

Teaching language skills

In this article I shall concentrate on the ways of teaching language skills to young children. I want to analyse what the best techniques to teach this group are. The age-group I have chosen need special activities which are motivating and fun, and help them develop positive attitudes towards the English language and language learning. I describe some activities which develop the child's listening, speaking, writing and reading skills.

1 Teaching listening

According to Brewster, Ellis, Girard (1992), listening is the first skill that pupils acquire, especially if they cannot read. Children start to learn the English language mainly through their ears and what they hear is their main source of language. You give them visual back-up by pictures, facial expression, mime and movement. When you are talking to children you must say something clearly and repeat it. You do not have to tell a story without breaks from beginning to end. Because young children have a short attention span, it is important not to overload them. You should choose activities that check understanding not only by the end but during listening tasks. You can use listening activities for different purposes. Some of them create a peaceful atmosphere by calm learners down or make them concentrate on something. Others create movement and noise to wake children up or make them move about.

1.1 Learning to listen in English

In the early stages of learning English, listening is hard work for young children. They spend a lot of time listening to the teacher and playing simple games, saying rhymes, singing songs and listening to simple stories. You must give the children confidence. You should tell learners that they cannot be expected to understand every word. You can ask them to focus more on specific details and you can use support materials which help

them feel confident about what is important to concentrate on. You can help the children to develop strategies for listening. The most important listening strategies include:

- Working out the meaning from context

You can encourage children to use their general knowledge about a topic and use pictures to work out meaning of new words.

- Predicting

You should encourage learners to predict what they think might come next. 'This means that they then listen to check whether their expectation matches the reality of what they hear. This helps to give children success in the task which, in turn, makes them feel more confident' (Brewster, Ellis, Girard 1992:57).

- Recognizing discourse patterns and markers

An awareness of words such as first, finally, help children especially when they listen to a sequence of events.

- Inferring opinion or attitude

You should encourage learners to notice your body language like gestures, facial expressions and the way you use your voice to stress important words.

1.2 Listening for information

Listening for information covers various activities that you use to check what the learners know or to give new information. Children listen for specific information and detail.

- Listen and sequence

Listen and sequence is an activity which is based on pictures or written statements rearranged into the correct order. Children listen to the text and put the pictures in the right order. This activity consolidates new vocabulary or structures, improves concentration span and memory.

- Filling in missing information

Filling in missing information is an activity in which learners can fill in the missing words

of a text, a song and a timetable.

➤ Listen for the mistake

In this kind of exercise children have to listen for the mistakes. You can use the correct text and wrong pictures or you make mistakes in the reading text and take the right picture.

➤ Questionnaires

Questionnaire is an activity which involves a filling in of numbers or a little bit of writing.

➤ Identifying exercises

This type of listening is based on the description of somebody or something whose identity pupils have to guess. Learners listen for detail to pick out key vocabulary used to describe.

➤ Listen and colour

In this activity you can use short spoken descriptions and pictures from children workbooks. Pupils like this kind of listening because they love colouring pictures and drawings. They listening to consolidate new vocabulary and understanding of concepts.

1.3 'Listen and do' activities

According to Scott and Ytreberg (2002), in these activities you tell children what to do using clear pronunciation and natural intonation. You can help them understand by gestures or by doing the actions. Learners must listen carefully and do what you say.

➤ Instructions

Instruction is a type of 'listen and do' activity which you use during English lessons. Giving genuine instruction you can see at once if learners understand the message.

➤ Put up your hands

There are all sorts of uses for this kind of activities. You can ask children to put up their

hands when they hear a certain word or sound. 'Or, in order to calm them down a bit, whisper the numbers from one to twenty, and ask them to put up their hands when you miss out a number' (Scott, Ytreberg 1990:23).

➤ Moving about

Moving about covers a very wide range of listening activities where children have to physically move about. They can do ordinary things in the classroom or crazy things. You can check movement words, classroom words, spelling, and counting. Using these exercises you know very easily if the learners have understood or not. Children can learn by watching the others. They understand because the movement and language go together.

➤ Mime stories

In this listening task you tell the story and learners and you do the actions. The advantage with this type of activity is that you can play with children.

