

**BOOSTING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS'
LISTENING SKILL THROUGH SPECIALLY
CREATED SONGS**

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Abstract

Listening skill is one of the language skills which has to be mastered by language learners. It is the first and foremost skill which becomes the foundation for further skills. For those young language learners who are in the phase of development of the so-called concrete operation, and have short span of concentration, language learning will be more effective if it is designed and wrapped up in the form of learning while playing. Song is one of the teaching techniques to assist them to optimize learning. Songs do not only make them happy to learn, increase concentration, enhance security and comfortable feeling, raise interests, but more importantly various vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and language expressions can be contextualized as to support language acquisition. This article aims at sharing theoretical insight and pedagogical practices on the use of special composed songs to accomplish listening instruction for fourth graders of elementary school.

Key words: *songs, listening skill*

1. Introduction

English instruction in the Indonesian educational system has been given much attention since 1960s. It is obviously stated in

the government document concerning with the standard of contents that the purposes of English subject in the school curriculum are of three folded, namely (1) to develop students' communicative competence either in oral or written forms, (2) to make students aware of the nature and significance of English to increase high competitiveness in global society, and (3) to develop students' understanding of the interconnection of language and culture (BSNP, 2006). Furthermore, Abdul-Hamied reports that based on the government regulation no. 2 year 1989 concerning with the national education system, it is mentioned that improvement of quality and life status of Indonesian people is indicated by the ability to interact with other nations effectively and efficiently through English (Abdul-Hamied, 2003:13).

Regarding the policy of English instruction to young learners, the Department of National Education has recently recommended the teaching of English in elementary schools. Considering the fact that Bali is well-known as one of the international tourist destinations in Indonesia, the local authority found it necessary to introduce English in the primary level. It is compulsorily given to grade four up to grade six. But, in some private schools, it is even started from grade one.

Listening is the first skill to occur in the process of language acquisition, it is also the most important to acquire since it gives a further foundation to other skills. In line with this, Morley

(2001:70) states that listening skill is the first skill in language acquisition, which learners acquire long before they are able to produce the language (speaking). Therefore, comprehension of language items both vocabulary and grammar must be contextually introduced. Dealing with this, she states that listening comprehension, which focuses on teaching listening in every phase of learning is something very crucial in second language acquisition. While Denes and Pinson (1963:1 as quoted by Morley, 2001:70) argue that listening comprehension gives a foundation of oral language development in a speech chain of listening and speaking.

In order that the goal of learning is to be achieved, the use of appropriate techniques of teaching and learning should be optimized. The techniques must be suitable with the characteristics of young language learners who have not yet possessed sufficient knowledge of the language. In accordance with the study previously conducted by Ratminingsih (2010), special composed songs were applied for the benefit of providing material which matched with the curriculum guidelines. Brewster et al. (2007: 162) convey that song is an ideal way to learn a language. Malley (in Murphey, 1993: 3-6) describes two main values of music and song, they are easy to memorize and are highly motivating. Murphey further explains that songs are kept long in memory, and can be part of us. As well, they are easy to be used of in the classroom. It can thus be summarized that both songs are techniques of

teaching which give a lot of benefits with the essence of creating a fun learning atmosphere. Songs can facilitate improvement in young learners' listening skill.

2. The nature of listening

Language skill is commonly categorized into two: productive skill and receptive skill. The productive skill refers to speaking and writing, while receptive skill concerns with listening and reading. Anderson and Krathwohl (2001:274) generally define skill as follows:

Abilities and skills refer to organized modes of operation and generalized techniques for dealing with materials and problems. ...The abilities and skill objectives emphasize the mental processes of organizing and reorganizing material to achieve a particular purpose...

More particularly, New Zealand Ministry of Education (2010: 1) defines language skill as an ability to use language knowledge and understanding to perform a language-based or language-related task, such as filling in a form (writing skill) or getting the gist of a news broadcast (listening skill). From both definitions, it can be summarized that language skill is an ability to use a certain way and technique, particularly language knowledge and understanding to perform a language task.

