

Could we help the less-able learners learn English faster?

Silp Rasri

Abstract

In a big class of the less-able English learners, the objective of teaching must be clear and also the teaching method together with teaching aids must be carefully selected. In my opinion, one of the suitable teaching approaches is the pattern practice drill. The reason is that the less-able, even though they have learnt English for some years, are not able to use English for any kind of communication. To have them learn English with the Traditional Grammar Approach: emphasizing grammatical rules, it is boring and not challenging. So, they should go forward step by step from simple English pattern drills and go gradually up to advanced English. They have to start learning from listening skill first and try to imitate repeatedly the correct pronunciation of native speakers from audio visualized lessons until they feel accustomed to the sounds and can pronounce them naturally. And the speaking interactive activities must be often done among their group or with other groups. Let them go slowly but firmly. And in the long run they will improve themselves ready for the advanced English.

Introduction

Raphael Gefen in his article Teaching English to less-able learners (ELTJ XXXV NO. Jan. 1981) lists four types of learners - the very able, the able, the less able and the unable. As it appears today in some schools or universities in Thailand, the majority of students are the less-able learners and also they are set in a large class. The problem is that even though they have passed the English courses arranged by that school or university, they still are the less-able learners in English. The problem is that the approaches

mostly used in Thailand are a Traditional Approach; that is, the teacher emphasizes grammatical rules, which is not a natural method in learning a language; students might be able to write some short sentences but to step up to a higher level it is still very hard for them, or even a Communicative Approach, which is also used popularly in Thailand; that is, the less-able learners learn speaking skills by memorizing the dialogues prepared by their teacher but apart from what they have learnt from the class, they can not form or express whatever they want to do by

* Assistant Prof.Dr., Sripatum University.

themselves. /
still the less-a
English for gr
a master of l
article is to er
to a very larg
learners.

The
aspects of Eng
a class, two ir
planned; first,
board, the tea
lessons and
arranged; secc
well selected.
teaching appr
less-able learn
This method
phrases and
improve their
even writing ir
problem is the
lets each learne
80 minutes. Th
into a group of
should be usec
tongue and Er
English is use
understand an
loose their self
spirits: high res
are highly need

themselves. Another problem that makes them still the less-able learners is that they have learnt English for grades, not because they want to be a master of English. So, the objective of this article is to emphasize on how to teach English to a very large class of about 60-80 less-able learners.

The less-able learners are weak at all aspects of English. In my opinion, to teach such a class, two important things must be carefully planned; first, teaching aids such as a white board, the teaching plan, audio - visual English lessons and good textbooks should be well arranged; second, the teaching method must be well selected. In my opinion, one of the English teaching approaches, which is suitable for the less-able learners is the Pattern Practice Drills. This method is to have learners drill words, phrases and sentences. The less able can improve their listening, speaking, reading and even writing in form of structural units. The big problem is the size of the class. If the teacher lets each learner say a sentence, it spends at least 80 minutes. Therefore, learners should be divided into a group of five or six. The bilinguals for this should be used with both the learners' mother tongue and English. The reason is that if only English is used, the learners will be hard to understand and get confused, causing them to lose their self-confidence. Above all, teaching spirits: high responsibilities and lively techniques are highly needed.

Who are the less-able learners?

"The less able" are the learners of English, who have spent some years learning English, but cannot improve themselves. They know some parts of speech such as words, adjectives, verbs, and even some forms of sentences but they cannot form a sentence or express themselves when they need to speak out.

Why are they the less-able?

Like in several countries, people in Thailand seldom have the opportunity to use English for any kind of communication; so, English is still a language that people think is not necessary for their life. In some remote schools, where qualified English teachers are not available, those who graduated in Social Science or other areas are assigned to teach English. So, the less able have been taught incorrect English. They cannot pronounce a word correctly. They have learnt English as one compulsory subject they need to know for their grades. These learners are still the less able, even though they have learnt English for over 10 years. The main problems are:

1. They have been taught incorrect English such as pronunciation, use of sentences and so on.
2. They study English as a compulsory course in their school.
3. They study English as knowledge but not as skills.

