

## TEACHERS' STRATEGY OF POSITIONING IN TEACHING YOUNG LEARNERS

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**Abstract:** Teacher's position in the classroom depends on several aspects including the classroom s/he teaches in – whether s/he has the ability to move around – and the nature of the activities s/he is going to do in the class. As teacher's gestures including positioning and body posture bring the particular message to the students, the position whether a teacher should stand in front of the students, crouch down near them or sit with them on the floor needs to be considered when the teacher plans the lesson. This paper presents a discussion on how teachers of young learners position themselves in the classroom, the observed students' behaviour during the lesson as the impacts of the positioning, and the teachers' perspectives of the impacts of their positioning towards the students' movement in the classroom. The study is done through observations towards an interview with two English teachers teaching classes of children of early years (4-5 years old), at a pre-school in Jakarta. It portrays a description of the teachers' position in the classroom and why they choose a particular position for a particular activity. The findings show that standing, sitting and kneeling in front of the students or among them is the most chosen position. Analysis on how students react to their lesson in relation to their position while teaching is also presented after a discussion on the reasons of teachers choosing their position in the classroom. As a final point, I elaborate the discussion on how teacher's positioning strategy can be implemented to help improving teacher's teaching practice. The presentation is envisioned for language teachers, language teaching researchers, teacher trainers, and those who are interested in the area of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL).

**Keywords:** *teacher's position, Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), young learners, classroom management*

### INTRODUCTION

The idea for doing this study started with an observation of class with a teacher teaching young learners for the purpose of program evaluation. It was a class at a pre-school in Jakarta, where students join an English class almost every day for 30 minutes per session. Trying to calm down the noisy class and make the students sit, the teacher I was observing

told her students to sit down. "Can you please sit down? Sit down, please? Everyone, please listen to me," she said, almost shouted, in order to grab students' attention and lessen the noise made by the students. Saying it several times, the teacher found out that the students did not want to sit down. By that time, she continued asking her students to sit down. This means that she used several minutes to ask students to do what she asked, almost in vain.

The school implements a teaching method in centres. The centre (classroom) does not have chairs and tables; students sit on the carpet instead. I could see that the teacher kept standing when asking the students to sit down on the big carpet, and the distance between sitting students and standing teachers was highly significant. A preliminary thought about the effect of this distance emerged. The distance might cause students to be hindered from communicating properly with their teachers, which resulted in the students' reluctance to sit while the teacher was standing.

The observation note has raised a question of how a teacher should position themselves so that it helps him or her delivering the lesson with minimum or without any technical issues that might hinder the flow of the lesson, and eventually promote learning.

Griffiths (2005) made a point that where and how teachers position themselves in the classroom shows a message about what teachers want the students to do. Therefore, it shall go in line with and help the teachers convey the spoken message, so that students gain better comprehension about the instruction the teachers give and the lesson the teachers teach.

Teachers' position in the classroom affects the running of the activities in the class as well as the students' behaviour during the lesson, which makes the discussion about teachers' position, becomes significant in the area of teaching. Positioning is an element of teaching preparation that needs to be considered carefully prior to teaching or when teacher plans the lesson in order for teachers to teach effectively in terms of time, and effectively in terms of method.

The discussion in this paper comprises the exploration of how teachers position themselves in the classroom and how they decide to position themselves in the particular location. It also presents the discussion of how each position sends out the message from the teacher and analyses on how students are influenced by the position chosen by the teachers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The terms children, young children, and young learners are used in the area of English Language Teaching (ELT) as seen in some literature including Brown (2001) and Harmer (2007). Braddock (2014) portrayed by the *Teaching English-British Council-BBC* website, depicts the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 in explaining that a child is “anyone who has not reached their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday irrespective of the age of majority in the country where the child is, or in their home country”. In the detailed chart, pre-school students (2-5 years old) are categorised as early years.

In the area of teaching in general, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), or Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), the discussion about teacher positioning is included in the area of classroom management. Bertrand (2009) describes that positioning self in the right place and making correct gestures will help teachers minimize or even solve the problem of managing, controlling, and grabbing the attention of the children. Children who do not pay attention might do so because of many reasons including the large numbers of students and that they talk about something else, that students do not understand the instructions, and that teachers do not know what they are doing (Bertrand, 2010). Thus, concluding Bertrand’s discussion, it is important for teachers to understand what they are doing by knowing where they will locate themselves in the classroom to ensure that the lesson is well accomplished.

