ENHANCING STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH BOARD GAMES AS INTERACTIVE LEARNING MEDIA IN ENGLISH CLASSES

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Abstract

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method within the framework of a best practice implementation. Conducted as a classroom-based intervention, the research aimed to document and reflect on an innovative teaching approach using board games to enhance speaking skills. Implemented at SMP Islam Darussalam Palangka Raya with 7th-grade students, the activity addressed challenges such as low student motivation and fear of making mistakes. Inspired by the 2023 Essential Skills of English Teacher Training (ESETT) in Bali, the board games were designed to provide a low-stress, student-centered environment that encourages spontaneous speaking and collaborative learning.The activity allowed students to practice speaking in real-time with their peers, which helped reduce pressure and increase confidence. Results indicated improvements in student participation, fluency, and willingness to communicate. Furthermore, this method is highly adaptable—not only for English but also for different subjects—making it a practical and flexible instructional tool aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings suggest that board games can be a sustainable and inclusive solution to improve language learning in diverse educational settings.

Keywords: Board Games, Speaking, Adaptable, Sustainable, Teaching

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Indonesian Ministry of Education has actively promoted the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes simplicity, flexibility, contextuality, and relevance to students' needs and local conditions. As of August 28, 2023, nearly 70% of schools in Indonesia had adopted this curriculum, which encourages teachers to innovate and adapt their teaching methods creatively (Kemdikbud, 2023).

In English classrooms, students often face challenges in speaking activities due to a fear of making mistakes, which reduces their willingness to participate. This issue frequently arises and affects overall classroom interaction. However, based on informal discussions and reflective feedback, students show greater enthusiasm when games are integrated into lessons. They find games enjoyable and less stressful, which helps create a supportive and fun learning atmosphere that encourages active participation and boosts their confidence in speaking English.

Another obstacle comes from limited teaching facilities. In some schools, including those with limited technological infrastructure, technical issues such as unavailable projectors or incompatible hardware frequently hinder the effective use of digital teaching aids. Furthermore, observations during the PPG Daljab program in 2023 and the ongoing PKGBI training for English teachers revealed that many schools—particularly in Central Kalimantan—continue to face fundamental infrastructure challenges, such as inconsistent electricity supply. These conditions further complicate the integration of technology into classroom learning. In July 2023, participation in the Essential Skills of English Teacher Training (ESETT) in Bali—organized by the U.S. Embassy in collaboration with World Learning—marked a significant turning point. The training highlighted how English language instruction could become more engaging and meaningful through the use of creative, game-based approaches. This insight inspired the development of board games as an alternative

instructional tool to enhance language learning experiences.

Picture 1. Activities with Board Games at the ESETT programme in Bali, 21-26 July 2023

Board games are structured activities involving dice, tokens, and a marked surface, all guided by specific rules. They are widely used in both educational and recreational contexts due to their accessibility and engaging nature. Unlike digital games, board games do not require electronic devices, making them especially practical for low-resource settings where technology may be limited or unavailable, yet learning remains essential.

The implementation of board games seek to offer a practical and inclusive solution for enhancing speaking skills in English classes by integrating board games into the learning process. It aims to inspire fellow educators to explore creative strategies that not only support language acquisition but also foster confidence, collaboration, and enjoyment in learning.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method within the framework of a best practice implementation. Conducted as a classroom-based intervention, the research aimed to document and reflect on an innovative teaching approach using board games to enhance speaking skills. Rather than relying on quantitative data, the study focused on classroom observation, student engagement, and reflective teaching to evaluate the effectiveness and adaptability of the method.

This study was implemented at SMP Islam Darussalam Palangka Raya in August 2023. The intervention consisted of three sessions conducted in a 7th-grade English class with 21 female students. Their English proficiency ranged from beginner to intermediate levels. The primary aim was to improve their speaking skills by fostering a student-centered, interactive, and enjoyable learning environment. Board games were used as a non-digital tool to encourage participation, reduce anxiety, and support meaningful communication in English.

This practice is primarily designed for English language teachers at the junior secondary level (SMP), especially those working in areas with limited technological access. It offers an alternative instructional method that can be tailored to various educational settings, particularly in schools with minimal access to electricity and the internet. By using non-digital tools, teachers can still create meaningful and interactive English learning experiences for their students.

The implementation was carried out in three main phases. First, during the English language introduction phase, students were introduced to basic expressions like greetings, farewells, and self-introductions using visual aids. Second, in the instruction phase with integrated games, students practiced constructing simple sentences through guided lessons that included short, interactive games. Finally, in the speaking practice phase, students engaged in board game activities in small groups, responding to open-ended prompts based on dice rolls to encourage spontaneous English speaking.