- 4. They have been taught a theoretical English but not a practical English.
- 5. They have no chance to use English inside and outside their class.
- 6. The teachers are not qualified.

How to improve the less-able learners :

To help improving the less-able learners, several factors need to be changed as follow:

- 1. School administrators should have a clear policy on teaching English.
- 2. Qualified teachers are needed.
- 3. Environment inside and outside of a class is important.
- 4. Teachers should not teach theoretical English: grammatical rules, but practical English.
- 5. The Pattern Practice Drill is one of the suitable approaches.
- 6. Listening skill takes priority to other skills.

Why not grammatical rules?

At first we should know what grammar is, "Grammar is the rules by which words change their forms and are combined into sentences, or the study or use of these rules" (Longman Dictionary of contemporary English; 1995), or "Grammar is a set of normative and prescriptive rules in order to set up standard of correct usage" (Radhey S. Varshney; 1998: 198). So grammar is

both the art and the science of language. As we have known, English is a foreign language and not a second language in Thailand. Learners hardly use it in their daily lives. They, however, have to study for their career progress. They have to improve their speaking and writing skills for social business interaction and so on. Grammar is like a concrete bridge for them to walk across to the other side of the river. So, the grammatical rules are necessary for the advanced classes, but not for the less able. The reason is that in the advanced class students are all the able or the very able. They are quite familiar with English, whereas the less able are not. So, the less able should not be taught in form of old fashionable grammar but in form of the pattern practice drills. An English proverb says that doing some things often for thirty times becomes a human's habit. If learners drill it over thirty times, it will become their habits, through which they can use it naturally.

What is the Pattern Practice Drill?

"It is one of the techniques of giving systematic and effective practice within a limited vocabulary and structures" (BARUAMH. 1995: 181). The pattern practice drills aim at establishing the pattern or the mould of a structure so that the learners can make the right choice in the pattern as a matter of automatic habit. These drills usually require the students to make rapid changes after a cue given by the

teacher.
oral cue t
the stud
accordan
command
pictures,
gestures,
repeat th
activities

**How to
"Patter**

listening

classify

between
ability. I

are hand

sentenc

listening

or three

the les

dialogu

group

confide

teacher. This cue may be oral or visual. In the oral cue the teacher utters a word or phrases and the students make appropriate response in accordance with the cue. Using visuals, this command is given by showing actual objects, pictures, words, or even sentences on flash cards, gestures, whiteboard, etc. and have students repeat them until they feel confident doing the activities.

How to start teaching "Pattern Practice Drills"

The First step :

- a) The visualized pictures and some listening aids are set up.
- b) Students are given a pre-test to classify their English ability.
- c) After that they must be grouped between into five or six depending on their ability. Each group sits at a round table.
- d) And then the easy English lessons are handed to each student.
- e) Brief structural patterns of simple sentences are explained.

The Second Step :

The teacher starts the class with a listening exercise, using a particular dialogue two or three times, then shows the pictures related to the lesson. After that the teacher reads the dialogue for two or three times and then lets each group repeat that pattern until they feel confident. Thereafter students rotate the pattern

among their group. The teacher just says new words to change the vocabulary in the pattern. When students feel confident using the patterns, they are assigned to find new words and make a pattern for their rotation in their group.

The example of the verb "to be":

1. The structural patterns of the verb "to be" are shown on the board and explained briefly as follows:

- a. S + be (is, am, are) + words
(Positive)
- b. Be + S + words? (Question)
- c. S + be not + words (Negative)
- d. Where (what etc.) + be + s +
(words)?

2. The English visualized lesson is open to the class, and the pictures of a particular object are shown to students.

3. The teacher introduces the class and starts teaching. OK! Everybody. Listen to the tape and repeat it. And try to imitate the sounds.

