

USING A "SNAKE AND LADDER" GAME IN TEACHING SPEAKING TO YOUNG LEARNERS

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Abstract

Speaking is the basic as well as the most important skill that needs to be acquired by English language learners. It is advisable that learning speaking English should begin as early as possible; however, to teach speaking skill to young learners is not an easy task since their age is the age of playing. Teaching speaking to young learners requires a teacher to find the technique best work with children, one of which is through games. One of the games that is corresponding to the age of young learners is a snake and ladder game. This paper aims at describing how a snake and ladder game is used in teaching speaking to young learners. Based on the discussion on applying a snake and ladder game, it is concluded that this game is the right game to apply in teaching speaking to young learners. People during early ages like playing and dislikes studying, especially in a formal education. By using this game, the children (learners) do not realize that they learn to speak English because they enjoy playing the game. In addition, this game supports the issue of student-centered learning because the students are the ones who actively practice speaking, while the teacher acts as the learning facilitator who provides assistance if needed.

Keywords: game, snake and ladder, speaking, young learners

1. INTRODUCTION

English is the most important language in the world because its speakers can be found in every country in the world. Considering such importance, English should be learned since early ages. A number of studies have found that learning English at earlier ages is effective and very helpful in developing children's English proficiency (Shin, 2010; Gawi, 2012; de Bot, 2014). In addition, Adzija and Sindik (2014) argue that the most suitable age for starting the learning process should begin at the preschool age. Those studies prove that English proficiency is more easily achieved at earlier ages.

Besides, among the four basic skills in learning English, speaking is considered the most important skill to be taught to young learners. A number of previous studies

suggest that young learners should be exposed to oral skills in English rather than reading or writing (Nikolov & Djigunović, 2006; Test, Cunningham, & Lee, 2010; Tinsley & Comfort, 2012). When relating to the theory of first language acquisition, every child will certainly be able to speak earlier than to read or to write.

However, to teach speaking to young learners is not an easy task, especially in terms of how to make it interesting for them. Therefore, teachers need to be creative, searching for the best technique that can attract young learners. Many previous studies were conducted to find out the technique, strategy, or approach that best work to teach speaking to young learners. Wardiah and Syafei (2016) use fun-brain

game as a technique to improve young learners' English mastery. Another study, conducted by Dewi, Kultsum, and Armadi (2017), promote the use of communicative games in teaching speaking to young learners. Such games contribute a positive improvement on students' active participation, confidence, and fluency in speaking. Unlike the two previous studies that focus on teaching technique, Fitria (2013) focuses on finding the best approach to teach speaking to young learners. She found that a project-based learning approach encourages teachers to provide more varied speaking activities for young learners, which ultimately improves the learners' speaking ability.

Furthermore, most of the recent research claims that, whatever the techniques or approaches are used in teaching speaking to young learners, those techniques or approaches should focus on the learners' activities (child-centered activities). Most of the recent studies claim that child-centered activities which support the holistic development of the child with music, dance, stories, games, and songs provide natural opportunities for children to nurture positive attitudes towards the new language (Calabrese & Dawes; 2008, Enever & Moon, 2009; Tinsley & Comfort, 2012).

The ideas mentioned above show that games are considered to be helpful in building and developing the young learners' interest in learning English. Shaptozhvili (2002) says that the game does not only engage students in an enjoyable and challenging activity with a clear goal but also provides practice in another key area i.e. vocabulary. Games facilitate initial practice and periodic revision of vocabulary in an enjoyable context, thus making classroom vocabulary study an amusing and satisfying experience for teacher and student alike.

Furthermore, games benefit young learners very much. Carrier (1980), Gerlach and Elly (1980), Cameron (2001), and Bakhsh (2016) find out several advantages

of applying games as a technique in teaching speaking to young learners. First, it can be used to change the pace of a lesson and to maintain motivation. Second, it can encourage students to interact and communicate. Third, it can increase students' vocabulary and reduce the dominant role of a teacher in the classroom. Fourth, it can act as a testing mechanism, in the sense that it will expose areas of weakness and the need for remedial work. Fifth, it can make students seek to solve a problem in which they are intimately involved. Sixth, it can be used to punctuate long formal teaching units and review students' energy before returning to more formal learning. Seventh, it is motivating and challenging. Eighth, it can help students to make and sustain the effort of teaching. Ninth, vocabulary games bring real world context into the classroom and increase the students' use of English in a flexible, meaningful, and communicative way. Tenth, it usually involves friendly competition and keeps students interested in learning the language. Finally, it can help the students learn and hang on to new words more easily.

One out of a numerous number of available games for teaching, a board game is considered as an effective media in teaching speaking to young learners (Suryani & Rosa, 2014). Games are media of intertwinement that can build up the students' motivation and reinforce such language skills as speaking and listening. The students play a board game in the classroom only for language learning which helps them to increase their speaking skill. The board game can be defined as something or an instrument used to attract students' motivation to follow the learning process because it can make them focus on learning (Suryani & Rosa, 2014, p. 20). In addition, games can avoid young learners from being bored during the learning speaking process. Besides, they also enable learners to acquire new experiences within a foreign language which are not always possible during a conventional teaching technique. The board game can serve as a helpful media that will benefit both teacher

and the students. One of the board games that can be brought into a speaking classroom is snake and ladder. In relation to the background of the problem elaborated above, this paper aims at explaining how the board game “snake and ladder” is used in teaching speaking to young learners.

