



Boosting young EFL students' speaking through game activities

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Abstract. English is treated as a foreign language in Indonesia. The language is introduced to students in public schools from Grade 7. This qualitative study investigated English teachers' efforts in using game activities in teaching speaking and the problems faced in its implementation to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) young learners, aged 12-13 years old, at a public middle school in Banda Aceh. Two English teachers from two classes of Grade 7 students were audio-recorded and observed while teaching, and further given a questionnaire. The findings found that both teachers used game activities in their classes. Problems faced by the teachers in implementing these activities revolved around their preparation, class participation and class management. The discussion is elaborated in the paper. The study suggests that well-planned preparation, better class management and a focus more on the students' participation are needed to reduce difficulty in carrying out these activities in large class sizes.

Keywords: Game activities, teachers' efforts, speaking, young EFL learners

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking is the process of producing, receiving and processing information. It is the capacity to orally express feelings, thoughts, opinions, and facts to others (Gani, Fajrina & Hanifa 2015). Arsjad and Mukti (1988) suggest that a good speaker must master the problems being discussed, and should speak clearly and precisely. Hence, when teachers teach speaking in a classroom, they should offer interesting instructions (i.e. methods and approaches) to help students improve their speaking ability (Asnawi, 2015). Teaching speaking is not as easy as it seems, several problems such as oral tests, failure to speak fluently and worry about being looked down on for making mistakes are the general anxiety problems that learners face in learning speaking (Čepon, 2016). To be aware of the students' needs and of their learning outcomes for any speaking task used in class is believed to be essential for any English speaking teachers to achieve success in the classroom (Farrell & Vos, 2018).

It is well known that the ability to speak good English can open wider opportunities to students globally (Beniss & Bazzaz 2014). In the case of learning a foreign language, such as English as a Foreign Language (or EFL), students' ability in accepting a new language can be developed by having enjoyable activities (Erdem & Erdem, 2015; Scott & Ytreberg, 1990). Accordingly, Burns and Joyce (1997) assert that speaking is one important part to improve the students' communication skills because speaking can make students interact in conversation with each other and to learn something new. Without enough activities to expose the target language to students in class, it will hinder their development in language skills as well (Erdoğan, Özen Altinkaynak & Erdoğan, 2013). Therefore, it is important for teachers to create an enjoyable learning environment in a classroom and generate a positive feeling about the subject (Johnson, 2012). There are many activities proposed by experts to assist students in learning to speak. Among these activities are games activities.

Games are defined by Hadfield (1998, p. 4) as “activities with rules, a goal and an element of fun”. Basically, a game that is educational aims to teach students about a specific subject and to also teach them skills, both educational and social skills (Türkoğlu, 2019). Lots of games can be used in a language classroom, among others are information gap, guessing, matching, exchanging and role play (Hadfield, 1998). A broad classification of games is made by Lewis and Bedson (1999) as follows: movement games, task-based games, and computer games. A teacher needs to consider types of games suitable to support the material being taught to meet the students’ needs and lesson objectives (Khan, 1991). A study by Hang (2017) to 27 English teachers of young learners revealed that the teachers said they would use games if they are suitable and adaptable to the content, design, and objective of the material being taught. The games chosen should make the children interact with each other and support group work.

Games have broadly been used in language learning and yield positive results. Gozcu and Caganaga (2016) found that using games to teach language to learners at the elementary level helped to motivate them since it brought fun and the feeling of satisfaction as well as reducing anxiety and stress. One of the students said that she had fun and was very motivated during the learning process. Another student said that she was not afraid of making mistakes in learning to practice the language, all she wanted to do was to use the language to convey her message to her interlocutor. However, this study also revealed that games can also be boring when students need to deal with an unfamiliar word. In this case, the teacher and peers should help the student in understanding the meaning of the word. A similar study was carried out by Prihartini (2018) to 20 university students. In this study, Prihartini (2018) used physical games to teach English grammar. The result was also positive where using games in the teaching process proved to facilitate the learners to acquire new grammatical items. Another study by Hang (2017) found that teachers of young learners agreed that game is an effective tool to teach English to their young students as well, because it made the students to stay focused on the materials and felt fun at the same time.

