

Chapter **Three**

Teaching speaking to young learners

At the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

Goals

- ✓ **define** speaking as it relates to children.
- ✓ **identify** expectations for children's oral language use and development.
- ✓ **explain** the advantages and disadvantages of the Audiolingual Method and Communicative Language Teaching for young learners.
- ✓ **describe** the role of pronunciation in a young learner's speaking program.
- ✓ **discuss** ways to correct young learners' errors.
- ✓ **describe** some of the challenges of using speaking activities with young learners.
- ✓ **demonstrate** familiarity with the techniques discussed in this chapter.

1. Introduction

This chapter begins with a description of speaking and the role of speaking in children's development of their first language. Background information on the teaching of speaking is provided. Next, an explanation of the development of speaking skills is provided including specific issues that you will encounter in the classroom. This is followed by a number of different techniques and activities which you can use with young learners. Suggestions for managing the noise level in the classroom are also presented.

2. What is speaking?

There are many different ways that children play with words and language beginning with the tickling rhymes that they hear as babies and continuing with other sorts of play which involve both the form and meaning of language (Cook, 2000). When children begin speaking, they experiment and play with the **utterances** that are made to form words and phrases such as *bye-bye*, or *go bye-bye*. As they grow, children integrate these words and structures into their real and imaginary play. Play is a vital and important aspect of a child's



The mother is helping her son expand his vocabulary.

development and language is a part of that play. It is important to consider the role of play in first language acquisition because it is a subtle reminder that play is also important in children's second language development. This reminder is useful when we plan **ESL** and **EFL** activities that foster children's English-language development.

It is also good to remember that children experiment with their native language when they are with their parents, other caregivers, siblings, and friends. This trying out of different words and phrases leads a native English-speaking child to acquire a 10,000-word vocabulary by the time he is four. In addition, very early on, children learn the power of their spoken words. They learn that, although they may be physically small and weak, their words can be used to provide joy. A child learns that a simple utterance such as *Mommy, I love you* can delight a parent.

On the other hand, young children may use words as a weapon against one another causing hurt feelings and bruised egos. In an attempt to deflect

some of the power of words that children hurl at one another, native English-speaking children are often taught the following rhyme:

*Sticks and stones
will break my bones,
but words will never hurt me.*

Children also learn that words can be used as a form of entertainment. Children talk while they play, either alone or with their classmates. During playtime at school or home, you might see children **role-playing**. They practice conversations between one another. In their play, they practice and adapt scripts that they have heard from adults either in person or on TV. Young children talk when they engage in make-believe activities. For example, a five-year-old girl might enjoy giving royal commands as she struts around the house with a plastic crown pretending that she is the finest princess in all the land. Young learners who are 10 and 11 years old do not engage in as much “pretending” as children who are slightly younger; however, they still enjoy dressing up for Halloween—a North American holiday where children dress in costumes and go door to door asking for candy. The children may try to talk the way a princess or a firefighter talks depending upon the costume being worn. Ten- and 11-year-olds are more likely to become interested in a different type of make-believe, such as science fiction.

Reflection



What do young children in your country like to pretend to be? For example, kings, queens, police officers, teachers. When you were a child, what did you like to pretend to be? What were some of the things that you might have said when you were playing? What would you have said when you were five? What would you have said when you were 10?

Share your answers with a classmate or colleague.

3. Background to the teaching of speaking

In Chapter 2, the role that listening plays in children’s language development was discussed. Speaking is equally important in children’s overall language development. Children learning English as their native language spend time developing speaking skills. If you were to visit a class for native English-speaking five-year-olds in North America, you would undoubtedly see children saying **finger-plays**, simple chants and rhymes with hand or finger motions. They would also be singing songs with their teacher. Usually the entire class sits together while everyone sings or chants in unison. This is a regular and important part of the school day because teachers working with young learners

recognize how important it is for children to develop strong speaking skills.

Many of the songs and finger-plays that children learn to say contain language that is repetitive. Look at Example 1—two favorite children’s songs—and see how much repetition there is in each song. Both of these songs also lend themselves to pantomime and TPR-style activities (see page 30). Children can easily mime the actions until they feel comfortable saying the words. Children gradually learn the repetitive lyrics of songs and eventually the entire songs.

