

Investigating Methods in Teaching Vocabulary to Early Childhood Students

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Abstract:

The mastery of English from an early age is an essential requirement. Kindergarten teachers must equip early childhood students with sufficient knowledge and skills in English. It starts with teaching them vocabulary, which facilitates their English communication. However, the main problem often faced is the selection of practical and enjoyable vocabulary teaching methods, as their learning style differs from that of older students. Therefore, this research aimed to investigate processes in teaching vocabulary to early childhood students. This study was conducted at Generation for Christ School using a qualitative descriptive approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews involving seven teachers as research informants. The data were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive approach. The results showed that the teaching methods applied by teachers in teaching English vocabulary to early childhood students are movement and songs, Total Physical Response (TPR), games, Grammar Translation Method (GTM), and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

Keywords: *Methods; Teaching vocabulary; Early childhood students*

INTRODUCTION

Learning English from an early age is crucial as it is a necessity in today's world. People who are proficient in English will be able to participate globally and internationally. Introducing English as early as possible means equipping people to navigate freely in the world of knowledge and technology (Harun, 2014). It is also hoped that by learning English, children will be able to interact with a wide range of people, breaking down language barriers for their development. If children are taught English from an early age, they will feel comfortable with the language (Priyanti & Nisa, 2022). Teaching English is important because early childhood is a crucial time for language development, and it is a good starting point because the earlier they start, the more time they have to learn. Early childhood also has a longer language learning period, which stimulates the improvement of their language skills (Stakanova & Tolstikhina, 2014). Age is an important factor in determining an individual's success. Learning English from an early age is said to have a higher success rate than starting in adolescence or adulthood. It is therefore considered more beneficial to introduce English to children at an earlier age (Harususilo, 2019).

Kindergarten plays a crucial role in developing various potentials in early childhood, including English language proficiency (Arumsari et al., 2017). Teaching English from an early age will yield more optimal results due to the high level of brain flexibility, making it easier for individuals to master a language. Commencing English language learning early is advantageous for memory and brain development. Children becoming familiar with and comprehending English earlier contributes to a more robust foundational knowledge. This is closely linked to their developmental characteristic of having a high level of curiosity (Faqihatuddiniyah & Rasyid, 2017). Their high level of curiosity facilitates learning a new language, as they are always intrigued by new and exciting things (Handayani, 2016). Furthermore, early childhood is an adequate period for introducing and learning a new language or vocabulary (Raden Agus Budiharto et al., 2021).

Vocabulary is a fundamental component that early childhood students must master in the process of learning English, enabling them to communicate more effectively in the language (A. B. Pertiwi et al., 2021) and it serves as the primary foundation in learning the English language (Tri Widyahening & Rahayu, 2021). Introducing English to early childhood students begins with vocabulary related to their daily lives and employs various engaging methods to capture their attention (Faqihatuddiniyah & Rasyid, 2017). Teaching English vocabulary can be conducted through multiple methods of learning (Ningsih, 2021). Early childhood can easily remember new vocabulary. However, the methods employed in the English language introduction process must be appropriate to ensure the achievement of the intended goals (Sriyeni & Gumiandari, 2021).

Introducing new vocabulary in early childhood is highly important as vocabulary serves as a central component in language usage. Vocabulary instruction is widely discussed in English language teaching (Raden Agus Budiharto et al., 2021). Vocabulary plays an essential role in mastering a foreign language, mainly English. Without a sufficient grasp of vocabulary, communication becomes challenging. Vocabulary is not merely a collection of memorized words with known meanings; it also involves the learning process of assembling these words (Basri et al., 2014). Vocabulary is a crucial factor in effective communication in English. Mastering a wide range of vocabulary significantly improves speaking, writing, and reading proficiency (N. N. Hidayati, 2017). Teaching vocabulary in early childhood education is highly appropriate as it falls within the golden age category, where this period is most effective for introducing English. Vocabulary learning involves not only memorizing words but also recognizing them, understanding how to remember them, pronouncing them, and use them correctly and appropriately in sentences (Tri Widyahening & Rahayu, 2021). In connection with this issue, a practical vocabulary teaching approach involves capturing the child's attention, paying attention to the meaning or usage of a word, and providing opportunities for repetition (A. B. Pertiwi et al., 2021). Furthermore, teaching vocabulary can be facilitated through songs, picture cards, games, and videos, or other media (N. Hidayati, 2018).