2. DISCUSSION

As a matter of fact, a “snake and ladder” game is a game commonly played by children for fun. They usually do it during their free time. Nevertheless, such game can also be used for teaching and learning

purposes. As such game is interesting for children, it can be used as a technique of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), particularly in teaching speaking to young learners. The snake and ladder game brought into a classroom should be designed in such a way that makes it possible to be used as the teaching media. The common form of snake and ladder game is certainly inappropriate to be used in language teaching which, therefore, needs to be modified or adapted to the target language teaching. One of the modifications of snake and ladder game can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The modified snake and ladder board game

As shown in Figure 1, the board of snake and ladder game looks different from its common form. Unlike the common look of snake and ladder board game, this board consists of only 25 boxes (spaces) each of which contains instructions or questions that will be verbally responded by the learners. The instructions and questions are so simple that enable young learners to give the expected responses. Like the common look of snake and ladder game board, the board also has snakes and ladders. Snakes indicate

“move down” and ladders indicate “move up”.

In teaching speaking to young learners by using a snake and ladder game, the learners are divided into several pairs, depending on the number of learners participating in the learning process. This is intended to speaking practice that will be performed by the learners during playing the games. When the game is applied to the class consisting of 16 learners, the teacher has to provide four snake and ladder game

boards, allowing all of the learners play the game, because each of the boards needs four players. Like the common rule of snake and ladder game, this game also needs a dice that will be shaken to determine the steps or movements of the players.

At the beginning of the game, one of the players from the first pair shakes the dice and rolls it to get the number of steps he/she has to perform. When the dice shows number 5, for example, he/she has to move five steps and puts the counter on space number 5. Based on the snake and ladder game board displayed in Figure 1, there is a ladder on space number 5. Once the counter lands at the bottom of a ladder, the player has to move his/her counter up to the top of the ladder, i.e. space number 7. However, before moving up to space number 7, the player (learner) has to follow the instruction on the space. On the space number 5, there is a question "What's your name?". This means that the players have to make a small conversation regarding asking his/her partner's name. Once again, when the counter lands on space number 7, there is another question "What's your hobby", meaning that the learners have to practice speaking by asking his/her partner's hobby. Once the first pair finishes the conversation, the turn is given to the other pair.

As the first pair does, the second pair also shakes and rolls the dice. When the dice shows number 4, they have to move four steps and put their counter on the space number 4. After that, they have to read the instruction "Put your bag on the chair". One of the players has to read the instruction loudly, and his/her partner performs the action of putting the bag on the chair. They will play in turn until one of the pairs lands on "finish" space. The pair that first lands on the "finish" space becomes the winner. It will be much better if the teacher provides a small gift to the winner, only to give more motivation to the learners.

Furthermore, when the counter lands on the tail of a snake, the players must move (slide) down to the head of the snake. In this case, the players have to perform both of the instructions or questions provided in both

spaces. For example, when the counter lands on the space number 22, the players have to read the question "What are you doing" and practice a small conversation on such topic. After that, they have to move down because on the space number 22, there is a tail of a snake. When the counter moves down, it arrives at the number 13 on which there is an instruction "Count from 1 to 10". This means that the players have to count from number 1 to 10 loudly.

While the learners are playing the game, the teacher is walking around the class to control their activities and possibly gives assistance or explanation if needed. By playing this game, the learners do not realize that they are learning speaking English at that time because they focus on the speaking activities guided by the game. In addition, one of the characteristics of children is that they like a competition; therefore, they will only focus on how to win the game. At the same time, they do not realize that they also practice speaking English. Applying this game is corresponding to the nature of student-centered learning (McCombs & Whistler, 1997; Collins & O'Brien, 2003; Glowa & Goodell, 2016) where the students become the center of learning activities and the teacher serves as a facilitator (Xiao et al., 2005; Ellerani & Gentile, 2013; Ahmed, 2015; Jagtap, 2016).

By playing this game, the main problem that is usually encountered by young learners in speaking (i.e. generating ideas) can be solved. They do not need to think the idea they will convey during speaking activities because what they have to say or speak with has been determined by the instructions or questions provided in each space of the snake and ladder game board. AlMutairi (2015) found that generating ideas is the main problem in speaking, and for which, he did a research by applying a brainstorming strategy to stimulate students to speak. Similarly, Borekci (2016) also proposes a brainstorming strategy to generate students' ideas in speaking.

Furthermore, this game also encourages young learners to enjoy learning speaking English. They will find that learning speaking English is an interesting activity. As a result, they will have more motivation to improve their speaking ability because they do not want to lose the game. Motivation is the key success of learning (Redondo & Martin, 2015), and once children have good motivation in learning, they will be used to doing it which eventually enhances their English speaking ability (Jafari, 2013).

3. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the discussion on applying a snake and ladder game, it is concluded that this game is the right game to apply in teaching speaking to young learners. People during early ages like playing and dislikes studying, especially in a formal education. By using this game, the children (learners) do not realize that they learn to speak English because they enjoy playing the game. In addition, this game supports the issue of student-centered learning because the students are the ones who actively practice speaking, while the teacher acts as the learning facilitator who provides assistance if needed.

The snake and ladder game modified in this paper is one of the examples of many other possible modifications. The number of spaces (boxes) used on the board and the instructions or questions provided on each of the spaces can be modified by considering the need of the learners. This game cannot only be applied to very young learners, but it is also possible to be given to a higher level of education, such as junior high school. However, the instructions and the level of vocabulary should be adapted to the prevailing curriculum.

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