➤ Drawing

Listen and draw activities are based on simple pictures. You or one of learners can tell children what to draw. In this way you might check numbers, colours, object vocabulary and propositions.

1.4 Listen and repeat activities

Listen and repeat tasks improve the listening attitude. They are fundamental tools for teaching young children the language. These activities are a good way of giving pupils a complete text with meaning. They teach pronunciation, intonation and stress in a natural way.

➤ Songs

Songs is one of kind of listen and repeat activities. They are a easy way to remember quite long chunks of language. 'Using songs is one way of escaping from the coursebook and adding new learning experience' (internet resource :www.Etprofessional.com/articles/songs.pdf). Songs give children the natural opportunity for

meaningful repetition.

➤ Rhymes

Rhymes have natural rhythm and have an element of playing with the language. 'They develop the ear which is the first, and one of the most important steps, in learning a language' (Roth, Ytreberg 1998:53). Children like repeating rhymes and playing with language. You can use them to introduce or practise new vocabulary or structures.

➤ Exercises

This form of listen and repeat activities uses drills, words with special sounds or short dialogue. Learners repeat them after you or one of the children.

1.5 Listening to stories

Listening to stories is motivating and fun and can help develop positive attitudes towards language learning. Pupils should listen in a friendly and secure atmosphere. It is important that they relaxed and comfortable. 'Listening to stories allows children to form their own inner pictures. They have no problems with animals and objects which talk – they identify with them, and the stories can help them to come to terms with their own feelings' (Scott, Ytreberg 1990:23).

Stories exercise children's imagination and link fantasy with their real world. Listening to stories develop listening and concentrating skills and allows you to revise or introduce new vocabulary and sentence structures.

2 Teaching speaking

It is important to find balance between natural talk and guided, controlled activities. Children should practise speaking English during lessons because they often do not have opportunity to practise after school.

2.1 Formulating language

Formulating language consists of patterns or routines what pupils memorize by hearing and repeating them regularly. 'If you want children to use English as much as possible in the classroom, it is important that they learn a number of phrases to enable them to participate and maintain in English' (Brewster, Ellis, Girard 1992:65).

Formulating language consist of:

- routines: What's the time?
- simple greetings: Hello! By!
- classroom language: Sit down! Listen!
- asking permission: Can I put the book away?
- social English: Have a nice weekend!
- communication strategies: Can you say that again, please?

In the early stages of learning children learn to use formulating language and communicate with a minimum of linguistic competence.

2.2 The ways of teaching speaking skills

Scott and Ytreberg (2002) claim that when learners do guided and controlled activities they use teacher or textbook language. During this kind of activity they should produce correct language. When they make mistakes you must correct them at once. On the other hand, the language of free oral activities is often tightly controlled. You allow children to express themselves and their own personality by saying what they want to say. Correction of language mistakes should not be done during this activity.

➤ Presenting new language orally

When pupils start learning English, they cannot produce it themselves. You should control the activities and present language to young children. You can present new language orally in these ways:

- Using mascot and puppets

Using puppets and class mascots is one of the most successful ways of introducing new language to beginners. You can present dialogues with puppets and mascots and you can use them to ask questions or children can ask through them. If you use puppets and

mascots you do not have to present oral work by yourself.

- Through the pupils

You must use true sentences about pupils. The sentences should be accompanied by the appropriate actions and sounds.

- Silhouettes

You can use silhouettes with a piece of wire or on the overhead projector.

- Drawings

You are able to use simple line drawings on the board.

- Pictures

You can use simple and clear pictures.

- Realia

You may use animals, clothes, toy furniture, telephones.

- Controlled practice

Controlled practice follows on directly from presentation. In controlled activities children try out new language. You establish the pattern with class and then pupils do it in pairs. The purpose of this type of activity is to train children to use simple, correct, useful language within a situation or context.

- Guided practice

After controlled practice there is guided practice where pupils work in pairs or in small groups. They practice the words doing exercises from textbooks. You can use miming, objects or pictures to help children understand the content.

