

Transformations in the English Classroom

Veronica L. Diptoadi

Abstract: In the past few years English has been taught at the elementary school level. However, many schools in Surabaya have introduced English in their curriculum at the pre-school level. In this paper the writer describes a Semi-International School in Surabaya as a model, because English is given since the play group level where students are about 2-3 years old. Thus, the focus of this paper is on be the reasons why English is taught at such an early age, constructivism as the theoretical base of the school curriculum, the English program based on topic-centered learning and activity-based approach and the facilities needed to support the whole teaching-learning process at the school.

Keywords: English for young learners, constructivism, topic-centered learning, activity-based approach, learning facilities.

There has been a growth of interests in the teaching of English to young learners in Indonesia in the last few years. This was due partly to the government policy that English can be offered starting from the fourth grade of elementary schools as part of the local curriculum. Besides that, the globalization era as well as the advance of technology strengthen the position of English as the language for international communication. As a consequence, people begin to realize that English should be taught as early as possible to give the learners ample time to develop a good mastery of the foreign language in addition to their own.

Veronica L. Diptoadi is a lecturer at the Widya Mandala Catholic University, Surabaya.

The key elements in the concept of primary English Language Teaching (ELT) vary from culture to culture; nevertheless, there are some characteristics that young learners share (Halliwell, 1994:3-5): (1) as young learners are just beginning their schooling, teachers have a great chance to shape their points of view of life in school; (2) they are usually eager and enthusiastic learners; (3) their learning can be closely linked with their development of ideas and concepts as they often learn indirectly; (4) they need physical movement and activity as much as stimulation for their thinking, and if the two can be combined, the better; (5) they get pleasure in finding and creating fun from the activities they do; (6) they have a vivid imagination.

In Indonesia there has been a debate going on about what the best age is for children to start learning a foreign language, in this case English. Formerly, English was taught when students started their junior high school at the age of 13. However, the government has recently decided that English can be taught starting from grade 4 of elementary school. Some schools in big cities even start offering English from a much younger age, such as from the age of 4 or 5 (Kindergarten).

In this paper, the writer is going to give an example of a semi international school located in Surabaya. The school starts its English program from the playgroup level, where the students are about two or three years old. There are a number of reasons why English is taught so early at the school. First, if children are exposed to foreign cultures from an early age they can build up feelings of being tolerant and sympathetic to others. Second, the school considers that to maximize learning time for important languages, the earlier the children start, the more time they have to develop a good mastery in them.

Furthermore, it is believed that children learn languages better than adults and many different explanations for this have been offered. Some of the main explanations are, that the brain is more adaptable before puberty than after, that children have fewer negative attitudes to foreign languages and cultures than adults, and that children's dependence on their immediate physical environment causes their language learning to be more closely integrated with real communication.

From the discussion above it is clear that from the students' side there are quite strong reasons for them to start learning another new language at an early age. Therefore, the school has set up a special English

program from the preschool level (2-5 years of age) to high school one. This program is based on the theory underlying the curriculum of the school, i.e. the *constructivistic theory*. As the focus of this paper is on young learners the *activity-based approach* combined with *topic-based learning* will be discussed here, as applied at the pre-school and elementary levels.

CONSTRUCTIVISM IN CHILD EDUCATION

Due to the rapid technological changes sweeping through the society, children have been raised in a world of instant access to knowledge, an environment where they control information flow and access, through a video game controller, remote control, mouse, or touch-tone phone. Thus, the question now is 'How do we educate the "new child", raised in such a world?' It is not just a matter of thinking up clever ways to use computers in traditional classrooms, but more important is the need for a guiding philosophy that suggests principled changes in the curriculum, and effective uses of technology as part of these changes (Strommen, 1992:2).

According to constructivist ideas, children actively construct their knowledge. They do not just absorb ideas spoken by the teacher or internalize them through repeated rote practice, but they actually invent their ideas. They assimilate new information to simple, pre-existing ideas, and modify their understanding according to new data. In the process, their ideas grow in complexity and power, and with appropriate support children develop critical insight into how they think and what they know about the world. In this case, constructivism emphasizes the processes by which children create and develop their ideas through the creation of a curriculum that matches as well as challenges children's understanding, fostering further growth and development of the mind (Strommen, 1992:2).

