

Using Play and Imagination to Enhance English Language Acquisition in Young Learners

Indra Susanto¹, Wilhelmina Tantri²

{indrassnt6@gmail.com¹, tantriwhl@gmail.com²}

Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng, Jl. Ahmad Yani No.10^{1,2}

Abstract. This paper aims to elucidate the advantages of incorporating young learners, play, and creativity in English language acquisition. It will also propose activities to be executed in environments for young learners, specifically targeting youngsters aged five and above. Drawing on the insights of educational theorist Van Alphen (2011), the paper underscores that both preschool and primary education can be significantly enriched through the use of creative and imaginative learning strategies. These strategies not only make learning more enjoyable but also support cognitive and linguistic growth. Additionally, the paper offers a range of activity suggestions that are suitable for young learners. By incorporating creativity and play, educators can promote a more engaging and effective approach to early English language education.

Keywords: English, play, creativity, imagination

1. Introduction

It is widely believed that language acquisition, especially English, should occur at an earlier stage of life. English, as a worldwide language with millions of speakers, offers numerous advantages for young learners in the future. Consequently, numerous parents assert that their children ought to acquire a second language in addition to their first language at the earliest opportunity. This phenomenon is also evident in the acquisition of the English language. Furthermore, it is believed that there is the existence of a biological timetable [1], after which the essential and irreversible acquisition of a second language transpires. This is referred to as the Critical Period Hypothesis. Parents enroll their children in schools that provide English language courses or immersion programs. In Indonesia, parents' apprehension regarding their children's English education in schools stems from the inclusion of English in the national curriculum [2].

Children and play are undeniably interconnected. Play and imagination have been extensively utilized in the implementation of suitable pedagogy for young learners. Integrating play into children's education yields two advantages: enhanced topic mastery and increased enjoyment during play. Young learners engage in productive learning when placed in an enjoyable atmosphere. In the Indonesian formal educational setting, English instruction

predominantly adopts a teacher-centered approach, resulting in passive engagement from students, particularly young learners. Integrating the advantages of youth, play, imagination, and English aims to identify a synergy that can significantly enhance the English language acquisition of Indonesian young learners. It's elucidated in the essay. Subsequently in the paper, the authors will propose activities to be executed in environments for young learners, specifically targeting youngsters aged five and above [3]. The activities are designed to provide a beneficial learning experience for kids.

2. Childhood, Play, and Creativity

This section presents study data to elucidate the advantages of incorporating young learners, play, and creativity in English language acquisition. Let us commence with young learners and the English language. The conviction in the notion 'the younger, the better' is prevalent in English language acquisition. Recent investigations have validated the conception. In the context of Saudi Arabia, it is contended that early English language acquisition, beginning at the age of five or six, yields superior outcomes compared to initiation at the age of twelve or thirteen [4]. Moreover, it is contended that enhanced performance results from early exposure to language training. A separate study conducted in a Middle Eastern context contends that a younger age facilitates English language acquisition. In the Palestinian context, first-grade students exhibit a notable advantage over fifth graders in reading comprehension and vocabulary[5]. The authors assert that the previous government policy mandating additional instructional hours benefits young learners. This, as per their assertion, demonstrates the efficacy of curriculum developers and policymakers in language learning interventions. Conversely, research conducted on the opposite side of the globe provide analogous results. A longitudinal study in the United States [6] indicates that, compared to their older counterparts, younger learners who receive ELL services earlier in life are more advantaged, as they can eliminate achievement gaps through substantial development. Furthermore, the authors urge governments to implement linguistic treatments at an earlier stage, specifically during the pre-kindergarten years. As demonstrated by these studies, a young age offers certain advantages in English language acquisition. This stage of development should be seen as a time when the possibility for beneficial language acquisition exists. Regrettably, this promise has not yet been fully realized in the Indonesian context.

