

Developing the Speaking Skill among ESL Elementary Learners*

Tunku Mohani Tunku Mohtar

Charanjit Kaur a/p Swaran Singh

Faculty of Languages and Communication
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia

Nadiah Yan Abdullah

Mazyani Mat

Centre for Languages and General Studies
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia

Abstract: The issue regarding the command of English among Malaysian students has been raised and discussed very frequently. One of the language skills they are obviously weak at is the speaking skill. They may have passed the English Language paper in the final examination. However, many are not successful at interviews which are conducted in English. Several reasons are attributed to this problem. One of the reasons is the weak foundation laid at the elementary level. This paper presents a case study on the teaching and learning of English at the elementary level. It focuses on developing the speaking skill at the initial stage among Primary One pupils. Although the focus is on the speaking skill, the other language skills are not ignored. In fact, they are integrated to reinforce the speaking skill. Various theories are provided to support and justify the undertaking. These theories aid in the understanding of acquisition of the speaking skill among young learners of English. This paper examines a number of factors that enable the pupils to acquire the language within the classroom context. The objectives of the paper are: to find out the teacher's pedagogical practices that encourage pupils to speak in English; to find out the views

Note:

* *This article is based on a paper presented at the International Seminar on Language Teaching (ISELT) 2015 organized by Pusat CITRA Universiti, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.*

of pupils regarding the learning of English; to evaluate the activities used to promote the speaking skill; to find out the challenges experienced by the language teacher.

Keyword: Speaking skills, ESL elementary learners

INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as a second language to beginners is full of challenges. What is more challenging is teaching the language to very young learners whose command of the first language is still very tender. A more daunting task is to enable them to use the language orally and also in writing. Since the English language is taught only as a subject in school, exposure to the language for many children is very limited. The low proficiency exhibited by many students in secondary schools and in some cases at the tertiary level may be caused by the weak development of the language at the primary school level. Speaking is the most important skill among the four language skills (listening speaking, reading and writing) because according to Ur (1996) people who know a certain language are considered speakers of the language. However, the speaking skill seems to be problematic for many Malaysian students. This has been attested to by a report which claims that students scored distinctions in the written English Language paper but failed at interviews (Rodrigues, 2006).

The use of English for oral communication appears to be difficult for learners of English as a second or foreign language. Zhang (2009) claims that for the majority of English learners, speaking is the most difficult skill to master. The problem is exacerbated when the language is only heard in the classroom and not practiced. The problem is also intensified when there is no support for its use outside the classroom. This point of view appears to be logical. However, there are a number of factors which can elucidate this matter. Ur (1996) attributes the difficulties to factors such as inhibition, nothing to say, low or uneven participation, and mother-tongue use. Rababa'h (2005) relates the difficulties in speaking to the

learners themselves, the teaching strategies, the curriculum, and the environment. The students' inability to communicate in English is due to the use of the first language in classroom management (Littlewood, 1981). In such a situation learners are deprived of the opportunity to speak in English.

The beginning stage of language learning is crucial as it is the foundation of language development. If this foundation is weak, then the development will be marred. What is taught is assumed to be learned by the pupils. However, it also depends on how it is taught and learned.

Focus on the speaking skill

The focus on the speaking skill is to effectuate the acquisition of the English language among elementary learners. It is imperative that this happens as the ability to speak English nowadays is crucial for advancement in certain fields of human endeavour, especially science and technology. According to the primary school syllabus (Standard Document) issued by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia, the basic skills in speaking are exchanging greetings, introducing oneself, make polite requests, thank someone and express a simple apology (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 17). The overall aim of the English Language Curriculum is 'to equip pupils with basic language skills to enable them to communicate effectively in a variety of context that is appropriate to the pupils' level of development' (p. 3).

The idea of focusing on the speaking skill is to enable the learners to communicate in English using simple structures, based on meaningful contexts. Since all the pupils in this study are of Malay parentage they are inclined to communicate in Malay in the classroom. Furthermore, all the content subjects are taught in Malay which is the medium of instruction. The English Language is taught as a subject in school. Naturally the pupils are comfortable to communicate in Malay. This makes the English Language teacher's task an arduous one. The burden of equipping children with the appropriate language skills should not rest on teachers alone. Teachers need not take full responsibility for this task.