Hence, to use games in the language classroom is aimed to develop students’ communication skills. By using games, students are expected to focus more on content than the form. The emphasize is on the ability to deliver the message and the interlocutor knows how to respond appropriately to the message (Greiner, 2010). Experts in English language teaching further argue that games help young learners grasp new words without memorizing it. This is because in playing a simple game, the students will likely repeat words that are good to help them build a relationship with the new words (Ibrahim, 2017). Moreover, another expert, Lee (1979) claimed that games make the students use the language receptively or productively and less attention is given to linguistic forms. The children’s learning activity is influenced by the great interest by themselves, therefore, games can help teachers create interesting teaching-learning environments to lure students’ attentiveness in learning speaking (Nurkencana, 2005).

Darmansyah (2010) explains that results in the learning will be more effective if the students are excited about what they are learning. Gardner (1995, p.94), who has developed the theory of multiple intelligences, argues that “we must use the positive state of the child to draw them into learning in fields where they can develop their competence”. Therefore, it is clear that the role of emotions in that learning process is essential to determine success in achieving the learning goals. Happy and relaxed moods are believed to help out students in concentration while learning.

Most of the previous studies on using games in language classrooms focused on the effect and the perceptions of both teachers and students on the use of games and its relation to the students’ language development. However, there were limited studies discussed on the teachers’ efforts in implementing game activities to EFL middle school students in teaching speaking and the problems faced by the teachers in its implementation. This research is intended to fill in the gap. It is expected this study can be useful for English teachers who teach speaking to young EFL students. By understanding the successful ways and knowing the problems in implementing games activities, teachers can prepare solutions and better lesson plans in its implementation. Likewise, it can enrich teachers’ knowledge of ways to teach speaking to beginners of English and can be used as a reference for those who want to conduct further research in the same field.

METHODS

This study used a qualitative approach to study the efforts and problems faced by teachers in the implementation of game activities. The source of data was two English teachers who teach in two different classes in one of the middle schools in Banda Aceh. They both taught English subject to grade 7 students. Each class comprised 30 students. The instruments used were observation and questionnaire. The observation, using video-recording and notes, was conducted on each teacher for two meetings; making a total of four class meetings for observation times during the research. Each meeting lasted for 90 minutes. At the end of the class, teachers were given an open-ended questionnaire with 15 questions inquiring about the implementation and problems in executing the game activities. Each of the items required a yes/no response followed by an open space so that they can further express their problems in their own words. The questions were divided into four sections: teacher's preparation problems, class participation problems, class management problems, and instructional problems. The first and the third sections consisted of four items each, while the second and the fourth sections comprised five and two items, respectively (refer to Table 1). The questionnaire, in general, was adapted from Yeganehpour (2016) with few modifications to suit the context of this study.

The data were analyzed through several stages based on the framework proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). First, the visual-audio recorded data were transcribed and correlated with the notes taken during the observations. Second, they were analyzed in three steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The data were sorted to focus only on that information related to the research questions. The sorted data were selected for descriptions. Finally, in conclusion drawing, the described data were further narrated as the final findings of this research.

Meanwhile, to turn the data from the questionnaire into qualitative insights, tagging was used (Baptiste, 2001). It basically involves looking through carefully at the responses provided by the teachers and trying to identify repeating themes (such as main points, problems, or opportunities). These themes were then labeled and finally, an idea of their frequency can be tallied.