- Dialogues and role play

Working with dialogues is a successful way to link guided practice and free activities. 'Controlled dialogues can easily develop into freer work when the pupils are ready for it. Putting pupils into pairs for doing the dialogues is a simple way of organising even large

classes' (Scott, Ytreberg 1990:39). You can use objects or physical movements in order to make a dialogue come alive for young children.

Role play is another way of working with dialogues. Children can act out different dialogues. You may give them role cards. This activity provide fluency practice. Children can speak in the first or second person and use facial expressions, intonation, stress, tone of voice . Dialogues and role play encourage natural chat in the classroom. Pupils use short complete bits of language and learn to ask and answer.

➤ Free activities

Controlled and guided activities prepare children for free activities where they say what they want to say. This kind of activities concentrate on the message or content and focus attention on meaning because fluency is more important than accuracy. 'Teacher control is minimal during the activity, but the teacher must be sure that pupils have enough language to do the task' (Scott, Ytreberg 1990:42).

You can let children to communicate in the foreign language in informal atmosphere and you can use a game element in the activity. There is a wide variety of free activities which children do in pairwork or groupwork.

2.3 Speaking activities

There are some activities which you can use to develop children's speaking skills:

➤ Look, listen and repeat

You show a picture card or a word card, say the word and children repeat. When you are satisfied with your learner's pronunciation you can move on to next word. This activity can be use to introduce new vocabulary or structures.

➤ Look and ask

You can use picture cards to encourage children to ask a particular question. 'This activity is often used to prepare pupils for freer activities such as pair work or questionnaires and surveys' (Brewster, Ellis, Girard 1992:70).

➤ Information gap

In this activity children work in pairs or groups asking and answering questions in order

to complete a task. Learners have chance to practise fluency and work independently of the teacher.

➤ Dramatization

Learners can act out a story or situation. This develop confidence, memory skills and provide integrated skills practice because children make invitations and posters.

➤ Listen and participate

When pupils are listening to stories, riddles, rhymes, poems, you encourage them to participate by repeating key vocabulary or phrases. This exercise involve children actively during listening .

➤ Retelling a story

Learners retell a simplified version of a story. You can help them with captions written on cards or in speech bubbles and check if they understand the main events in a story.

➤ Rhymes, action rhymes, songs, chants

You can use these activities to introduce or consolidate new vocabulary. 'These are learnt as chunks of language and involve pupils in imitating and miming. Rhymes or songs with actions also provide exercise and encourage body control' (Brewster, Ellis, Girard 1992: 69).

➤ Reading aloud

This task is used to practise pronunciation and sound or letter combinations. Children can read words and sentences aloud during some games such as Snap or phonetic Bingo.

➤ Memory games

This activity is based on short spoken messages and lists of items. When pupils take part in some games like Chinese Whispers they repeat a certain word or structure. You use this exercise to practice pronunciation and improve memory skills.

➤ Guessing games

Children describe something or someone or ask questions. The class must guess what is

it. You can use this games to supply a realistic context when your pupils practise the pronunciation of specific structures.

➤ Questionnaires and surveys

Learners interview others and collate the information on a chart. They practise fluency and listening skills.

3 Teaching reading

While listening is the main source of language when children start to learn a foreign language, reading is the second main source. It is very important to make reading an enjoyable activity in the language learning experience because books open up new worlds to pupils.

3.1 Approaches to reading

According to Scott and Ytreberg (1990), there are different ways to approach the introduction of reading in the English language:

➤ Phonics

This way is based on letters and sounds. You teach the children the letters of the alphabet and the combination of letters. Then you show them how to pronounce the letters and simple words. You can start with three or four letters which make up a number of words.

➤ Look and say

This approach is based on words and phrases. You should start by teaching words which are familiar to the pupils and use a lot of flashcards with written words. You can show and say the word and point to the object, then children repeat this word.

➤ Whole sentences reading

In this approach the words are not showed in isolation, but as whole phrases and

sentences. You teach children recognition of whole phrases and sentences that have meaning in themselves.

➤ Language experience approach

This way to reading is based on the children's spoken language. 'The teacher writes down a sentence for the child to read which is based on what the child has said' (Scott, Ytreberg 1990:51).

