, most of the students were motivated to talk with their peers. This is particularly noteworthy as, often, Young Learners may be hesitant to speak due to their limitations in language or content. What might ensue is a situation where they prefer to keep silent and not respond or volunteer their ideas for fear of making mistakes (Sabnani & Goh, 2022). By providing the words and ideas for the topics to be discussed, teachers effectively reduced the heavy cognitive demands on students and enabled them to use the input in their interactions almost immediately. In a similar manner, teachers had modelled the language for the class.

Skills and strategies

The teachers carried out focused instruction on the verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication. They illustrated the importance of projecting one's voice, so as to be audible and well heard by all listeners. They taught students pronunciation of the vowel and consonant sounds, and how they could effectively use pauses and manage pacing to regulate their speed. They highlighted the importance of varying intonation by appropriately changing the pitch of their voice to draw listeners'

attention to the salient points presented and, in so doing, sustain their interest.

Students were guided on the nonverbal aspects of speaking, as well, for example, how they could use facial expressions, eye contact and natural gestures to support the spoken message and more effectively convey their ideas. Students were also taught how to read nonverbal cues from listeners, for example, to read the audience's facial expressions and responses which could indicate they may not have understood the message, and to think about how to paraphrase utterances to ensure the important points were well received.

The teachers demonstrated a strong knowledge of their learners. They took the time to talk to each and every one of their students to learn about their interests and hobbies. They tapped this knowledge to help students connect classroom learning with examples from their own lives and experiences. For example, when students were engaged in a discussion about their thoughts on the issues, one of the teachers shared a structure to extend their responses and substantiate their answers when offering a viewpoint.

- Answer the question directly.
- Support it with strong reasons.
- Elaborate with examples from your experience.

The credibility of the responses, well substantiated and elaborated on, would more effectively convey their points of view to listeners and convince them.

Conclusion

The article has shared the practices of experienced teachers to develop their Young Learners' oral competence by: deepening their appreciation of accuracy and fluency; providing language and content; and honing skills and strategies for effective speaking. The teachers tapped their strong knowledge of their learners to design tasks in alignment with their interests and hobbies.

They were intentional in conceptualising lessons using authentic speaking texts

on topics of interest and relevance to their learners, incorporating students' experiences. These efforts enabled them to successfully connect classroom instruction with learners' prior knowledge to extend the learning. These thoughtful instructional actions are well aligned with Cameron's (2001) view of the value of designing fun lessons at appropriate levels to engage students, sustain their interest and possibly challenge them.

The teachers' concerted actions to develop speaking competence by improving learners' knowledge and skills, and creating conducive contexts in the class, were important in encouraging participation. The warm welcoming environment in the lessons where teachers gently recast utterances and helped students with ideas and language for speaking allowed them to manage their anxiety and move from being other-dependent to being independent speakers (Thornbury, 2005).

References

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