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## **Teaching Language Skills to English Young Learners in Korça, Albania: Listening & Speaking**

### **Abstract**

*Learning to communicate a foreign language is a very complex process which involves the development of the four skills: listening, speaking, writing and reading. The aim of this article is to focus on teaching of two skills: listening and speaking to young learners of Korca, Albania. Of the four skills, listening is naturally the first skill young learners need to develop before they feel ready to speak, read and write. They listen to the teacher when he/she is greeting them, introducing new words and expressions, asking questions, giving instructions and practicing better through the teachers’ praises and feedbacks. By listening to all these, understanding their meaning and learning how to pronounce words correctly, they are preparing themselves for the next skill: speaking. In speaking, young learners learn how to use the right pronunciation, stress and intonation patterns in order to communicate successfully. The targets of this article are the English teachers who teach in grades 3 – 6 in public elementary schools in Korça, Albania and they are asked to complete a questionnaire concerning the basic principles of listening and speaking skills and which activities they use to teach these skills. These activities have multiple functions as they make young learners think, concentrate on their work and then speak and participate in conversations. Activities may be seemed as challenging, but teachers can make them fun and purposeful, creating an enjoyable atmosphere and motivating young learners to listen and speak. Also teachers are asked about the benefits of young learners from speaking and listening skills. By providing daily opportunities to use English orally the teachers will help the young learners use the language naturally and develop fluency. Listening to English through different activities makes young learners more motivated to listen carefully and understand the texts. Most of them require little technology, need minimum preparation and can take place regularly in the classrooms.*

**Key words:** *listening, speaking, young learners, basic principles, speaking and listening activities.*

## 1. Introduction

The teaching of listening and speaking has attracted a greater level of interest in recent years than it did in the past. Schools examinations now often include a listening and speaking component of second language proficiency so they are necessary to be learned since they are in the elementary schools.

Earlier views of listening saw it as the mastery of discrete skills or micro skills, such as recognizing reduced forms of words, recognizing cohesive devices in texts, and identifying key words in a text, and these skills should form the focus of teaching. Later views of listening drew on the field of cognitive psychology as they emphasize the role of the listener, who is seen an active participant in listening, employing strategies to facilitate, monitor, and evaluate his or her listening. (Richards, J.C. 2008).

Approaches to the teaching of speaking in EFL have been more strongly influenced by fads and fashions than the teaching of listening. "Speaking" in traditional methodologies usually meant repeating after the teacher, memorizing a dialog or responding to drills reflecting the sentence-based view of proficiency prevailing in the audio lingual and other drill-based methodologies of the 1970s (Richards, J. C. & Rogers, T. S. 1986). The emergence of communicative language teaching in the 1980s lead to changed views of syllabuses and methodology, which are continuing to shape approaches to teaching speaking skills today (Richards, J.C. 2006). Grammar-based syllabuses were replaced by communicative syllabuses built around notion, functions, skills, tasks or other non-grammatical units of organization. Fluency became a goal for speaking courses and this could be developed through the use of information-gap and other tasks that required learners to attempt real communication despite limited proficiency in English. In doing so, they would develop communication strategies and emerge in negotiation of meaning, both of which were considered essential to the development of the oral skills. The basic principles of listening and speaking skills are going to be explored and also the activities and the benefits of Young learners will be in the focus of this paper.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research questions

The main questions of this paper are:

1. Which are the basic principles of listening and speaking skills?
2. Which are the benefits that Young learners get from speaking and listening skills?
3. Which are the activities that develop listening and speaking skills?
4. Which grades do English teachers use these activities in?

### 2.2 Context and participants

The objective of this paper is to study the teaching of listening and speaking skills in the elementary public schools in Korca, Albania. 24 teachers who teach

English from Grade 3 to Grade 6 were asked to complete a questionnaire to get the answers of the above questions. The data provided are analyzed and are shown in later sections.

### **2.3 Instruments of the study**

The instruments that were used to get the results were two: questionnaires where teachers had to write the answers of the questions concerning the teaching of listening and speaking skills, and also interviews were used to get any detailed answers about the related questions.

## **3. Teaching listening**

It is through listening that babies first learn the language. It is also believed that exposure to English should be first done through exposing young learners to verbal talks. Learners get many things through listening. When learners have the opportunity to listen to listening materials, then teachers should expose young learners to listening to English as much as possible. Of the four skills in English, young learners make the most of the lesson through listening. They learn to understand the materials through listening, get the instruction and explanation through listening, learn to pronounce words through listening, and practice better through listening to teachers' praises and feedbacks. Therefore, listening skills become very crucial emphasis in the teaching of English to young learners.