In this activity, students played the board game in small groups of three to four, taking turns to roll dice and respond to prompts using their experiences, imagination, or critical thinking. The teacher played an active role throughout the process—guiding students before, during, and after the game. This included explaining instructions, monitoring group interactions, providing feedback, and leading reflection sessions to reinforce

language use and learning outcomes.

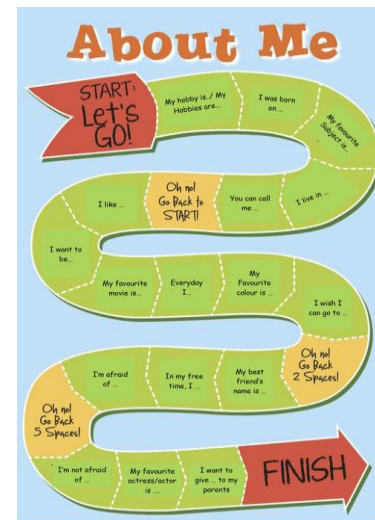**Picture 2.** Original Version of Board Games
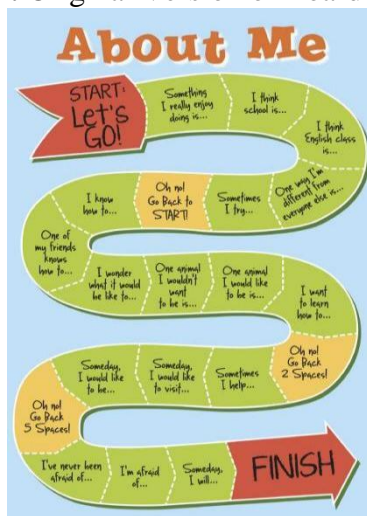
The board games used in this activity were intentionally designed to promote conversation, collaboration, and the development of English vocabulary. They were not implemented in their original form without thoughtful consideration. Prior to classroom use, the content and structure of the games were carefully reviewed and evaluated. Adjustments were made when necessary to align the games with specific lesson objectives and the students' English proficiency levels.

This process was guided by the principle of differentiation, ensuring that the learning experience would be inclusive, relevant, and effective for students. By tailoring the materials to meet learners' needs, the games became not only a fun activity but also a purposeful tool that supported language development in a more meaningful way.

The modified version of the board game was specifically adapted for seventh-grade students learning the topic of self-introduction. Vocabulary and sentence structures were simplified to match their beginner to intermediate levels of English. In contrast, the original version of the game, which contained more advanced language and complex structures, was deemed less appropriate for this age group and proficiency level, as it could have caused confusion or discouraged active participation.

Picture 3. Modification Version of Board Games

Picture 4. Original unmodified version of the Board Games used directly in the classroom
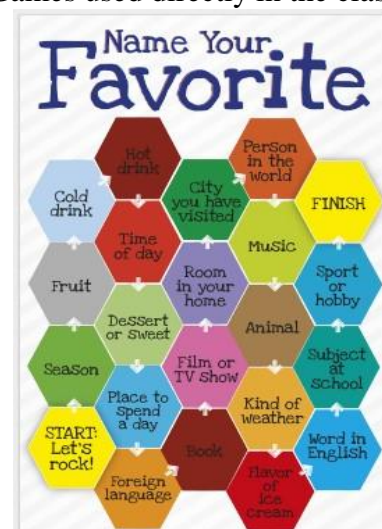
RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of board games as interactive learning media in English language instruction revealed several positive outcomes. These games transformed the classroom atmosphere into a more relaxed, student-centered environment that reduced anxiety and encouraged learners to speak with greater confidence. As a result, students became more comfortable taking linguistic risks and expressing themselves in English without fear of making mistakes. This shift laid the foundation for more open communication and active participation, consistent with Fithriani (2021), who observed that board games lower

affective barriers and promote a safe space for language production.

In addition to boosting students' confidence, the board games also enhanced motivation and engagement. Learning became a social and enjoyable experience, where students no longer saw English as intimidating or boring. The interactive format of the games provided frequent opportunities for learners to use English in meaningful contexts. These experiences encouraged not only individual expression but also collective enthusiasm for classroom activities, especially among students who were typically passive in traditional instructional settings. This aligns with findings by Alsawaier (2018), who reported that gamification enhances motivation by fulfilling learners' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Furthermore, the board games fostered several key 21st-century learning skills. Students practiced real-time interaction, collaborated in small groups, and strengthened their vocabulary and sentence structure through repeated exposure and peer feedback. The activities were also inclusive in nature, adaptable to different student needs and subject areas. As highlighted by Werlinger and Inostroza (2024), board games support inclusive education by promoting oral production through visual support and collaborative learning, making them effective tools for differentiated instruction.