The second topic to consider is the application of play as a pedagogical approach for young learners, especially in the context of English language acquisition. Multiple studies have demonstrated the advantages of play. It is argued that play serves as a medium for young learners to exercise autonomy, cultivate their interests, foster social interactions, and experience enjoyment and relaxation [7]. Furthermore, she contends that curriculum content must align with children's interests, as it significantly enhances learners' excitement. This may also encompass the execution of play. Research on minority children in the United Kingdom indicates that the incorporation of play enhances their confidence in speaking English and improves their communication abilities [8]. Their research also provides an opportunity to explore cultural diversity. It has also been asserted that child-initiated play in English language acquisition among young learners facilitates target language development by offering possibilities for experimentation, choice, error-making, and decision-making, ultimately fostering autonomy in learning [9]. In a different early childhood environment with varied English proficiency, it has been observed that learners with limited English skills are

generally less engaged in play[10]. The limited interaction results from the young learners' insufficient English competence to engage with their more proficient peers. Various reasons have been identified that can hinder the application of play in relation to its pedagogical benefits [11]. The expectations of learners, the available play resources, the establishment of boundaries and behavior management, the balancing of time constraints and academic standards, and the varied backgrounds of learners, their parents, and coworkers. These studies have demonstrated the advantages of play in English language acquisition, especially for young learners. Despite certain limitations in the integration of play into learning, the advantages should not be obstructed by challenges that can be mitigated. The research presented indicate that the integration of play in education is contingent upon the teacher's involvement. Through thoughtful engagement in play, educators can yield significant advantages for young learners, enhancing both their language acquisition and enjoyment of play.

Imagination is as essential as play for young learners. Imagination is also manifested in play. The incorporation of imagination in play leads to imaginative play. It has been contended that imagination is a crucial element of developmental processes in play [12]. Vygotsky, a prominent psychologist, asserts that the role of imagination is vital for life [13]. In examining the views of renowned educational theorist Van Alphen, it is asserted that children's education in both preschool and primary settings can be enhanced through the implementation of imaginative learning strategies [14]. The theorists assert that imagination can 'augment educational content, resulting in a deeper experience and comprehension' (p.32). In English Language Teaching, the provision of materials for young learners should facilitate the enhancement of imagination and creativity to foster linguistic and social development [15]. These literatures clearly illustrate the significant role of imagination in the learning process. The delivery of education that integrates pedagogy and resources that stimulate imagination can enhance young learners' creativity and language acquisition.

3 Proposed Activities

In the Indonesian setting, the use of play-based learning in English lessons is rare. The pedagogy of English lessons remains predominantly teacher-centered. Furthermore, traditional pedagogical approaches include classical methods such as grammar-translation, the direct method, and explicit instruction. There is fear that the application of these strategies may induce boredom in young learners, leading to a rapid loss of interest. It is argued that young infants learn most effectively through play and other pleasurable activities, and they possess a vibrant imagination [3]. Consequently, in the subsequent section of this essay, the authors will offer three actions pertaining to the integration of play and imagination for young learners within the Indonesian setting. The exercises can be easily integrated into the learning process and require no complex preparations. The activities that the author suggest are Reverse Order, Locate the Magic Sentence, and Heads Up.

Reverse Sequence

This game is versatile and suitable for many age groups, while it is particularly engaging for smaller children. The activity we propose below encompasses both play and creativity. This activity intends to contradict the teacher's instructions. Given its target audience of young learners, incorporating movement activities like leaping will be advantageous. The

incorporation of imagination enhances the enjoyment of the action. This activity focuses on their vocabulary component through the integration of this activity. For example, teachers can utilize 'basic directions' as the subject matter. The following explains the sequence of the activity:

The instructor should first impart the target vocabulary to the students, including terms such as 'left', 'right', 'ahead', and 'backward'. Total Physical Response is recommended for young learners [3]. Once the pupils have mastered the target vocabulary, they are arranged in a circle. If the number of participants is excessive, the activity may be segmented into two or three periods. The groups that are not participating might assist the teacher by serving as judges. The teacher thereafter elucidates the rules of the game for the students, which entail doing the contrary of what the teacher instructs. For instance, when the instructor commands, "Jump to the left," the students must leap to the right.