Example 1

This is the way we wash our clothes

This is the way we wash our clothes, wash our clothes, wash our clothes.

This is the way we wash our clothes so early Monday morning.

This is the way we iron our clothes, iron our clothes, iron our clothes.

This is the way we iron our clothes so early Tuesday morning.

The Hokey-Pokey

You put your right foot in.

You put your right foot out.

You put your right foot in.

You shake it all about.

You do the Hokey-Pokey and you turn yourself around.

That’s what it’s all about.

You put your left foot in.

(Etc.)

Children can make up their own verses or versions of songs and finger-plays known as **innovations**. This gives children an opportunity to take a known pattern and put their own twist to it. Teachers prompt children in order to come up with their own verses (see Figure 1).

You put your left elbow in.

You put your left elbow out.

You put your left elbow in.

You shake it all about.

You do the Hokey-Pokey and you turn yourself around.

That’s what it’s all about!

You put your left ear in.

You put your left ear out.

You put your left ear in.

You shake it all about.

You do the Hokey-Pokey and you turn yourself around.

That’s what it’s all about!

Figure 1 An innovation of *The Hokey-Pokey*

Once children understand how to create their own verses, they often can be found on the playground making up all sorts of verses for different songs.



Make a list of your favorite English-language children's finger-plays or songs. See the appendix on pages 204–208. Be sure to select ones where you know or have all of the words for at least one of the verses. Rewrite one of the finger-plays or songs using your own words.

Share your creations with your classmates or colleagues.

4. The development of speaking skills

Contrary to popular myth, younger children learning English as a foreign language do not develop English-language skills more readily than older learners. However, they have a clear advantage when it comes to pronunciation if they begin learning English as a foreign or second language at an early age (Birdsong, 1999). Nevertheless, there are some phonemes which English-speaking as well as non-native-speaking children have difficulty with. It is not uncommon for a six-year-old child to have trouble articulating /r/. The /s/ sound as well as /th/ can also be difficult for some children. As a teacher working with ESL or EFL, you should keep this in mind when you are working on pronunciation. I do not focus too much on sounds that are troublesome for children until they are 10 or 11 years old, and even then I am careful not to insist.

I am also very careful to look at children's mouths when they are having trouble pronouncing different sounds. Sometimes the cause of difficulty can be as simple as baby teeth that have fallen out and are not yet replaced by adult teeth. Or a child may have just received dental braces or a dental retainer and may be slightly struggling with different phonemes because of this.

Avoid unrealistic expectations

What is known about the development of English-language skills in native English-speaking children can be used to influence the way that we teach English to ESL or EFL young learners. The expectations for children learning ESL or EFL should not be greater or more demanding than the expectations for children learning to speak in English as their native language. When working with children learning ESL or EFL, I try to keep in mind some of the issues that impact native English speakers and make sure that my expectations are not unrealistic. The two issues that I am most concerned with are mean length of utterances and pronunciation and are described below.

Mean length of utterances

Educators and linguists examining native-English language development look at the child's **mean length of utterances (MLU)**. The MLU are the number of **morphemes** found in a sample of a child's utterances. A morpheme is the smallest unit of meaning in a word. For example, the prefix *bi* means *two* and is considered to be a morpheme. Thus, the word *bicycle* is made up of two morphemes—*bi* and *cycle*. The word *cat* is also a morpheme. There is some debate about what the MLU is for children of different ages. However, it is widely accepted that very young children produce MLUs which are shorter than older children. The MLU for a five-year-old is not going to be as long as that of a 10-year-old. For example, a five-year-old might say, "Do I have to go?" Whereas a 10-year-old might say, "Yeah, I know I was supposed to go five minutes ago." The expectations for speaking for children should be tailored to their development. Children should not be expected to produce utterances that are beyond their stage of development. For more information about child development see Chapter 1.