Certain factors drawn from theoretical literature can help mitigate the problem. They are different views regarding language acquisition and development.

Views of language acquisition and development

Language acquisition and development have been viewed from various perspectives. The behaviourists believe that learning is a result of a series of stimuli and responses. Learners are made to produce language automatically through repetition of structures. Habits are formed as a result of reinforcement and reward.

The behavioristic ideas were rejected by Chomsky (1986). According to Chomsky, children have an inherent ability to learn any language. Chomsky believes that children are born with a Language Acquisition Devise (LAD). They are able to pick up and process language that they hear around them easily. They are also able to acquire grammar based on certain similarities all languages have. Chomsky accounts for this ability through his principle of Universal Grammar (UG). All languages are made up of the same components such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, vowels and consonants. Nevertheless, in learning a second language, learners may produce linguistic structures which differ from those made by native speakers of the language. Schachter (1990) argues that second language learners do not use principles of UG independently without referring to their first language.

According to the cognitive and information processing theories, language learning is the result of the human brain forming networks of associations based on the input received. Piaget (1959) postulates that children interact with their environment to obtain knowledge and understand the world around them. Vygotsky's (1962) view is in line with Piaget's. He maintains that the child acquires language by engaging in conversation with adults. The adults teach children about the world around them.

Lenneberg (1967), a psycholinguist, postulates the Critical Age Hypothesis for language acquisition. According to this hypothesis language acquisition can easily occur between the age of two and the age of puberty, that is, around

the age of twelve. After this age, the acquisition process is slower. The explanation seems to be that during the critical age language processing can take place in both the right and left side of the brain. After maturation, the language function shifts to the left side of the brain. Lateralisation is said to have taken place. Acquisition after this stage is said to be slower and less successful than normal first language learning (Krashen, 1975; Lenneberg, 1969; Scovel, 1969). Some authors (DeKeyser & Larson-Hall, 2005; Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003) support the existence of the CPH. However, a few studies have shown that children above the age of 12 are faster than younger children in acquiring second language morphology and syntax (Ervin-Tripp, 1974; Fathman, 1975). Authors such as Bialystok (2001) and Birdsong (2005) are in favour of this view. Although the aim of this study is not to support or disapprove this theory, the results may indirectly implicate it.

Krashen (1982) posits the idea of comprehensible input. According to his input hypothesis, the amount of comprehensible input is the most important factor in the amount of language acquired. McLaughlin (1992) postulates that second language learning can be a frustrating experience even for adults. It can be just as frustrating for children although it is generally believed that children are “facile second language learners” (ibid. pp. 129). Finocchiaro (1994) opines that childhood is the most favourable period to lay a firm foundation for oral fluency. In their research Hakuta, Butler and Daria (2000) discovered that it took two to five years for young children to acquire oral English.

REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

A study by Dil (2009) revealed that Turkish EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners were anxious and unwilling to communicate in English classes. They were fearful of being negatively evaluated when they made mistakes.

A study was conducted by Hakuta, Butler, and Witt (2000) on English language learners in Grades 1 to 6 in San Francisco Bay Area. The objective was to discover how long it took English learners to attain oral proficiency. The samples

had been in the area since Kindergarten. The researchers concluded that it took between 2 to 5 years to acquire oral English.

Al-Hosni (2014) investigated grade 5 learners in a basic education school in Oman. Four teachers and three classes from one school were involved. She discovered that the learners encountered three major speaking difficulties. They were linguistic difficulties, mother tongue use and inhibition. These difficulties were attributed to the teachers' perceptions and tacit beliefs about teaching speaking, teaching strategies, curriculum, extracurricular activities, and assessment rules.

Although efforts at teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) or second language (ESL) at the primary school level in Europe and Asia have increased (Tucker, 2001), the related research literature is still at infancy level (Cameron, 2001).