According to Larsen in Hartono, several vocabulary teaching methods in English can be applied to early childhood students, namely the grammar translation method, audio linguistic method, direct method, silent way, and community language learning. The Grammar Translation Method emphasizes the importance of translating skills from one language to another and is suitable when the teacher is introducing new vocabulary to early childhood students. The Audio Lingual Method focuses on habit formation in learning a foreign language. It can be applied to early childhood students by having them repeat dialogues and practice roles in those dialogues. In the Direct Method, the teacher directly shows images of the vocabulary being learned, allowing early childhood students to understand the English equivalent of the vocabulary. The Silent Way is used to teach

pronunciation to early childhood students directly or through audio. Community Language Learning is used in conversation classes where students work in groups and practice English conversations (Hartono, 2020). In addition to the above methods, other methods can be used to teach early childhood students English. They are Total Physical Responses, Songs, Games, and Stories. Total Physical Response emphasizes activities related to physical movement. Song uses singing and songs as a medium. Games use play as a medium for learning. Stories are implemented by reading short stories in English (Muliyah & Fernando, 2019).

Several studies have been conducted in Indonesia and abroad to investigate methods of teaching vocabulary; however, they differ from the present research. Holidazia & Rodliyah explored English vocabulary learning, specifically concentrating on learning strategies for high school students (Holidazia & Rodliyah, 2020). Addressing this issue, Herdyastika & Kurniawan also conducted a study to determine suitable methods to early childhood to learn a vast English vocabulary easily. Their research differs as it primarily compares Communicative Language Teaching and Grammar Translation methods (Herdyastika & Kurniawan, 2020). Sucandra et al. examined the factors causing difficulties in mastering English vocabulary and proposing solutions. However, their research differs from the current study as they focused on elementary school students, whose language development stage is undoubtedly different from that of early childhood students (Sucandra et al., 2022). This topic has also been investigated by Lotfie et al. in Malaysia, who discussed English teaching for preschoolers but solely focused on challenges without addressing vocabulary teaching methods (Lotfie et al., 2022). Recognizing the urgency of teaching English to early childhood students, this research aims to investigate the methods teachers employ in teaching vocabulary. As mentioned earlier, teaching early childhood students differs significantly from adolescents or adults. Therefore, paying attention to the teaching methods is crucial, as an inappropriate method may yield less favorable learning outcomes. One determinant factor in the success of English language instruction lies in selecting methods. The findings of this research are expected to provide valuable insights into the development of language education for early childhood students.

METHOD

The researchers employed a qualitative descriptive research method. Qualitative descriptive research aims to collect information and describe all observed phenomena or conditions objectively and without bias (Mukhtar, 2013). Therefore, the phenomena under investigation revolve around the methods used in teaching vocabulary to early childhood students. This research was conducted at Generation for Christ School, North Toraja, South Sulawesi for within one month. The researchers were actively involved in all stages of the research process, from planning to reporting research results. The informants for this research were the teachers in this school, with a total of seven participants. A semi-structured interview was used as the research instrument. The data were processed and analysed using a qualitative descriptive approach. The analysis stages comprised data collection, reduction, presentation, conclusion drawing, and verification (Miles, 1994). The researcher transcribed the data collected through interviews to identify patterns of issues. The necessary information was selected and coded according to the informants, and then categorized. Finally, conclusions were drawn and the data were verified. The data were presented by grouping them based on the types of methods used by teachers in teaching English vocabulary.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on data analysis, five methods of teaching English vocabulary to early childhood students can be identified, namely movement and songs, total physical response (TPR), games, grammar translation method (GTM), and communicative language teaching (CLT).

