

DEVELOPING YOUNG LEARNERS' SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH VARIOUS ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

The development of speaking skills is a central goal in early language education. For young learners, oral communication is more than just a linguistic competence—it is a tool for cognitive, emotional, and social growth. This article examines the theoretical underpinnings of speaking skill development, outlines the unique characteristics of young learners, and explores a range of engaging and age-appropriate classroom activities designed to enhance speaking proficiency. Through a discussion of pedagogical strategies and the teacher's role, the article aims to provide practical insights for educators committed to fostering confident and competent speakers in the early stages of language learning.

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Theoretical Framework: Speaking is a fundamental aspect of human communication, and in the context of language learning, it serves as a primary means of expressing ideas, emotions, and intentions. For young learners—typically defined as children between the ages of 4 and 12—the acquisition of speaking skills is an essential component of their overall linguistic development. Unlike adult learners, children acquire language in a more natural and intuitive way, often through play, imitation, and interaction. Therefore, the methods and strategies employed to develop speaking skills must be tailored to their developmental stages, interests, and learning styles.

In many language learning contexts, speaking is often undervalued in comparison to reading and writing. However, for young learners, the oral domain forms the foundation upon which literacy and other language skills are built. Without strong speaking abilities, learners may struggle to engage fully in classroom activities, social interactions, and eventually, academic success. Thus, it is vital for language educators to prioritize the development of speaking skills

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through a variety of interactive and meaningful activities.

The development of speaking skills in young learners can be best understood through the lens of several educational theories. Vygotsky's **socio-cultural theory** underscores the importance of social interaction in language learning. His concept of the **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)** suggests that children learn best when they are supported by a more knowledgeable other—typically a teacher or peer—who helps them progress from what they can do independently to what they can achieve with guidance.

Similarly, **Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)** emphasizes the use of authentic language in real-life situations. It prioritizes fluency over accuracy in the early stages and encourages the use of language as a tool for communication rather than a set of grammatical rules to be memorized. These principles align closely with the needs of young learners, who thrive in environments where language use is spontaneous, meaningful, and socially interactive. Moreover, **Krashen's Input Hypothesis** and the concept of "comprehensible input" are also relevant. According to Krashen, learners acquire language when they are exposed to input slightly above their current proficiency level ($i+1$) in a low-anxiety, supportive environment. Speaking activities for young learners should therefore be designed to provide rich input and reduce stress associated with performance.

Characteristics of Young Learners: Understanding the developmental and psychological characteristics of young learners is crucial for designing effective speaking activities. Some of the key features include:

- **Short attention spans:** Activities must be varied and dynamic to maintain engagement.
- **Concrete thinking:** Young children tend to understand and relate to real-life objects and experiences better than abstract concepts.
- **Love of play:** Playful, imaginative contexts stimulate interest and natural use of language.
- **Curiosity and eagerness to participate:** Children are naturally inquisitive and benefit from tasks that encourage exploration and expression.
- **Need for praise and encouragement:** Positive reinforcement helps build confidence and motivation.

Because of these traits, traditional, grammar-focused approaches are often ineffective with young learners. Instead, activities should be hands-on, sensory-rich, and meaningful to children's real-world experiences.

Activities to Develop Speaking Skills: A variety of activities can be used to develop young learners' speaking skills. The following are particularly effective due to their interactive and age-appropriate nature.

Storytelling and Role-Play

Storytelling allows learners to engage with language in a structured yet creative format. Teachers can begin with well-known tales, using props or visuals, and encourage learners to retell the story using their own words. This helps develop narrative structures, sequencing skills, and vocabulary. Role-play extends this further by allowing children to act out scenes or

create dialogues. For example, setting up a “grocery store” or “doctor’s office” in the classroom gives learners a chance to practice functional language in realistic contexts.

Songs, Chants, and Rhymes

These are among the most effective tools for developing pronunciation, rhythm, and intonation. The repetitive nature of songs and chants helps in memorization and builds confidence in language use. Incorporating movement or gestures further reinforces learning and supports kinesthetic learners.

Show and Tell

In “Show and Tell,” each student brings an object and talks about it in front of the class. This activity enhances descriptive language, presentation skills, and personal expression. It also builds confidence in speaking in front of peers. Teachers can scaffold the activity with guiding questions such as “What is it?”, “Where did you get it?”, and “Why is it special to you?”

Picture-Based Activities

Pictures provide visual prompts that spark conversation. Students can describe images, compare scenes, or create stories based on what they see. This encourages vocabulary development, critical thinking, and spontaneous speech. Pair or group discussions based on picture stories also promote collaboration and active listening.

Interactive Games

Games provide a low-pressure environment where learners can practice language in a fun and meaningful way. Examples include:

- **“Guess Who?”** – practicing questions and personal descriptions.
- **“Simon Says”** – improving listening and following instructions.
- **“Find Someone Who...”** – practicing yes/no questions and answers.
- **Board games** – using speaking prompts or question cards.

These activities help learners practice turn-taking, question formation, and other discourse features essential for fluent conversation.

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