RESULTS

Results from Observations

During the observation, it was found that the type of game used by the first teacher (henceforth T1) for her 7th-grade students was "Paper Plane". The purpose of the game was to get the students to know each other and break up the boredom in learning. The material needed was just papers. It took T1 about five minutes to explain the rules of the game. In this game, T1 did not divide the students into groups. Before the game began, T1 handed a piece of paper to each of the students. He then asked the students to write three things: their names, their likes or dislikes, and their aspirations. Next, the students were asked to make a paper plane with their paper on which they had written down the information. After all students had finished writing in and making their paper planes, the teacher asked them to fly the paper planes at once and each student had to catch one flying paper plane. After each student had a paper plane in hand, they were to sit down properly in their chairs and took turn to stand in front of the class to read the information on their paper plane (except the name), meanwhile, the other students guessed whose paper plane was being presented. This game lasted for about 40 minutes. T1 conducted the game in the opening of the lesson (first hour) because English was the last subject that day. So, the teacher wanted the students to feel fun from the beginning and ready to get into the lesson in which the topic was "Descriptive Text".

T1 conducted the same game in the next meeting, in which the topic was "Asking and Giving Opinion". Nevertheless, this game was not quite proper for this topic. T1 asked the students to play the same game, "Paper Plane", where every student was handed a piece of paper that was already filled with questions that asked about their opinions. For example, one paper asked, "What

do you think of the National Examination? When another student received this paper plane and presented the answer to other students to guess who provided the opinion, it turned out there were many similar responses because T1 had given the same question to five pieces of paper. In total, there were only 6 questions for 30 students. When their answers were similar, it was difficult to determine the one student that answered it. And so, the class became quite hectic due to many students talking at once. T1 should have prepared 30 questions, alias a different question for every student to overcome the problem.

The second teacher (henceforth, T2) also used a game activity at the beginning of her class. The game was called, "Guess Your Animal". The aim of the game was to increase the speaking skill of the students and to review the lessons learned in the previous meeting. The material needed was picture cards of different animals. First, it took about five minutes for T2 to explain to her students the rules of the game. Second, T2 asked the students to pick one of the cards that she had prepared. Each card contained a picture of an animal and its name. The students were told not to show their cards to their friends. After each student chose a card, they were given five minutes to prepare three sentences to describe their animals. After that, one by one, the students described their animals while the other students tried to guess the name of the animal being described. The first student who raised his or her hand may present his or her guess. If the guess was correct, he or she got a point. The students who got the most points won the game. The game lasted for about 40 minutes before the class ended in order to review the lesson for the day.

In the next meeting, for the topic "Quantifiers", T2 used the game called "Paradise Bound". In this game, the students were asked to brainstorm on what they would need if they were stranded on a desert island. T2 divided the students into groups of five. Working in pairs or groups were claimed to be able to share thoughts among the students (Achmad & Yusuf, 2014; Fata, et al., 2016). Each group must think and decide on only 10 items they needed to survive on their island. Five items must be of count nouns, and another five must be of non-count nouns. After each group discussed their items, they were to present their final list to the class. The classroom became quite lively since some touches of humor were added when some students presented lists that were considered bizarre by other students. This game also took approximately 45 minutes to finish before T2 moved on to the second hour of the class to further teach about quantifiers in English to her students.

Results from Questionnaires

The results of the questionnaire are presented in Table 1. In items that were ticked "no", each teacher provided their reasons or responses towards the problems. Table 1 shows the responses of Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 in the questionnaire. From 15 questionnaire items, the teachers have 10 similar responses and five different ones. The first section of the questionnaire is about the teachers' preparation problems. Item #1 is concerned with whether the teachers forget or not know what to say during the game activity. Both teachers answered "no" for this item. This indicates that neither teacher had any performance issues during activity implementation. For Item#2, it inquired about their preparedness in implementing the activity and whether it had been included in their lesson plan. For this item, T1 answered "yes" while T2 answered "no." This means T2 prepared the instructional materials well while T1 did not. This can be seen in the variety of games implemented by both teachers in two of their class meetings, where T1 had used a similar game in two sequences of meetings, while T2 used two different ones. In Item #3, it aims to find out whether the teachers had not planned the teaching strategies well and the game activity used was not relevant to the lesson to be taught. For this item, T1 responded "yes" and T2 responded "no". T1 further confessed that he had prepared the game in a hurry for the second meeting. This shows that T1 did not plan the strategies well and that his game activity was not relevant to the lesson. Finally, for this section, the last Item #4 is concerned with the teachers' interest in teaching English. Their responses both reflected their high interest in teaching English.

