

# **CRITICAL ISSUES IN FOSTERING YOUNG LEARNERS' LISTENING AND SPEAKING SKILLS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF UZBEKISTAN**

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## **Annotation**

This article discusses current critical issues related to listening and speaking skills of young learners in the process of teaching, in Uzbekistan. The picture that emerges concerning the current issues in listening and speaking to young learners can be given under two main headings: teacher-related issues and curriculum related issues.

## **Аннотация**

В данной статье обсуждаются актуальные вопросы, связанные с навыками слушания и речи у молодых учащихся в процессе обучения, в Узбекистане. Картина, которая возникает в связи с текущими проблемами слушания и разговора с молодыми учениками, может быть представлена под двумя основными заголовками: вопросы, связанные с учителями, и вопросы, связанные с учебной программой.

**Key words:** young learners, listening and speaking skills, critical issues, curriculum, communicative approach, audio materials.

**Ключевые слова:** молодые ученики, умение слушать и говорить, критические вопросы, учебная программа, коммуникативный подход, аудиоматериалы.

In an increasingly globalized world proficiency in English, the world's lingua franca is perceived by many non-English-speaking countries as vital to professional communication. The capability of talking gets to be one of the five abilities that ought to be obtained by every child in this 21 century period (Seamolec on line course 2: 2006). Communicating and collaborating and dialect

boundaries ended up a need in assorted and multinational communities. Uzbekistan is also not exception of this process; if someone wants to obtain a job, the one should take an interview where for sure the question can be expected about the fluency of English. In planning each child to have a good communication expertise, teaching speaking and listening could be an essential necessity to be taught not as it were for grown-up learners but also for young learners. The response to the ever-increasing demand for English has led to reform language education systems and introduce English at earlier ages in elementary schools, or even in pre-school educational establishments in Uzbekistan.

As a result of such developments, the field of teaching young learners has expanded. In the pre-school educational establishments, basic English is taught to kids mostly using audio-lingual approach to teaching. The school curriculum for foreign language teaching in primary schools has now focused much on the development of communicative competence with an emphasis on the oral skills of listening and speaking. Hence, teachers of English are expected to make the improvements of children's listening and speaking skills as the main aim of teaching.

This article illustrates how young learners' listening and speaking skills can be effectively promoted. With the recent introduction of English into the young learner primary ELT curricula in Uzbekistan, development of children's oral-aural skills has started to receive more attention. However, teaching listening and speaking skills to young learners is found to be highly challenging by teachers. As a result, a lot of related issues have appeared. The first critical issue concerns teachers' not being professional enough in teaching listening and speaking or their not being confident in their English ability, which is almost universally identified as a problem (Baker 2008; Kuchah 2009; Littlewood 2007; Nunan 2003). Most teachers of English still use grammar translation method of teaching at primary schools. It is generally accepted that to teach using communicative approach, teachers need to have good levels of English. This is partly because communicative approaches have traditionally encouraged a target -language –only classroom,

which means teachers must use only English in the classroom. In case there is something challenging for almost all learners of the class, the teacher may use L1. In this regard there were organized a lot of teacher training courses for foreign language teachers (mainly English language) that aimed at introducing new approaches to teaching, and even some courses were arranged for boosting up the teachers' level of English skills, especially speaking and listening. In Uzbekistan EFL teachers working in public schools required to have B2 CEFR level that is equalized with IELTS 6 band. According to the official CEFR guidelines, someone at the B2 level in English: can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization; can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party; can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

Furthermore, communicative approaches focus on learners' communicating with their own active vocabulary range, rather than just answering questions given at the end of written texts or just doing grammar or vocabulary exercises; the language skills are in demand in the current global market of employees, those required for the second. A primary way of helping children participate as listeners and speakers in conversations is for teachers to model good listening and speaking techniques themselves, for which they need advanced level of fluency (Enever 2019). We are aiming at advanced fluency level here, not advanced English level. As mentioned above, fluency is one of the ways that leads to confidence of teachers in their English speaking ability. However, the question arises as to what level of proficiency and fluency teachers really need in order to teach in primary schools in Uzbekistan. It may be that the real issue is not the teachers' lack of proficiency, which may well be more than adequate for teaching English to young learners, but rather a lack of confidence predicated on the belief that native-like competence is required to teach CLT successfully.

A further critical issue is that teachers find teaching speaking skills particularly difficult, perhaps they are not aware of the methods of teaching speaking. In a global study of the experiences of young learner teachers of English reported in Copland et al.(2014), teachers overwhelmingly and across countries and contexts stated that teaching speaking was the greatest challenge they faced. Problems included getting children to speak it, teaching pronunciation, setting up, and managing speaking activities.

