

ISLAMIC PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' PRACTICES OF USING COMPETITIVE GAMES FOR TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS

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ABSTRAK

Meskipun banyak penelitian telah membahas dampak permainan kompetitif terhadap hasil belajar, namun belum banyak penelitian yang secara khusus menyoroti praktik guru dalam menerapkan permainan tersebut di kelas EFL, terutama bagi siswa usia dini. Untuk mengisi kekosongan ini, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi praktik guru sekolah dasar Islam dalam mengaplikasikan permainan kompetitif untuk mengajarkan bahasa Inggris kepada siswa usia dini. Dengan menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif, penelitian ini dilakukan di dua sekolah dasar Islam yang berlokasi di Pekalongan dan Batang, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia. Dua guru Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL) direkrut berdasarkan kriteria tertentu, yaitu tahun pengalaman mengajar Bahasa Inggris kepada siswa usia dini, penerapan permainan kompetitif di kelas mereka, dan partisipasi dalam lokakarya tentang permainan pendidikan interaktif. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas dan wawancara semi-terstruktur serta dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa praktik guru EFL di sekolah dasar Islam dalam menggunakan permainan kompetitif melibatkan proses implementasi yang sistematis dan kontekstual. Permainan tersebut tidak dilakukan secara spontan, melainkan mengikuti prosedur terstruktur, sambil juga disesuaikan dengan kebutuhan siswa dan kondisi kelas. Penelitian ini berkontribusi terhadap pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang bagaimana permainan kompetitif diterapkan dalam konteks kelas nyata.

Kata kunci: Permainan Kompetitif, Pengajaran Bahasa Inggris, Sekolah Dasar Islam, Peserta Didik Usia Dini

ABSTRACT

Although numerous studies have discussed the impact of competitive gaming on learning outcomes, limited research specifically highlights teachers' practices in applying these games in EFL classrooms, especially to young learners. To fill this void, the present study aims to explore Islamic primary school teachers' practices in applying competitive games for teaching English to young learners. Anchored with a qualitative case study design, this research was conducted in two Islamic primary schools located in Pekalongan and Batang, Central Java, Indonesia. Two EFL teachers were recruited based on specific criteria, i.e., years of experience in teaching English to young learners,

the application of competitive games in their classroom, and participation in workshops on interactive educational games. Data were garnered through classroom observation and semi-structured interview and analyzed employing thematic analysis. The findings of this study indicate that the Islamic primary school EFL teachers' practices in using competitive games involved a systematic and contextual implementation process. The games were not conducted spontaneously but followed structured procedures, while also being adjusted to students' needs and classroom conditions. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how competitive games are applied in real classroom contexts.

Keywords: *Competitive Games, English Teaching, Islamic Primary Schools, Young Learners*

INTRODUCTION

Competitive games are game-based activities that involve an element of competition between individuals or groups with the aim of winning a particular challenge. They are often used in various learning contexts, including language teaching, because of their ability to increase learner motivation and engagement (Wright et al., 2006). Competitive games involve structured competition between individuals or groups to achieve specific learning goals and can develop various skills in children (Blegur, 2017). Research on competitive games highlights several key characteristics such as competition, clear rules, objective scoring systems, and rewards for winners as fundamental elements that encourage a competitive spirit (Elias et al., 2012). In conclusion, competitive games are game-based activities that involve competition and have clear rules, objective scoring systems, and rewards for winners, which can increase learner motivation, engagement, and skill development.

The types of competitive games in English language learning include team-based games, individual-based games, and technology-based games (Prensky, 2003). Research has shown that competitive games in EFL speaking classes for young learners can increase motivation, build confidence, and create a fun atmosphere that lowers anxiety (Hikmawan et al., 2023). Nevertheless, competition in education can have both positive and negative effects on student motivation and learning. Competition can encourage students to perform better (Chen et al., 2010), but it can also make them overly focused on winning and discouraged when they

fail (Lam et al., 2004). Some studies suggest that competition can lower students' confidence when they compare themselves to others (Chan & Lam, 2008) and can make weaker students feel unmotivated if they continuously lose (Cheng et al., 2009). Therefore, competitive games in English learning can increase students' motivation and confidence, but they also have potential negative impacts, such as lowering self-confidence and reducing motivation among less capable students.