Table 1. *Teachers' responses in the questionnaire*

Item	Statements	Responses	
		Teacher 1	Teacher 2
<i>Teacher's Preparation Problems</i>			
1	Forgetting or not knowing what to say	No	No
2	Instructional materials are not well-prepared	Yes	No
3	Not well-planned strategies, i.e. the icebreaking activity does not fit the lesson to be taught	Yes	No
4	Lack of interest in teaching	No	No
Reasons for the responses above: T1 wrote: <i>I prepared the game for the second meeting in a hurry.</i>			
<i>Class Participation Problems</i>			
5	Students are not paying attention	No	No
6	Students are not active and responsive	No	No
7	Students have difficulties in following the activity	Yes	No
8	Students do not participate in the activity	Yes	No
9	Students use their mother tongue during the activity	Yes	Yes
Reasons for the responses above: T1 wrote: <i>Many students still use Indonesian and Acehnese. They got confused with the game in the second meeting.</i> T2 wrote: <i>Some students used their mother tongue when presenting the notes in the Paper Plane game. Even though I keep telling them to use English and helped them along the way, using the mother tongue is unavoidable.</i>			
<i>Class Management Problems</i>			
10	Difficult to handle due to large class size	Yes	Yes
11	Difficult to handle due to students' behavior	Yes	Yes
12	Managing a classroom dependently, need an assistant	No	No
13	Not enough time	Yes	No
Reasons for the responses above: T1 wrote: <i>There are many students in one class. It is difficult to handle one by one, especially when some need further explanation on the instruction, or naughty and bothers others, or noisy. I wish I have an assistant.</i> T2 wrote: <i>I have a large class, with thirty students to teach. It would be more effective if I have an assistant so every student will be paid attention to.</i>			
<i>Instructional Problems</i>			
14	Giving unclear direction and logical explanation	No	No
15	Lack of skills in formulating clear, simple, and easily understood instructions	No	No
Reasons for the responses above: -			

The second part of the questionnaire is about class participation problems. Item #5 is to discover if the students were not attentive during the game activity. Both teachers answered “no”; which indicates that the students were paying attention to the activity. Item #6 if the students were not active and responsive during the activity. For this item, both teachers also answered “no;” this signifies that the students were dynamic during the games. Item #7 inquires whether the students faced difficulty in following the activities. T1 responded “yes” to this item while T2 answered “no.” From these responses, we can conclude that T1’s students had difficulties following the activity and this was seen in the second class observation of T1 when he implemented the “Paper Plane” game that did not fit well with the topic being taught. The students of T2 did not have such difficulties since she used proper games with the topics to be taught. Item #8 aims to find out whether the students were not participative during the game activity. For this item, T1 answered “yes” and T2 answered “no.” These different responses show that T2’s students were participative while those from T1’s was not. Presumably, this was also due to the game that was not in line with the topic to be taught by T1 for that day. Lastly, Item #9 is concerned with

whether the students used their mother tongue during the activity. Both teachers responded “yes” to this item. Their open responses in the questionnaire also expressed their concern on students’ frequent use of their mother tongues while learning English during the activities.

