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Challenges and Strategies Used by English Teachers in Teaching English Language Skills to Young Learners

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Abstract—Teaching English language skills as a foreign language to young learners is not easy, many things should be considered so that the teaching can run well. Young learners are sometimes motivated in learning, but they are sometimes demotivated. Young learners only learn when they want to learn, and they will not learn if they do not want to learn. Teachers need to encourage young learners' motivation in learning process. This study was conducted to investigate the challenges encountered by English teachers in teaching English language skills to young learners. This study was done through the qualitative research with a demographic questionnaire and depth interviews as the data collection methods. The demographic questionnaire was analyzed descriptively and the data of interview were analyzed by within-case and cross-case displays. There were four teachers from three different schools who participated in this study. Findings of this study identified two main themes related to the challenges and the teachers' strategies in teaching English language skills to young learners. The themes were the challenges in teaching English language skills and the teachers' strategies. Four strategies were implemented in teaching English language skills to young learners including playing games, using songs, providing a lot of practices, and memorizing. These findings could be useful for those who are teaching English or working with young learners.

Index Terms—language skills, learning strategies, motivation, teaching strategies, young learners

I. INTRODUCTION

English as an international language has a big role in many aspects in Indonesia, such as international relationships, economics, education, and etc. English is also a significant requisite for gaining a good job (Nunan, 2005). As a foreign language, English is easier to be learnt when learners are young as a child is an active learner and thinker. So, children will be more active in learning language than adults, and they will understand easier than adults. That is why we should teach English as a foreign language especially to children who are between five and twelve years old in order that they are able to learn the language well. Linse and Nunan (2005), McKay (2008), and Philp et al. (2008) state that children who are between 2 and 13 years old are in their critical period. This is a very significant stage for learning a language because when people are mature, they are no longer in their critical period, they will face difficulties in learning a

language. Therefore, the critical period should be used as good as possible to make young learners learn English as a foreign language well.

Although, young learners have good abilities in learning language, they still have to be handled carefully because young learners have special and unique characteristics that are different from adult learners. They need creative and innovative teachers; furthermore teachers should understand the characteristics of the young learners. Then, they need more attention in learning. Vygotsky (1978 as cited in John-Steiner et al., 1996) stated that based on his research on young learners, the learning and development of young learners take place in context. That is, young learners learn based on what is happening around them. So, young learners need teachers who can teach them well. Besides, they need the support of many good media and materials. Moreover, young learners cannot be forced to be what the teachers' want; they always do what they want. They have unpredictable emotions; they are able to change quickly. Furthermore, children as foreign learners of English do not have input in English. They do not know about English language and its skills exactly. It challenges English teachers to handle children in learning English.

These reasons encouraged us to conduct this study. We conducted the our study by investigating some elementary schools to find out the challenges encountered by English teachers in teaching English language skills to young learners and the teachers' strategies in solving those challenges. Two open-ended questions guided this study are: (1) what are the challenges encountered by English teachers in teaching English language skills to young learners? (2) How do they overcome those challenges?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Challenges in Teaching English for Young Learners*

Young learners are still in the growing and developing processes. They are still learning how to manage their behaviors and feelings (Moon, 2005). In this process, they will express every feeling that they have even they get lost their emotional control, especially when they get mad and happy. Moreover, young learners' emotions are still inconsistent and unpredictable. It is changeable quickly in every condition. Because of this unpredictability, Clark (1990 as cited in Moon, 2005) said that the young learners are different from adults. Sometimes, they like to do something, but they can change directly to be bored in doing that. Besides, according to Nunan (2005), the young learners have inconsistent development. Some children may grow up earlier than others, whether it is in the cognitive skill, emotional, or social immature. There are some children who are able to read and write in the early ages, whereas the others cannot do that yet at the same age. Because of that, many challenges appeared for the teachers in teaching English for young learners. They should be aware of their learners' development, characteristics, and their learners' ability to make the young learners able to learn English well. Besides that, they also encountered some challenges to make the classroom becomes purposeful, supported, meaningful, full practice, enjoyable, and social (Shin, 2005). Purposeful means that teachers should be able to know the purpose of teaching-learning before they teach the young learners. Then, the teachers are also demanded to support young learners in learning. They must motivate their learners. Meaningful is that the teachers should be able to make the classroom meaningful, so young learners will feel embraced to miss the class. Besides, because of young learners are the active learners, so they prefer to learn by doing. This case demands teachers to create the learning processes to become full practices so that young learners will enjoy the class. The last, teachers should have social characteristics. They have to know what they should do to their learners. They have to understand well all of their learners, without exception.