Research shows that using games in English language learning can be particularly effective for young learners. Games have been shown to increase motivation, vocabulary acquisition, and English proficiency while reducing anxiety (Wang et al., 2011). The use of competitive games in English language learning is especially relevant for young learners, such as early childhood and primary school students, because they tend to learn through fun and interactive experiences (Al-karawi, 2020). Competitive games are also considered effective in developing young learners' communicative skills in English language learning (Ibrakhimovna, 2024). Therefore, the use of competitive games in language teaching provides an interactive and enjoyable learning experience that aligns with young learners' learning characteristics.

Using competitive games in language learning can create a more interesting and enjoyable classroom atmosphere. Competitive games provide opportunities for competition, rule-following, and fun, thus helping teachers create a positive learning environment (Sanchez et al., 2007). Their use in teaching young learners creates a more relaxed and enjoyable learning environment that leads to better educational outcomes compared to traditional teaching methods (Kolarska, 2020). However, the successful implementation of this strategy depends greatly on how teachers manage classroom dynamics and balance competition with collaboration in order to maintain a positive learning experience for all students.

Although competitive games have several benefits, they also present challenges that can hinder effective learning, especially when they foster excessive competition among young learners. Teachers often face difficulties such as managing noise, maintaining classroom organization, and ensuring that students have enough time to practice and consolidate vocabulary (Bakhsh, 2016). In addition, competition in academic settings can induce anxiety and negatively affect

student participation and learning outcomes. Young learners may associate their abilities with how well they perform compared to others, causing some students to lose motivation to avoid feelings of failure (Wang & Yang, 2003). Anxiety caused by competitive games can also interfere with concentration and learning because it increases cognitive pressure, especially for young learners who are more sensitive to fear and anxiety (Liu et al., 2024). Therefore, teachers' understanding of competitive game dynamics and how they adapt these games in classroom teaching are essential factors in ensuring successful implementation.

Based on pre-research conducted through conversations with two English teachers at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) in Batang and Pekalongan, an overview of classroom practices in applying competitive games in English learning was identified. The first teacher, identified as Mrs. N, explained that she has used competitive games such as word relay and vocabulary race, both individually and in teams, where winners receive extra points. She stated that competitive games are an interactive method that can enhance students' learning motivation, but they require teacher supervision to avoid emotional stress, as some students become overly focused on winning. Meanwhile, the second teacher, Mrs. D, has implemented games such as quiz bowl using spinner technology and vocabulary races in groups, with rewards such as extra points or small monetary prizes for winners. According to her, students become more enthusiastic when there is a target to achieve, although challenges remain in controlling the class during the game and encouraging participation from academically weaker students. These findings indicate that competitive games can be effective and enjoyable learning strategies, but proper planning and classroom management are necessary to maximize their benefits.

Previous studies have also reported several challenges in the implementation of competitive games for teaching young learners. Common challenges include difficulties in controlling the classroom during games, unequal student participation, and negative psychological effects on students who are less able to compete (Cameron, 2001). Additionally, competitive games can trigger aggressive behavior among young learners, which requires careful classroom management strategies (Castellanos, 2002). However, there is still limited research that

specifically examines teachers' practices in implementing competitive games for teaching English to young learners. Most previous studies focus more on student outcomes rather than on how teachers organize, manage, and evaluate the use of competitive games in the classroom. This gap needs further investigation.

Based on the arguments above, this study aims to conduct a deeper investigation into teachers' practices in using competitive games for teaching English to young learners. The main focus of this research is on how teachers organize students, explain game instructions and rules, manage classroom interaction during the game, and evaluate learning outcomes after the activities. This study also briefly presents the methodology by focusing on the research questions: (1) How do teachers implement competitive games in teaching English to young learners? and (2) What challenges do teachers face during the implementation? This research uses a qualitative case study approach with observation and interviews as data collection techniques, while data are analyzed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. By understanding teachers' practices, this research is expected to contribute to the development of more effective teaching strategies. In addition, the findings are expected to help teachers design competitive games that are not only interesting but also support students' academic progress and classroom participation effectively.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore teachers' practices in using competitive games for teaching English to young learners. Qualitative research was considered appropriate because it provides an in-depth understanding of classroom activities and teaching experiences in natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study method was used to examine how competitive games were implemented, managed, and evaluated in real classroom contexts (Yin, 2018).

