

## **TEACHING SPEAKING TO YOUNG LEARNERS THROUGH ROLE PLAY**

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### **Abstract**

Role play is a potential activity which gives change for the students to enhance their speaking performance in a meaningful context. This study tries to investigate how the role play is implemented in teaching speaking in kindergarten context. Further, it also attempts to find out the kinds of speaking performance produced by the students during the teaching learning process. An exploratory case study research design was used in this study while the participants of this study were 22 students whose ages range between 5 and 6 years old. The data were gleaned from classroom observations, observation rating scale, and students' daily learning records. Analysis of the data shows that teaching speaking to young learners in this study is conducted by implementing the sequence of activities that generally can be divided into three main stages, i.e. the activities before, during and after role play. The first stage is carried out as preparation to conduct the role play in the second stage while the last stage is conducted as a reflection from the teacher and students about the language which has been learnt and also about the teaching learning process. The other result from data analysis shows that the students can produce three kinds of speaking performance during the teaching learning process, these include: naming objects, producing simple sentences, and getting involved in a dialog. By conducting role play, the students are able not only to memorize and mention the word regardless its context but also use the language in meaningful contexts.

*Keywords:* teaching speaking, young learners, role play, speaking performance

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Most children associate learning the second or foreign language with learning to speak it (Girard et al., 2003). For young learners, it is not necessary to demand that they to be competent communicators because they also still learn it in their first language. The teacher needs to set the learning goal which is realistic. What is realistic for kindergarten in learning foreign language is not beyond the skill mastered by native language speakers (Linse, 2005: 49). The speaking activities can be started 'from those which provide tightly controlled practice to those which provide freer communicative language use' (Girard et al., 2003: 106). As a consequence, the teacher needs to develop a repertoire of activities providing a balance between control and creativity, repetition and real use and provide models of spoken English.

In the classroom, there are some kinds of speaking performances that can be carried out by students, such as: **1)naming objects** (Read, 2006; Cameron, 2001: 64; Girard et al., 2003: 81) that is usually carried out at the initial stage in young learners' classroom; **2)producing single word or phrase as response** (Cameron, 2001: 49); **3)producing simple sentences** (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2006; Girard et al., 2003) and **4)getting involved in a dialog** (Ytrenberg & Scott, 1990: 39; Cameron, 2001; Paul, 2003: 77; Linse, 2005; Pinter, 2006; Suyanto, 2008). Of course, this is not a long dialog as adult learners can do. Simple and short role play is suitable for children's level of language (Vernon, 2009).

### **2. ROLE PLAY IN THE TEACHING OF SPEAKING TO YOUNG LEARNERS**

Role-play activity is one of the classroom teaching techniques that encourage students to participate actively in the process of learning English (Alwahibee, 2003). Role play goes by many names, such as: acting, improvisation, dramatic play, pretend play, socio-drama, etc. (Jarvis, 2008). In this study, role play is defined as a teaching technique in which the students are asked to interact either as themselves or

someone else in imaginary situations with or without scenario to provide useful expression for real-life language use.

There are a number of other factors that make role play become 'a very powerful tool in the language classroom' (Alwahibee, 2004). The first advantage of role play in improving students' speaking performance is that it provides the environment when language is used in meaningful situations by implementing role play in classroom because it contextualizes the language in real or imagined situations in and out of the classroom (Wessels: 1991; Wright, 2004:7; Krish, 2001 in Chen, 2004; Thornbury, 2006). The second reason of using role play is that it can motivate language use and practice (Phillips, 2004; Wortham, 2006). The students can do the same activity with different levels, so that all students can carry out the activity successfully. The third advantage is that role play can be used to provide opportunities for the student to be involved actively. When the students participate in role play, they will master the competence they learn (Boediono, 2001 in Mudairin 2009). It is in line with Troiano *et al.* (2002) who assert that the students are not passive recipients of the instructor's knowledge when role play is implemented. It means that the students should be engaged in the activities, without which there will be no learning. The last advantage is that role play can increase the students' confident to use foreign language (Wessels, 1991; El-Nadi, 2000; Phillips, 2004; Bongtsoon, 2008). As Phillips (2004) further states that by taking on a role, students can escape from their everyday identity and lose their inhibition.