Pronunciation and young learners

As stated above, when young children are learning to speak in English as their native language, they sometimes have difficulty articulating specific phonemes such as /th/ or /r/. These difficulties can occur due to developmental factors. As most children grow and develop, they become able to **articulate** the different English-language phonemes. Some native-speaking children even need articulation therapy in order to learn how to pronounce certain sounds. Although I am a native speaker of English, I personally had trouble as a child with /r/ which was a bit embarrassing because I couldn't even pronounce my first name, Caroline, correctly. Fortunately, a speech therapist helped me learn how to properly articulate /r/.

Listed in Figure 2 are the sounds and ages when children should be expected to master different English-language sounds. It is not uncommon for children to learn many of these sounds at younger ages.

Age	Sounds Mastered
3 years	p, n, m, w, h, and all vowels
4 years	d, t, b, g, k, f
5 years	y, ing
6 years	l, j, sh, ch, wh
7 years	r, s, v
8 years	v, th, blends

Figure 2 Ages when native-English speakers usually master English-language sounds (Child Guidance Clinic)

Reflection



Make a list of 10 words that young children have difficulty pronouncing in your native language. How old are children who have trouble pronouncing these words? Does this difficulty continue as children develop? Are these English-language phonemes or do these phonemes exist in English? How could you incorporate special attention to these sounds in your lesson?

Share your answers with a classmate or colleague.

Overgeneralization of errors

Children have a tendency to **overgeneralize** grammar rules when they are learning English as their native language. Generalization is a vitally important aspect of human learning and involves inferring and deriving a rule, or law (Brown, 2000). One classic example of overgeneralization occurs with the use of the past tense. For example, *I seed the movie. I drawed the apple.*

Overgeneralization can also occur when a learner takes rules from his first language and applies them to a second or foreign language. For example, a Spanish-speaking child learning English might say, *I like ice cream chocolate,* instead of *I like chocolate ice cream.*

The process of learning one's native language, be it English or another language, requires a great deal of work. When teaching children to speak a second or foreign language, it is important to keep in mind the development of their skills in their native language. Time should be spent at home or at school helping children to develop skills in their native language because becoming proficient in any language requires attention to the process. ESL

or EFL instruction should not be at the expense of first-language development. Therefore, children should be given opportunities to develop skills in their first language both at school and at home.

5. Classroom techniques and activities

Speaking activities are an important part of any young learners' ESL and EFL classroom and are often considered the focal point of instruction. When teaching speaking, it is especially important to select activities which match the objectives of your program. For instance, if you teach in a school that emphasizes music and the arts, you would include a lot of songs authored by others as well as by your students. The specific techniques and tasks that you choose should be based on the aims of the program coupled with the learners' stages of development.

Audiolingual Method (ALM)

The **Audiolingual Method (ALM)** to language teaching is based on the notion that one can learn language by developing habits based on the patterns of language (Celce-Murcia, 2001). There are two important features of ALM which can easily be adapted for the young learner classroom: drills with choral response and dialogues. The first feature typical of ALM is drills aimed at getting learners to practice using the patterns that occur in language. Substitution drills, such as in Example 2, are a hallmark of the ALM classroom. Note that one word is *substituted* in each line of the drill. Drill 1 below would be appropriate for young learners at early stages of English-language development as well as for young learners under the age of eight. Drill 2 is what many consider to be more typical of ALM and would work especially well with children who have studied English for some time or who are over the age of eight. Older learners are better able to understand the concept of adjectives and can make the substitution almost instantaneously when the exercise is introduced. Younger children will need to do Drill 1 several times and then later can move on to Drill 2.

Example 2

Substitution Drills

Drill 1

Children listen and repeat the sentences spoken by the teacher.

Teacher: *This is a yellow dress.*

Students: *This is a yellow dress.*

Teacher: *This is a blue dress.*

Drill 2

Students: *This is a blue dress.*

Teacher: *This is a red dress.*

Students: *This is a red dress.*

Teacher: *This is a yellow dress.*

Students: *This is a yellow dress.*

Teacher: *blue*

Students: *This is a blue dress.*

Teacher: *red*

Students: *This is a red dress.*

Teacher: *jacket*

Students: *This is a red jacket.*

Etc.

Although drills can be dull and boring for the learners, they do not have to be. Whenever possible, try to personalize the content to the learners in your classroom. For instance, do the drills in Example 2 based on the different clothes that some of your learners are wearing. Have them stand up while you point to the dresses they are wearing and lead the drill.