This study aims to examine a number of factors that enable the pupils to acquire the language within the classroom context. The objectives of the paper are:

1. to find out the teacher's pedagogical practices that encourage pupils to speak in English;
2. to find out the views of pupils regarding the learning of English;
3. to evaluate the activities used to promote the speaking skill;
4. to find out the challenges experienced by the language teacher.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a small scale study which is part of a bigger study on the development of English language competence among elementary learners.

Sample population

The study presents a case of one teacher teaching English Language in a Primary One class in a Primary school. The school is located in Behrang, a small town which is about

20 kilometres from Tanjong Malim, Perak. The pupils were all Malay pupils. They came from the areas surrounding Behrang. The average age of these pupils was seven years. There were 14 girls and 11 boys in the classroom. Their parents or guardians were working in either the government or private sector. Most of the parents or guardians were low income earners. The pupils had just enrolled in Year One (Primary One). Some of them had undergone kindergarten in the same school. Their performance at English was ascertained by means of a pre-test. Most of them were able to write their names, match same words, and fill in the blanks with appropriate letters of the alphabet (Appendix A).

Research Instruments

The instruments used in this study were lesson observations, interviews and document analysis. Three observations were conducted and field notes were taken to record the teacher's instructional strategies and pupil participation. Each lesson lasted one hour.

Three interviews were informally conducted with the teacher and one with a few of the pupils observed. An informal interview or talk was carried out with the teacher after each lesson. The interviews were aimed at finding out the teacher's problems with regard to the teaching of English to Primary One pupils. The pupils were interviewed to ascertain their level of English they had attained after six weeks of schooling.

The documents examined were the module used by the teacher to teach in the classroom and the pupils' written work. Examination of the module was based on the teacher's comments and opinions after she had used the first few units in her teaching.

Data Analysis

Data obtained from observations, interviews, and document analysis were analysed qualitatively following the thematic approach (Holliday, 2012). The data obtained were taken

holistically and organized under themes according to the research questions and issues raised.

FINDINGS

Pedagogical Strategies

Data collected through observation revealed the teacher's pedagogical strategies which were discerned as consisting three main stages namely, introduction, engagement activity, and practice. The strategies used at each stage varied from lesson to lesson depending on the topic.

a. Introduction

In the first lesson observed the teacher demonstrated the use of prepositions 'in', 'on', and 'under' by making her pupils carry out her instructions, for example, 'Put your eraser in your Tupperware', 'Put your eraser on your Tupperware' and 'Put your eraser under the Tupperware'. The teacher checked the pupils' understanding by repeating the instructions and actions and ensuring that they were following the instructions correctly.

In the second lesson the teacher taught pupils the use of singular and plural forms using 'a/an' and 'some'. She showed pupils a pen and asked them to repeat after her 'a pen'. This was followed by a pencil and the pupils repeated 'a pencil'. Next, the teacher showed two pens. When pupils said 'two pen', the teacher corrected them. The teacher showed three pens and pupils said 'three pens'. The teacher then introduced 'some' by saying 'some pens'. The teacher showed four pens. When the pupils said 'pens' the teacher corrected them by saying 'some pens' which was then repeated by the pupils. The teacher stressed the sound of 's' in 'some pens'. The pupils repeated after the teacher. The teacher repeated the whole process by showing one, two, three and four pens to get pupils to say 'a pen' and 'some pens'.

In the third lesson the teacher taught the use of ‘some’ in context. She distributed picture cards which showed food items such as fried chicken, cupcakes, carrots, eggs, ice-cream and doughnuts to the pupils. Each pupil had a card. She told them to hold up the cards when she called their names. She told them to say “I have some.... “. Pupils had to complete the sentence by saying out the food item shown in the picture. She called up one pupil “Abdullah” to show his card:

Abdullah: I have some..... (unable to complete)

Teacher: fried chicken

Abdullah : fried chicken

Teacher: I have some fried chicken

Abdullah: I have some fried chicken

b. Engagement activity

This stage of the lesson was meant to reinforce what was taught at the beginning of the lesson and to check how much pupils had learned. At this stage, the teacher used her computer notebook to teach. In the first lesson, the teacher showed some examples of the prepositions using some colourful pictures. Using a computer notebook and a projector, the teacher showed the structure ‘There is’ which appeared on the screen. The teacher then showed a picture of an egg and asked the pupils whether “There is ‘a egg’ or ‘an egg’?” When a pupil said ‘a egg’ the teacher repeated the question. When another pupil answered ‘an egg’ the teacher read out the structure “There is an egg in the egg-cup”. The pupils repeated the structure after the teacher. The teacher reminded the pupils of the rules regarding the use of ‘a’ and ‘an’. She even demonstrated the use of the prepositions again.