The research was conducted at two private primary schools in Batang and Pekalongan where English was taught as a subject. The participants were two EFL teachers, namely Teacher N and Teacher D, who taught fifth- and sixth-grade students. Two EFL teachers were recruited based on specific criteria, namely years

of experience in teaching English to young learners, the application of competitive games in their classroom, and participation in workshops on interactive educational games. Their teaching practices provided relevant data for this study.

Data were collected through classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. Observation was used to examine how teachers organized students, explained game rules, managed classroom interaction, and conducted evaluation during competitive game activities. Each teacher was observed once during regular classroom learning. Interviews were conducted offline in Indonesian for approximately 30 minutes with each teacher to obtain deeper information about their preparation, implementation, and classroom management when using competitive games.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. To ensure trustworthiness, this study applied triangulation by comparing findings from observation and interviews. This method helped strengthen the credibility and consistency of the research findings (Camburn & Barnes, 2004).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that the implementation of competitive games in teaching English to young learners was carried out through several structured teaching practices, namely classroom management, giving instructions, game procedures, teacher–student interaction, and evaluation of students (Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

Classroom Management

These findings indicate that competitive games were not used as spontaneous entertainment activities, but as planned instructional strategies integrated into English lessons. Teachers carefully organized the learning process so that games supported vocabulary learning, student participation, and classroom engagement. This supports Richards and Lockhart (1996), who explain that teachers' classroom practices reflect pedagogical decision-making in managing effective learning

activities. In terms of classroom management, both teachers demonstrated different but equally effective strategies in organizing students, controlling classroom discipline, and managing time during competitive games. Teacher N preferred students to stand while playing because movement increased focus, energy, and active participation, while Teacher D asked students to remain seated in groups due to limited classroom space and a larger number of students. Teacher D instructs students to remain seated with their group teams when playing competitive games, which will be seen in Figure 4.1.



Figure 4.2 Seating Arrangement Practice by Teacher N

Both teachers also used simple classroom control signals, such as “concentration begins” and clapping with “silent please,” to regain students’ attention when the class became noisy. In addition, they carefully allocated time for material explanation, rule explanation, gameplay, and lesson closure. These findings are consistent with Evertson and Weinstein (2006), who state that effective classroom management includes organization, discipline, and time efficiency. The differences between both teachers also support Adler’s (1984) concept of teachers’ practical knowledge, where teachers make instructional decisions based on real classroom conditions rather than applying one fixed strategy.

Giving Instructions

Giving instructions for the game also emerged as an important aspect of successful implementation. Both teachers consistently explained game rules in Indonesian rather than English because they believed students would understand the instructions more clearly. This decision shows that teachers prioritized comprehension over language exposure during game preparation. In addition, both teachers relied on body gestures such as pointing, walking, standing, and hand

movements to support verbal explanations. Instead of using printed visual aids, they preferred direct physical demonstrations because these were simpler and more effective for young learners. However, they used different strategies to check students' understanding. Teacher N asked students whether they had any questions before starting the game, while Teacher D preferred conducting a short trial run followed by asking if students were ready. These findings align with Ur (2012) and Scrivener (2011), who explain that effective instructions must be clear, brief, and adjusted to students' level of understanding. This suggests that clarity of instruction is a fundamental requirement in competitive game-based learning.

Game Procedures

The procedural steps for playing competitive games were also carried out systematically in both classrooms. Teacher N implemented Word Relay, while Teacher D used Vocabulary Race. Although the game formats were different, both teachers followed clear stages: dividing students into balanced groups, explaining rules, preparing questions, guiding participation, recording points, and announcing winners. Teacher N's Word Relay focused on teamwork and vocabulary building through turn-taking at the board, while Teacher D's Vocabulary Race emphasized speed, confidence, and active recall through quick question-and-answer competition. These observations were reinforced by photographic documentation showing Teacher N directly guiding the Word Relay activity, as will be shown in Figure 4.2.



Figure 4.2 Guiding the Word Relay Activity by Teacher N

Both teachers actively supervised the games to ensure students followed the rules and that every student had equal opportunities to participate. In addition, both

teachers consistently recorded points on the board after each correct answer so students could monitor their progress. This transparent scoring system increased motivation and maintained fairness, as will be shown in Figure 4.3.