3.2 Starting points

The teacher should create a routine for story reading from a book. You read aloud and point to the words as you say them because children should understand the connection between spoken and written word. Pupils can ask questions and talk about the story. You leave the book in the book corner and tell children they can read it on their own. Read the story again the next week and give pupils their own copy. Then read with the all the class from time to time.

Instead of reading from a book, you can use a class story. Everyone has own copy and can colour them. You might also read texts based on the child's language. This kind of reading is based on a picture or is about something which has happened. You start from a simple sentence and gradually build up stories.

There are two various reading techniques: reading aloud and reading silently. Reading aloud is useful with beginners in a language. 'The teacher can use it as a means of training and checking rhythm and pronunciation. The teacher can read a sentence or phrase and the class or parts of the class can read in chorus after' (Scott, Ytreberg 1990:58). An efficient way of checking work is also reading dialogues in pairs or small groups. You should encourage children to read silently by having print everywhere, giving them messages in writing, making books available to them etc. You can use silent reading as the starting point for role play. It is important that in the classroom there are different reading materials such as reading cards in box or a book pocket, home-made books, picture dictionaries, easy readers for foreign language learners, books with tapes etc.

3.3 Reading activities

According to Brewster, Ellis and Girard (1992), there are some reading activities which you can use during lessons to improve reading skills of your learners:

➤ Playing games such as Odd-one-out or Spot

Children identify similarities and differences between letters and words. You can use these games to develop phonic skills and sight recognition of words.

➤ Playing games such as Bingo, Dominoes and Snap

You can use Domino cards, Bingo boards and written words on cards for Snap. The pupils learn a lot of letters, words and pictures. This activity develop phonic skills and recognition letters and common words.

➤ Sequencing

This activity is based on sentences written on card or sentences with boxes. Pupils listen to a description and arrange sentences in the right order. This is useful way to check comprehension.

➤ Reading words and rearranging them to make sentences

You can use sentences on cards cut up into individual words. This task check comprehension and develop an understanding of word order.

➤ Using vocabulary prompt cards to make statements

You use prompt cards with words and pictures showing nouns or action verbs. This is useful way of a prompt for speaking and pronunciation practice.

➤ Matching pictures to speech bubbles

During listening to a cassette or the teacher, children read a selection of speech bubbles and choose the correct one. This activity is use to reinforce listening skills and develop faster reading.

➤ Checking written statements

The pupils read sentences based on a survey and check whether they true or false. They

can read riddles and write answers to the riddles. You use them for encouraging problem-solving and to reinforce concepts.

- Reading and ticking a chart to make sentences or ask questions

This exercise rehearse sentence patterns and pronunciation. You use chart on the blackboard or on worksheet.

4 Teaching writing

Writing in foreign language is useful and enjoyable part of the lesson. It add hands to eyes and ears. Children can express their personalities, train the language and consolidate learning in the other skill areas. 'Writing is an exciting and rewarding activity and is the most visible of the skills' (Scott, Ytreberg 1990) According to House (1997) younger children take longer to write a simple exercise because their hand co-ordination is not fully developed.

4.1 Controlled writing activities

Byrne (1990) thinks that the teacher should give the children adequate opportunities to use orally learned language in writing. In controlled exercises they can reinforce key structures and vocabulary.

According to Scott and Ytreberg (1990), controlled writing activities practise the language and concentrate on on the language itself. Here are some controlled writing activities:

- Straight copying

This activity is starting point for writing and reinforce language that has been presented orally and through reading. During coping the words, children can read aloud quietly to themselves to see connection between the written and spoken word. The children with straight copying difficulties can start off by tracing words.

- Matching

Children match pictures and texts or choose the sentence which they want write about

the text.

- Organising and copying

This activity is a good introduction to structured writing. Pupils choose sentences and complete the letter.

- Delayed copying

This exercise train short term visual memory. 'Write a short, familiar sentence on the board, give the pupils a few seconds to look at it, and then rub it out and see if the pupils can write it down' (Scott, Ytreberg 1990:71). You should not use a test in this kind of activity.

- Copying book

Children can copy new vocabulary, a little dialogues or whole stories.

- Dictation

Dictation should be short and connected to work which has gone, made up of sentences that be said on one breath and normal speed.