Helgesen (2003:24) describes listening as an active process which aims at creating meaning from what is heard. Listening

requires learners to receive and understand input. Morley (2001:70) pinpoints that the centrality of language instruction is given to the teaching listening. Programs in listening comprehension in every phase of language instruction are considered very important in second language acquisition. Denes and Pinson (1963 in Morley 2001:70) state that listening comprehension forms a foundation for oral language development in a speech chain of listening and speaking. According to the main average, human beings listen twice more than speak, four times more than read, and five times more than write (as quoted by Morley, 2001:70). Buck (2001:31) further explains that listening comprehension is an active process of constructing meaning, and that this is done by applying knowledge to the incoming sound. The knowledge applied is of two types, namely linguistics knowledge and non linguistics knowledge. The linguistics knowledge includes phonology, vocabulary, syntax, semantics, and discourse structure. Meanwhile, non linguistics knowledge involves knowledge on topics, contexts, and general knowledge about the world. Hadley (2001:179) adds that listening comprehension is a complex process which needs linguistics knowledge, cognitive processing skill, scheme-based comprehension, and contextual clues whether within the text or beyond. Listening skill is a problem solving activity which involves hypothesis formation, inference, and ambiguity resolution and input uncertainty to form meaning. Meanwhile, Richards (2008:3-15)

views listening in two perspectives, namely: (1) listening as comprehension, and (2) listening as acquisition. Listening as comprehension is a traditional way of thinking the nature of listening. In this way, listening and listening comprehension are two synonymous terms. This view is based on the assumption that the main function of listening in second language is to facilitate comprehension of oral discourse. While listening as acquisition views listening as a part of language development. Language development occurs if learners develop ability in features of language input, then internalize those new language items in their language repertoire by making used of the language items in producing oral language.

It can then be concluded that listening skill is one language skill which has a central place in second language acquisition. There are two perspectives of listening, namely listening as comprehension and listening as acquisition. In listening as comprehension, learners should be able to comprehend the text they hear. In order to do so, they have to possess two kinds of knowledge, linguistics and non linguistics, while in listening as acquisition, the learners do not only have to comprehend the text they hear, but also have to be able to use them.

3. The role of listening skill to elementary school students

Many experts in education view that listening skill is necessary to be given emphasis from early stage of learning because

good listening competence will give a positive impact to the second language development. In relation to this, Rost (as quoted by Nunan, 2004: 238-239) points out that listening is a very vital skill in language class because through listening learners receive various inputs. Being unable to understand inputs in the appropriate level, learning will never occur. Therefore, listening is a fundamental skill. Rivers (in Morley, 2001:70) further states:

Speaking does not of itself constitute communication unless what is said is comprehended by another person... Teaching the comprehension of the spoken speech is, therefore, of primary importance if the communication aim is to be reached.

Scott and Ytreberg (2000:21) add that listening is the skill that is firstly mastered by children, especially when they have not yet learned to read. When the learners start to learn a foreign language, the language is exposed through their ears and what they hear is the main source of the language. Thus, it can be said that listening is a very essential skill to be mastered by children, since listening is the main source of language learning. Paul (2003:71) further emphasizes that children should be given as many listening exercises as possible in line with their level. The suitable level for them is the level which is easy or slightly above their ability so that they can understand the incoming input. If the level is too difficult, they may lose their confidence and enthusiasm to learn.

From all the aforementioned views, a conclusion can be drawn that listening skill has a very important role in the second language development. Through listening, learners not only learn various language aspects, such as sound system, words, sentences (syntax), and pronunciation, but also gain a foundation to develop further language skills, like speaking or oral communication. Therefore, students must be given as optimum exercises as possible.