B. *English Teachers for Young Learners*

Teachers are the ones who have many roles in teaching and learning stages. For being good and professional teachers, they not only need to be the model in the classroom, but they also should be the controller, organizer, assessor, prompter, participant, resource, observer, and tutor in their class Harmer (2003). However, in teaching English, a teacher should not only perform these roles, but they also have to be able to make their classes interesting. They have to love their job as teachers and then they should have a lot of knowledge, and they also have to be able to be entertainers (Harmer, 2002). English teachers for young learners should be aware of some ways or channels of young learners in receiving the information. According to Nunan (2005), children learn through three learning channels, such as auditory, tactile, and visual. Therefore, the teachers should try to present the lesson based on young learners' channels so that they are able to obtain and comprehend the lesson well. In creating a teaching and learning's atmosphere, teachers should be able to differentiate between the demanding and supporting ones (Cameron, 2005). They have to have many ways and strategies to support young learners to study. Teacher should invite them to love and enjoy English very much.

III. METHODOLOGY

The participants who involved in this research were four teachers who taught English to young learners in three different schools in Jambi. The researchers used a qualitative method with a case study approach to obtain the aim of this study (Abrar et al., 2018; Erlina et al., 2019; Mukminin & McMahan, 2013). This research was done in three elementary schools by involving four English teachers for young learners with a snowball strategy. The data of this study were collected by a demographic questionnaire and in-depth interviews (Mukminin, Ali, & Ashari, 2015). The

researchers provided the demographic questionnaire and distributed it to some elementary schools in Jambi. Then, from the demographic questionnaire, the researchers gained some participants who provided the information related to this study. The interview was done for 25-40 minutes for each participant. During the interview questions, among other things we asked our participants to obtain information on their background, their decision to go into teaching young learners, and their feelings as teachers.

We also asked the participants about what the challenges encountered by them in teaching English language skills to young learners and how they overcame those challenges. They were also asked to respond to the questions related to their personal abilities to overcome those challenges. Marshall and Rossman (1999) stated that qualitative data analysis was “a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating process” (p. 150) and “Undoubtedly, no consensus exists for the analysis of the forms of qualitative data” (Creswell, 1997, p. 140). As is typical in a qualitative study, data collection and data analysis do not occur in a serial way; rather data collection and data analysis affect each other. In this study, we collected the data and after the data had been collected, we transcribed and analyzed them through reading transcripts of each participant. After we transcribed their interview data, we analyzed the data, and put relevant chunks of statements into our set categories. We reanalyzed and compared all transcripts across teachers in order to find the frequency of statements among participants for each general category or theme (Mukminin, Kamil, Muazza, & Haryanto, 2017). To make sure the credibility or the trustworthiness of our study and to ensure our interpretations, we included verbatim examples from the transcribed interviews. We also confirmed member checking. We checked not only with teachers but also with co-researchers that served as member checking (Habibi et al, 2018).

IV. FINDINGS

Based on the data analyses, there were two main themes and eleven sub-themes. The main themes were the challenges encountered by English teachers in teaching English language skills and teachers’ strategies that were implemented by the teachers in solving the challenges. The challenges include teaching listening, teaching speaking skill, teaching reading skill, teaching writing skill, learners’ characteristics, learners’ motivation, and media while teachers’ strategies were games, songs, providing a lot of practices, and memorizing.