Another critical issue concerns how listening input is delivered to children and the role of the teacher during this process. According to my observations listening to audio materials is one of the most frequent activities in the young learners' classroom, although video and digital recordings are becoming more accessible. Teachers may also worry that they do not provide a good model for students as they do not sound like as 'native speakers'. Recent discussions of World Englishes (e.g., Galloway and Rose 2015) have tried to dispel the myth that native speaker is a model to aspire to (Copland 2011). Sounding like a native speaker is not the most important factor to make the learners become a good listener or speaker of the target language, the main thing is being a good lesson designer. Moreover, following the designed lesson plan while conducting the lesson. According to Shin and Crandal (2014), when designing listening activities for young learners, we need to remember the following seven principles:

Prepare your lines carefully.

Use listening activities that reflect real-life learning.

The listening activities should be developmentally appropriate.

Use a variety of techniques to make listening input comprehensible.

Check comprehension using a variety of response types.

Keep listening active – always give learners a listening task.

Equip your students with intelligent guesswork strategies.

An important characteristic of YLs with regard to listening and speaking is their ability to imitate the new sounds of the target language. It is also claimed that successful listening and speaking skills are long-term job and require a lot of

practice. It is therefore important that children are exposed to use opportunities to listen to English from a variety of sources where the speakers use English in a variety of context. The most effective listening activities activate prior knowledge with pictures or realia. By activating prior knowledge, the children will also review the known vocabulary and pre-teach unknown vocabulary. It is important to prepare students for listening by contextualizing the listening practice, to give them listening tasks to create active learning, to use TPR activities, songs and dramatizations. Unfortunately, students receive little dedicated listening and speaking practice in their classes.

Another concern relates to how many hours of input children receive in schools and what happens in the lessons. Nunan (2003) suggests that at least 200 hours per year of instruction are needed for measurable progress to be seen in Foreign Language teaching. However, Ho (2003) found that in many countries in East Asia, the hours in primary schools are varied, from one two hours per week in South Korea to Korea to between four and six hours in Malaysia, Singapore and between three and five hours (five hours in specialized schools) in Uzbekistan.

Multi-level learners are also found challenging in terms of listening and speaking. Distinction is the reality that children in class have different needs, levels, ways of learning, interest rates to language learning and motivations. Nunan(2003) argues by the very nature of their job, teachers must be aware of children's basic physical and psychological needs. So that they can provide the best instruction possible, they need to adjust educational experiences to meet the developmental stage of the individual child.

Another possible problem relates to the curriculum material for listening and speaking in state education in particular, which may not always be appropriate. In the global survey reported by Copland et al. (2014), it was reported that in some countries such as South Korea and Malaysia, one textbook is prescribed for each grade, and it is used by all teachers. In other countries, a range of government approved textbooks for teachers are available to choose from those. With a view to examining the listening input children receive in Uzbekistan, there are some

locally published English textbooks ( Kid's English, Fly High. etc.) used in state primary schools. The findings show that some textbooks lacked a listening component; even though there are some listening activities teachers skip them for different reasons (no audio resources pack of the textbook, no technical equipment, and some other minor reasons). Which suggests that the centrality of listening to developing young learner English is not well understood in Uzbekistan at least. Where textbooks are inadequate or inappropriate, teachers could be trained to create their own materials. They could also have a number of useful items such as CDs with songs and stories, flashcards, puppets and a collection of realia to allow them to improve listening activities. In such cases, the teacher can record his or her voice as the audio source, and use it. However, the observations have shown that teachers in Uzbekistan often lack the time and expertise to develop appropriate materials.

To conclude, the picture that emerges concerning the current issues in listening and speaking to young learners can be summarized under two headings: teacher-related issues and curriculum related issues. Teacher related issues focus on teachers' low proficiency level in English or their lack confidence in their English ability; the challenges they face around teaching speaking and differentiating for learning. Curriculum related issues focus on insufficient time allocated to listening and speaking in school curricula and problems related to teaching materials for listening and speaking, particularly in state education. There are a lot of big issues related to teaching young learners, improving listening and speaking skills of YL, but to my concern teachers should work on themselves hard in order to achieve proficiency level of teaching.

However, the question arises as to what level of proficiency and fluency teachers really need in order to teach in primary schools. It may be that the real issue is not the teachers' lack of proficiency, which may well be more than adequate for TEYL, but rather a lack of confidence predicated on the belief that native-like

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