In the second lesson, the teacher used her notebook to show pictures in order to teach the singular and plural forms. She focused on the use of ‘a/an’ and ‘some’.



Figure 1 Pictures showing ‘one’ and ‘more’

She used two pictures simultaneously to demonstrate ‘one’ and ‘more’. At this point, the teacher reminded the pupils the rules governing the use of ‘a’ and ‘an’. When she pointed to each picture, the pupils would either say ‘an ice-cream’ or ‘some ice-creams’.

The teacher then showed other pictures of food items which required the pupils to use ‘a/an’ or ‘some’. She praised pupils who gave the correct answers. Some pupils had difficulty in pronouncing the final letter ‘s’. The teacher made the pupils practice the ‘s’ sound in the words given such as ‘nuggets’ ‘biscuits’, buns.

In the third lesson, the teacher told a pupil, Abdullah, to point to a female pupil. A girl stood up and showed her picture. The pupil had to repeat “I have some....

Pupil: I have some....

Teacher: I have some cupcakes

Pupil: I have some cupcakes.

The teacher then told the pupil to point to another pupil of the opposite gender. The same teaching and learning process went on for about 30 minutes. Pupils repeated the same structure with pictures showing the food items.

c. Practice

This stage of each lesson was meant for pupils to practice on their own the use of the items taught. The pupils worked in groups at their own desks. They were given worksheets to complete in class (Appendix B). The teacher monitored

the pupils' work. She provided individual attention to the pupils. She ensured that the weak pupils were sufficiently guided. The better pupils were encouraged to help the weaker ones (Appendix C). Some pupils had problems reading the instructions and also matching the pictures to the correct information. The teacher made the pupils repeat the words found in the module many times so that they could say it independently without relying too much on the teacher.

Views of pupils

With regard to the learning of English, the pupils' participation in class indicated their interest in the subject. However, the rate of learning differs. Some pupils learned faster than others. An interview with six of them revealed various stages of mastery. Four out of six were able to answer questions given to them which were "What is your name?" and "How old are you?" Two of them understood the questions but did not answer in complete sentences. They merely gave their names and their ages. Two pupils could not understand the questions in English. Out of the six, one pupil did not like to learn English as he said it was difficult for him. The others said they liked to learn English but could not give any reason although the question was asked in Malay.

Activities used to promote the speaking skill

According to the teacher, the activities provided in the module were suitable for the pupils. The first lesson dealt with introducing oneself. Pupils merely had to learn how to answer questions such as "What is your name?" and "How old are you?" These questions were considered suitable for pupils to learn in view of their first week at school. They were not familiar with one another in the classroom. The related questions and answers were meaningful in the classroom context. The teacher, however, supplemented the activity with that of her own, especially where phonics was concerned. She also provided additional pictures using the

notebook as they were colourful and bigger in size compared to those given in the module. The activities in the module incorporated grammatical structures which were used in context to make them meaningful to the pupils. Oral activities such as question and answer, poems, songs, and short dialogues were included in the unit of the module taught.

Challenges experienced by the language teacher

The teacher revealed that there was a need to improve the pupils' language proficiency as well as their reading abilities. The pupils' reading ability would enable them to speak confidently. The teacher agreed that the English language module designed could help improve the pupils' proficiency. Being resourceful and creative in the classroom would also motivate the pupils to learn English better. The teacher mentioned that she had to prepare interesting activities that would suit the pupils' needs and also their level of English language acquisition. The teacher found introducing the topic of each lesson to the pupils very challenging. It was difficult to make the pupils understand certain concepts, for example, the articles 'a' and 'an'. The pupils were still unclear about their use. The English language modules distributed to the pupils were photocopied and were also not clear and therefore, the teacher felt it could also de-motivate the pupils to learn English. The teacher switched to L1 to assist the weaker pupils in the classroom so that they could understand the subject taught in the classroom. The pupils' limited proficiency was one of the reasons for the teacher to incorporate L1 in the classroom.