There are two specific features of constructivism which are related to child development, they are play and experimentation as valuable forms of learning (cf. Daiute, 1989). Play is a form of mental exploration in which children create, reflect on, and work out their understanding, while experimentation is the manipulation and testing of ideas in reality, providing children with direct, concrete feedback about the accuracy of their ideas. Both play and experimentation (exploration) are self-structured and self-motivated processes of learning and encourage children to reflect on their ideas in ways not generally found in current school curricula.

Besides, the fact that play and experimentation are powerful forces in the development of the individual mind, constructivism has provided the additional discovery that a lot of benefits are created when children work together, such as in collaborative or cooperative learning (Rysavy & Sales in Strommen, 1992). In cooperative learning children are able to reflect and elaborate not only on their own ideas but also on those of their peers. Children will regard their peers not as competitors but as resources. Furthermore, cooperative learning develops a sense of shared progress and shared goals, and a feeling of teamwork, which in turn produces significant advances in learning.

The focus of constructivism, then, is the child as a self-governed creator of knowledge. Thus, educational practices that follow should facilitate children's learning by nurturing their own active cognitive abilities. To achieve this objective, the school should provide a supportive environment, in which children can create their own ideas, both individually and cooperatively. For this special environment, Strommen (1992) uses the term 'child-driven learning environment' (CDLE). The two key features of CDLE are the changed relationship between teacher and student and the provision of a resource-rich, activity-based curriculum for learning.

In CDLE the teacher plays the role as a guide by helping the children to organize the knowledge they receive and assisting them as they take the initiative in their own self-directed explorations, instead of directing their learning. Sometimes the teacher has to become a giver of knowledge as in the old model, because at that time the children need guidance in a particular task or content area. Frequently, the teacher has to move around the classroom, among groups of children, helping individual children or the group as a whole.

To sum up of how a constructivist classroom would look like, the following factors should be considered in the learning process in class (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

First, respecting students' ideas and encouraging independent thinking encourages student autonomy and initiative. Second, the teacher asks open-ended questions and allows wait time for responses, so the students have time to structure their answers based on others' ideas and comments. Third, higher-level thinking is encouraged by the teacher who helps the students to connect and summarize concepts by analyzing, predicting, justifying, and defending their ideas. Fourth, students are engaged in

dialogue with the teacher and with each other, because this social discourse helps students change or reinforce their ideas, so meaningful classroom dialogue can occur. Fifth, the teacher provides opportunities for students to be engaged in experiences that challenge their minds and encourage them to find solutions. Sixth, the class uses raw data, primary resources, manipulative, physical, and interactive materials to guide the students to be involved in real-world possibilities that help them to prove the hypotheses made.

For the provision of a resource-rich learning environment, how English is taught at the pre-school and elementary levels by using an activity-based approach combined with topic-centered learning activities will be elaborated below.

THE TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS OF THE SCHOOL

Before going on to the English program in details, the writer would like to give an overview of the main features of the educational system at the school, which is based on the constructivistic theory: (1) the curriculum and the methodology are child-centered where the child's needs and interest are given full attention, thus, the education of the whole child: his/her moral, physical, emotional and intellectual growths are taken into consideration, (2) the learning is individualized, where children are free to work at their own pace, (3) the teaching methodology emphasizes "learning by doing" and problem solving, involving frequent use of working in small groups.

In line with this system, the English program is designed according to the activity-based approach integrated with topic-centered learning (Brumfit et al., 1991:18-19)

Topic-Centered Learning

This type of learning can be clearly seen at the preschool and beginning elementary levels, where English is taught integratedly with the other subjects, such as math, social sciences and natural sciences. The students are given a topic, for example 'body parts', which they have to explore with the teacher's guidance. In their exploration they are involved in various kinds of activities which may be scientific, creative and investigative. In other words, they learn English integratedly with other subjects.

