

MELTA 2013 Workshop Paper:

The Non-Reading & Non-Writing Road to Speaking and Listening Success

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Introduction

Background

The relatively new Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR) syllabus for Malaysian primary schools (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2010) specifies that Listening and Speaking be the focus skill of lessons for one day in four for Years 1 to 3, and one day in five for years 4 to 6. Combined with the introduction of Language Arts which is by nature largely oral and aural by nature, this effectively gives Listening and Speaking more hours of focused attention than each of the traditionally emphasized Reading, Writing and Grammar. This change dramatically changes the required nature of English language lessons in Malaysian schools from reading and writing to listening and speaking. This reform of the Malaysian school curriculum is in line with modern pedagogy. Celce-Murcia sums this up well:

But with the advent of the theory of communicative competence (Hymes 1972) and the practice of communicative language teaching ... the teaching of oral communication skills as a contextualised sociocultural activity has become the focal point in many ESL classrooms.

(Celce-Murcia, 2001)

Observed Problems with Listening and Speaking Lessons

Observations were made during in 2011 and 2012 of practicum students from Institut Pendidikan Guru Kampus Dato' Razali Ismail in Kuala Terengganu, and practices of local primary school teachers were examined in relation to Listening and Speaking lessons. Information was gathered from IPG students, primary school teachers, IPG lecturers, and independent observers from non-government organizations. These observations were garnered from direct observation during lessons, "post-mortem" sessions after lessons, interviews with supervising lecturers, and communication with third party observers during lessons.

English language Listening and Speaking lessons in Malaysian primary schools were observed to be commonly fraught with several pitfalls which detract from effective learning and increase in English language proficiency of listening and speaking.

The first pitfall is that lessons often become reading and writing exercises, with little speaking or listening actually being practiced by students. Reading and writing are more easily observed and controlled by the teacher, and therefore more easily presented and assessed. Reading and writing also afford the teacher breathing space in which students are relatively quiet and sitting at their desks. Written results are easily displayed on the classroom wall, and placed into student portfolios. Reading and writing involve a different skillset than does listening and speaking. Learning the one does not greatly improve the other. The temptation is to use reading and writing that are useful to the teacher rather than listening and speaking which are conducive to learning.

The second problem arises when commercial listening texts are played to students who are expected to listen and learn. These texts are often inauthentic and outdated, incorporating outmoded and inappropriate language for students in today's Malaysian schools. Listening texts that are designed for European-cultured countries often have little validity in the Malaysian setting. Texts about making snowman, giving gifts at Christmas, dancing at parties, and Little material was found in school resource centres that proved culturally and linguistically suitable for Malaysian school students. Krashen underlines this view:

The best methods are those that supply "comprehensible input" in low-anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. (Krashen, 2003)

A third difficulty is the temptation to ask students to listen and repeat words and phrases from the teacher or from a recording. This is a most unnatural activity which has no counterpart in natural speech interactions. It was observed that choral speaking in class results in unnatural timing and intonation of speech patterns. It was observed that not only does the teacher often speak in an unnatural way to the class because of noise factors in the typical Malaysian classroom, but students speaking chorally usually reply to the teacher in the same way. Vowels are unnaturally lengthened, speech speed is slowed beyond a normally acceptable level, vocabulary is limited to a short range, and word-final consonants are all but elided. This elision of word-final consonants is a common Malay-context problem which goes undetected in a noisy environment.

A fourth deterrent to learning during Speaking and Listening lessons occurs when students are required to speak in front of others when they are unprepared with suitable guidelines, grammar and vocabulary. This can be an embarrassing situation for the student, the affect of which tends to prevent progress in speaking proficiency. Chitravelu, Saratha and Choon accurately report that

If the listener has very little or no knowledge of the contents of the text...then this would make it very difficult for him to understand the text and respond to it. (Chitravelu, Sithamparam, & Choon, 2005)

Many lecturers who were interviewed in this study recalled embarrassment at being asked to stand up and speak to their class individually and unprepared during their school years. In some cases among lecturers resentment at this imposition remains many years later.

Objective of this Workshop

This workshop presents a style of Listening and Speaking that incorporates authentic conversational speech patterns, and deliberately avoids any use of reading and writing. The lesson presented is immediately repeatable by any TESL teacher, and is infinitely adaptable to any age and any language ability. During this activity students are immersed in natural English language listening and speaking conversations with little or no need for special equipment. Participants are led through the process of equipping Malaysian school students with vocabulary, grammar and speaking skills to produce fluent English language in a non-threatening environment and without the use of reading or writing media.

The simple methodological principles used here form the cornerstone of advancing Listening and Speaking competencies for present and future Malaysian students. The communicative nature of these exercises address the problematic areas discussed earlier in this paper. When presented with attention to detail, students will be confident of success when they stand up to speak to the class in English because they are well prepared with appropriate vocabulary and grammar, they will be sufficiently motivated and engaged in the topic, and they will be assured of praise for effort.

Download This Workshop

This workshop file can be downloaded for free from

<http://communicative.weebly.com>

Conclusion

Although responses to the survey questions included here will vary to some degree, it is generally agreed that:

- a) Listening and Speaking are the most frequently used forms of communication
- b) Listening and Speaking are different skills, and even more different from reading and Writing
- c) We ought to use techniques and approaches that encourage learning rather than what is easy to assess, or is readily available
- d) Speaking and Listening are best learned without the distractions of the different skills of Reading and Writing.