**Role play for young learners has its own characteristics**, such as: short, simple, repetitive, and conducted in short sessions. It is in line with Phillips (1993) and Vernon (2009) who highlights that role play for young learners must be short and simple since children have difficulties in making long sentence even though they have understood a text, they will use one or few words to explain their understanding (Cameron, 2001: 49). Therefore, the teacher should have creativity in choosing role play to be conducted in a classroom of young learners.

It is important for the teacher to keep the session in role play short with many repetitions (Brewer, 2007). It is assumed that repetitive of language in the role play can make the students remember the language easier which in turn makes the students safe to produce the language. In other words, repetition can be used to reinforce new language and concepts (Phillips, 1993: 5; Brewer, 2007; Vernon, 2009). This is also consistent with Fleta (2007) who says that 'children have natural tendency to repeat and they learn through repetition'. But the most important thing is that the role play should be assigned according to the students' language ability levels (Vernon, 2009). It is considered important to conduct repetition activities because it is one of the effective ways to avoid the students' reluctant in conducting the activity.

## **2.1. Procedure of Teaching Speaking through Role Play**

Teaching speaking through role play consists of three stages, corresponding to the typical structure of most lessons. These cover: **the activity before, during, and after role play** (Girard et al., 2003: 61; Harmer, 2008: 201). The activities before role play are conducted as preparation, as Wessels (1991) states that preparation is required to make the students ready to learn. The other activity before role play is conducted by introducing new vocabulary by using picture, game (Wessels, 1991; Vernon, 2009), realia (Mumford, 2005) and storytelling (Read, 2008). After the students recognize the vocabularies and dialog in role play, the students have chance to practice the lines together with the whole class (Vernon, 2009). She also suggests that more advance students can have longer lines and the less advance students can play short lines.

The second stage is applying the role play that has been practiced. In this case, Phillips (2004) and Girard et al. (2003) say that younger children find it difficult to work in group and conduct speaking activity, so, very guided activity is considered better for them. Additionally, to make the role play activity more meaningful, the teacher invites the students to use mime and gesture. It is in line with Girard *et al.* (2003) who states that young learners are excellent mimics. Besides, properties should be provided by the teacher to make the play livelier (Horn et al., 1993). In this study, the teacher uses head bands (Phillips, 2004), pictures and realia (Mumford, 2005; Budden, 2008; Baldry, 2010) to make the students easy to be involved in a dialog in role play. In the last stage, there are two activities can be carried out, that is: checking students comprehension and checking students' feedback (Phillips, 1993; Huang, 2008). Because the students' knowledge of English is still very limited, they recommend doing the former activity in children's native language, as the aim is not to practice English but to involve children in the learning process.

The letter activity is conducted to know students' feeling of the lesson by requesting them to express what they thought of it by drawing the face which reflects how they feel about the activity. The paper tries

to investigate the implementation of teaching speaking to young learners through role play and to find the kinds of speaking performance of young learners during the teaching speaking through role play.

### 3. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design which is considered appropriate 'to investigate little-understood phenomena' (Marshall and Rossman, 2006: 34). The participant of this study was 22 students whose ages range between 5 and 6 years old. Classroom observation, observation rating scale and document from students' daily learning record were used as the data collection technique of this study. The classroom observation was conducted for seven sessions that took forty minutes for each in which the researcher acted as 'a teacher as a researcher' and a participant observer. During the observation, the researcher took note on everything that was going on in her class after the class. Events were then reconstructed into field notes (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2007). Since no observation is value-free or theory-free, a colleague was invited to observe the class (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2000: 538-539).

In the case of this study, observation rating scale was used to record the kinds of speaking performance conducted by the students during the teaching speaking through role play. These includes: **mentioning the object names, producing single word or phrase as response, producing simple sentences, and getting involved in a dialog**. There were 3 sets of observation rating scales to record the assessment conducted by the teacher:

- the 1<sup>st</sup> set of observation rating scale recorded the students' speaking performance of role play 1 in the first and second meeting,
- the 2<sup>nd</sup> set of observation rating scale documented the students' speaking performance of role play 2 in the third and fourth meeting,
- the 3<sup>rd</sup> set of observation rating scale recorded the students' speaking performance of role play 3 in the fifth, sixth and seventh meeting.

