

Improving Young Learners' Communication Skill Through English Extracurricular Activities

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Abstract

Improving young learners' communication skills nowadays is not an easy job for teachers. The limitations of time and the obligation to finish certain materials really inhibit teachers' creativities. Besides, the materials might not be challenging for students. One effective way to solve this problem is by providing English extracurricular activities. The reason is because teachers have more authority to choose the materials. This paper is focused on the printed materials to be used and the activities to be done during the process. Printed materials are used here because so far the English tests center on the reading comprehension. The writer offers materials, among others, brochures, recipes, folk tales, story books, comics, letters, posters, song lyrics, communication games, children's books, anecdotes, and magazines. The activities include predicting, previewing, role playing, practicing oral reading, giving presentation, retelling, active listening, acting, singing and poster making. The activities are individual, small group, pair work or all class activities. The materials and activities are suggested for the fifth grade students of Elementary School. The writer assumes that students at this level have mastered more vocabularies comparing to students of the lower levels. Besides, in general, school will give the fifth grade students a chance to get involved in extracurricular activities. The sixth grade students are not allowed to participate in any extracurricular activities anymore since they focus to study UNAS materials. Teachers should choose the materials and activities which are suitable for their students' levels of English proficiency. Ideally, one class consists of students with the same level of proficiency in order to get the maximum result. Theoretically, after discussing all the materials and doing all the activities, at least, students get two benefits. They do not only improve their communication skills but they also enjoy reading.

Keywords: improve, young learner, communication skills, extracurricular activities

Introduction

Teachers often meet obstacles to improve young learners' communication skills due to the obligation to finish materials which have been determined in a limited time. The school materials might not be challenging for students. One effective way to resolve this problem is by providing English extracurricular activities. The reason is because teachers have more authority to choose the materials. Although the time allotment for English extracurricular activities is limited, these kinds of activities can be effective tools to improve young learners' communication skills. Communication skills here mean, in Lynch's view (1996), the abilities to communicate facts, opinions and emotions. If the materials and the activities are appropriate, maximum result will be achieved. Ideally, one class consists of students not more than twenty with the same level of proficiency in order to get the maximum result. Besides improving the communication skills, the activities are expected to be able to make the students enjoy reading.

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For those purposes teachers choose printed materials and assign their students to read every week. By doing so, it is expected that the students' reading habit is growing and their reading skills are improving. As Mikulecky (1990) notes that "reading improves with practice" (p. 13). Printed materials are used here because so far the English tests center on the reading comprehension.

Materials such as brochures, recipes, folk tales, story books, comics, letters, posters, song lyrics communication games, children's books, anecdotes, and magazines are necessary to use. These materials will really challenge students' imagination and creativity. It is also important to provide students with materials which make them love and respect God, family, country, other people, themselves and their environment. In short, teachers should find materials which help their students become better people not only become more knowledgeable ones.

In order to improve the students' communication skills, the writer suggests several activities. The activities include predicting, previewing, role playing, practicing oral reading, giving presentation, retelling, active listening, acting, singing and poster making. The activities are individual, small group, pair work or all class activities.

The materials and activities above are suggested for the fifth grade students of Elementary School. The writer assumes that students at this level have mastered more vocabularies comparing to students at the lower levels. Besides, in general, school will give the fifth grade students a chance to get involved in extracurricular activities. The sixth grade students are not allowed to participate in any extracurricular activities anymore since they focus to study *UNAS* materials.

The writer recommends the materials and activities above in the light of the following characteristics of how the fifth grade students of Elementary School learn. According to Harmer (2003), the characteristics are as follows:

- Students can easily lose interest.
- They focus on themselves
- The students' favorite topics are their own lives.
- They need individual attention and appreciation from the teacher.
- They are enthusiastic and curious to learn about the world around them.
- They learn through what they see and hear

A variety of materials are provided and ample room for different activities to be taking place is given to keep the students engaged. As soon as the students get bored, teachers will move on to the other material or activity. Not only that, teachers will also give their students much freedom to be creative because children love discovering things, using their imagination, making things, drawing things, doing physical movement or singing (Harmer, 2003). As Rakhmat (2003) points out that students' creativity blossoms when teachers appreciate new ideas or allow their every single student to be creative. In addition, the learning process does not only happen in the same classroom, students can do the activities in other places, such as hotels,

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supermarkets, school garden or other places. Moreover, teachers may assign their students to work with their mobile phones or computers, not only pens and papers.