Tape : This is an eagle. (Pause)

- Students : This is an eagle. (Two times)
 Teacher : Ok. Say after me. (Showing a picture of an eagle)
 Teacher : This is an eagle.(repeat)
 Students : This is an eagle.
 Teacher : Is this an eagle?(repeat)
 Students : Is this an eagle?
 Teacher : Yes, this is an eagle.(repeat)
 Students : Yes, this is an eagle.
 Teacher : Is it an eagle? (repeat)

Students : Is it an eagle?
 Teacher : No, this isn't an eagle.
 Students : No, this isn't an eagle.
 Teacher : Okay, Everybody! Now we have a new word "a tiger; a Bengal tiger", (showing a picture of a Bengal tiger) and you all have to do the same as we have done. Now, every group starts your dialogue.

(Example of group one)

Ladda : This is a Bangal tiger.
 Amporn : Is this a Bangal tiger?
 Wimol : Yes, this is a Bangal tiger.
 Santi : Is this a Bangal tiger?
 Ratre : No, this is not a Bangal tiger.
 Teacher : Good, now we have another words "young Bangal tiger". Okay, start.

(Example of group five)

Porn : That is a young Bangal tiger.
 Wim : Is that a young Bangal tiger?
 Sang : Yes, that is a young Bangal tiger.
 Tree : Is that a young Bangal tiger?
 Linda : No, that is not a young Bangal tiger.
 Teacher : Now! "A young Bengal tiger in the zoo."
 Santi : This is a young tiger in the zoo.
 Wimol : Is this a young tiger in the zoo?
 Ratre : Yes, it is.
 Ladda : Is this a young Bengal tiger in the zoo?
 Amporn : No, it isn't.
 Teacher : Good! Now, we are going to change the patterns. Okay, answer my

question.
 Teacher : What is this?
 Students : That is a young Bangal tiger.
 Teacher : Now, start with this picture.
 Santi : What is this? (Showing a picture of a zebra)
 Ratre : That is a zebra.
 Wimol : Is this a young zebra?
 Amporn : Yes, that is a young zebra.
 Ladda : Is this a young zebra?
 Santi : No, that is not a young zebra.
 Teacher : Now, we use a word " Where" Where is a zebra?
 Students : It is in the zoo.
 Ladda : Where is the zoo?
 Students : It is in Bangkok.
 Santi : Where in Bangkok?
 Students : It is near the palace.
 Teacher : Good! Now, "How" How old is this zebra? Is it young or old?
 Students : It is young.
 Teacher : Now, start with this picture.
 Wimol : How big is this crocodile? Is it small or big?
 Ladda : It is big.
 Ratre : How is this elephant? Is it small or big?
 Santi : It is very big.
 Amporn : Yes, it is very big.

(The WH-question patterns with the verb to be are practiced like this until students feel confident in speaking)

The third step :

Having practiced drilling the patterns of the verb "to be" to a fluent level, a pair of students is assigned to make up their own dialogues based on the verb "to be" and have a conversation until the teacher thinks they can use them confidently.

Examples of THERE IS and THERE ARE

Now, let's practice using THERE IS, THERE ARE. Look at the patterns first.

-
- There + is (are) + word (s) + phrase (Positive)
 - Is (Are) + there + word (s) + phrase? (Question)
 - There + be + not + word (s) + phrase (Negative)
-

Teacher : What is that?
 Students : It is a book.
 Teacher : Where is the book?
 Students : It is on the table.
 Teacher : OK. Say after me. There is a book on the table.
 Students : There is a book on the table.
 Teacher : Is there a book on the table?
 Students : Yes, there is a book on the table.
 Teacher : Now, start a pattern two.
 Teacher : What are those?
 Students : They are books.
 Teacher : Where are they?
 Students : They are on the bookshelf.
 Teacher : There are books on the bookshelf.
 Now, say after me. There are many books on the bookshelf.

Students : There are many books on the bookshelf.
 Teacher : Are there many books on the bookshelf?
 Students : Yes, there are many books on the bookshelf.
 Teacher : Are there many books on the bookshelf?
 Students : No, there are not many books on the bookshelf.

The example of TO DO:

Teacher : Okay, students, now we are going to practice a verb TO DO as a helping verb. We will study the patterns first.