To avoid bias from the researcher in assessing the students' speaking performance, another observer who was also the researcher's colleague was assigned as a rater to assess the students' speaking performance. Besides, the data from transcript, field notes, information from the classroom teacher are also used to find out the kinds of speaking performance of young learners.

The rating scale was also designed by providing a column to make qualitative judgment about the extent to which a behavior was present (Beatty, 1994; Wortham (2005). The researcher considered Vygotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development to identify the children's speaking performance (Wortham: 2005). Students' daily learning records were collected at the end of each role play. They constituted the resource of information to know students' response toward the teaching speaking through role play (Phillips: 1993). In this study, the teacher asked the students to color a happy face when they liked the lesson and color a sad face when they disliked the lesson.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result from data collection and data analysis are explained and discussed in two main points (i) the implementation of teaching speaking to young learners through role play; (ii) kinds of speaking performance of young learners during the teaching speaking through role play.

#### 4.1. The implementation of teaching speaking to young learners through role play

From the classroom observations, it can be seen that the role play was implemented by referring to the certain pattern that can be divided into **three main stages**, corresponding the typical structure of most lesson, i.e. the activities before, during and after role play (Girard, 2003; Harmer, 2008: 201). In this study, the three stages are elaborated with procedures recommended by some practitioners who have conducted the English teaching by using role play (Wessels, 1991; Girard et al., 2003; Phillips, 2004; Mumford, 2005; Read, 2008; Budden, 2008; Vernon, 2009).

The **activities before role play** comprise *preparing appropriate condition, introducing new vocabularies, telling story section, practicing the dialog for role play, and determining which characters students should act out*. These activities were conducted in order to make the students perform the role play well. **Listening to stories** has some tremendous effect in vocabulary development, for both first and second language acquisition (Mason and Krashen, 2004).

From the researcher's note, the students seemed to pay attention to the teacher so that they could understand the content of story well. Their understanding of the story could be seen when they answered the teacher's question after storytelling session. The following data from the researcher's note describes can be used as evidence:

*Setelah bercerita, guru bertanya kepada murid tentang isi cerita yang baru saja disampaikan. Murid merespon dengan menceritakan apa yang dragon sukai dan apa yang tidak dragon sukai. Selain itu siswa juga merespon pertanyaan guru dengan mempraktikkan phrase yang ada dalam cerita misalnya: I don't like apple, I don't like sandwich. (Obs#2, 19/03/10)*

After telling story, the teacher asks the students about the content of the story that just has been told. The students respond by telling what the dragon like and what the dragon doesn't like. Besides, the students also respond what the teacher asks by practicing the phrase in the story, for example: I don't like apple, I don't like sandwich. (Obs#2, 19/03/10)

The students seemed to be enthusiastic in this activity. They showed that they could understand the content of the story. It is in line with Wright (1995) who suggests that the students listened to the story to find the meaning in stories, so they listened with a purpose. It is not surprising to see that the students are enthusiast in storytelling session since one kind of children's characteristic is they love story and fantasy (Vaezy, 2006 and Suyanto, 2008).

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The students' enthusiastic can also be proven by considering students' responses when listening to the teacher's storytelling. The students repeated what the teacher said in storytelling without being asked by the teacher. It can be shown in the excerpt below:

Teacher : Ok. Small dragon. He walks in the park. *Tik tuk tik tuk...* He is hungry very very hungry. He says "Ough, I'm hungry very very hungry" (rub her stomach and make the facial expression of hungry people). There is a boy. He gives the dragon an apple. He says, "Have an apple" (pretend to give apple)

Ss : Have an apple (repeating what the teacher says).

Teacher : And the dragon testes the apple. *Nyam nyam...* (Chewing)

Ss : Yuck (saying the expression before the teacher say it)

Teacher : Yuck, I don't like apple. An then he is still hungry. The dragon says. I'm hungry very very hungry.