Enhancing Speaking Confidence through Low-Stress Environments

One of the most prominent findings of this study was the significant increase in students' speaking confidence when board games were integrated into English lessons. Prior to the intervention, learners often displayed hesitation and anxiety, reflecting common patterns of foreign language anxiety which adversely impact confidence and participation in spoken activities (Fithriani, 2021). The board game format provided a low-stress, playful context in which students could take linguistic risks without fear of negative evaluation. Meta-analyses indicate that

educational board games consistently reduce speaking anxiety and enhance learners' confidence in L2 oral performance (Putri & Putri, 2019).

In the current implementation, students were observed speaking more freely and experimenting with new vocabulary and structures, a shift aligned with findings from Meifung & Yeo (2020), where ESL learners in the experimental group "presented and justified their ideas more confidently" after sustained exposure to board games. Additionally, Fithriani's review of pupils using board games illustrated that 'board games lowered their speaking anxiety and provided a game-like atmosphere which enabled them to express their ideas freely' (Fithriani, 2021). These converging results demonstrate how board-game-based learning can effectively reduce psychological barriers and create a supportive space for spontaneous verbal interaction.

Finally, the engagement generated by board games also helped in diminishing performance pressure typical of conventional pedagogies. Students reported forgetting their fear of mistakes and instead focused on enjoyment and participation. Such reactions are consistent with broader research indicating that game-based approaches foster risk-taking and diminish fear of failure, ultimately leading to improved speaking performance (York, 2020). Overall, by creating an emotionally safe environment, board games facilitated a notable improvement in learners' willingness and confidence to communicate in English.

Increasing Student Motivation and Classroom Engagement

The integration of board games into English language instruction had a substantial impact on students' intrinsic motivation and classroom engagement. Students expressed greater enjoyment during lessons and reported increased enthusiasm for participating in class activities. This marked a notable shift from the more passive behaviors often observed during traditional lessons dominated by textbooks and worksheets. Board games offered a dynamic

and participatory alternative that transformed learning into a socially interactive and playful experience, promoting deeper engagement even among typically reluctant learners.

This finding aligns with Putri and Putri (2019), who found that game-based instruction helps reignite student interest, particularly in language subjects often perceived as difficult. Similarly, Fithriani (2021) emphasized that game-based activities improve students' emotional connection to the content, which in turn boosts motivation and willingness to engage. Moreover, a study by Alsawaier (2018) concluded that gamification strategies, such as board games, increase motivation by fulfilling psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence—key drivers in self-determination theory.

The use of board games also fostered a learning environment where participation felt voluntary and enjoyable, rather than obligatory or stressful. As students took ownership of their learning through play, their sense of involvement deepened. These observations echo Meifung and Yeo's (2020) research, which demonstrated that board games enhance engagement by promoting friendly competition and collaboration, thereby making the learning process more meaningful.

Developing Speaking Skills Through Real-Time Interaction

Board games provided students with meaningful opportunities for real-time spoken interaction, a key aspect of developing communicative competence. Unlike scripted drills or memorization-based activities, these games presented students with spontaneous prompts through dice rolls, question cards, or peer input. As a result, learners were encouraged to formulate and express their ideas immediately using their available vocabulary and grammar knowledge. This process mirrors real-world communication and supports the internalization of sentence structures in a more natural, authentic manner.

This finding aligns with Pittayanantakul and Phusawisot (2012), who concluded that "board games significantly improve speaking

performance among EFL students by fostering interaction and contextual communication." The open-ended nature of the tasks allowed students to respond based on their own proficiency levels, aligning with the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on differentiated instruction. Additionally, Nguyen and Nguyen (2020) emphasized that real-time interaction through games "allows students to develop fluency and confidence as they are pushed to speak without overthinking or translating in their minds," a process that strengthens automaticity in spoken English.

Moreover, this kind of interaction cultivates not only linguistic fluency but also higher-order thinking skills. Students often had to explain, elaborate, or justify their opinions while playing, which enriched their speaking experience. As supported by Suhendar and Fitriyani (2023), "speaking through game-based tasks activates critical and communicative skills simultaneously, making students more aware of how to structure their responses for effective delivery." These benefits highlight how board games can serve as an efficient medium for nurturing real-time spoken interaction in a collaborative and engaging context.

Supporting Collaboration and Peer Learning

The implementation of board games in the classroom not only enhanced speaking skills but also fostered collaboration and peer-assisted learning. Through small-group gameplay, students were encouraged to communicate, support one another, and negotiate meaning as part of a shared activity. The interactive nature of the board games— rolling dice, answering prompts, responding to peers—provided a structured yet flexible environment for students to collaborate actively. These interactions promoted a sense of shared responsibility for learning, where students with varying proficiency levels could contribute meaningfully.