Besides providing various materials and activities, teachers need to create and sustain positive classroom atmosphere. According to Harmer (2003) for that purpose, teachers should do the following things. In the first place, teachers should create a supportive and cooperative environment to suit the various learner types. One of the examples is by giving feedback and correction just at the right moment. Secondly, teachers should establish good relationships with all students so they can work together either individually or in groups. This can be greatly enhanced when teachers pay the same attention to all the students in their classes, not only to certain students. Thirdly, teachers show much interest in English and all the activities. Fourthly, Teachers allow students to move around as long as they do not disturb other students. Fifthly, teachers have to choose topics which are interesting and relevant to their students' experience to make their students become totally involved or take part with enthusiasm Sixthtly, teachers do not mind giving any information to the students concerning the tasks given as long as it is tolerable. Seventhly, teachers are open to students' opinion concerning the material, purpose, topic and activities. Eighthly, teachers use a piece of music because it can provide amusement and learning.

5 Meanwhile to make the classroom **8**mmunicative, Nunan (1989) suggests that the teacher has to play his three main roles. The first is to perform as a facilitator of the communicative process, the **5** second is to perform as a participant, and the third is to perform as an observer and learner. The different roles of the teacher will make students feel closer to him and feel free to express themselves.

Material and Activities

Communication between teacher and students should be built since the first meeting. (http://www.ndt-ed.org/TeachingResources/ClassroomTips/Goal_Setting.htm) The first thing to do is communicating the goals, objectives, activities and materials to the students. The purpose is not just giving ideas but also accepting ideas so that collective agreement can be achieved. However, before starting the discussion, the teacher needs to convince his students of the benefits of having these materials and activities. Of course, the teacher must be willing to give up what is not accepted by the students. Through discussion, the teacher will really know the students' interest. In this case the students' interest becomes very important because "students' motivation for reading increases when they read what they are interested in." (Mikulecky, **1**90, p. 13). It is also good to select the activities with students because the activities will match not only students' interest but also their abilities, needs, and backgrounds so that students desire to talk, listen, read, and write (see Gunderson, 1991). After having come to agreement, both parties make the schedule of activities. Another important thing to do is **6**ting the rules of the class together.

(http://www.ndt-ed.org/TeachingResources/ClassroomTips/Effective_Discipline.htm)

The willingness of the teacher to involve his students from the beginning will give a positive impact on students and ultimately on the learning process. Students feel valued

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and respected so that they will become self-motivating learners. Thus, the learning process becomes more meaningful and exciting.

In the English extracurricular class teachers may use materials like brochures, recipes, folk tales, story books, comics, letters, posters, song lyrics communication games, children's books, anecdotes, and magazines. Those materials have illustration and the language is simple. Besides, discussing these materials³ will activate the students' prior knowledge. The activities which students can participate are predicting, previewing, role playing, practicing oral reading, giving presentation, retelling, active listening, acting, singing and poster making. Further discussion will be about these materials and activities.

Since the materials used in the class are printed material, students need to be equipped with previewing and predicting skills. According to Mikulecky (1990), those two skills are very significant for increasing reading effectiveness. Concerning previewing, he adds that having the skill of previewing, students will enable to understand new texts. By previewing, students get enough information from the text to start hypothesizing about it and to initiate the cognitive process of matching new information with their prior knowledge. Students now understand that they are able to get initial information of the text. Firstly, by noticing any pictures/illustrations, names, numbers, dates, words that stand out. Secondly, by paying attention to the title, parts of the text, the first sentence of each paragraph, the last sentence of the text or the last paragraph. Besides, students may get confidence because they are able to answer their teacher's questions without reading the whole passage. Having the prior knowledge correlating to the text makes the students respect themselves more. Then, it will encourage students, especially the weaker ones, to explore the material.

After previewing, students need to have a practice of predicting. Concerning the predicting skill, Mikulecky (1990) recommends teachers ask the students to make predictions about the text before it is read or make predictions during reading. Students may predict from titles, illustrations or headlines. After giving their predictions, they should clarify their reasons. Moreover, he informs that simple materials like folk tales, fairy tales or children's stories are appropriate to be used. If the teacher activates students' previewing and predicting skills, it will encourage their students to read more, aware of any features given and use their imagination.