Ss : I'm hungry very very hungry (repeating what the teacher says).

From the data above, it indicated that the students liked to repeat what the teacher said. By doing repetition, the students also learnt the language. It is in line with Fleta (2008) who claims that "children have a natural tendency to repeat and they learn through repetition". Besides repetition, the students gave responses to the teacher's telling story by listening it thoroughly.

**The activities during role play** consist of *application of practiced role play, using mimes and gestures, and using properties*. The students require the teacher's guidance in the form of *verbal* or *non-verbal* cues based on their need. After the students recognized the new words and also the dialog that would be acted out in role play, *the students practiced the lines in the story*. This activity was conducted by involving all students in the class. This activity is recommended by Vernon (2009) who proposes that before students carry out the role play, the whole class can participate in practicing the line in the play. The activity can be described in the excerpt below:

- Teacher : *Sekarang... yang sebelah sini akan jadi dragon* (instruct the students on the right side). *Nanti bergantian ya.. nanti semua dapat giliran jadi dragon* (help students wearing head bands). *Yang sebelah sini akan jadi anak yang memberi apple* (give picture cards of apple to the students). Stand up... *Begini ceritanya. Dragon mengatakan "I'm hungry very very hungry"*.
- Ss : I'm hungry very very hungry.
- Teacher : *Kemudian yang sebelah sini* (instruct the students in the middle) *memberi apple kepada dragon dan mengatakan "Have an apple"*.
- Ss (middle group) : Have an apple.
- Ss (right group) : Nyam nyam.. Yuck, I don't like apple.
- Teacher : Very good. *Sekarang memberi sandwich. Ayo stand up. Kita coba lagi, ayo dragon mengatakan apa?*
- Ss (right group) : ...
- Teacher : I'm hungry very very hungry.
- Ss (right group) : I'm hungry very very hungry.

As the data shown, the teacher gave the instruction and gave the model of language to the students to practice the lines the story. However, after practicing two or three times, some students could remember the dialog and practice the lines without the direct guidance. The teacher only raised questions about the lines on what the students said. The teacher asked to the students in the middle group about what the dragon said when he was hungry. She said, "*Dragon mengatakan apa ketika lapar?*" (What the dragon says when he is hungry?), then the students said the expression just taught. The following excerpt can be used as prove:

- Teacher : *Dragon mengatakan apa ya ketika lapar?*
- Ss (middle group) : I'm hungry very very hungry (without model of language from the teacher)
- Teacher : Have an egg (giving assistance to the students with verbal cuess).
- Ss (left group) : Have an egg (they pass out the pictures of egg to the students in other group).
- Ss (middle group) : Nyam...nyam...nyam...(move close mouth as if chewing something).  
Yuck, I don't like egg (wave their hands without verbal cues as assistance).

The extract showed how students practiced to speak in a meaningful way. The students said the sentences, did mime, and used appropriate picture in practice. This activity was appropriate with children when they learnt new language. This kind of activity is recommended by Pinter (2006) who states that "at the beginning stages with children, it is a good idea to focus on simple but purposeful and meaningful pattern drilling and personalized dialog". As a result, the students could produce the simple sentences without any difficulty. The students' performance in this stage was influenced by their success in conducting the first stage.

At the last stage, **the teacher checks students' comprehension to know how well the students understand the language has been taught and checks students' feedback to know their response**. The data from student's daily learning records show that almost all students gave positive responses toward the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> role play, but some of them started to be bored when the same stages were again applied in the teaching learning process in the next session.

#### 4.2. The kinds of speaking performance produced by the students during the teaching learning process

Based on the target of the teaching learning process and also the result of observation, there are three kinds of oral production that can be performed by the students in which speaking is taught through role play. These include: (1) Naming objects; (2) Producing simple sentences (3) Getting involved in a dialog. Those kinds of oral production conform to the activities organized by the teacher in the teaching learning process. It is in line with Brown (2001) who clarifies that the oral production of the students relies on the teacher's role in selecting the types of speaking performance that the students are supposed to do.

