

Language Games in Teaching and Learning English Grammar: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Traditional teaching and learning process referring to chalk-and-talk has become outdated in lessons. Teachers and learners are exposed to various task-based process to encourage a better participation among learners throughout the lesson. One of the most common and preferred teaching strategies is the use of language games to aid the teaching of various skills. The growth of digital learning tools and web applications being used in lessons taking the use of language games to a modern and advanced platform for learners to engage in lessons. The use of interesting and suitable materials along with the various approaches when conducting language games during lessons helps to cater to learners' needs and interests on the subject-matter especially in learning grammar in context. Many researches have used various language games to show its effects on learners' knowledge, competency and motivation in learning a language, focusing on different targeted language areas and skills such as grammar. Therefore, this paper, based on reviews of past literature, will explore the use of language games in teaching and learning grammar, with reference to second language (ESL) learners. The findings indicate the beneficial usage of language games to teaching and learning of grammar in for ESL learners. This study is useful to prove the importance of language games as a teaching strategy to help enhance learners' English grammar acquisition.

Keywords: ESL, grammar games, language games, learning grammar

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1. Introduction

The importance of grammar in the English language cannot be ignored (Savignon, 2017) as it is relatively an essential language form (Alijanian, 2012) that learners need to master in order to create meaningful sentences. Grammar is defined as the study of words operating together to form meaningful sentences (Thekes, 2011; Goodman & Goodman, 2014). It is important for ESL learners to construct sentences and confidently express their ideas since some might feel shy because they are scared of making grammar mistakes resulting in a misunderstanding of the original ideas. Similarly, some find grammar rules to be challenging to grasp (Baharudin & Yunus, 2018) thus suggesting the use of technology tool as an effective teaching aid. It reflects the advantage of language games to improve the teaching and learning of grammar and importantly assist learners to work on their grammar proficiency. This fun approach to the teaching and learning of English grammar is accommodating and efficient especially when dealing with young and teenage ESL learners. In Malaysia, grammar or Language Awareness acts as pillar in ESL and is a skill that must be taught during English lesson with textbooks and workbooks presenting the key grammar rules that learners have to master by the end of their secondary school years.

The introduction of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches since the past years has brought a more effective style of language teaching and learning. According to Ngoc and Iwashita (2012), "CLT is a language teaching approach that emphasises the communication of meaning rather than the practice of grammatical forms in isolation" (p.26). In the 21st century second and foreign language acquisition, a CLT approach is able to shape a classroom practice that allows learners to be communicatively competent according to the contexts in which English is taught (Savignon, 2017). Language games are part of CLT approach for its characteristics that include learner-centredness, meaningful collaborative and interactive activities, the use of relevant and authentic materials, the focus of meaning and linguistic forms in context and also the roles of teachers as facilitators (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, as cited in Ngoc & Iwashita, 2012). It encourages learners to use language creatively and communicatively other than offering relaxation and enjoyment to them as the participants (Adeng & Shah, 2012). In definition, language games are language learning through gameplay (Godwin-Jones, 2014) which involves the communicative aspects of learning (Willis & Willis, 2013; Adeng & Shah, 2012). Therefore, it brings about the sentiment that teaching and learning of grammar should not be done in isolation but in a proper context and authentically. There are two types of language games; digital and non-digital or physical games with both being widely used to aid language lessons. Non-digital language games such as board games; Snake and Ladders and Grammar Monopoly, Dominoes and Wheel of Grammar (WOG) are still relevant among teachers and learners. Whereas Quizlet, Edmodo, Frogplay and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG) are among the choices for schools which are equipped with proper facilities for digital language games to take place.

Hall (2017) explains that "typically, communicative and interaction-based approaches to English language teaching (ELT) have suggested that teacher talk should be minimised, providing the opportunities for learners to talk, practise and produce language" (p.23). Naturally, this fulfils the requirements of a 21st-century teaching and learning approach where learners dominate their learning (Hall, 2017) as well as integrating the Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) elements in grammar lessons. Language games in CLT also plays a vital role to ensure ESL learners' ability