A. *Teaching Listening Skill and the Challenges*

For young learners, listening skill is formed when they listen to a variety of sounds and voices around them, people talking, animals’ sounds, transportations, and etc. (Nunan, 2005). They only learn from simple and easy listening. Young learners listen to the simple instructions. The findings in this study indicated that some of participants reported that teaching listening to young learners was not too challenging because young learners were not demanded to be able to listen the difficult listening. For example,

Participant 1: Yes... it is right, because listening is just how to imitate what the teacher says like listening to the teacher how to pronounce a word well.”

Our participants described that they did not find any serious challenges in teaching listening skill to young learners.

B. *Teaching Speaking Skill and the Challenges*

According to Nunan (2005), young learners learn speaking skill while playing some simple utterances. They imitate simple words from people around them, whether it is direct or from the conversation on the television that they listen. The measurement of children’s ability in speaking English is only when they are able to utter some simple words. However, because English is not young learners’ first language, teachers found some challenges in teaching speaking to young learners such as young learners did not have much time to learn and speak English. Furthermore, they felt shy to speak English and they tended to be silent when they were learning. For example,

Participant 2: The problem is, for example, they are used to speaking English as it is not their first language.

Participant 3: In speaking, students feel shy to speak, but it’s not so difficult, because we still speak in short sentences or short conversations.

C. *Teaching Reading Skill and the Challenges*

Reading is divided into two types that are reading for the pleasure and reading for the information (Nunan, 2005). Reading for the pleasure is a reading as a fun activity which is only for a hobby; it is like reading novel, poetry, song’s lyric, short story, and etc. Meanwhile, reading for the information is such a kind serious activity which involves a thinking skill. People have to think to understand and comprehend the meanings or messages from the passages. Reading for young learners is included as reading for pleasure. Young learners are not demanded to comprehend the information of a passage, they only learn about how to decode the words. In our study, participants reported that they did not find many challenges in teaching reading skill; they only found that their learners did not have much vocabulary of English and cannot translate the words from English to Indonesian. For example,

Participant 1: ..for young learners, reading is more for pleasure, they are required to look for detailed information. So, when I teach them, they just have problems in understanding the meanings of the words.

D. *The Challenges in Teaching Writing Skill*

Writing is divided into two types, namely the academic writing and non-academic writing. Academic writing

includes research articles, papers, or thesis. For young learners, writing is related to their ability to write a simple sentence, even a paragraph (nonacademic writing). However, although it is only a word or a simple sentence, participants in this study found many challenges in teaching this skill to young learners. They reflected that many young learners were not able to write in English well. For example,

Participant 2: Writing is the most difficult skill for young learners as they are not familiar with English words.

E. The Challenges in Children's Motivation

The inconsistent characteristics of the young learners result in their motivation in learning. Young learners are sometimes motivated in learning, but they are sometimes demotivated. Young learners only learn when they want to learn, and they will not learn if they do not want to learn. Our participants reported that their students' motivation was up and down in learning English.

Participant 3: My experience is that their motivation is unpredictable. They are really motivated, but sometimes they are feeling lazy to study.

F. Teaching – Learning Media

Based on our data analysis, media was not part of teachers' challenging aspects. Teachers were not too worried about it because their schools provided all of teaching media required to support their teaching and learning processes. They could use media that are suitable with skills that would be taught such as laboratory, books or other facilities to teach English.

Participant 1: We have complete teaching media and our school provides us with what we need to teach.

Participant 3: It is not a big deal, we have a lot of books to use in teaching.

Based on the data, our participants did not find any challenges in using media for teaching English language skills.

G. Teachers' Strategies

Our findings indicated that there were some strategies implemented by the teachers to solve the challenges in teaching English language skills to young learners. Our participants reported that games, song, and pictures were the most favorite strategies to motivate their learners in learning English. Besides, memorizing as the traditional way was used an alternative way in teaching vocabulary. The participants reported,

Participant 3: Basically almost of them like a game, because a game is more fun.

Participant 4: Singing a song together is one of my ways to teach English for young learners.

Participant 1: My students like to memorize when they learn new vocabulary and I am fine with that as long as they enjoy it and it helps them to improve their language skills.

V. DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to investigate the challenges encountered by English teachers in teaching English language skills to young learners. We found that there were challenges that were encountered by English teachers in teaching English language skills to young learners. Furthermore, we also found some strategies used by the teachers in solving challenges in teaching English language skills to young learners. For listening skill, teachers did not find too many challenges in teaching the skill. However, for speaking skill, participants said that it was more difficult than teaching listening skill although students were only demanded to be able to mention some simple words. Nunan (2005) said that children speak English as a foreign language in doing some simple utterances; however our participants reported that young learners still felt strange with English words because English is not their first language. Additionally, lack of time for practicing also was reported as one of the challenges for them in teaching speaking skill for young learners. Silberman (2006) stated that people need more practices in gaining the second language. However, our participants explained that their young learners only had one or two hours in a week to learn English in their school. Even, sometimes some of young learners were shy to speak English, because they were not used to speaking English.

For reading skill, our participants reported that they only found problems when their young learners read the texts. They still had difficulties to translate the texts from English into Indonesian. According to Nunan (2005), reading is a set of skills to make senses and derives meanings from the printed words. Furthermore, Cahyono and Utami (2011) state that children will be measured to be able to read when they can do the initial readings such as alphabets and simple words. So, young learners are not demanded to be able to translate words yet.

The last is teaching writing skill. Our findings indicated that teaching writing was as the most challenging and difficult skill for teachers in teaching young learners. Although in writing skill, young learners are not demanded to be able to use a complex sentence, they are hoped to be able to write simple words even simple sentences. Our participants reported that their learners still had problems to write the spellings of words. They still do not understand how to write in a good structure for simple sentences as a result of the lack of knowledge about grammar. Another interesting finding is related to young learners' motivation to learn as young learners have unpredictable characteristics. They still learn on how to manage their emotion. In our findings, our participants reported that young learners were sometimes too enthusiastic in learning, but sometimes they did not want to learn at all. Sometimes they laughed, but suddenly they cried in the classroom. This kind of unpredictable characteristics was the most challenging for teachers.

Not only in the challenges, the investigation of this study also explored four subthemes related to the strategies that implemented by the teachers to solve of the challenges. The participants generally explored that they used four fun ways as the solution in teaching the English language skills to young learners. The ways are included games, song, practice, memorizing. However, our participants reported that they had several strategies to deal with those challenges. One of them is to use games. For teachers, games are favorite and fun activities for young learners in learning. The participants in this study told that games could help them to encourage young learners' motivation in learning process. Moreover, games help young learners in reaching and understanding the lessons as Pinter (2006) stated that young learners learn through playing. They also generally reflected that they used some games in teaching their learners to make young learners become enjoy in the class. Our participants also reported that they used songs as one of the fun activities that can make young learners enjoy the lesson. Songs are able to stimulate young learners in learning. It helps them to gain the lesson easier. Garton, Copland, and Burn (2011) found that many teachers used song to maintain young learners' attention in learning. Then, the next strategy implemented by our participants was practicing. Young learners are active and critical ones. They cannot learn in silent ways or only listen to their teachers. Garton, Copland, and Burn (2011) found that implementing practices to engage young learners in learning was useful including in teaching grammar rules to young learners. The last strategy used by our participants in solving the challenges and difficulties was memorizing. They used memorizing as one of the strategies to help their young learners in enriching their vocabulary. This strategy was implemented because many of young learners were poor in vocabulary. They did not have or know basic vocabulary yet. Garton, Coplan, and Burn (2011) also found that memorizing activity was as one of the traditional ways in enriching young learners' vocabulary.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Teaching English language skills as a foreign language to young learners is challenging. Teachers should consider many things in order to engage young learners in learning. Findings of this study identified two main themes related to the challenges and the teachers' strategies in teaching English language skills to young learners. Teachers in this study were challenged to teach the four English language skills to young learners. Particularly, they were challenged not only to teach language skills but also to motivate them in learning as their behaviors are unpredictable in the classroom. In this study, it was found that four strategies were implemented in teaching English language skills to young learners including playing games, using songs, providing a lot of practices, and memorizing.

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