To enhance the activity's significance, the educator may incorporate elements of Indonesian folklore and music to accompany the task and stimulate the learners' creativity. As previously indicated, the fundamental element of play is imagination [12]. The educator may employ the traditional folklore of *Roro Jonggrang*, a narrative in which a prince must construct a thousand temples in a single night as a condition for his marriage proposal. The prince employs magical forces to construct the temples. The teacher may state, "Observe, children, the stones are soaring in and approaching us to construct the temples." Ensure that you avoid being struck by the hard stones! The enchanted stones are elusive. One should proceed in the contrary direction of the stone!"

To enhance the difficulty, the instructor may escalate the game's complexity by introducing two consecutive commands or accelerating the pace of movement. The participant(s) adhering to the reverse sequence triumph in the game. To enhance learners' motivation, little rewards such as confectioneries or stationery may be offered.

Identify the Magic Phrase

This practice targets the learners' listening skills and serves as an introduction to the topic of adjectives. To enhance its significance for young learners, the teacher can integrate a narrative into the exercise; hence, the inclusion of storytelling is recommended. To align with the Indonesian context, the narratives employed may derive from Indonesian folklore, as the country possesses a multitude of such tales with which the learners are acquainted. The educator may utilize the narrative of *Bawang Merah* and *Bawang Putih*. *Bawang Putih*, an orphan residing with her harsh stepmother and stepsister, *Bawang Merah*. The following is the sequence of the activity:

First, prior to the reading of the narrative, the instructor organizes the students into groups of three to five. Second, in each group, the instructor supplies five envelopes with jumbled words intended for usage as magical sentences that relate to the narrative. Given that this is intended for young learners, the sentence length should be restricted to five words. The envelopes are sequentially numbered from one to five. The instructor must ensure that the students refrain from opening the envelopes unless instructed to do so.

Third, the instructor narrates the tale of *Bawang Merah dan Bawang Putih* to the students. In the narrative, the teacher may state, for instance, "Now *Bawang Putih* reaches the river, yet the giant crab obstructs her passage." She requires the incantation. Could you please open the first envelope and assist *Bawang Putih* in locating the magical phrase?"

Fourth, the learners in their group rearrange the words to form a correct statement. Given the learners' youth, the phrases may be succinct, such as "The giant crab is handsome." In addition to incorporating humor, this might serve as an introduction to adjectives for the learners. The instructor proceeds with the narrative until all the enchanted phrases are disclosed.

Engaging in this practice allows young learners to perceive themselves as integral to the narrative, assisting the protagonist. Incorporating narrative and play, as seen in this activity, can provide previously indicated benefits, including the enhancement of social interactions, enjoyment and relaxation [7] along with the development of confidence in English speaking [8].

Heads-Up

This task might serve as an exercise for vocabulary development. This practice seeks to enhance learners' proficiency in vocabulary. Integrating heads-up is an additional method for utilizing the flashcards. Additionally, an application with the identical name is accessible on iOS and the Google Play Store. The program enhances efficiency by allowing teachers to modify the cards to align with the instructional materials. The subsequent activity serves as a model for implementation in the Indonesian young learner context:

The students are organized into groups of seven to 10 individuals. Each group must designate one member to serve as the representative, responsible for holding the flashcards or the phone on their head.

The representative of each group must accurately deduce the words on the card based on hints provided by the remaining group members. To enhance enjoyment and difficulty, each group member may provide only one clue to the representative. For example, if the displayed word is 'Apple', the associated clues may be 'red', 'sweet', 'round', etc.