and confidence to use grammar correctly in performing all language skills including when solving riddles and problems. The educational environment is fast evolving to challenge and adapting learners to a VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) environment (Meng, 2014) in which learners' thinking and problem-solving skills are developed. In regards to the English language syllabus, the current Malaysian English textbooks introduce functions and practices for the intended grammar items, however, do not reflect CLT principles. Chambers & Yunus (2017) have similar opinion that "the Subject-Verb Agreement (SVA) and Verb-To-Be (VTB) introduced in textbooks in primary and secondary schools are usually in the form of tables which can slow down the learning process as most learners find it distasteful" (p.1642). The design for layout and the presentation of the grammar rules in textbooks and workbooks are considered important as they play a role to attract learners' interest. When grammar teaching is concerned, language games become a medium to teach ESL learners both grammar structures and the use in communicative and real-life context. As assured by Savignon (2017), "learners seem to focus best on grammar when it relates to their communicative needs and experiences" (p.4-5). This sums up the effectiveness of teaching grammar through various independent and communicative approaches. In keeping abreast with the recent technological advancement, education needs to be meaningful and effective for the development of skills. Hence, ESL learners should learn the basic of grammar to use it in communication instead of merely on the purpose of examination. They should be exposed to not only the technical aspects of the language namely the grammar and forms but also, the structural and functional aspects of it. Both should not be differentiated but to be adapted and assimilated in order to create a link for meaningful use. This paper reviews past literature for the use and advantages of language games in teaching and learning of grammar with particular reference to ESL learners particularly on fluency, interest and motivation.

2. Literature Review

Adhering to various communicative approaches, language games in teaching and learning holds numerous advantages in enhancing ESL learners' fluency and language skills. It creates an enjoyable environment for an effective learning process. Goodman & Goodman (2014) state that "children learn language best in an environment rich with opportunities to explore interesting objects and ideas" (p.197). Language games provide a platform for learners to communicate using the target grammar forms in a more interesting and authentic manner as supported by Ellis (2006, as cited in Alijanian, 2012) that "grammar is no more considered as meaningless, a context-independent set of rules prescribed about language forms but it is regarded with respect to communication" (p.415). It should be taught with the willingness to engage learners in interaction using the targeted grammar items and by providing them the freedom to use the target language (Willis & Willis, 2013). Likewise, according to Krashen (1988), in second language performance, there are two independent systems named as 'the acquired system' and 'the learned system'. The acquired system (acquisition) requires a natural communication or meaningful interaction in the target language, while the learned system (**learning**) is the product of a conscious process which resulted in knowledge of the language, such as grammar rules (Krashen, 1988). Learners play an active role (Thirusanku & Melor, 2014) and the active involvement from the learners when accomplishing language games creates consciousness on the importance of practicing the grammar forms in their interaction freely. The real-life situations act as a platform to enrich ESL learners' language skills and confidence when facing various and common events.

However, a study done by Alijanian (2012) shows that “CLT and direct grammar teaching were both favored by the teachers” (p.416). Another opinion regarding ESL learners is that, there is a need for them to first grasp the basic knowledge of grammar by doing structural practices (Chambers & Yunus, 2017) before being given the communicative task which is supported by the findings in Alijanian (2012) in her study that “learners became distracted if the rule was not explained first” (p.417). The study explores teachers’ beliefs about the teaching of grammar. It investigates how teachers view the traditional grammar teaching and also through games, hence taking another study on Iranian EFL learners, by Taheri (2014) which firmly assured that “games are beneficial in language learning, while traditional form-focused is not that most effective because they lack some features of the game” (p.548). According to Willis & Willis (2013), “many traditional methodologies begin by teaching grammatical forms before going on to set communicative activities for learners to use those forms” (p.18). Adding to that, Thekes (2011) says “the constant explanation of grammar rules and decontextualizing grammar are quick ways for teachers to demotivate their learners and some English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers still fall into the comfortable trap of presenting grammar through rules” (p.1). Hence, there are the demands of variation in the teaching and learning of grammar to escape the traditional ways which often be used in grammar lessons (Briewin, Naidu & Mohamed, 2013; Taheri, 2014). TBLT is said to be an approach that encourages learners to engage in meaning (Willis & Willis, 2013) rather than learning the language skills in isolation. Similarly, this reflects the use of language games to help ESL learners develop their language skills, confidence and communicative skills.

In a wider context, when games are integrated with language lessons, it supports higher-order learning and thinking skills (HOTS) which are very important for learners to develop themselves as future professionals (Rahman & Bakar, 2018; Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014). Nevertheless, there are different views being discussed in Alijanian (2012) on “the separate treatment on grammar which fails to produce language knowledge and that learners learn grammar best if it is presented within a text” (p.417). The differences of ideas show the differences in teachers' perceptions towards approaches in teaching grammar. Language games as a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach is designed to produce ESL learners who are able to use English in the real world, using the learned grammar forms in real-life communication (Willis & Willis, 2013) and to participate effectively in society (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Although it is argued that this learning approach is not structured and learners are required to take initiatives with the use of an authentic target in fostering autonomy and competency (Benson, 2011, as cited in Chik, 2012), once learners are motivated and interested in the language, they are able to be responsible in their own learning. Language fluency or competency is enhanced due to ESL learners’ willingness to use the language at all times.