4. Aspects of listening skill

Bachman and Palmer (as quoted by McKay, 2007:52) explain that one of the areas of language knowledge which should be mastered by learners is *grammatical knowledge*, which consists of vocabulary, syntax, and phonology/graphology. In line with them, Morley (2001:70) states that in listening skill, learners can learn elements of grammatical structures and new vocabulary items which are contextualized in communicative discourse. Cross (1991: 244) also emphasizes that in listening activity, learners can gain vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation. In more detail, Valette (1977:74-110) asserts that listening skill needs mastery in three aspects, that is discriminating sounds, comprehension of specific elements, and comprehension as a whole. This mastery can be achieved if the teaching of listening focuses on sound system, comprehension of vocabulary, comprehension of grammar, and

comprehension for communication. Hence, these four aspects should be given much attention in order to build students' listening skill. On the psychological perspective, Elliot et al. (2000:59-61) and Hetherington et al. (2006: 271-272) clarify that in a child language development, the main components of language which need to be developed are phonology (sounds), syntax (grammar), semantics (meaning), and pragmatics (usage). Thus, it can be concluded that there are four main language aspects which have to be considered in developing child listening skill, namely comprehension of sounds (phonology), comprehension of grammar (syntax), comprehension of vocabulary (morphology and semantics), and comprehension for communication (pragmatics).

5. The nature of elementary school students

Harmer (2007a:14) classifies three groups of learner ages, namely children, adolescents, and adults. Children are group of learners between 2 to 14 years, adolescents are group of learners between 12 to 17 years, and adults are group of learners from 16 above. He further mentions that the children group is divided into two, young learners are those between 5 to 9 years, and very young learners are those between 2 to 5 years. According to Harmer (2007a:14), the characteristics of children are (1) when they learn they do not only focus on what is being taught, but also on other things simultaneously, such as taking information from the sur-

roundings. Seeing, listening and touching are as important as teacher's explanation in comprehension process. Abstraction of grammatical rules is less effective for children. Children usually respond well on activities which focus on their lives and experience. However, children' attention that is their commitment to consistently pay attention to the activity is very short. Another important characteristic of children is their ability to become competent speakers of the new language if they are provided with adequate facilities, and if they get enough exposures. Harmer (2007b:81), in his book entitled *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, points out that age is one important factor which has to be considered in making decision of what is taught and how it is taught. People of different ages have different need, competence, and cognitive skill. Children may acquire the foreign language better through playing, while adults may acquire it better through abstract thinking.

Scott and Ytreberg (2000:1-4) give further details that children are those between 5 to 10 or 11 years. They divide children into two main groups, namely (1) group 5 to 7 years, and (2) group 8 to 10 years. The characteristics of five to seven year olds are (1) they can talk about what they are doing, (2) they can tell you about what they have done or heard, (3) they can plan activities, (4) they can argue for something and tell you why they think what they think, (5) they can use logical reasoning, (6) they can use their vivid imaginations, (7) they can use a wide range of into-

nation patterns in their mother tongue, and (8) they can understand direct human interaction. On the other hand, the general characteristics of eight to ten year olds are (1) their basic concepts are formed, (2) they can tell the difference between facts and fictions, (3) they ask questions all the time, (4) they rely on the spoken word as well as the physical world to convey and understand meaning, (5) they are able to make some decisions about their own learning, (6) they have definite views about what they like and do not like doing, (7) they have a developed sense of fairness about what happens in the classroom and begin to question the teacher's decisions, and (8) they are able to work with others and learn from others.

Thus, fourth graders are classified as children or young learners between 9-10 years, whom Scott and Ytreberg define as group 2, who have general characteristics as they understand basic concepts, are able to differentiate facts from fictions, are full of curiosity, understand the physical world and oral words are used to understand or convey meaning, are able to take decision, have a clear view about like and dislike, understand fairness, and able to collaborate with others.