Movement and Songs

The most dominant method used by teachers in teaching vocabulary is through movement and songs. Based on data obtained from interviews, all informants stated that they apply this method. This is evident from the statements of informants 1 and 3, who expressed, "If our vocabulary teaching method uses songs." Similar expressions can also be found in the statement of informant 2, "Yes, it's the same through songs. Because we are currently focusing on the animal theme, so there are songs about animals with their English names. Anjing dog, kucing cat, kupu-kupu butterfly, ikan fish. That's what we teach while moving with various styles, like that." This statement is supported by the opinion of informant 4, "With songs, because early childhood students easily understand them, we use an LCD in class, also use videos." Another opinion in line with the previous ones is provided by informant 5, "But also through songs, for example, songs that match the weekly theme." Another expression can also be found in the statement of informant 6, "Movement and songs are used to teach English. In the morning, we use English songs accompanied by movements while singing." The opinions of the previous informants are reinforced by the statement given by informant 7, "Children are happiest when learning English words through movement and songs." From the informants' statements, it can be understood that the movement and song method is the most frequently used method by teachers to teach English vocabulary. Children also quickly comprehend the material, feel happy, and are enthusiastic about learning English.

Regarding the above findings, Uzer's research indicates that movement and songs are the most frequently used methods of teaching English in early childhood education. When early childhood students are introduced to songs with English lyrics, they become familiar with English vocabulary indirectly. He also adds that movement and songs can help early childhood students enhance their English language skills, especially their vocabulary (Uzer, 2019). Arumsari supports this viewpoint. She found that kindergarten teachers in the Sukolilo district of Surabaya often use movement and songs when teaching English (Arumsari et al., 2017). To this issue, Inawati also conducted a study. She found that movement and songs are used to teach English content to early childhood students, including vocabulary, phrases, or specific sentence patterns (Inawati, 2018).

In teaching English to early childhood students, using movement and songs is an engaging and enjoyable way to make them happier, more enthusiastic about learning, and to make teaching materials easier to understand (Susfenti, 2021). Another benefit of the movement and songs method is that early childhood students can learn while playing through concrete activities. They can enjoy fun English learning, and they can learn vocabulary with enthusiasm (Purwanti, 2020). Therefore, the selection of songs should consider the language development of children. Songs that are suitable to early childhood students can make English learning more meaningful and enjoyable. Additionally, singing can also help early childhood students to pronounce English vocabulary (Harun, 2014).

Total Physical Response (TPR)

The second method employed by teachers in teaching vocabulary to early childhood students is Total Physical Response (TPR). This method is reflected in the statement of informant 1, who mentioned, "Sometimes we directly instruct them, touch your head, touch your nose. It's like the real thing." This statement is supported by informant 2, who expressed a similar view: "Yes, we also use the body directly, for example, pointing to parts of the

body and saying ‘This is my head’, etc., and using objects around us.” In connection with the above statements, informant 3 revealed that:

“We use direct media. For example ‘I can see with my eyes’, so it’s shown directly. Early childhood students understand better when it’s shown. Similarly, with objects around us, we directly practice in the classroom. For example, ‘Touch the table’. So, the learning media use objects around us.”

Apart from the statements mentioned above, there is also the opinion of informant 5, which is related, “usually after morning blessings, we enter the classroom and get the children moving. For instance, ‘Touch your head’, ‘touch your eyes’, and so on. Uttered while pointing to the respective body parts.” In line with this statement, informant 6 expressed the view that, “So, we teach according to the theme in every week, for example, a theme about ‘ourselves’, so we teach about parts of the body and then instruct them to point and say it in English.” This opinion is reinforced by the statement given by informant 7, who said, “We use greeting sentences and command sentences, for example, ‘Sit down, stand up, please,’ like that.” The above description shows that the Total Physical Response method is quite popular among teachers because it can be adapted to the weekly themes. Early childhood students also enjoy it because it involves body movements.