Each group participating is allotted one minute to complete the entire set of flashcards. To achieve a perfect score, the group must construct a short statement utilizing the term. For instance, "My preferred fruit is the apple." or "The apple is spherical."

To enhance the enjoyment of the performance, two groups may participate simultaneously, while the remaining individuals assist the teacher by serving as judges. The group with the highest number of accurate answers and sentences prevails.

The activity exhibits an element of play. Utilizing vocabulary drill through games and competitions will prevent learners from experiencing boredom associated with traditional methods like worksheets. Students also get the opportunity to construct meaningful short sentences. Despite potential obstacles in execution, the engagement of learners in the activity and the resultant cacophony signify their active participation.

4. Conclusion

Children possess several potentials at a young age. This essay contends that youth, play, and creativity significantly enhance young learners' acquisition of the English language. In the Indonesian context for young learners, English pedagogy fails to incorporate play, which could enhance the enjoyment of learning. Educators have a crucial role in incorporating play and imagination into the curriculum. This essay presents the advantages of youth, play, and creativity in facilitating English language acquisition for young learners. Several beneficial

activities exist to facilitate the integration of play and imagination in English language acquisition. Considering the aforementioned aspects, the authors are optimistic that the pedagogy of English in Indonesia, particularly in the context of young learners, can transition from a traditional teacher-centered approach to a more student-centered model through the implementation of play pedagogy, which offers a novel learning experience for young learners.

References

- [1] L. Ortega, *Understanding second language acquisition*. Routledge, 2014.
- [2] M. S. Zein, "Elementary English education in Indonesia: Policy developments, current practices, and future prospects," *English Today*, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 53–59, Mar. 2017, doi: 10.1017/S0266078416000407.
- [3] J. Harmer, "The practice of English language teaching 4th ed," *England: Pearson Education Limited*, 2007.
- [4] E. M. K. Gawi, "The Effects of Age Factor on Learning English: A Case Study of Learning English in Saudi Schools, Saudi Arabia.," *English Language Teaching*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 127–139, 2012.
- [5] R. Dwaik and A. Shehadeh, "The Starting Age and Ultimate Attainment of English Learning in the Palestinian Context.," *English Language Teaching*, vol. 8, no. 10, pp. 91–99, 2015.
- [6] M. Gottfried, V.-N. Le, and A. Datar, "English language learners and kindergarten entry age: Achievement and social-emotional effects," *J Educ Res*, vol. 109, no. 4, pp. 424–435, 2016.
- [7] S. Howe, "What play means to us: Exploring children's perspectives on play in an English Year 1 classroom," *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, vol. 24, no. 5, pp. 748–759, 2016.
- [8] F. Tang and L. D. Adams, "'I have f-rien-d now': how play helped two minority children transition into an English nursery school," *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 118–130, 2010.
- [9] S. Mourão, "Taking play seriously in the pre-primary English classroom," *Elt Journal*, vol. 68, no. 3, pp. 254–264, 2014.
- [10] S. Dominguez and J. Trawick-Smith, "A qualitative study of the play of dual language learners in an English-speaking preschool," *Early Child Educ J*, vol. 46, no. 6, pp. 577–586, 2018.
- [11] F. S. Baker, "Challenges presented to personal theories, beliefs and practices of play in Abu Dhabi kindergartens: The English medium teacher perspective," *Early Years*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 22–35, 2015.
- [12] A. I. into Play, "Imagination, Playfulness, and Creativity in Children's Play with Different Toys," *Am J Play*, vol. 7, no. 3.
- [13] K. C. Tsai, "Play, Imagination, and Creativity: A Brief Literature Review.," *Journal of Education and Learning*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 15–20, 2012.
- [14] P. Van Alphen, "Imagination as a transformative tool in primary school education," *RoSE—Research on Steiner Education*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2011.
- [15] D. Bao, *Creativity and innovations in ELT materials development: Looking beyond the current design*, vol. 58. Multilingual matters, 2018.