This kind of learning has some benefits (Brumfit et al., 1991:18). First, it is the question of context, which helps the students appreciate where their learning fits into their experience. A word given in isolation is rarely meaningful, as a sentence without a context is hard to understand. The second important thing is meaning. If the topic chosen are relevant to the students' interests or experiences, they will be interested to explore those topics in greater depth. Thus, it can be concluded that topic-centered learning provides a clear context to make learning more meaningful and create a conducive situation for learning and using language in the classroom.

Activity-Based Approach

In this approach, a clearly defined teaching framework is needed. The students are guided along a learning pathway, which starts with input, and active understanding, continues with practical tasks and ends in speaking (and writing). This particular framework consists of three learning phases (Vale & Feunteun, 1995: 30-31). (1) A preparation phase, which contains a series of physical response activities with the key language, needed for the main activity. In this phase, students are exposed to key language and respond to it physically, but they do not have to produce it. For example, if the topic is about parts of the body; teachers present the topic through activities such as 'touch your nose, raise your left arm', etc. Students do the actions, but they do not have to utter the sentences. In this way, the students' confidence is aroused and they will be motivated to go to the main activity stage. (2) A main activity phase in which the students perform all kinds of tasks relevant to the topic. In carrying out those tasks they can do them individually or, in groups, which supports their social development. The children practice certain language structures by following a series of instructions, comments from the teacher in English. For example, related to the instructions they have learnt in the previous stage, the teacher can ask them to cut, draw or glue different parts of the body to make the whole body as well as to learn to distinguish hand from fingers, foot from toes, etc. (3) In the last phase, which is the follow-up and consolidation phase, the teacher encourages the children to speak (and write) based on specific language points, such as numbers and colors. For example, children will be able to answer short questions such as, 'What color are your eyes?', 'How many fingers do you have?'

To support the Topic-Centered and Activity Based Approach, the teacher decorates the classroom according to the topic. If the topic is 'Body Parts' then pictures showing various body parts are put on the wall along with sample of songs and puzzles to be filled in. The students use toys such as dolls and puppets individually as well as in groups to learn about body parts. Besides that each corner of the classroom can be transformed into a learning center for the students. For example, in the Listening corner, a tape recorder with several headphones is provided for the students to listen to stories or songs related to the topic. The Reading corner will have some storybooks, where the students can read anything about parts of the body. At the Writing and Speaking corner students who have finished the teacher's task can be given additional activities such as writing a short paragraph or making a dialogue about the topic. In this case, the Listening and Reading corners is used more for individual work, while the Writing and Speaking corners are more for group work. Special spaces on the walls are provided for the students to put their work, even the ceiling can be used to hang the students' work.

By transforming the classroom into a self-sufficient learning center, the teacher can help the students explore the topic in an enjoyable way to achieve a well-rounded mastery of all the four skills. In addition, the students will have ample opportunities to express themselves either individually as well as in groups and learn to appreciate their own work and their friends.

These two approaches of language learning are in line with the Constructivistic Theory mentioned before. In a constructivistic classroom, as groups share their tasks and end results, students themselves can provide feedback for each other. Besides, in some closed activities, higher level students can assess their own achievements by matching their results with the predicted outcomes, while the teacher keeps an overview of students' competence and progress. In this case, the teacher should base his/her evaluation not only on testing, whether orally or written, but also on classroom observations. By listening to and observing students' interchanges, the teacher can measure levels of confidence, fluency, motivation and attitudes to problem solving.

The teacher should also keep a record book to note down which students are successful or have difficulty in each activity. Such records

To support the Topic-Centered and Activity Based Approach, the teacher decorates the classroom according to the topic. If the topic is 'Body Parts' then pictures showing various body parts are put on the wall along with sample of songs and puzzles to be filled in. The students use toys such as dolls and puppets individually as well as in groups to learn about body parts. Besides that each corner of the classroom can be transformed into a learning center for the students. For example, in the Listening corner, a tape recorder with several headphones is provided for the students to listen to stories or songs related to the topic. The Reading corner will have some storybooks, where the students can read anything about parts of the body. At the Writing and Speaking corner students who have finished the teacher's task can be given additional activities such as writing a short paragraph or making a dialogue about the topic. In this case, the Listening and Reading corners is used more for individual work, while the Writing and Speaking corners are more for group work. Special spaces on the walls are provided for the students to put their work, even the ceiling can be used to hang the students' work.