The findings of this study are supported by research conducted by Selviani et al. They identified that the vocabulary skills of early childhood students in English undergo development after being taught using the TPR method. They also enjoy learning because this method can capture their attention (Selviani et al., 2022). Consistent with the aforementioned research results, Fadlan & Nopriansyah also conducted classroom action research by implementing the TPR method with early childhood students. They found that the TPR method can enhance their English skills (Fadlan & Nopriansyah, 2021). Ulya and Ichsan conducted research that further supports the above arguments. Their research results indicate that the TPR method can significantly impact the development of English vocabulary in early childhood students (Ulya & Ichsan, 2021).

The TPR method is highly suitable for teaching English to early childhood students. In this method, they can learn English in a fun-filled environment, free from pressure or stress during the learning process (Setyoningsih, 2016). Additionally, this method focuses on activities involving direct physical movement, naturally capturing the interest of children who enjoy being active, making the process of introducing English vocabulary to early childhood students easier (Alianti & Kurniawan, 2023). In applying TPR, we can start by using simple command sentences used in everyday life, such as: Listen! Watch! Sit down!. Afterward, vocabulary is introduced using body language through gestures and facial expressions. It is also important to pay attention to the emphasis or intonation of the voice on the vocabulary used, making it easier for early childhood students to understand (Mazhabi, 2019). Furthermore, the TPR method can stimulate early childhood students to increase their English vocabulary, understand the meanings, and be able to pronounce English vocabulary correctly (Ni Luh et al., 2019).

Games

Games are the next method employed by teachers to teach vocabulary to early childhood students. This was revealed by five informants, as evident in the statements of informant 1 who stated, “In the class during the introduction of numbers, we use games.” A similar opinion was also expressed by informant 2, stating, “English vocabulary teaching is done in the form of playing so that children feel like they are not learning but playing.” Another statement made by informant 5 is, “Examples of games used to teach English include scattering numbers and then finding them. The teacher gives instructions, like ‘findi-

ng number three, etc'. Also, there are clapping games. For example, 'red is one clap, yellow is two claps, and so on'." This statement aligns with the opinion of informant 6, who said, "We also use games to teach vocabulary." Another opinion discussing games method is evident in the statement of informant 7, "Introduction to colors in the form of games, for example, stepping on colorful puzzles." From the opinions of the informants above, it can be understood that games are a frequently applied method by teachers in vocabulary instruction because they can make early childhood students enjoy learning. They are also more motivated to learn because the classroom atmosphere is not boring.

Teaching English vocabulary to early childhood students should employ engaging methods that enhance their learning motivation. Naturally, they enjoy playing; hence, games are highly suitable for vocabulary instruction. Through games, they can learn while playing, creating a pleasant and non-monotonous learning atmosphere (Lestiyanawati, 2017). Consistent with the above theory, the research findings of Baimbetova indicate that the use of games in teaching English can assist and enhance the vocabulary of early childhood students. Furthermore, they are more inclined to enjoy learning through games, are better motivated, and can remember vocabulary more effectively (Baimbetova, 2020). Moreover, the research results of Bakhsh show that games are an effective method to help early childhood students learn vocabulary and make learning an enjoyable experience for them. He recommends five games for teaching vocabulary: Hot Potatoes, Memory Challenge, Last One Standing, Pictionary, and Bingo. He also adds that through games, children can comprehend learning in an enjoyable manner, facilitating easy retention of vocabulary (Bakhsh, 2016).

Grammar Translation Method

The vocabulary teaching method applied by early childhood educators, as mentioned by the informants, is the Grammar Translation Method. This is evident in the statement of informant 1, who expressed, "We pronounce Indonesian words and their translations using visual aids. We often use this method with early childhood students. When we use pictures, they tend to respond more quickly." Another perspective is shared by informant 2, stating, "We create things from cardboard that they bring, for example, learning about houses. We introduce, for instance, the names of different parts and teach them the English equivalents." Similar sentiments are echoed in the statement of informant 3, who mentioned, "Students pronounce English vocabulary and also translate it into Indonesian." This assertion is reinforced by the opinion of informant 4, who mentioned, "Teachers often mention both Indonesian and English, and students translate between the two languages." A viewpoint aligned with the previous ones is presented by informant 6, who stated, "We also teach students through books in the library. So, we show them the Indonesian language and then translate it into English". To strengthen the previously outlined arguments, informant 7 suggested, "We can also create things like an aquarium from used milk cartons, where the names of the fish are attached, along with their meanings in English." Based on the arguments presented by the informants, it can be concluded that the Grammar Translation Method is a method employed in teaching vocabulary by translating Indonesian words into English and vice versa. This method can also assist early childhood students in enhancing their English vocabulary in an enjoyable manner.