Moon (2000:1) conveys that children who learn English as a second language at school have already learned one language, and when entering a class, they will bring their experience of the previous language, that may help them in learning and learning

English. Therefore, teachers must be able to make use of and build this ability and characteristics. Moon (2000:14) further clarifies that in a foreign language learning situation, children are very much dependent to school environment as inputs. Thus, teachers are usually the only important source for children learning. She further argues that children do not learn using one way, but various ways. They are only able to use those ways if teachers develop an appropriate learning environment, that is the learning environment which gives sufficient exposure, is meaningful, give them freedom to take risks and investigate, make them use the language to communicate with teachers and friends, and receive feedback from learning process. In line with the above points, it can be concluded that the teacher is the main source of learning for students in the classroom, so he/she should be able to build a good environment for an optimum result of learning.

6. Technique of teaching using songs

Song is defined as short voice, usually simple, either accompanied or not by musical instrument (Britannica Concise Encyclopedia, 2010:1). Flattum (2004:1) further notes that a song is a combination of melody and lyrics, which are enlightened by addition of harmony and rhythm or beat. It has structure, usually repeats of verses and choruses. Hence, it can be said that a song is a combination of melody and lyrics or a composition of words and

music, which has structures in the form of repeats of verses and choruses, is either accompanied or not by musical instrument.

Songs are believed to have enormous benefits in language teaching. Malley (in Murphey, 1993:3-6) proposes two main advantages of music and songs in language teaching and learning, namely: songs are easy to memorize, and very motivating to learners. Murphey (1993:7-8) adds that songs work on short and long term memory. They enjoy hearing, activate the repetition mechanism of language acquisition device, and relaxing.

In accordance to Murphey, Paul (2003:58) states:

Songs add a whole dimension to children's classes, and make it easier for the children to remember words and patterns and natural chunks of language. Songs can add feeling and rhythm to language practice that might otherwise be flat, help children remember things more easily, and draw children more deeply into a lesson.

In more details, Brewster et al. (2007:162-163) clarify the values of song in terms of four major resources, namely (1) linguistics resource, (2) psychological/affective resource, (3) cognitive resource, and (4) social resource. Linguistically, songs are to introduce new language and structure and vocabulary are empowered and repeated. Songs can develop all language skills and pronunciation. Psychologically/affectively, they can motivate and give fun and minimize anxiety. Cognitively, they can improve concen-

tration, memory and coordination and train sensitivity toward rhyming clues which help meaningful comprehension, and socially, they can improve cooperation and sharing among learners. From all the above definitions, it can be synthesized that songs have four main values, namely linguistics value, psychological/affective value, cognitive value, and social value.

Brewster et al. (2007:165) further point out different types of songs, rhymes and chants which contain various language features can be used for different purposes. Mol (2010:1) mentions that there are many types of songs which can be used in the classroom, such as nursery rhymes, contemporary songs, and songs specifically written for English language teaching.

Cross (1991:165-166) discusses several ways which can be used to teach song and rhymes, namely (1) Ostensive Way: the teacher illustrates story through picture and mimic, (2) Translation: the teacher translates the text into learners' language, when the song contains complex linguistic aspect, (3) Cloze Text: the teacher writes the text on the board, poster or work sheet, but the clues or phrases are deleted, and learners can work in pairs to identify the missing words while listening to the song, (4) Focus Question: the teacher gives questions on the board or work sheet to guide the class while listening, (5) True-false Statement: the teacher produces the whole text before it is listened by using true/false statement, (6) Private Study, which is used for a longer

song. After quick reading, the learners are asked whether they need additional explanation. It is done either in the target language or their first language. Then, the song is played and studied, (7) Jigsaw Listening: the teacher prepares jigsaw version of the text before being listened. Words are jumbled and learners are instructed to arrange them, (8) Disappearing Texts: the teacher attaches the whole text on the board and learners read it while listening. Then, they perform the song. Next, one or two words are erased and the song is sung again. On and on more and more words are erased and the song is kept sung, (8) Dictation: the teacher dictates the text and corrects it before hearing the song, (9) Mixed Mode of Presentation: a combination of two or more techniques, and (10) Demonstration Procedures: a demonstration of step by step with an introduction of prosody, in all verses all rhythmic patterns are the most important linguistic features in all poetic forms, all stressed syllables are given attention.