Peer interaction played a crucial role, particularly for learners with lower English proficiency. These students benefited

significantly from observing and imitating their more capable peers, a process commonly referred to as *language scaffolding*. As York (2020) highlights, "board games enhance spoken interaction and student engagement, especially when structured around collaboration and peer support." This is consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, especially the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learning is most effective when mediated by more knowledgeable others. In this context, the board games created natural opportunities for such scaffolding to occur in real time.

Additionally, Boardman and Vaughn (2013) emphasize that peer-assisted learning strategies in language classrooms increase student accountability and mutual support, thereby reinforcing both academic achievement and social development. Moreover, Fitria and Rofiq (2022) demonstrated that "interactive group-based learning, including board games, builds learners' communicative competence through repetition, clarification, and joint construction of meaning." These findings suggest that the cooperative framework provided by board games is highly conducive to both language development and social-emotional learning, especially in classrooms that value active, inclusive participation.

Applicability Beyond English and for Inclusive Classrooms

Although the original aim of the board game was to enhance speaking skills in English classes, its structure and design demonstrate strong potential for use across various subjects. With suitable content modifications, board games can support learning in science (e.g., explaining natural phenomena), religious education (e.g., discussing moral dilemmas), and civic education (e.g., exploring democratic values). This cross-disciplinary flexibility highlights the value of board games as a versatile teaching tool that promotes active engagement and meaningful learning across the broader school curriculum.

The flexibility of board games also aligns well with the principles of inclusive education. Their visual and interactive nature allows for accessibility among students with diverse learning needs. For example, students with hearing impairments can respond using visual cues or sign language, while students with cognitive or linguistic delays can engage using simplified language, modified prompts, or through peer assistance. These affordances enable the application of differentiated instruction—not only based on academic ability but also on accessibility, learning style, and communication mode.

This finding supports Werlinger and Inostroza (2024), who state that "board games promote oral production even in early learners and can be tailored to suit inclusive classrooms through visual supports and peer collaboration." Similarly, Indriyani et al. (2022) emphasize that "board games not only enhance language performance but also create a socially rich learning environment that benefits both general and special education students." Furthermore, Chou (2017) highlighted that game-based learning improves motivation and engagement among students with special educational needs, particularly when the tasks are cooperative and context-driven. These findings confirm the value of board games not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a medium for equitable and inclusive classroom practices.

Teacher's Role in Facilitating Reflective and Adaptive Learning

The role of the teacher in implementing board games extended beyond delivering instructions; it encompassed facilitating, observing, evaluating, and adapting the learning process. Throughout the implementation, the teacher actively gathered feedback from students after each session to assess the effectiveness of game components and identify areas for improvement. For instance, some students recommended revising questions to be more relatable to their daily lives, while others suggested adding time constraints to enhance engagement. This

process exemplifies reflective teaching, in which instructional strategies are adjusted based on real-time classroom observations and learner input.

Such adaptability demonstrates the teacher's role as a responsive practitioner—one who is attuned to the dynamic nature of the classroom. According to Schön (1983), reflective practitioners are those who continuously evaluate their actions to improve their professional practice. In the context of game-based learning, this reflection includes assessing student engagement, language output, and group dynamics, then modifying the board game elements accordingly. As described by Farrell (2015), teacher reflection is not merely a post-lesson activity but a mindset that fosters ongoing pedagogical growth and learner-centered decision making.

Moreover, the ability to adapt instructional tools like board games to meet diverse learning needs aligns with the concept of adaptive expertise. Hatano and Inagaki (1986) distinguish between routine expertise (repeating established procedures) and adaptive expertise, which involves modifying practices to solve novel problems. The teacher's willingness to evolve the board game format in response to students' reactions illustrates the latter. This role is essential in ensuring that innovative methods like game-based learning remain not only effective but also sustainable and relevant across varying classroom contexts.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of board games as interactive learning media effectively enhanced students' speaking confidence, motivation, and classroom engagement. These games fostered a low-pressure, student-centered environment that encouraged authentic communication and peer interaction. Their flexibility and offline usability made them suitable for diverse educational settings, including under-resourced and inclusive classrooms. Aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum, board games supported creative, experiential, and differentiated learning.

Beyond English, they can be adapted for other subjects such as science, social studies, or character education. The method also promoted collaboration, problem-solving, and social development—key 21st-century skills. Overall, board games offer a practical, inclusive, and sustainable instructional approach that enriches language learning and broader educational experiences.

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