### **4.3. Naming objects**

Naming objects is a kind of speaking performance that can be carried out by young learners (Read, 2006; Cameron, 2001). In this study, the students were able to name objects in the listen and repeat activity and in the guessing picture activity. According to the data from the 1<sup>st</sup> observation rating scale, it could be assumed that all of the students could mention the name of objects shown by the teacher through flash cards. It could also be seen from the data that 12 out of 16 students could mention the name of food correctly, clearly, and loudly without assistance from the teacher. The following data can be used as evidence:

Teacher : What is it? (showing the picture of apple)  
Ss : apple,  
Teacher : (showing the picture of hat)  
Ss : Hat  
Teacher : (showing the picture of egg)  
Ss : egg  
Teacher : (showing the picture of ice cream)  
Ss : ice cream,  
Teacher : (showing the picture of pizza)  
Ss : pizza,  
Teacher : (showing the picture of sandwich)  
Ss : Sandwich

When the teacher showed the pictures, the students could directly mention the name of objects in flash cards. It also can be seen from the data that the students apparently familiar with the name of objects and possess the ability to mention them. The students' speaking performance in this study supports Akbari's research (2008) which points out that pictures are believed to be effective in improving students' vocabulary learning particularly for young learners. In addition, Leny (2005) who conducted a study on kindergarten found that pictures help the students understand and memorize the difficult words.

However, there were also five students who need assistance from the teacher to mention the name of an object (one from five objects) in the picture. When the teacher showed the picture of sandwich the students identified it as pizza. Thus, the teacher gave the cue in the form of verbal cue. The excerpt below describes the process:

Teacher : What is it? (showing the picture of sandwich)  
Ss : Pizza  
Teacher : Sand...  
Ss : Sandwich

The data from the extract shows that the teacher gave some assistance for the students in the form of verbal cues. In terms of giving assistance the researcher followed the suggestion from Vygostky (in Wortham: 2005) regarding to his scaffolding theory. He asserts that teacher's help is needed for the children for being competence in certain skill, including language. In addition, Pinter (2006: 11) states that 'the teacher can start with what the child already knows and carefully builds on it according to the child's immediate needs to go forward'.

### **4.4. Producing simple sentences**

In the session which the students practiced the lines together with the whole class, almost all students were able to produce simple sentences with limited guidance from the teacher. However, the students' competence in producing simple sentence varied from one student to others. It can be seen from the 1<sup>st</sup> observation rating scale which recorded the students' speaking performance in first and second meetings. The teacher gave the non verbal cue for the students by miming the part of the dialog with no word spoken. The following excerpt describes the process:

Teacher : (Rubbing her stomach and miming as if she was very hungry with no word spoken out)  
Ss (left side) : I'm Hungry, very very hungry (rubbing their stomach and miming as if they were very hungry).  
Ss (right side) : Have an apple (handing out the picture cards).  
Ss (left side) : I don't like apple (waving their hands).

The data above seemed to suggest that the students had the ability to say the sentences without any difficulty. It indicated that the students had learnt the oral production skill beyond the speaking skill taught to the students in kindergarten class. As Handayani's research (2009) on teaching English in kindergarten finds that listening and speaking activities focus on vocabulary mastery. Further, she asserts that the activity observed in her research dominated by mentioning the name of objects. The data above also revealed that the students have the ability in producing not only object names but also **simple sentences**, such as: "I'm hungry", "Have an apple", and "I don't like apple". The students could achieve those kinds of oral productions since the teacher provided activities which demanded that the students speak and also provide the media to be used in the teaching learning process.

Early in the activity, the students had a chance to practice lines without media, after that a set of picture cards were given to the students to make it easier for them to comprehend the sentences. After practicing lines as described on the excerpt above, a student named Rose held a card with the picture of pizza and she automatically said to her friend "Have an pizza" while giving the picture of pizza to her friends. The observation data also revealed that Rose seemed to have difficulty in using the *article* in the sentence. She used the article "an" interchangeably. She succeeded in using a correct article when it was required, as in:

Have *an* apple.

She also used the 'an' article when it was not required

Have *an* pizza.