Another challenge to the teacher was making the pupils understand instructions given in English. Most of the time, she had to simplify the words and instructions. She often resorted to using gestures to make students understand, for example, the word 'like'. She showed 'thumbs up' to indicate 'like' and down to indicate 'don't like'. At other times, she had to code-switch that is, using the pupils' mother tongue, Malay.

DISCUSSION

The data obtained in this study provide ample evidence that it is not easy to get young learners to acquire a second language within a very short time. Espinosa, an expert on early childhood education opines that “becoming proficient in a language is a complex and demanding process that takes many years” (2015). Nevertheless, in this study a few pupils managed to acquire certain elements of the English language within a few weeks. On the other hand, some were unwilling to respond in English. They were shy and had problem articulating in English. A similar problem was also discovered by Al-Hosni (2014) who investigated grade 5 learners. The pupils had such a problem because of mother tongue and inhibition. A likely problem is that they were afraid of making mistakes similar to a revelation made in Dil’s (2009) research. It was also noticed that learning rates differed from pupil to pupil

The factors which appeared to influence the acquisition of the language were as follows.

a. Teaching strategies

It was noticed during the lessons the teacher provided:

1. relevant and meaningful contexts for teaching new linguistics elements. The context included pictures and objects.
2. a lot of repetition of the structures taught.
3. comprehensible input. The linguistic elements were easy enough to be understood by the pupils.
4. scaffolding procedures in a lesson, beginning with controlled activities, then guided, followed by more independent work.
5. sufficient linguistic input. The amount of new items taught was not too much nor too little for learning in one lesson.
6. a variety of techniques to make the language comprehensible to the pupils. The technique included the use of the children’s mother tongue, Malay.

7. encouraging remarks when pupils made correct responses.
8. monitoring of pupils' work during practice activities.

b. The teacher

The teacher was enthusiastic in teaching English to children. She used English most of the time in the classroom. She only resorted to Malay when pupils failed to understand the examples or instructions given. She translated to English what pupils conveyed in Malay, for example, when a pupil said "*Saya makan donut di kantin tadi.*" The teacher asked the pupil to repeat after her, "I ate a doughnut in the canteen just now."

c. Pupils

The pupils were able to understand English although they were not ready to speak it. They were able to complete the exercises given in the classroom. They were also able to respond to the teachers display questions most of the time, that is, they were able to answer "Yes" or "No" appropriately. At other times they gave very brief answers, for example, in one lesson dealing with food items, the teacher asked a question.

Teacher: Where do you see doughnuts in the school?

Pupils: Canteen.

It is evident that the pupils were able to understand the teacher's question which was in English because the context was familiar to them. Words such as 'doughnuts' and 'school', provide the key elements for pupils to answer the teacher's questions.

d. Topic

The topics dealt with were within the pupils' experiences. They included introducing oneself and food items. The

pupils were able to answer questions such as “What is your name?” and “How old are you?” The pictures provided in the lesson units enabled the pupils to identify the food items even before the teacher mentioned them.

e. Activities

The activities were within the pupils’ ability to answer. This was in line with the input hypothesis that comprehensible input will enable pupils to learn the language. The activities were also very short. They did not take a long time for the pupils to complete in class. This enabled the teacher to check the pupils understanding of the lessons. The integration of grammar in context ensured that the language was taught more meaningfully.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that there is no one direct strategy to develop the speaking skill among young learners especially when the language is not their mother tongue. The various theories mentioned above have a role to play in the children’s acquisition of English as a second language. Each of the theories contributes to the understanding of how a language is acquired by children.

The data obtained in the study was enough to make some deductions about the development of the speaking skill among young learners. They have shown interest in learning the English language. However, the environment outside the classroom did not encourage the use of English. The pupils interacted using their mother tongue during recess time. It is felt that more interactive activities in the classroom will help them to communicate in English among themselves.