Mikulecky (1990) further states that predicting skill can be sharpened through active listening activity. Moreover, this activity can bring students closer to their first culture. This activity needs to be given since being able to listen is part of communication skills. (<http://www.ndt-ed.org/TeachingResources/ClassroomTips/Listening.htm>) Good reading materials applicable for this purpose are folktales *Malin Kundang* and *Joko Kendil*. From *Malin Kundang*, students will learn about the way of life of Sumatrans and how to respect parents. From *Joko Kendil*, students will learn about Javanese culture. In addition, they will also understand that judging people only from their physical appearance is not wise. Gunderson (1991) also agrees that active listening is a good exercise to develop predicting skill. He suggests the teacher himself should frequently conduct an active reading exercise for the whole class. ²armer (2003) proposes an example of active listening activity that develop predicting skill. The teacher gives each student in the class a letter from A to E. Students with same letter get same

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word ² phrase. The teacher put the students in five-person groups composed of students A-E. Then each group has to try and predict what the passage is all about. The teacher monitors the ² groups encouraging them and if necessary, feeding them with new words. Finally, when the groups have made some prediction ² the teacher asks them whether they would like to hear the passage that all words came from. Investing it with humor and making the reading dramatic and enjoyable.

According to Harmer (2003), "One of the most useful kinds of text for students to work with is song lyrics" (p.243). To make the process of learning fun for every student, the teacher asks his students to bring their favorite songs to class. To make the atmosphere more lively, they can also be permitted to bring their music instruments. Students are asked to give reasons why they like their songs and say what they think the message might be. Teachers will discuss the difficult words or the messages together with all students. The main point here is not trying to finish all songs but having fun with songs. Students and teacher can sing, play music or dance together. Even students are given a chance to introduce their own songs.

Since young learners like games, teacher can use communication games which make fluent speaking amusing. Communication games here means games which are designed to cause communication between students frequently depend on an information gap so that students have to communicate in order to accomplish their tasks (Harmer, 2003). Here is one example of communication games. The game involves two teams, Team A and Team B. The teacher gives a word such as *Surabaya*. The first member of team A gives a piece of information about Surabaya in a sentence. Then the first member of team B gives different information. Finally, all the members of both teams have to speak without repetition. The team will get one point whenever the member of the opposite team fails to give right information or make any repetition. Each member of both teams will listen carefully to avoid repetition and helps each other before they take turn. The team which can give more information within certain time will succeed.

According to Gunderson (1991), Oral reading which improves the students' phrasing and intonation is also important to be practiced. This activity prepares students to clearly communicate in English, including speaking in front of the class or giving presentation. The teacher, who is supposed to be the positive oral reading model, should read aloud as often as possible to students.

Tierney and Readence (2000) suggest to use Choral and Repeated Reading. They think that it is the most effective primarily with students in the elementary grades. This strategy aims to equip students with the ability to use proper expression, to function as part of a group and to appreciate oral expression.

Tierney and Readence (2000) add that this strategy also helps the teacher to make all students active. Poorer readers and shy students will actively get involved and the overly confident students will not dominate an oral reading exercise. The whole-group format will save the poor readers as well as the shy students from humiliating corrections while they acquire confidence in themselves. This format may discourage the obtrusive students but the teachers can

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ask them to be the models in their small groups. Nevertheless, Gunderson (1991) suggests the teacher to be careful not to create invidious comparison.

The teacher may allow the students to choose materials that are of interest to students generally, such as comics and story books. Walt Disney's *Donald Ducks* English version comics can be an alternative. Before students start reading, they can sing a song entitled *Old MacDonald* which can be easily downloaded from internet. Students will be acquainted with at least five new words, i.e. moo, turkey, cluck, woof, and gobble. Walt Disney's *Donald Ducks* English version comics are good choices based on following considerations. They are published by The Walt Disney Co which has worldwide popularity. They present full-color pictures which enable to attract young learners. They are easy to get and affordable. They bring joy, happiness and fascinating insights to the readers in a natural way. As a result, students do not only improve their phrasing and intonation, but also their perspectives. Students can work individually or in groups. Students working in groups may share the work among themselves. One student will read the narrator's words and the rest of the group members will read the characters' words. Since this activity does not aim to check the students' comprehension, students may read Walt Disney's *Donald Ducks* Indonesian version comics if they get problem to understand the story. The teacher, of course, monitors and corrects the students' phrasing and intonation at the right time in order not to destroy the fun. Even, the teacher should enhance the pleasure by getting involved as the narrator or one of the characters.

Besides comics, the teacher can utilize other interesting bilingual children's books which have full-color pictures. For examples, Joy to Learn publisher presents the following children's books. The books entitled *Heaven is A Wonderful Place*, *The Super Secret*, *The Glory Garden*, *The Grouchy Giant*, *The Amazing Ark* and *Can God See Me?* will help students to know more about God. Meanwhile, the books entitled *Help Others* and *Share with Others* will improve the students' relationships with other people.