### **3.1 The basic principles of listening**

English teachers find the following principles of teaching listening to children useful:

- Listening in English is difficult for many young learners. They often do not understand what the teacher is saying and they ask the teacher to speak in Albanian. Therefore, it is important that the teacher should speak at the young learners' level or just above so that they can understand and not lose confidence (Paul, 2003).
- Instructions are the most natural classroom communication that young learners can experience as Scott and Ytreberg have noticed (1990). Children need a lot of exposure to real spoken English, so it is advantageous for them if the teacher speaks and gives instructions in English as much as possible.
- Because young learners use the teacher as a language model, teachers should think of how to clearly introduce an activity before going to class. The teacher may need to repeat, rephrase and modify her instructions when the young learners look confused. This strategy will enable teachers to give instructions in English. However, if needed, the teacher can give the instructions in Albanian and then repeat them in English, giving the young learners a frame of reference (Bertrand, 2008).
- It is a good idea to support a listening activity with visuals such as pictures, facial expressions, movements, and mimes. When young learners can relate to what they are hearing with movement or action, they comprehend what they hear and remember it for future use.

### **3.2 The benefits of teaching listening to Young learners**

Among the many benefits of teaching listening to children the teachers listed the following:

- Listening activities can be used to energize young learners or to create a quiet atmosphere. Some activities require children to make movement and noise, while others make them think and concentrate on their work.
- As children become accustomed to the teacher's repeated greetings and instructions, they internalize the words and phrases, learn to respond appropriately, and begin to participate in genuine conversations.
- Recorded listening material provides opportunities for children to hear different accents.
- Children use the teacher's pronunciation as a model for their own pronunciation.
- Listening activities develop children's abilities to focus on both general and specific information, raising their awareness that they can understand a story or conversation without knowing the meaning of every word.
- Audio lessons using cassette tapes and CDs are useful for modeling correct pronunciation and offering a different approach for young learners to hear spoken English. The teacher should prepare the tape before coming to class and stay calm and focused when trying to rewind the tape for a second listening.

### **3.3 Listening activities**

Following the English teachers provided a variety of listening activities that they incorporate into their lessons to teach listening. These activities depended on the grades of the young learners. 85% of the activities were provided from the books, whereas 15% of the activities were created by them.

#### **Songs (Grade 3-6)**

All the English teachers use songs in their lesson plan to teach listening. The general principles of using songs as a listening activity are as follows:

- Teachers need to prepare the young learners before they listen to a song. This can be done by showing young learners pictures of the situation or characters from the song using a puppet to sing the song alone or with the young learners
- Teachers can also use puppets to ask questions, encouraging young learners to predict what they are going to hear and to show whether they enjoyed the song or not.
- Teachers should encourage young learners to participate while listening to the song by singing along and moving their bodies. This action will give the young learners meanings to what they hear, build up their confidence, and create a fun environment.
- Teachers can use the same song again in different lessons to motivate the young learners and to build their confidence. If young learners are familiar with what they listen to and say, they will feel more secure about learning English.

### **Dictation (Grade 3-5)**

Dictation can be both fun and challenging to young learners from grade 3 to 5. 74% of the teachers use dictation to check listening and also writing skills. It does not need to be boring and monotonous. The teacher can dictate anything from single words to a complete text while the young learners listen and write down what they hear. If a complete text is used, the teacher should dictate word by word or phrase by phrase. Dictation has advantages such as the following (Scott and Ytreberg, 1990):

- It is useful to gain young learners' attention and to calm them down after a noisy and energetic activity.
- It is a good activity for a large class.
- It provides not only listening practice related to sounds, sentence structures, and meanings, but also spelling. In addition, it can be used from pronunciation practice when young learners are asked to repeat what they hear. It is important that teachers give clear instructions with demonstrations when introducing a dictation activity so that the young learners know exactly what to do.

### **Rhymes (Listen and Repeat) (Grade 3-5)**

56% of the teachers use Rhymes in their teaching. This type of activity is used in grades 3 – 5 as it can be fun while motivating young learners to learn English. Young learners gain confidence when they can say the English words with the right sounds, stress, rhythm, and intonation. This activity is even more meaningful to the young learners if combined with movements, objects, or pictures (Scott and Ytreberg, 1990).

Children learn through repetition. Rhymes are naturally repetitive and fun because young learners can play with the language. Below is an example of a rhyme that can be used with young learners:

#### **Rain**

Rain on the green grass,  
Rain on the tree,  
Rain on the house-top,  
But not on me.