Thus, it can be concluded that there are several forms of songs, namely nursery rhymes, contemporary songs, and special songs written for English language teaching. They can be taught in many different ways. Among others are ostensive way, translation, cloze text, true-false statement, jigsaw, focus-question, disappearing text and even mixed presentation.

7. Standard competency and basic competency for listening skill for fourth graders of elementary level

The standard competency to be achieved is the ability to communicate orally and in written form comprising listening, speaking, reading, and writing which is used to conduct a simple classroom interaction through determined themes, such as introduction, family, school environment, taking into account the concepts of *greeting, objects, number, alphabet, action*.

The basic competencies to be achieved for elementary school students especially those of the fourth graders in semester one are listening for someone's identity, listening to commands, request, and prohibition, listening and responding to instructions, and listening to family relationship.

Regarding the standard competency and basic competency required, the songs applied in teaching should be in line with the competencies under concern. Below are the examples of specially created songs and the students' worksheet.

Theme: Introduction (Greeting)

SONG 1: (using the tune of "Are You Sleeping")

Hello, Miss Tina. Hello, Miss Tina.

How are you? How are you?

I am fine, thank you. I am fine, thank you.

How about you? How about you?

Additional verses:

Good morning, Miss Tina

Good afternoon, Miss Tina

Good evening, Miss Tina

I am well,

I am OK,

Student's Worksheet

SONG 1:

Please fill out the blank space with the appropriate words from the song (Lengkapilah bagian yang kosong dengan kata-kata yang tepat dari lagu):

....., Miss Tina....., Miss Tina.

..... are you? How

I am fine, thank you.

.....? How about you?

The above song is composed to teach the theme “*introduction (greeting)*”. In that song, the composer tries to introduce vocabulary, grammar points, and language expressions used in greetings. Pronunciation is also emphasized through out the teaching using the song. After several times of playing the recording of the song, the students are given follow-up activity in the form of filling out the blank space in their worksheet. This activity is designed to assess their listening comprehension. The other follow-up activity which can alternatively be conducted is to ask the students to perform a simple dialogue after their

comprehension. In this case, the teacher integrates the teaching of listening and speaking.

In the following example, the theme under concern is “*things in the classroom*”. In this song, the composer tries to introduce various vocabulary of things the students find in the classroom. Pronunciation is also emphasized. In the follow-up activity, students are assigned to write down as many vocabulary as possible while listening to the song. So, the purpose of this activity is to integrate listening and writing.

Theme: Things in the Classroom

SONG 2: (using the tune of “*London Bridge is Falling Down*”)

Pencil, eraser, book and pen,
Book and pen, book and pen,
Pencil, eraser, book and pen,
Those are my things.

Table, duster, desk, and chair,
Desk and chair, desk and chair,
Table, duster, desk, and chair,
Those are my things.

Cupboard, ruler, bag and blackboard,
Bag and blackboard, bag and blackboard,
Cupboard, ruler, bag and blackboard,
Those are my things.

Student's Worksheet**SONG 2:**

Write down the things mentioned in the song:

1	7
2	8
3	9
4	10
5	11
6	12

8. Conclusion

Songs are effective techniques to teach young language learners. They can coordinate between playing and learning as to increase their interests to learn. Through songs, various vocabulary, grammar points, and language expressions are contextualized to assist them acquire the language.

9. Recommendation

In regard to the benefits of using songs in teaching the language, it is strongly recommended to English teachers in the elementary school to utilize songs to teach listening skill. The teachers can maximize the use of songs by integrating other skills, such as reading, speaking, and writing.

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