After practicing oral reading which trains students to practice in appropriate stress, intonation and speed, students can act out the stories above. It will not be difficult for them since they have already rehearsed the dialogues. Harmer (2003) evaluates that this kind of activity should be given since it is both a learning and a language producing activity. Moreover, this activity will help students overcome their boredom since, as mentioned before, they easily lose interest. Other alternatives, teachers can ask their students to act out plays, their course books or even their own dialogues. After rehearsing, students have to give their first performances. Since not all students are brave enough to come out to the front of the class, the teacher can ask the students to work in groups and not force the shyest student to perform first. It will be good if students have a chance to make improvisation by making a little change because it will sharpen their creativities.

The students now learn and read the reading passage for themselves and try to answer the following detailed comprehension questions, either individually or in groups. Gunderson (1991) convinced that ESL students cannot leave the reading passage if they are to succeed in school. Harmer (2003) notes that these activities, reading and discussing, along with predicting and listening make the students are likely to be very involved with the procedure. There are so many

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reading passages can be used. One of them is a passage entitled *Crazy* from *Developing Skill* by L.G. Alexander and published by Yayasan Kanisius. This passage is actually for higher level students but it is good to try since it will tint the students' view of the process (see Harmer, 2003). This passage is chosen because it is humorous and it is about children. After reading it, students will learn that children often have far more common sense than their elders.

Teachers can also work with anecdotes. Some anecdotes from *Enriching Your Vocabulary through Anecdotes* by Pertiwi Ambarningrum and published by Cladina media will be much helpful. Anecdotes number 40, 49, 50, 104, 115, 122 and 125 are not difficult to understand by the fifth grade students. Although the writer provides translation, still, students have to think in order to understand the anecdotes. Some questions will help the students to catch the meaning.

It is also important to give students comprehension exercises to help improve comprehension (Gunderson, 1991). The following are several suggested activities for that purpose:

1. Students change the form of the reading so that a brochure becomes a story, a brochure becomes a conversation, a song lyrics becomes a story, a story becomes a role-play, a story becomes an interview, a story becomes a song lyrics.
2. Students become tour guides giving information based on the brochure.
3. Students are given a story and are asked to change the parts that they do not like. They should give the reason.
4. Students produce posters that represent the story. The posters can be displayed for other students who do not take the English extracurricular activities.
5. Students retell stories.

Tierney and Readence (2000) agrees that retelling is a proper means to verbalize what the students know or to assess students' understanding of what they have read. It is a better exercise than answering questions because students are free to respond in their own words concerning what they understood from the text. Thus, it enables the teacher to judge the richness of the students' understanding. The teacher may use two procedures. Firstly, the teacher reads the story and then, asks the students to retell it or write their retelling. It is good sometimes to let students decide whether they want to retell the story or write their retelling to make them feel secure, confident, and comfortable. Secondly, the students read story and then orally retell it.

The teacher should provide students with stories from other countries to widen their perspectives, at least to know other cultures. *Favorite Stories From Thailand* by Jenny Watson and published by PT Rosda Jayaputra Jakarta can be a good option. It contains fourteen stories selected from the annals of Thai folklore. The vocabulary and sentence structure match the fifth grade elementary students' needs and capabilities. Students with different capabilities and interests will have no problem of understanding the stories for the stories have been presented in ascending order of length and difficulty. These stories, together with the exercises, will inspire the students to read more and to try writing or retelling stories.

Tourist Brochures of holiday resorts in Indonesia are also significant and interesting materials for students. At least students will gain three benefits. Firstly, the brochures which are

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usually complemented by pictures of beautiful places of interests will grow the students' love for their country. Secondly, students who are fond of traveling will be enthusiastic to engage in the class activities. Thirdly, students will know the various indigenous ethnic groups, unique culture, varied food and beautiful nature in their own country. Teachers can create activities such as sharing experiences, describing places, making holiday plans and making interviews. It will be interesting if students can act as tour guides, tourists or travel agents.