Figure 4.1 Recorded Points on The Board by Teacher D

These findings are supported by Wright et al. (2006), who state that effective language games require clear stages, teacher supervision, and structured scoring systems. This confirms that competitive games were implemented as organized instructional activities rather than unplanned classroom games.

Teacher–Student Interaction

Teacher–student interaction played a major role in maintaining student engagement and emotional comfort during the games. Both teachers provided continuous encouragement, praise, and support throughout the activities, although their feedback styles were different. Teacher N often gave immediate corrective feedback by directly explaining the correct answer when students made mistakes, while Teacher D relied more on verbal praise and motivational expressions because she believed her students responded positively to encouragement. Both teachers also ensured fairness by giving equal opportunities to all students and avoiding favoritism during the competition. For example, Teacher N awarded points fairly when both groups answered correctly at the same time, while Teacher D gave

additional opportunities to groups that had not yet scored. Positive nonverbal communication such as smiling, eye contact, and thumbs-up gestures were also consistently used to reduce anxiety and increase confidence. These findings support Brown (2001), who explains that teacher interaction provides feedback and scaffolding for language learning, and Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory, which emphasizes that learning occurs through supportive social interaction between teachers and students.

Evaluation of Students

Evaluation practices also reflected careful teacher planning and emotional awareness. Both teachers clearly announced winners, praised student effort, and managed students' emotional responses after the game ended. Teacher N involved students in calculating the final scores together before announcing the winner, creating transparency and fairness, while Teacher D directly announced the winner based on the visible scores already written on the board. Both teachers appreciated the winners through verbal praise, but Teacher N encouraged the whole class to applaud, while Teacher D also provided small rewards such as snacks. Importantly, both teachers also gave emotional support to students who lost. Teacher N reminded students that the main goal of the game was learning and having fun, while Teacher D motivated students to try harder in the next game. They also helped students calm down after the game by using gentle communication and positive reinforcement so that excessive excitement or disappointment did not disrupt classroom harmony. These findings are consistent with Black and Wiliam's (1998) formative assessment principles, which emphasize feedback and student support, as well as Krashen's (1982) socio-affective perspective, which highlights the importance of reducing anxiety and maintaining motivation in language learning.

Overall, the implementation of competitive games in this study can be described as structured, adaptive, and pedagogically sound. Teachers did not simply use games for entertainment, but carefully integrated them into English lessons through systematic planning, classroom management, clear instructions, active supervision, supportive interaction, and fair evaluation. Competitive games functioned as meaningful teaching strategies that improved student motivation,

participation, vocabulary learning, and classroom engagement while maintaining emotional balance among young learners. These findings support Richards and Rodgers (2014), who explain that successful teaching depends on the appropriate integration of methods and techniques based on learning goals and student needs. Therefore, competitive games can be considered effective instructional practices for teaching English to young learners when implemented with careful attention to classroom context and student characteristics.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that teachers' practices in using competitive games for teaching English to young learners were carried out through a structured and contextual process. The implementation began with classroom management, where teachers organized students into groups, arranged seating based on classroom conditions, controlled discipline, and managed time effectively. Teachers also provided clear game instructions using simple language and gestures to ensure students understood the rules before starting the activity. During the games, teachers followed systematic procedures such as dividing teams, explaining rules, guiding participation, recording scores, and maintaining fairness. Teacher–student interaction was also important, as teachers provided encouragement, corrective feedback, praise, and emotional support to keep students motivated and actively involved throughout the learning process.

The evaluation stage was conducted through score recording, winner announcements, rewards, and emotional support for both winning and losing students. Teachers ensured that the competitive atmosphere remained positive by maintaining fairness, appreciating student effort, and helping students manage excitement or disappointment after the game. These findings indicate that competitive games were not used as spontaneous or recreational activities, but as planned instructional strategies that supported vocabulary learning, participation, confidence, and classroom engagement. The implementation of competitive games in this study can therefore be described as structured, adaptive, and pedagogically appropriate for teaching English to young learners.

This study contributes to English language teaching by providing practical descriptions of how competitive games can be implemented effectively in primary classrooms. It highlights the importance of teacher preparation, classroom management, and emotional support in ensuring that competition remains healthy and beneficial for students. However, this study is limited by the small number of participants, as it only involved two teachers from two schools. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve more participants from different educational settings and to examine the long-term impact of competitive games on students' language achievement and classroom participation.

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