A limited previous study has found out that teachers’ gestures and body posture, together with the positioning, has meaning to the students. In a research report written by Sime in 2006, teachers’ gesture is considered to function “in direct relation with their intention of organising the interaction” (p. 222). The monitoring function of teachers’ gestures and movement is also explored. “Teachers’ walking around the class from group to group or shift of body posture together with maintained eye contact indicated to the learners that they are being monitored” (p. 223). This portrays clearly that teachers’ movement has particular aims.

Sime’s (2006) study on the teachers’ gestures suggests three types of functions including cognitive, emotional, and organizational. The latter serves as a tool of classroom management, which involves teacher's positioning in the classroom. In spite of the difference of participants' age between Sime's and this research, it is logically accepted that "learners interpret teachers' gestures in a functional manner" (Sime, 2006, p 211). This function is explored in this research to create a discussion on how teacher's positioning in the classroom impacts the behaviour of the students.

In relation to where teachers position themselves among their students, another discussion by Larsen (2015) depicts what teachers can do to interact with their students in the classroom. A teacher would choose or need to stand in a particular position or move from group to group, or even crouch near the students based on the purpose of the teacher-student interaction, whether it is to give instruction, help students working in pairs, or give specific attention to students. This is in line with Griffith's (2005) suggestion on the importance of the position's role to send the message towards the students telling what teachers want their students to do.

Thus, within the surprisingly very limited study on how teachers' position in the classroom contributes on the students' learning process and the result, this research is one of the very few studies that fill the gap. This research is envisioned to enrich the discussion in the area of classroom management, specifically on teacher's positioning in the classroom.

## **METHODS**

The research aims at exploring teachers' strategies of positioning in the classroom. It portrays where and how teachers place themselves in the classroom, why or how they decided to choose the position and the teachers' perspective on how their position influences the students' position and behaviour or actions during the lesson.

The study explores and builds understanding about the topic of teacher's positioning. It aims at framing a strategy of positioning done by English teachers of young learners. The practice of constructing understanding through participants' point of view marks the study as a qualitative study (Merriam, 2009). The data is gathered from various ways including observation, interviews, chart completion, and photo elicitation, which also marks the study as a qualitative study because it does not rely on a single data source, as Creswell (2009) explains.

The study involved two English teachers at a Pre-school in Jakarta, Indonesia. The recruitment of participants uses the saturated method. The method applies a non-probability sampling procedure where participants come from all members of the targeted population because of the small population that makes it too few for making the sample out of them (Borg & Gall, 2007 in Benson & Odera, 2013). The two English teachers are all the teachers in the pre-school under study; therefore, all the two English teachers are recruited as the research participants. Given pseudo names, the first teacher is a female teacher and uses the name Netty, and the second teacher is a male teacher who uses the name Ferry.

The data collection is done through observation, interview, chart completion, and photo elicitation. Observation, which is described as “the act of watching social phenomenon in the real world and recording events as they happen” (Matthews & Ross, 2010 in Herdiansyah, 2013, p. 129), and a “purposeful, systematic and selective way of watching and listening to an interaction of phenomenon as it takes place” (Kumar, 2014, p. 173) is used to collect data on how teachers position themselves in the classroom. The observation is done in two sessions for each teacher, focusing on the way teachers position themselves and the body gestures and posture that they make, in relation to students' actions or behaviour during the lesson, recorded in an observation note. Pictures are taken during the observation, which later becomes the material for the photo elicitation method.

Interview, as a means to “obtain a special kind of information” (Merriam, 2009, p. 88), is done once with each teacher, exploring what position the teachers usually take and why they choose that position. The interview also explores the teachers’ reflective thoughts about their teaching practices including the influence of their position towards the students’ behaviour and position. The interview applies semi-structured method, on that lets the interviewer elaborate and ask more questions as the situation develops (Lichtman, 2006). Having interview guide consisting of main questions, I am open to the possibility of getting into a situation where more questions for clarifications are needed to ask. The interviews are recorded and transcribed.

The participants are also required to complete a chart of “Teacher’s Position in the Classroom”. As a different form of survey or questionnaire, this is done in order to give chance for teachers to explain their positioning in the classroom through a written document. Completing what the participating teachers discuss in the interview, the chart says what is not seen in the observation and what is not said in the interviews. The chart is provided in the Appendixes.