The Grammar Translation Method remains widely popular in English vocabulary learning. This method aids early childhood students in recognizing and understanding vocabulary as teachers use both languages in the classroom during instruction (Herdyastika & Kurniawan, 2020). The teacher pronounces vocabulary words in English and then translates or repeats them in Indonesian. The use of Indonesian in the classroom is intended to make learning easier for children to comprehend (Elmayantie, 2015). Furthermore,

activities within the Grammar Translation Method also help students translate readings, enabling them to comprehend what they read and enhance their English vocabulary and grammar skills (Marnina & Sauhendra, 2023).

Communicative Language Teaching

The next method employed by teachers in teaching English vocabulary to early childhood students is Communicative Language Teaching. This is evident in the statement made by informant 1, who said, “The focus is on vocabulary and simple conversations, and indeed, English is adjusted according to the theme each week. Efforts are made to ensure that interactions in the class use English.” Another perspective is provided by informant 2 as follows:

“Then, regarding everyday conversations, it’s usual when asked, ‘Good morning, how are you?’ like that. Then we ask about the names of the days, ‘What day is today?’ Then asked about their feelings, ‘Are you happy today? Or ‘take your book,’ or ‘open your book on page, for example, page two’, like that.”

The above statements are supported by the opinion of informant 5, who stated, “The greetings are also like asking for permission, they are taught ‘I want to go to the toilet,’ like a habit and command sentences. Every day they learn English.” Furthermore, informant 6 also expressed their opinion: “With everyday conversations like: ‘Good morning, how are you today?’” The statements above are further supported by the opinion of informant 7, who stated, “If we’re here, it’s just everyday conversations, for example: ‘what day is today? Today is Tuesday’.” From the informant’s description above, it can be understood that the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching is a habit among teachers and students in the school. This method aims to develop the communicative competence of students, with one aspect of communication competence that can be developed being linguistic. The language elements focused on in this aspect include vocabulary, grammar, and morphology (Rambe, 2017); therefore, this method is highly suitable for teaching vocabulary.

In applying the Communicative Language Teaching method, English is taught by teachers while communicating with early childhood students. Through this method, they can acquire a wide range of English vocabulary through various activities and direct interactions with their teachers and peers. English learning begins with teaching greetings, followed by character formation through teaching five magic words (sorry, help, excuse me, please, and thank you), and is always in line with the current learning theme. If a student makes a mistake in pronouncing vocabulary, the teacher can correct them immediately. This aims to make children accustomed to daily communication and learning English. The advantage of the Communicative Language Teaching method lies in the intense interaction in English, so early childhood students become accustomed to and understand the meaning of the vocabulary. However, if they already have a basic understanding or background in using English, while others do not have the same foundation, it can lead to misunderstandings in communication. Therefore, teachers must assist students in translation (Herdyastika & Kurniawan, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Vocabulary teaching methods for early childhood students need to consider their conditions. They enjoy learning and can master vocabulary quickly if the methods used by the teachers are creative and engaging. Therefore, based on the analysis results it can be concluded that the methods that kindergarten teachers can apply in teaching vocabulary to early childhood students are movement and songs, total physical response (TPR), games, Grammar Translat-

ion Method (GTM), and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). In addition, teachers often encounter challenges in vocabulary teaching. Indeed, this can disrupt the process of teaching English to them and can affect their learning outcomes. Considering this reason, further research is recommended to explore the challenges in teaching vocabulary to early childhood students, along with solutions that can be offered to address these challenges.

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