The third part of the questionnaire was about class management problems. Item #10 aims to discover whether the teachers found it was hard to handle the class due to its large size. Both teachers gave the same response to this statement, which is “yes.” This result shows that it was difficult for the teachers to manage their classes as they consist of 30 students each, which is considered a large class. Item #11 wants to know whether the teachers had difficulties in handling the class because of the students’ behaviors. As presented in Table 1, both teachers responded “yes” to this statement. This denotes that both teachers agreed that the class was difficult to handle because of the students’ behavior. The observations done also showed that the classes could become quite noisy from time to time when students were talking at once when playing the games. Item #12 is to discover whether the teachers managed their classes on her own or with the help of a teaching assistant. Both teachers responded “no”. This reveals that neither teacher had any help from a teaching assistant. Both teachers managed their classes independently. Finally, Item #13 aims to discover if the teachers felt that the allocated time was not enough to implement the game activity. T1 answered “yes,” confirming that he indeed felt that the time was not enough. T2, however, answered “no”, which means that she could finish the game activity within the allocated time. In the space provided, both teachers had wished that they had teaching assistants to help them teach and manage the students in the large classes.

The last part of the questionnaire queried about instructional problems. Item #14 is to discover if the teachers found it was difficult to give a clear direction and logical explanation to the game activity. For this item, both teachers answered “no,” indicating that they did not have any problems in giving a clear direction and logical explanation of the activity. Item #15 marks the end of the questionnaire. The item aims to ask the teachers whether they were unable to formulate instructions that were clear, simple, and easily understood by the students. Both teachers also responded “no” to this question, assuring that they were indeed able to do so.

DISCUSSION

Based on the observation, it was found that both teachers used games in their classroom for 40-45 minutes. The game used by T1, “Paper Plane” is categorized as a type of guessing game which was able to make the students get to know more about their friends. The choice for this game was similar to the criteria of games chosen by teachers in a study by Hang (2017), where one of the criteria for a game used by the 27 English teachers in his study was one that could make students interact with each other. However, since the English material taught directly after the game was over was writing a “Descriptive Text”, the information on a friend’s characteristics obtained from the “Paper Plane” game was not enough to describe a classmate. In the second meeting, T1 used the same game but this time the students need to give their opinion based on the question they found on their paper plane. The problem with using this game was the teacher only provided six questions for her 30 students. Since the students provided similar opinions, a hectic situation occurred in the classroom. The game used was found to be less correlated to the material for that day which was “Asking and Giving Opinion” since the questions were already provided by the teacher and unfortunately, not one question for one student. This was one of the disadvantages pointed out by Stojkovic and Jerotijevic (2011), where the use of games in a classroom may raise a discipline issue where students get noisy and stray away from the basic purpose of the game-play activity, which is to meet the lesson’s objective.

In the other classroom, T2 used the game “Guess Your Animal” on the first meeting as a review for the lesson learned in the previous meeting which was about animals, as well as to increase the speaking skill of the students. This game raised a competition atmosphere in the classroom since whoever gave the correct answer would get a point. This fun situation was able to reduce students’ anxiety and lowering their stress in learning a foreign language. In the second meeting, T2 used a different game called “Paradise Bound” which was directly correlated to the material taught for that day which was learning “The Quantifiers”. By having the game prior to

learning about the quantifiers, students already have ideas on what are count and non-count nouns. It was clear from the observation that T2 was more successful in using games and correlate them to the material taught for that day. The use of game was not just for fun, but more importantly, the students were able to learn the language and achieved the objective of the material being taught. This is in accordance with Khan (1991) who points out that the type of game chosen by a teacher has to meet the students' needs as well as the lesson's objectives.

The difference results in using games by T1 and T2 were found from the response to the questionnaire distributed to the two teachers. T1 admitted that his instructional material and strategies were not planned and prepared well enough, therefore, the game chosen was less correlated to the lesson's objectives. This indicates that T1 did realize his mistakes, especially when the second class meeting did not go as well as expected during the implementation of the game activity. This is a good sign when teachers are aware of their slip-ups, they can elevate their teaching by making improvements in the future (McGregor & Cartwright, 2011). Furthermore, having the awareness of the students' needs is also important for teachers to achieve learning goals in the classroom (Farrell & Vos, 2018). Unlike T1, T2 claimed that she had planned and prepared the activities ahead of time before the class started. As a result, students were found to enjoy learning activities by using games. In this case, T2 was able to relate the game given for the students and reached the lesson's objective for each meeting and succeeded in managing her classroom. What had been done by T2 was in line with Groover (2005) has suggested that, indeed, materials need to be prepared ahead of time to achieve the goals of learning, and this also include considering the size of the class, and the suitability of the activity to the lessons being taught. In short, the teacher's lack of preparation in employing the activities in the classroom can likely results in an unsuccessful teaching and learning process.