As there is a need for more detailed, reflective and elaborating explanation about teachers' position in the classroom, photo elicitation as another way of obtaining more explanation from the participants fulfils the need. “Photos sharpened in informants’ memory and reduced the areas of misunderstanding” (Harper, 2002, p. 14) and photo elicitation “mines deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews” (p. 23). Close (2007) adds to the point that “often photograph use in interviews evokes previously lost information, feelings and memories” (Close, 2007 in Marsh et al., 2016, p. 45). The method is done by “inserting a photograph into a research interview” (Harper, 2002, p. 13). In this study, I used pictures I took during my observation. From the many pictures that I took, I chose 4 pictures that represent varieties of teachers’ positioning. Later in the interview, I ask the teachers what happened in the classroom at the time when the pictures were taken and why teachers chose to take that position in that particular part of their lesson. The explanation obtained from the participants complete the answers they give in the interview, describing more wholly about their strategies of positioning. This is a

generative aspect in the research because “it gave greater insight and a new understanding from the deeper perspective of the research participant” (Marsh et al., 2016, p. 46).

However, observation, interview, documents and records as the source of data have limitations (Patton, 2015). In observation, limitation lies on the “possibility that the observer may affect the situation being observed in unknown ways” (p. 190), also on the limited focus on external behaviours because an observer cannot see and hear what the participants think and feel. Limitation of an interview data lies on the possibility of “distorted responses due to personal bias, anger, anxiety, politics...” (Patton, 2015, p.190). The limitation that documents and records – in this research the photos – have lies on the possibility of incompleteness and inaccuracy. Variety of data sources reduces the weakness of each method. Thus, triangulation of data is implemented in this research.

With the above-mentioned ways of data collections, the data analysed includes interview transcripts, observation notes, and completed charts. In this qualitative research, the process of data analysis starts with coding the data obtained from the interview, observation notes, and chart completion. Themes are generated from the research questions, namely where teachers position themselves in the classroom, how they decide to choose the position, and how they see their position influence students' behaviour during the lesson, which becomes the core categories.

The analysis involves comparing data from the three data sources. Not only comparing, the three data sources can be used to complete each other and form a full chart or result of all three categories. Eventually, a more comprehensive chart is completed using the above-mentioned data sources.

## **DATA FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

It is important to mention that, out of the many theories, conversations and research on teaching, very little has explored about teacher's position in the classroom. This study is designed to discuss the findings from the view and conversation on classroom management; however, finding sufficient supporting ideas and opinions is everything but satisfactory. Therefore, the analysis is grounded on the findings to build an understanding on how teachers decide their position and view their position in relation to their students' behaviour.

### **Teachers' Positioning Strategy**

#### **Types of Positions**

In her teaching, Netty stands behind, in front of or among the students. She also sits opposite the students. Sometimes she also kneels beside her students, in front of or among them. Ferry usually positions himself besides, among or in front of his student while standing. He sometimes also sits beside and in front of the students.

The table below summarizes the position that the teachers take during the lesson. The data is generated from the interviews and the chart that the teachers have completed.

Position	beside	behind	in front of	among (or with)
stand	√	√	√	√
sit	√		√	√
crouch				
kneel	√		√	√

*Figure 1. Teacher positioning in the classroom*

The position of crouching is not a popular position among these two teachers, which may be caused by the classroom setting. The classroom does not use tables and chairs but carpet to sit on, which makes the teachers do not have the needs to position themselves in such a way. However, although the classroom arrangement makes students and teachers sit on the carpet during lesson, there are activities that are done standing. In such a case, teachers and students stand.

### **Variations of Positions and Their Aims**

Either sitting, kneeling or standing in front of, beside, among or behind the students, the teachers had their reasons.

Ferry stands for explaining about activities that will be done standing. “Sometimes I stand in front of them when I need to give information about what we are going to do” (Ferry). He also expects the students to be more active in terms of doing more activities in different position instead of only sitting down. “I don’t want them to just sit for 15 to 20 minutes. I want them to be active by standing up.”

The choice of standing position is also taken for the purpose of getting students attention. Ferry believes that when he stands, he can grab his students’ attention. “Sometimes, first in the session I begin with getting their attention in a standing position, so I can grab their attention. After they pay attention I sit down to talk about the material we are studying that day” (Ferry).