From the second language acquisition perspective, this case was common. Clearly, Rose had the competence to produce a sentence even though she did not have the same knowledge of article as a native speaker (Ellis, 1997). According to Linse, (2005: 51), children have a tendency to over generalize grammar rules when they are learning a new language.

#### **4.5. Getting involved in a dialog**

In the role play session the students had the opportunity to get involved in a dialog. The 1<sup>st</sup> observation rating scale showed that their performances were in various levels. Some of the students (6 out of 18 students) could be categorized into the outstanding level since they were able to produce simple sentences and get involved in a dialog with very limited or no guidance from the teacher. The teacher gave them a non verbal cue (only pointing, not giving a model again) to the students and they could say their sentences correctly, clearly and loudly.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> role play, there were some students (Mary, Sofi, Aurora, Sheila, and Rose) who were able to produce sentences and getting involved in the role play with limited assistance from the teacher. The following excerpt describes the activity:

Teacher : I'm hungry, very very hungry. Give me three pears.

3 Ss (Nia, Nasfia, Asyiah) : (unclear)

Teacher : Three pears ...

3 Ss (Nia, Nasfia, Asyiah) : Three pears for you.

Teacher : I'm hungry, very very hungry. Give me four apples.

4 Ss (Rose, Fadia, Zaid, Sheila) : Four apples for you (giving a flash cards contains picture of four apples)

The data above seemed to suggest that in this session some students could carry out speaking performance with various intensity of guidance for each student. Some students needed much guidance in the form of verbal cue and some students needed no guidance from the teacher. They were able to speak the sentence independently. The students who had guidance from the teacher with verbal cues were the students involved in average level. They were able to produce the simple sentences but the teacher's guidance was still essential. In this role play, the students practiced only three or four times to produce the simple sentences because of the limited time. When the teacher tried to assess their speaking performance in producing simple sentences, they showed that they needed guidance from the teacher.

The data also showed that the students seemed to be able to use the formulaic chunk. To make the description clear, the process of speaking performance will be represented by Zaid. For example: when the other student gave him the picture of an apple, he said:

"I don't like *apple*".

After that, when the other students gave him the picture of a sandwich he said:

"I don't like *sandwich*"

As described above, it could be seen that the student seemed to acquire formulaic language "I don't like\_\_\_\_", which could be used to perform communicative functions that were important to them and

which 'contribute to the fluency of their unplanned speech' (Ellis, 2005: 12). Formulaic language is 'the language that is produced as whole chunks rather than being put together word by word' (Girard et al., 2003). In this section, Zaid can produce formulaic chunk which should be complemented. Chunks help speakers to produce language faster because they do not have to think of individual words (Pinter, 2006). As the data shown, without the teacher's guidance Zaid could produce the language fast when he was given different picture cards from his friend in the dialog.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a small part of the result of a qualitative exploratory case study on investigating the implementation of teaching speaking to young learners through role play and finding the kinds of speaking performance of young learners during the teaching speaking through role play. The result shows that the teaching of speaking in which role play is implemented will be successful when the material is interesting, the learning environment is enjoyable and the period is short. Additionally, it is better that role play is not too often to be used in the whole teaching program, for example: role play can be conducted twice or three times in the whole semester. Besides, role play will be successful in the implementation when the teacher can tailor the roles to play the student's strengths, for example: more advanced students have larger roles to allow them to use and practice their vocabulary and pronunciation; less advanced students can have smaller parts with fewer lines so they can meet their goals and feel triumph of success.

The finding of the second problems also indicates that the students can perform three kinds of oral production skill, these include: naming objects, producing simple sentences, and getting involved in a dialog. The students carry out the speaking performance with various level of guidance to each student. The students performed better when they get much exposure from listening and have chance to practice the language used. Additionally, the students can perform better when the dialog in role play is simple and short. However, as the subject of this study is kindergarten students, they need very guided activity in conducting role play.

In this study, naming objects can be done by the students with high independency while in producing simple sentences and getting involved in a dialog the students need various guidance from the teacher based on their level of ability. Based on the students' speaking performance described above, it can be concluded that the teaching speaking to young learners through role play in this study is considered successful because it enables students not only naming objects but also use the vocabularies they learnt in meaningful context.

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