REFERENCES

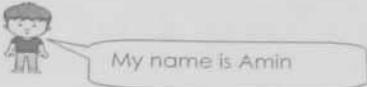
- Al-Hosni, S. (2014). Speaking difficulties encountered by young EFL learners. *International Journal on Studies in English language and Literature*, 2(6), 22-30.
- Bialystok (2001). *Bilingualism in development: Language, literacy and cognition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Birdsong, D. (2005). Interpreting age effects in second language acquisition. In J. F. Kroll & A. M. B. De Groot (Eds.), *Handbook of bilingualism: Psycholinguistic approaches* (pp. 109-127). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1986). *Knowledge of language: Its origin, nature and use*. Westport: Greenwood.
- DeKeyser, R., & Larson-Hall, J. (2005). What does the critical period really mean? In J. F. Kroll & A. M. B. De Groot (Eds.), *Handbook of bilingualism: Psycholinguistic approaches* (pp. 109-127). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dil, Y. (2009). EFL learners' communication obstacles. *Electronic Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(29), 84-100.
- Ervin-Tripp, S. (1974). Is second language learning like the first? *TESOL Quarterly*, 8(2), 111-127.
- Espinosa, L. M. (2015). Second language acquisition in early childhood. In R. New, & M. Cochran (Eds.). *Early Childhood Education*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group. Retrieved from <http://www.learningdomain.com/MEdHOME3/ECEcurriculum/SecondLanguageAcquisitionLEspinosa.pdf>
- Fathman, A. (1975). The relationship between age and second language productive ability. *Language Learning*, 25(2), 245-253.
- Finocchiaro, M. (1964). *Teaching children foreign languages*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Hakuta, K., Butler, Y. G. & Witt, D. (2000). How long does it take English learners to attain proficiency? Retrieved from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download;jsessionid=A42D80F11A97D2CC799FF406F4F7A206?doi=10.1.1.32.2371&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Holliday, A. (2012). *Doing and writing qualitative research*. Los Angeles: SAGE
- Hyltenstam, K. & Abrahamsson, N. (2003). Maturation constraints in SLA. In C. J. Doughty & M. H. Long (Eds.).

- Handbook of second language acquisition* (pp.539-588). London: Blackwell.
- Krashen, S. (1975). The critical period for language acquisition and its possible bases. In D. Aaronson & R.W. Rieber (Eds.), *Developmental psycholinguistics and communication disorders*. New York: New York Academy of Sciences.
- Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Lenneberg, E. (1969). On explaining language. *Science* (no.165). pp. 635-643.
- McLaughlin, B. (1992). *Myths and Misconceptions about second language Learning*. Retrieved on from http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_Myths_Misconceptions/
- Ministry of Education Malaysia. (2012). *Dokumen Standard Kurikulum Sekolah Rendah*. Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Education Malaysia.
- Piaget, J. (1959). *The language and thought of the child*. London: Routledge.
- Rababa'h, G. (2005). Communication problems facing Arab learners of English. *Journal of Language and Learning*, 3(1), 180-197.
- Rodriges, S. (2006, September 5). 'A' in exam, 'F' in interview. *The Star*, N47.
- Scovel, T. (1969). Foreign accents, language acquisition and cerebral dominance. *Language Learning*, 19(3-4), 245-253.
- Tucker, G. R. (2001). Age of beginning instruction. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35(4), 597-598.
- Ur, P. (1996). *A course in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zhang, S. (2009). The role of input, interaction, and output in the development of oral fluency. *English Language Teaching*, 2(4), 91-100.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1962). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Appendix A: Test

English Language
Test 1

1. Copy the words in the sentence.

 My name is Amin

a. MY name is Amin. ✓
b. My name is Amin. ✓
c. MY NAME IS AMIN. ✓

2. Match the words in Part A with those in Part B. The first one is done for you.

Part A	Part B
What	your
is	name?
your	What
name?	is

3. Fill in the blank with your name.

My name is NURUL SYAFIQ A ✓

1

Appendix C: Classroom Activity