-
- S + v-1 (v-1 +s (es) + object (Positive)
 - Do (Does) + S + v-1 + object? (Question)
 - S + do not (does not) + v-1 + object (Negative)
 - What (where etc.) + do (does) + S + v-1?
-

Teacher : Do you like English?
 Students : Do you like English?
 Teacher : Yes, I do.
 Students : Yes, I do.
 Teacher : Do you like French?
 Students : Do you like French?
 Teacher : No, I don't.
 Students : No, I don't.
 Teacher : Now, start, say " Thai food"
 Students : Thai food
 Teacher : Do you like Thai food, Ratee?
 Ratee : Yes, I do.
 Teacher : Now, Ratee, ask Ladda
 Ratee : Ladda, do you like Thai food?
 Ladda : Yes, I do. What about you, Wimol?

Do you like Thai food?
 Wimol : No, I don't. You, Santi? Do you like Thai food?
 Santi : Yes, I do very much.
 Teacher : Ok. Now, let's practice using WHY? And BECAUSE
 Teacher : Why do you like Thai food?
 Students : Why do you like Thai food?
 Teacher : Because it is very tasty.
 Students : Because it is very tasty.
 Teacher : Now, Ladda, you ask Ratre.
 Ladda : Do you like Thai food, Ratre?
 Ratre : Yes, I do.
 Ladda : Why do you like Thai food?
 Ratre : Because it is tasty. What about you? Wimol, Do you like Thai food?
 Wimol : Yes, very much.
 Ratre : Why?
 Wimol : Because it is tasty.
 Teacher : Does your father like watching TV?
 Students : Does your father like watching TV.
 Teacher : Yes, he does.
 Students : Yes, he does.
 Teacher : Why does your father like watching TV?
 Students : Why does your father like watching TV?
 Teacher : Because he likes news programs.
 Students : Because he likes news programs.
 Teacher : Now, Santi, you ask Ratre.
 Santi : Why does your mother like doing housework, Ratre?
 Ratre : Because she is diligent.

Having practiced like this many times, students are assigned to do speaking interactive activities about what they have learnt.

The example of To Have :

Teacher: Now, a verb TO HAVE, Look at the forms.

-
- S + have (has) + got + object (Positive)
 - Have (Has) + S + got + object? (Question)
 - S + have (has) + not + got + object (Negative)
-

Teacher : Have you got a pencil?
 Students : Have you got a pencil?
 Teacher : Yes, I have.
 Ladda : Where is your pen?
 Ratre : It is on the table.
 Ratre : Have you got a car, Santi?
 Santi : Yes, I have.
 Ratre : Where is your car?
 Santi : It is over there.

The examples given above are suitable for some of the less-able learners. As mentioned above, the less-able learners are weak in most aspects of English, so students should learn by repeating the patterns as much as they can and gradually they will develop their skills and improve their skills to the higher level of English.

Conclusion

English is a foreign language of Thai people. Outside of the classroom, learners rarely use it for their daily communication. Some

learners :
 English :
 learnt Er
 are the k
 When th
 with ov
 studies,
 selected
 course r

Baruam
 Crystal.
 Harmer.
 Larsen.
 William

Weeler,

learners in remote school seldom listen to real English pronunciation, even though they have learnt English for more than 10 years. So, they are the less able to understand spoken English. When they are grouped in a large mixed class with over 60 students in a higher level of studies, a suitable teaching method should be selected carefully. The absolute objectives of the course must be clear. They should crawl up the

mountain slowly and confidently. The teacher's role is both as a teacher and a facilitator. Above all, the techniques of teaching are paramount. When students improve their language skills particularly their listening and speaking skills, and become capable, they gain confidence and can learn more quickly with their teacher and finally achieve learning goals they have set for themselves.

Bibliography

- Baruamh. T.C. (1991) **The English Teacher's Handbook**. New Delhi : New Delhi University Press.
- Crystal. David (1986) **The Cambridge Encyclopedia**. United Kingdom : Cambridge University Press.
- Harmer. Jeremy (1991) **The Principle of English Language Teaching**. London : Longman Press
- Larsen. Freeman (1986) **Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching**. : London : Oxford University Press.
- Williams. Mario and Robert Burden L. (1997) **Psychology for Language Teachers**. United Kingdom : Cambridge Press.
- Weeler, Rod (1994) **A Training Course**. London : Oxford University Press.