By transforming the classroom into a self-sufficient learning center, the teacher can help the students explore the topic in an enjoyable way to achieve a well-rounded mastery of all the four skills. In addition, the students will have ample opportunities to express themselves either individually as well as in groups and learn to appreciate their own work and their friends.

These two approaches of language learning are in line with the Constructivistic Theory mentioned before. In a constructivistic classroom, as groups share their tasks and end results, students themselves can provide feedback for each other. Besides, in some closed activities, higher level students can assess their own achievements by matching their results with the predicted outcomes, while the teacher keeps an overview of students' competence and progress. In this case, the teacher should base his/her evaluation not only on testing, whether orally or written, but also on classroom observations. By listening to and observing students' interchanges, the teacher can measure levels of confidence, fluency, motivation and attitudes to problem solving.

The teacher should also keep a record book to note down which students are successful or have difficulty in each activity. Such records

are very useful for report writing and as a basis for setting up enrichment and remedial programs as well as discussions with parents.

In line with the constructivistic theory, the teacher inside as well as outside the classroom plans a lot of learning activities. In language learning especially, starting from Grade 1, students are given reading projects where they are motivated to choose their own books in the library to read. The teacher helps them in comprehending the content, pronouncing the difficult words, before they retell the story in front of their friends.

To activate the students, the teacher uses experiential learning where they can apply the concepts they have learnt in class through real life experiences, such as making reports in English about a visit to the zoo or museum and conducting simple experiments in the science lab. At times, students conduct interviews with people found in their environment at school or at home and they write reports about them. Furthermore, problem solving and discovery methods are also introduced in the classroom, making the students active in finding the answers through various learning resources available inside and outside the school.

CONCLUSION

In order to ensure maximum results in the learning of English using the activity-based approach, the school has provided several facilities, such as: (1) spacious classrooms for maximally 24 students at the elementary level and 20 at the preschool level; (2) tables and chairs which can be easily arranged for individual, pair and group work; (3) two teachers working together as a team, monitoring the students as an individual and providing enrichment programs for the good students as well as remedials for the weak ones; (4) a library, audio-visual media, computer and science labs where individual students are encouraged to follow various programs set up by the teacher and conducted in English; (5) a special Growth-Center which monitors the students' physical and emotional growths, as they should be healthy and well-adapted social individuals to achieve optimal results in whatever they are learning, including language.

As a conclusion it can be said that students should be the center in the process of teaching and learning. It is the task of the school and the parents to set up a conducive situation where the students can develop themselves optimally in an enjoyable way. After all, a good mastery of a language will help the child to become a whole person who can express

his/her ideas and accept other people's thoughts, so he/she can live a peaceful life with his/her fellow human beings.

REFERENCES

- Borich. 1988. *Effective Teaching Methods*. Columbus: Merrill Publishing Company.
- Brooks, J.G. & Brooks, M.G. 1993. *In Search of Understanding: The Case for Constructivist Classrooms*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Brumfit, C, Moon, J. & Tongue, R. (Eds.). 1991. *Teaching English to Children*. London: Nelson English Language Teaching.
- Daiute, C. 1989. *Play as Thought; Thinking Strategies of Young Writers*. Harvard Educational Review, 59 (1): 1-23.
- Diptoadi, V.L. 1997. "Passive" Teacher vs. Active Learners: A Dilemma? A Paper presented at the 1997 RELC Seminar, Singapore.
- Halliwell, S. 1994. *Teaching English in the Primary Classroom*. New York: Longman Group UK Limited.
- Rysavy, S.D.M. & Sales, G.C. 1991. Cooperative Learning in Computer-Based Instruction. In E.F. Strommen. 1992. *Constructivism, Technology, and the Future of Classroom Learning*. New York: Center for Technology in Education, Bank Street College of Education.
- Strommen, E.F. 1992. *Constructivism, Technology, and the Future of Classroom Learning*. New York: Center for Technology in Education, Bank Street College of Education.
- Vale, D. & Feunteun, A. 1995. *Teaching Children English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.