### **Filling in Missing Information (Grade 3-6)**

This activity is used in all grades by all the teachers. According to Scott and Ytreberg (1990) there is a broad range of listening activities that require young learners to find general and/or specific information, such as identifying activities in which young learners listen to descriptions and then find the pictures that are being described. Putting things in order activities require young learners to put a number of pictures in the right order according to what they hear. Questionnaire and filling in missing information activities are included in this category and they require young learners to write the words, phrases, or numbers they hear.

While listening to a song or conversation, children can fill in missing words from the printed song lyrics or from a chart or schedule. For example, while young learners listen to a dialogue in which two children are talking about their school schedule, they write the missing information into the schedule.

### **Stories (Grade 3-6)**

The teacher can either tell a story or read a story to the young learners. All the English teachers use stories according to the young learners' level. Teachers ask them to repeat words and phrases, use facial expressions and gestures, and keep eye contact with them. Puppets are used to make the story come alive for the children. The stories are generally included in the English textbooks, but 45 % of the teachers add stories from different story books in their English syllabus.

### **Responding to Commands – Activities Using Total Physical Response (TPR) (Grade 3-5)**

In this type of activity the young learners respond physically to the teacher's commands and it was used in grade 3-5 to teach classroom language, imperatives, and vocabulary related to actions. 95% of the English teachers use this kind of activity in their routine class instructions, games, or storytelling.

Although TPR does not require young learners to practice English orally, it is widely practiced with children and beginner learners as it has several advantages:

- Children enjoy moving around and have fun while learning.
- The teacher does not need a lot of preparation for a simple TPR activity.
- TPR activities do not need a lot of space and work well with large classes.

An example of a TPR listening activity is the Simon Says game.

### **Checking Off Items in a List (Grade 3-4)**

This activity encourages young learners to listen for specific information and 76% of the teachers use it to practice vocabulary the young learners have learned or to introduce new words. While listening, the young learners view a series of pictures or information and check off any pictures or information for which they hear the vocabulary.

### **Arranging Pictures as a Story is Told Aloud (Grade 4-6)**

This activity is usually done in pairs or small groups in grades 4-6 and 64% of the English teachers use this activity. While listening to a story, the young learners look at a series of pictures. By listening to clues and key words, such as names of people, places, things, and physical descriptions, they arrange the pictures in the same sequence as that of the story.

## **4. Teaching Speaking**

Speaking is equally important in children's overall language development. It is the first output after the first input (Listening), long before they can write. Teachers who work with young learners recognize how important it is for children to develop

strong speaking skills. Speaking is the way they communicate about what they feel or what they need, and also the way their adults, such as parents and teachers, to communicate what is good and what is bad. If a child tends to do something bad or has an aggressive behavior, such as bullying his or her friends, may be that because she or he cannot communicate well enough to tell what she or he feels or needs.

#### **4.1 The basic principles of speaking**

Bailey (2005) states that the three main reasons for getting young learners to speak in the classroom are:

- to provide young learners with practice in using English in real life situations.
- to inform the teacher and the young learners about the young learners' progress.
- to get information about the young learners' speaking problems.

During the interviews with teachers they argued that the figure of the teacher is instrumental in helping young learners learn to speak fluently and they complete the following principles in the questionnaires:

- Teachers should motivate young learners to practice as much as possible. The more often young learners use the language, the more automatic and natural their language becomes. Once young learners feel comfortable using the language, they will be eager to learn more.
- Teachers must give young learners a reason for speaking. Choosing familiar and interesting topics for young learners to discuss will motivate them to speak.
- Teaching speaking in the language classroom can be challenging. Albanian young learners usually speak Albanian when they cannot say what they want in English, or they may not speak at all because they are afraid of making mistakes.
- Teachers should provide appropriate feedback and correction. In most EFL contexts, young learners are dependent on the teacher for useful linguistic feedback. It is important that teachers provide the kinds of corrective feedback that are appropriate for each type of activity.
- Teachers should focus on both fluency and accuracy. It is very common that teachers focus mostly on interactive activities (fluency) and forget about grammar and pronunciation accuracy. Therefore, teachers should make sure that the tasks help young learners practice both fluency and accuracy.

#### **4.2 The benefits of teaching speaking to Young learners**

English teachers were very helpful by providing the benefits of teaching speaking to young learners. This is relatively easier since kids are natural chatterboxes and they love to talk and look for chances to communicate meaningfully.

- Teachers should find the right balance between controlled activities and letting children talk naturally in the classroom.
- Teachers should take care that children talk accurately and correct their linguistic errors. However, no correction should be done when children are talking in free speaking activities.
- Young learners should get as many speaking and listening opportunities as possible in the classroom. Their speaking time should steadily increase as the teacher prepares them for various communication situations.
- Combining different approaches and using various methods and tools should give young learners plenty of opportunities to take part in communicative situations and help them internalize certain vocabulary terms or grammatical points.