Recommendations

An area not covered by this study and workshop is that of assessment of Listening and Speaking. This is a complex area that deserves its own study. It has been generally observed that Malaysian teachers have hitherto left Listening and Speaking unassessed. The few pieces of Listening and Speaking testing that were observed in schools heavily utilized skills of Reading and Writing. This, in the view of the researchers and authors, largely invalidates (Brown, 2004, p. 22) the testing.

Many Western education systems assess Listening and Speaking through checklists completed by teachers during informal observation of students' oral and aural responses during class time. These checklists are then placed in the students' portfolios for inclusion in reporting procedures. This system could be easily incorporated into Malaysian assessments of Listening and Speaking, given a portfolio style of reporting, and sufficient latitude for teachers with school-based assessment. This method presumes considerable English language proficiency by English language teachers.

A system of speaking assessment that embodies internationally recognized authenticity and validity is the IELTS speaking test (IELTS, 2013). A similar test is easily devised

using parameters taken from KSSR English language proficiency descriptors suitable to the year level of the students in question. This could be administered formally, during a one-on-one session as per the IELTS Speaking test, or informally during teacher observation of student discussions in class.

An under-utilized source of listening texts is that of student- and teacher- originated texts recorded in class and used in subsequent classes. The availability of recording and playback facilities in laptop computers lends itself to this form of listening text-gathering.

References

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Appendix1: Workshop Exercises

Workshop Exercise 1: Differences Between Writing, Reading, Speaking and Listening

What are the differences between Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing?

Tick the boxes to identify descriptors of Writing, Reading, Speaking and Listening.

(10 minutes)

	Writing	Reading	Speaking	Listening
Intake				
Output				
Uses hands				
Uses eyes				
Uses mouth				
Uses ears				
Print medium				
Sound medium				
Rapid response required				
Plenty of response time				

Assign a number between 0 and 10: 0 = disagree 10 = completely agree

	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
Easily assessed				
Easy to display students' work				
Used in everyday communication				

Workshop Exercise 2: Which are the most commonly used forms of communication?

Which do we use most of – Listening, Speaking, Reading or Writing?

Think about your daily routines. Do you listen, speak, read or write most frequently?

	Listen	Speak	Read	Write
%				

Workshop Exercise 3: Desirable Teaching Approaches and Techniques

Rank these reasons in order as good reasons to teach, using a given approach or technique. Place number 1 next to the most valid reason. Choose the second most valid reason and place number 2 next to it. Proceed down to number 10 as the least valid reason. Feel free to discuss this with other workshop participants. (10 minutes)

<i>Reason for using a certain approach or technique</i>	<i>Ranking 1-10</i>
I found this worksheet that looks interesting	
This approach will help my students learn better	
I am familiar with this approach	
I am a busy teacher and do not have the time to prepare more thoroughly	
This approach will keep students quiet, which helps with discipline	
This lesson will produce some great display items	
Using this activity will make it easy to assess student success	
This approach is fun for the students	
This approach is fun for the teacher	
This technique is recommended in the textbook.	

Workshop Exercise 4: A Simple Technique to Encourage Authentic Listening and Speaking Without Reading and Writing

Students: Year 3

Proficiency of students: lexicon of 200 English nouns and verbs and adjectives

Can form simple sentences

Focus Skill: Listening and Speaking

Objectives:

- That students use the possessive form of nouns – his her Dad's Omar's
- That students practice the use of names of a wide variety of colours
- That students engage in conversation in English.

Stages:

1. The teacher uses flash cards to drill the names of colours with the whole class. Smaller groups are chosen to respond eg just the boys/girls, just this group, just these three, just this one.
2. The teacher gives examples eg "My book is red", "My brother's shoes are brown"
3. Students volunteer sentences of their own. Eg "My pen is yellow", "Nazeri's shirt is white", "Faiza's ruler is brown".
4. A demonstration group of 5 students try this exercise with teacher's help:
Each student volunteers one sentence involving a possessive and a colour.
eg My sister's shoes are black.
The next student in the group repeat information from the previous student, changing the person form first person to third person Eg Nor Azia's sister's shoes are black. This student then volunteers their own information. Continue until all students have contributed.
5. Each group of 5 in the class repeats this process with their own information. Teacher helps as required.

Workshop participants play the part of Year 3 students as above.

Workshop Exercise 5: A More Advanced Example Exercise

This is an exercise using the same technique as Exercise 4 but allows for a more advanced English language proficiency.

Instead of possessives and colours, our special feature is going to be Past Continuous verb tense followed by “when” –

Eg “Last week I was walking on the beach when a wave splashed all over me and wet all of my clothes”

Eg “This morning my mother was washing the dishes when a rat ran over her foot.”

Praise for effort is used throughout, as is praise for correctness.

Small tokens of achievement are handed out as rewards to maintain positive attitude.

Stages

1. The teacher gives examples eg “Last week I was writing a letter an email to my friend in Perak when my computer blew up”, “Last night I was eating in a restaurant when a fire broke out in the restaurant kitchen”.
2. Students volunteer sentences of their own of conjoined sentence using “when”.
3. A demonstration group of 5 students try this exercise with the facilitator’s help:
The first participant presents a sentence of their own. The next student in the group repeat information from the previous student, changing the person form first person to third person Eg “Last night she was eating in a restaurant when a fire broke out in the restaurant kitchen”. This student then volunteers their own information. Continue until all students have contributed.
4. Each group of 5 in the class repeats this process with their own information. Facilitator helps as required.