In regards to class participation, T1 reported that his students had difficulties in following the activity, thus they were not participative. These problems might have something to do with the choice of activity that he had chosen in the second meeting which was deemed to be not quite suitable for the lesson. Hence, a teacher's efficient preparation is important in managing a class with a diverse range of students (Oliver & Reschly, 2007). Although T2 did not face the same problem, both teachers did have one problem in common: their students still used their mother tongue, Indonesian and Acehnese, during the game activities. This finding is not a surprise since Davis (2016) mentioned that tenacious use of first-language is one of the ten common problems in ESL or EFL classroom. It is something that every EFL teacher is likely to face and must find ways to reduce this practice if it is not effective in the teaching and learning process.

Another problem that the teachers faced was related to class management, both teachers shared three class management problems: difficulty in handling the class due to large class size, difficulty in handling the class due to students' behavior, and a struggle in managing the class independently. In addition to the three problems, T1 also had a problem with time. Despite T2 did not mention so, the researchers assumed that she did, too. Because both teachers spent about 40-45 minutes for the game activities. In other words, they used up half of their class meetings merely for the warm-up activities. This problem is possibly due to the fact that both teachers had a large class size and so it took some time to get all students involved in the games. The literature also notes that teachers agree to the fact that dealing with large classes are a challenge (Fortes & Tchantchane, 2010), and at most times, are not effective for teaching and learning because it hinders their possibility to provide equal quality teaching input to every student (Gobena, 2013; Yelkper, et al., 2012).

As for the instructional problems, both teachers claimed that they did not face any problems. This means that regardless of the preparation, both teachers were able to give logical explanations about the game activities and formulate clear, simple, and easily understood instructions to the students. This is in line with Constantinescu (2012) who informs that that games should be technically easy to use in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to discover the efforts and problems faced by two English teachers in teaching speaking by implementing Ice Breaking activities to EFL students in their classrooms in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Two instruments were used to collect data, which were an observation sheet and an open-ended questionnaire. It can be concluded that both teachers used games activities at the beginning of their classes. The games were "Paper Plane", "Guess Your Animal" and "Paradise Bound". The aim of the games was to activate and invigorate the students when the English classes started so that they would be more energized to learn lessons for the day. These activities were also to trigger students to speak up in class. Learning should be within a fun and relaxed environment to increase students' concentration on the materials being learned. Nevertheless, there were also several problems found during the implementation of these activities. The problems revolved around teacher preparation, class participation, and class management. In teacher preparation, one of the teachers did not well prepare the game ahead of time, and thus, the results of the activity were not satisfying. In terms of class participation, one of the teachers also had difficulty in having students not fully following and participating in the activity. Finally, dealing with class management, both teachers had difficulties in managing the classroom and handling the students due to the large classroom sizes. Only one of the teachers felt the time was not enough to implement the game activities, presumably because of the large number of students in a class. Moreover, both teachers did not have problems in instructions, because they felt that they have given clear direction to the students in implementing the games for the game activities. However, the results from observation found that the game used in the second meeting of the T1's class was less suitable for the lesson.

Although this research has reached its aims, there are still some identified limitations. First of all, the research only focused on two English teachers teaching in two different classes for four meetings. It would be better if it could be done with more teachers and more class meetings. Future researches are suggested to focus on the solutions to solve the teachers' problems in using game activities to complement the findings from this present study.

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