### **4.3 Speaking activities**

Many types of speaking activities that teachers included in their lessons are the following:

#### **Recitation (Grade 3-4)**

Young learners choose a short poem or rhyme and recite it in class. This activity can be done individually, in pairs, or in groups. Poems were generally found in the English textbooks of grades 3-4 and all the English teachers use them in their plans.

#### **Pronunciation Drills (Grade 3-5)**

Young learners repeat correct pronunciation in chorus and individually. This activity is used by all the teachers as it helps young learners practice and remembers the vocabulary as well as the pronunciation.

#### **Choral Reading (Grade 3-6)**

In this activity Young learners read a short sentence or passage together and all the teachers use it. As the young learners read, the teacher can listen for young learners' pronunciation and give corrections when the activity ends.

#### **Role Play (Grade 3-6)**

Role plays are used in all the grades and Young learners are given particular roles in an imaginary situation to act out. The teacher can help them prepare their own dialogues for the roles as they need to do more than recite bits of accurate language in drills and dialogues. (M. Lightbown & Spada, 2013)

#### **Storytelling (Grade 4-6)**

The teacher can tell a story, adjusting the language to the young learners' level, or read a story aloud without adjusting the language in grades 4-6. Young learners can be asked to share their experiences with the class, to retell their favorite story, or to create an ending to a story that the teacher tells. 87% of the teachers use storytelling in their English teaching.



### Songs (Grade 3-6)

Young learners listen to a song and learn the lyrics. They are used in all the grades by all the English teachers Adding physical movements to the song creates a fun environment and helps the young learners learn pronunciation, vocabulary, and meanings of words.

### Questionnaires (Grade 3-6)

Questionnaires are found in all grades and Young learners ask their classmates a set of questions in order to complete a questionnaire. The result of their surveys can be checked by the teacher or discussed together in class. For example:

Can you...	Me	Classmate 1 (name)	Classmate 2 (name)
Swim?	_____	_____	_____
Ride a bicycle?	_____	_____	_____
Play badminton?	_____	_____	_____
Sing a song in English?	_____	_____	_____

Young learners first answer the questions for themselves by writing a check mark ( ) next to the activities they can do or a cross (x) next to the ones they cannot do. Next, the young learners move around the room interviewing their classmates and filling in the questionnaire. When they have finished their interviews, the young learners can tally the number of young learners who can or cannot do each activity. The questionnaire above can be used to reinforce the use of can and can't.

### Talking and Writing Box (Grade 3-4)

54% of the teachers experiment with this kind of method in grades 3-4. They can put the pictures or topics in the box and the young learners can choose one that is interesting to them, or teachers can do it like the example below:

*What do you think the girl is doing?*

- She is standing up.
- She is dancing.
- She is smiling.
- What is your suggestion?

The teachers show a funny picture, the funnier the better, and give young learners some multiple choices relating to the language focus and also give them choice to give their own opinion.

### Tongue Twisters (Grade 3-5)

This method can be used to teach pronunciation in a fun way and 89% of the teachers use them in grades 3-5. Children adore tongue twisters because they perceive saying the sounds as a game or challenge. Tongue twisters generally have the same phoneme repeated over and over again, which is quite hard. The examples of tongue twisters are:

**Sally sells seashells at the seashore*****If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper, where's the peck of pickled peppers that Peter Piper picked?*****5. Conclusion**

Listening and speaking skills not considered by the English teachers as two independent skills but they are related with each other. For example, songs are used to teach listening and speaking skills in grades 3-6 by all the English teachers. A great number of teachers knew the basic principles of listening and speaking skills and the benefits that young learners got from these skills were many.

As far as activities are concerned, it was clearly noticed that they are adapted to the level of the young learners. Listening activities that are used in grades 3-6 are: Songs, Filling in the Missing Information, Stories; other activities such as Dictations, Rhymes, and TPR activities are used in grades 3-5; whereas Checking Off Items in a list is used in grades 3-4 and Arranging Pictures as a Story is Told Aloud is used in grades 4-6.

Speaking activities that are used in grades 3-6 are Choral Reading, Songs, Questionnaires, Role plays; Recitation and Talking & Writing Box are used in grades 3-4; whereas Pronunciation Drills and Tongue Twisters are used in grades 3-5.

In conclusion English teachers can always combine listening and speaking skills in all the activities in the classroom to make young learners confident in the English language learning and provide the best environment for them to speak English as much as they can.

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