You can use drills for several minutes as a way to introduce a new language pattern to children. For instance, bring in pictures of food items as you pretend to eat different things or hold up pictures of an apple and say, *I like apples*. Then have the students repeat your sentence. You can also say each sentence and have students respond in unison, using the technique known as **choral response**.

Choral response is also used when children repeat the lines of a poem or song. Sentences with substitutions can be slipped right into the young-learner curriculum in the form of songs, chants, and finger-plays. When children are singing songs or finger-plays that have repetitive language and language substitutions, they are learning the patterns of the English language. Looking back at *The Hokey-Pokey* (page 48), you can easily see how the language resembles a substitution drill. When children sing the song, they are repeating the lines over and over again, and they are substituting words throughout the various verses. They are also repeating lines with one or two words changed or substituted for other lines.

Reflection



Look back at the Action box on page 49 where you rewrote a finger-play or a song. Make a note of the basic pattern and list the words that were substituted.

Share your answer with a classmate or colleague.

Dialogues

The second feature of ALM which can easily find its way into the young learners' classroom is dialogue. Dialogues provide learners with grammatically controlled scripts that they can use in real life. Dialogues can very easily be scripted and turned into child-friendly role-plays. Whenever possible, the role-play should be based on the types of real and make-believe conversations that children have when they work and play.

Using puppets to introduce dialogues

Puppets can easily model different dialogues for children to practice with their classmates. You can also use puppets to show children how to work with a partner or in small groups. Teachers working with young learners are often aware that children feel more comfortable talking with a puppet than with an adult (Slattery and Willis, 2003). The use of puppets is very appropriate in the young-learner classroom. A child who developmentally is too shy to speak to an adult in front of his peers, may feel very comfortable when the same adult is holding a puppet and speaking to the child as the puppet. Puppets also make the language-learning activity more fun!

Fishbowl technique

One specific technique which helps children learn how to work with a partner or in a small group is known as the **fishbowl**. The teacher can either invite a volunteer to do the activity with him or can model the activity using two or more puppets. The teacher models the activity that the children are expected to do while everyone in the class watches as if the teacher and the volunteer were in a fishbowl. Children then go back to their seats knowing clearly what they are expected to do.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Teachers have realized the value of connecting real-life situations with classroom instruction and thus have embraced **Communicative Language Teaching**. **CLT** is an approach and a philosophical orientation that connects classroom-based language learning with the language that learners need in order to communicate outside of the classroom (Nunan, 2003). From the standpoint of teaching English to young learners, it is necessary to connect classroom learning to the real-life child-focused situations where children use language. There are many different situations where children use language to communicate and convey meaning such as asking a parent for help finding something that is lost, playing a game, saying a finger-play, inviting a friend over to play, and creating an art project.

CLT with children is slightly different than CLT with adults in part because children often enjoy playing the role of an adult or grown-up. They may, for example, find role-playing a flight attendant and an airline passenger to be an authentic activity even though in the real world they will not be, at least in the short term, a flight attendant. The activity can be authentic because it represents the type of authentic play, outside the classroom, that a young learner might engage in depending upon her interests and stage of development. This type of play is very meaningful for young learners in part because it gives them a chance to rehearse different language that they will use later on in life. For example, you may have played *teacher* as a child.

It is necessary to consider the type of language that children need in order to communicate in specific situations. For instance, if children are going to role-play finding a pair of lost socks, they would need to know the interrogative *where*. They might also need to know prepositions such as *in, on, under*, etc. Another instance would be when children are playing board games. They will need to be able say *first, next, last* as in spaces on the game and whose turn it is to play. If children are talking about a birthday party they had or went to, they will need to know the past tense.

In CLT, the focus is on getting the message across and helping children acquire **fluency**. In some cases, the language will need to be adjusted to meet the language level of the young learner. In other cases, the communicative task will require language that the children have not yet learned. When the task requires language that is unfamiliar to the children, I either modify the task or teach the necessary language. If I am teaching children a traditional game with a lot of steps, I may leave out some of the steps. For instance, if we are playing the game Concentration, I may omit the step that the child who gets a matching pair also gets an extra turn.