Besides those reasons, Ferry considers positioning for the easiness of delivering his message. Ferry believes that sitting down together with the students enables him to explain better the lesson. "I think I want to explain about the material and get their attention by sitting down." In other sessions, he puts the students in a row, for the ease of running the activity. "It's easier to put them in a row, so they need to queue one by one, not just sitting but standing." He adds, "I give the explanation about the girl do one activity and the boys do another activity, I don't know, it's just easier I guess." It is seen that Ferry chooses a particular position to suit the nature of his planned activities.

Meanwhile, Netty explains that she would kneel in order to make the students feel comfortable with her for the purpose of good communication. "Maybe because I want them to feel that I am as height as they are. So they don't feel that I am more powerful. They feel like I am a friend, not a teacher so they don't feel hesitate to start a dialogue" (Netty). Every time she is in distance with her students, she will come closer, directing her body towards or kneeling beside her student to position herself near her students to give more explanation. "And then when I get them some task and then they want me to explain more, I will go close to them and then be kneeling or sitting... it depends... if the students stand I will kneel, if the students are sitting I will sit" (Netty).

When she is standing, she will bend her body towards her student who asks something to her and answers or explain in that position. This is described in the picture, which is explained as "This is when my student asked me about a question, I was standing before the student asked but because I want him to get close to me so I took that position" (Netty)

From the chart that the teachers completed, interviews, and the photo elicitation, a summary of teachers' aims when taking particular positions is made. The following chart describes when a particular position is taken.

Position	beside	behind	in front of	among (or with)
stand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to assist students when they do activities using a white board</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to monitor the students' activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to give instruction</li> <li>to explain the topic being taught</li> <li>to grab students' attention</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>when giving students exercises</li> <li>to do the activity with the students</li> <li>to give instruction for activities done in the circle while the students are standing</li> </ul>

sit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to listen to students' opinion</li> <li>• to listen carefully to students' pronunciation</li> <li>• to encourage / assist students doing activity in front of the class</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to give instruction</li> <li>• to explain the topic being taught</li> <li>• to grab students' attention</li> <li>• to assist students when they do exercises</li> <li>• to explain the lesson</li> </ul>	
kneel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to be in the same level of height with the students</li> <li>• to encourage students of doing an activity in front of the class while students are standing</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to listen to a student's question or opinion</li> <li>• to point out certain pictures of movement for the class</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to demonstrate certain activity while students are standing</li> </ul>

*Figure 2. Variations of position and their aims*

Teacher's positioning is a strategy that the teacher has. The position is taken with considerations and it has the aim. The chart shows that one aim can be done in more than one position; it depends on the activities that will be going on. Giving instruction can be done while sitting or standing, but the teacher needs to be in front of the students. This also applies to the aim of explaining the lesson and grabbing students' attention. Kneeling near the students is necessary to show that teacher is of the same level as the students to create comfort in the students and promote good communication flow.

As an external factor, the teacher's ability to easily move around the classroom influences positioning. Whether teacher can move easily in the classroom – which depends on the classroom size – will determine if the teacher takes some locations to stand or sit, or takes only one spot to place himself or herself in the classroom during the lesson. Besides the above-mentioned, the classroom setting is included at this point. Whether the class uses chairs or carpets for the students and teachers to sit on will determine whether the teacher needs to stand, sit on the chair, sit on the mat or to have any other position. Type of activity relates to the task that the students are performing. The teacher will need to stand for

guiding students do games and in-class movement and take other positions for the purpose of different activities.

### **Teachers' Perspectives on How Their Positioning Affects Students' Behaviour**

Ferry often found difficulties telling the students what he wanted them to do. Ferry often stood in front of the students while the students were requested to sit on the carpet during the lesson. The students would jump or run towards him to touch the teaching aid – usually flash cards or picture books – he brought for the class. He had considered the students to be a little improperly behaved, causing the situation in the class a little chaotic.

“I never thought that my position will affect the situation in the classroom until a friend of mine told me about it. She suggested that I sit with students and then when I implemented the suggestion, a big change happened. The students were calmer than before, and they communicate very well with me. It seems that they knew what I wanted to do with them. Maybe because they are more comfortable with me now.” (Ferry)

Ensuring that students understand what the teacher wants them to do is important. Making students understand that the teacher will do the activity ‘with them’ is therefore crucial. For that reason, Ferry tried different position after a discussion about positioning in the classroom with his friend to make the students understand, resulting in the more ‘controllable’ class because the students felt like they were doing the activity together with the teacher who was nearby and reachable.