Other materials which will give students, either girls or boys, valuable learning experience are recipes. Students are not assigned just to read the recipes but also to cook. They are free to choose their favorite recipes. They will learn new words from different context which can enrich their vocabularies. They have to read carefully and understand the steps in order to serve good food. To make the activity fun, they are offered to work either individually or in groups. They will be active involved in buying the ingredients and cooking. The teacher does not focus on the result only but also on the process. After doing the cooking experiment, students have to make a report or share their experiences. It includes the reasons why they choose the recipe, the process when they buy the ingredients and cook and any problems they encounter. In short, they try to communicate facts, their opinions and emotions. Of course, students have no problem to say if they do not enjoy the activity because they are free to express their opinions. At least, they can learn that cooking is not an easy job and it is not only can be done by girls or women. As a result, they will respect those who cook for them. Besides, they will not too picky anymore. Besides giving reports, they also have to show pictures when they conduct the activity and the food they cook. Then, their pictures with the comments are displayed for other students.

Other inspiring sources of materials are English magazines. They can be solutions to the problem of students easily getting bored. There are at least two magazines which are interesting to use, *Hello* and *Fun* English magazines. From *Hello* English magazines, students will enjoy reading letters, poetries and jokes. They also know more about their favorite singers, actors or actresses, friendship, healthy life, science, new songs and idioms. Some students enjoy doing the English test and finishing the puzzle. Meanwhile, *Fun* English magazine presents the instruction how to make craft, stories and songs. These various kinds of materials really benefit our students. Students are given freedom to choose materials that are of their own interests. When they get bored, they can move to another material. To check the students' comprehension, the student who chooses article on science or decides to read a story is assigned to retell what he has read. The student who chooses letters are assigned to write a letter, Students are also free to finish the puzzle, do the English test or write their own poetries. Making craft is another good alternative. The teacher can sing together with students and do the oral reading using the poetries.

Still concerning with writing letters, the teacher can ask the students to make connection with overseas students via email. They have to maintain the relationships. Then, they should share with their classmates what they know about different cultures, lifestyles and many other things as a result of their friendships with the overseas students. Students can also write love letters or make posters. The point is that they can freely express their feelings, opinions and dreams. The letters can be addressed to whomever they love, for examples, parents, teachers, siblings, grandparents and friends. Gunderson (1991) suggests that the focus should not be on the accuracy of the language they use but on the content of what they are writing. Concerning the

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poster making. students can provide any information and suggestion about honesty, love, respect, environment, health, friendship or other topics. In class the student should explain his poster, along with the reasons why he chooses the topic, the illustration, the objectives to be achieved, the proper placement of the poster. This activity is useful for the students since they learn how to convey the core message and how to get people interested in their news. It will be motivating for the students if teachers participate in these two activities. Students also get a chance to receive their teacher's letters or learn from their teacher's posters.

The skill of speaking can be sharpened through role plays. In a role play, students are told about who they are, and what they think and feel. Thus we might tell a student that she is Ratna and she wants to buy a bag but her money is not enough. Then, she asks her friend's opinion. The second student becomes Ratna's friend and the third student takes a role as the shopkeeper. Role-plays are effective when they are open-ended, so that different students have different views of what the outcome should be, and a consensus has to be reached. Another role-play such as planning a reunion is fairly easy to replicate in the classroom. In groups of five the students role-play the meeting. And at the end different groups discuss the decisions they have to come. Harmer (2003) points out that role-playing has three obvious advantages. In the first place, it can be good fun and thus stimulating. Secondly, it allows doubtful students to be more honest in expressing themselves than they might be when speaking for themselves. Thirdly, by including the world outside, students can use a much wider range of language than some more task-centered activities may do. Harmer (2003) further adds that teachers may encourage their students by participating in role-plays as long as they do not participate too much or dominate the speaking.

The above activities mix the skills of speaking, listening, writing and reading. It is good because it will make the process of learning extraordinary (Gunderson, 1991). Harmer (2003) agrees with Gunderson since students will get a rich language experience. Gunderson further adds that besides improving students' oral language, such activities will grow their self-confidence. Back to the characteristics of how the fifth grade students of Elementary School learn, those activities will really capture students' attention.

Conclusion

In this paper I try to present an idea that extracurricular activities are able to improve young learners' communication skills. Due to the little time allocated for extracurricular activities, teachers have to really prepare the condition to attain the maximum result. The materials should be well selected. The activities should be appropriately designed. To be noticed, the materials and activities should match not only students' interest but also their abilities, needs, and backgrounds. In addition, the teacher also need to create pleasant atmosphere for students to learn by creating a good communication in the classroom, both teacher and students and students with students. All of these efforts will prompt students to talk, listen, read, and write. The materials and activities above not only will improve young learners' communication skills but also will grow their reading habits and increase their reading skills. Hence, these extracurricular activities are able to help students understand their other school texts. Last but not least, at the end of the program, hopefully, students also become better people, not only more knowledgeable ones.

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