4.2 Guided written activities

- Fill-in exercises

These activities require understanding but do not require production of language. They focus on specific language items, like preposition or question forms and can be used for vocabulary work. According to House (1997), younger children can be given lines for each letter and the first letter.

- Letters, cards, invitations

This writing is useful way of getting children to write short meaningful pieces of writing and it is a popular language class activity. Pupils can write letters to each other and send them by the classroom postman.

➤ Dictation

This kind of task is a good starting point for discussion in the pre-writing stage of writing. You can dictate half a sentence and children complete it in their own way.

4.3 Free writing activities

In free activities children try out their language in a freer way, the language is their own language and the teacher is the initiator and helper. Pupils should concentrate first on content and spend a lot of time on pre-writing work. Pre-writing activities give pupils language, ideas and encourage them before writing. 'A short simple conversation about the subject can be enough to get ideas going and collect thoughts' (Scott, Ytreberg 1990:75). You can ask questions or use the key word to write word stars which give words and ideas about what to write. Easy to make are vocabulary charts with simple drawings or pictures and vocabulary collections. Children can make a picture dictionary using their own themes and ideas. Free writing covers a wide range of activities:

➤ Dialogues

The dialogues can be completely free activities. Using speech bubbles is very useful for this type of task. The dialogue might be a result of pairwork based on a model dialogue or a given situation.

➤ Descriptions

A large number of free writings includes picture descriptions. Children can make a collage which is a large piece of paper with illustrations and texts.

➤ Letters

The free letters should be written to other pupils or to the teacher and should be answered without any comments on the language. Children can write letters to pen-friends from English-speaking class or a class that learn English as a foreign language.

➤ Stories

Children can write their own stories or group stories. Before writing they should do lots

of pre-writing activities. You have to help pupils during writing and check final version which can be displayed.

W moim artykule wskazałam ważne techniki i ćwiczenia nauczania małych dzieci umiejętności językowych. Głównym zadaniem nauczyciela w pracy z dziećmi jest osłuchanie z językiem. Słuchanie jest pierwszą umiejętnością, która dzieci nabywają, zwłaszcza w takim przypadku, kiedy jeszcze nie umieją czytać. Słuchanie w celu uzyskania konkretnej informacji zawiera różne rodzaje ćwiczeń, które nauczyciel może stosować, aby podać nowe informacje lub sprawdzić wiedzę uczniów. Technika polegająca na słuchaniu i powtarzaniu uczy dzieci wymowy, rytmu i intonacji w naturalny sposób. Dzieci lubią słuchać opowiadań, które pobudzają ich wyobraźnię i łączą świat fantazji z ich realnym światem. Nauczanie mówienia powinno być poprzedzone prezentacją nowego słownictwa w znanym dzieciom kontekście przy użyciu na przykład: przedmiotów, rysunków, gestów. Następnie nauczyciel powinien skontrolować jego właściwą percepcję przez uczniów poprzez różnego rodzaju ćwiczenia utrwalające. Etapem końcowym są samodzielne ćwiczenia, których celem jest zwrócenie uwagi na płynność a nie na poprawność mówienia. Kiedy dzieci zaczynają uczyć się języka angielskiego, czytanie jest drugim głównym źródłem nauki obok słuchania. Bardzo ważną rzeczą jest uczynienie czytania przyjemną aktywnością w czasie lekcji i zachęcenie uczniów do czytania w czasie wolnym. Pisanie w języku angielskim jest ekscytującą częścią lekcji, ponieważ dodaje dłonie do zaangażowanych już narządów wzroku i słuchu. Pod kierunkiem nauczyciela dzieci mogą pisać własne prace, takie jak listy czy zaproszenia. W samodzielnych ćwiczeniach jest bardziej kładziony nacisk na zawartość niż na poprawność.

Bibliography

Brewster, J., Ellis, G., Girard, D. *The Primary English Teacher,s Guide*, Suffolk, Penguin Books, 1992

Roth, G., *Teaching Very Young Children*, London, Richmond Publishing, 1998

Scott, W.A., Ytreberg, *Teaching English to Children*, Harlow, Longman 2002

Opracowała
Renata Dufaj