Meanwhile, Netty reflected that in some sessions, what she did to make the students do what she wanted them to do did not work. Netty had difficulties in grabbing her students' attention. She would give instruction with a higher voice, although resulting in nothing but students who did other things. This had made her think about the necessity of having consideration about the position she would take.

“In some sessions when I think I can get their attention, it didn't work. In some cases when I give instruction by standing position, they just did their things. They stood and played around. So, I think it's necessary to think about position.” (Netty)

After her thoughts about the importance of correct positioning a teacher must have, Netty adjusted the place she locates herself in the classroom and the way she took the stance. She sits with the students and kneels on the floor. She does not stand in front of sitting students. Now even when she stands with the standing students, she would bend her body towards

the students when talking as a strategy of having equal eye level and making her message delivered to her students. This is due to the height difference between the two parties.

### **Sending the Right Message**

In the discussion about how teachers locate themselves in the classroom, the principle is that where teachers place themselves and how they set their body stance will make students act accordingly, which promotes learning. This means that teachers probe students to do what they suggest through their positioning and posture. Griffiths' (2006) arguments that teacher's position shows a message and Harmer's (2007) explanation that teachers "can convey a number of meanings" (p. 44) through the way they use their bodies suggest that teacher's position needs to support the teacher's spoken language. Posture, as a way of setting the body in a particular stance, conveys meaning too. This "physical paralinguistic features" (Harmer, 2007, p. 44) or "non-verbal behaviour" (Sime, 2006) sends powerful messages to the students about what teachers mean. Gestures, according to Sime (2006) influence the process of language learning. This argument suggests that every teacher's movement should be considered or done with consciousness.

To be specific, teachers will stand among the students to show that they are ready to move around the class with them. They will stand in front of the students to indicate that they are about to give instruction for the next activity. They sometimes will need to stand beside the students to indicate that they are ready to assist the students, and will stand with their body bent towards the students to show that they are willing to listen to the students. It is also indicated that teachers will sit to show that they are asking for attention to be listened to. Lastly, they will kneel to show their students that they are ready to listen to the (standing) students.

Because the positioning also gives signal about teacher's expectation on where students should locate themselves and how they should act during the activity, a teacher who stands and asks students to point out a picture by touching the picture will mean that students need to stand and be in a comfortable position for approaching the teacher and do what is required. The type of the class activities contributes to the strategy of positioning. The activity in progress affects the choice of teacher's positioning and posture (Griffiths, 2005).

Where teachers place themselves include locations such as in front of, beside, behind, among, and between. Combined with posture such as bending towards students, moving forward to the students while listening to students' talking, teachers give signal about their expectation on students' position and actions as well as show a particular attitude about how they 'see' or 'position' their students; that they are of the same level with their students. Bending or moving their body towards the students enables teachers to show more attention to what students say. Kneeling near the students enables them to show that they

treat students as 'friends', where they can have an equal position and communicate better because there is no 'power relation' issue. Netty's explanation about the reason she kneels near the student shows that she considers the same eye level important to show the absence of the afore-mentioned issue.

Although proximity or close distance is “both a matter of personal style and of culture” (Harmer, 2007, p. 44) because “distance may denote formality or lack of interest” (p. 44), teacher’s action to move his or her body towards students reduces the physical distance between a teacher and the students, which can be used to “send conscious message about intent” (Harmer, 2007, p. 44). Netty’s movement of bending her body towards the students, moving closer to the students while sitting, and kneeling beside her students shows closeness as an indication of intimacy as well as the intention to carefully listen to the students, although to many others, as Harmer (2007) claims, closeness can mean threat.

One point to ponder is that sometimes teachers move spontaneously. They do not realise they have moved to a particular place in the classroom and have particular body stance, which has sent the wrong message to the students. In such case, students will act based on how they perceive the message, which might be considered not accord with the teacher’s expectation.

## CONCLUSION

The main consideration for teachers to choose their position in the classroom is the type and objective of activities that teachers do for every stage of lesson. This means that different stage might need different positioning by the teacher. For each purpose, teachers deliberately choose where and how they position themselves in the classroom. In relation to that, because teacher positioning affects students’ position and behaviour in the class, it needs to be considered and planned prior to lesson. Moving without reasoning is not considered sensible. Lastly, as every position and movement send the message to students, it is considered appropriate for teachers to position themselves deliberately and with consciousness, in order to convey the correct message. Thus, the lesson promotes learning better.

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