2.1 Language Games To Stimulate Interest On Learning

Adeng & Shah (2012) state that “grammar teaching that is too dependent on rules and memorisation makes learners lose their interest and motivation” and add that “games are the most suitable to learn the grammar of a second language” (p.23). It comes to terms that learning grammar in different communicative settings through active games is more interesting rather than doing grammar practices with workbooks. ESL learners are more interested to learn particular grammar through authentic language games with a widened repertoire of tasks related to real-life contexts. Also, the application of different classroom activities and learning strategies is crucial to assist

learners with various needs (Chambers & Yunus, 2017) as these can encourage learners to participate and engage in grammar lessons. Undoubtedly, language games have activities to suit ESL learners' language needs and for them to learn in an effective and encouraging environment. Godwin-Jones (2014) claims that "games can offer an immersive environment in which extensive use is made of the target language" (p.10) which is similar to digital games as stated by Chik (2012) that, "learners can practise foreign language learning and use autonomously through activities they were passionate about, and moved the learning process beyond classroom" (p.96). Both non-digital or physical and digital language games arouse ESL learners' interests to participate in the usually boring grammar lessons other than it can be applied in lessons even though the classroom is not equipped with modern technological tools. The context given to suit the targeted grammar items permits ESL learners to learn effectively as it brings about the authentic time and places used. As highlighted by Briewin et al. (2013) on providing context to present targeted grammar items, "it can arouse interest, stimulate interaction and help them to understand places, people and events as well as simplify situations which would otherwise be abstract and difficult to explain in words" (p.250). They are informed on which tenses to use given the situations. Apart from that, through language games, learners have a greater autonomy in learning grammar (Baharudin & Yunus, 2018) as they are able to make sensible connection of the knowledge and its usage, also fit in Butler' (2017) statement on game-like materials "that allow individualised learning and encourage autonomy in order to cater to the genuine interests of learners" (p.735).

Interestingly, based on a study on Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs on grammar teaching, Alijanian (2012) says:

the experienced teachers were aware of the fact that grammar classes are boring and the need for them to use a variety of teaching styles and extra activities to keep the learners interested and motivated through working out tasks and grammar games (p.418)

Whereas Nedomova (2007, as cited in Adeng & Shah, 2012) agrees that "it makes the lesson more attractive and protect them from being bored" (p. 575). Teenage ESL learners are at the age where they are keen and eager to play and explore thus, attracting them to focus and involve actively in the grammar games throughout the lesson. Similarly, Mubaslat (2011/2012) expresses that "games ought to be at the heart of teaching foreign languages and that games should be used at all stages of lesson" (p.4). It is, therefore, appropriate to conclude that using interactive games to teach grammar helps to stimulate learners' interests. In fact, this is agreed by Godwin-Jones (2014) that "the strong motivational factors involved, game playing can be a powerful agent for learner autonomy, a potential resource for long-term language maintenance, and an entry-point for gaining interest in learning new languages" (p.11). Learners who are interested in learning will be emotionally involved in the lesson and fully appreciate it. In the long run, this element helps learners to understand and remember the lesson especially the targeted grammar items. Learning through language games is an enjoyable retreat from a boring grammar lesson for ESL teachers who are looking for ways to keep learners interested and motivated in acquiring the English skills (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014) since the innovative materials will appeal to them (Briewin et al., 2013; Mubaslat, 2011/2012).

2.2 Language Games To Develop Fluency

Developing ESL learners' fluency in the target language, English is a highlight to a successful language lesson. Learning grammar provides learners with proper and deeper understanding of the English language especially when it is learned unconsciously through practices (Chambers & Yunus, 2017). Equally, ESL learners must use the language actively through communication with others in order to progress in a game (Godwin-Jones 2014; Chambers & Yunus, 2017; Adeng & Shah, 2012) providing a room for improvement in fluency and proficiency. Godwin-Jones (2014) further explains that "learners are using language in real and meaningful ways to accomplish a task through games" and it is great that "they are exposed to cultural and linguistic knowledge that they are unlikely to have encountered in a textbook or in the classroom" (p.10). A research conducted by Chambers & Yunus (2017) has found out that Wheel of Grammar (WOG) has helped Form Five learners from a school in Sarawak to construct simple sentences and apply correct basic rules of Subject-Verb Agreement (SVA). Equally, Adeng & Shah (2012) from their research on the use of games in teaching grammar has resulted in the revelation that "grammar games encourage, entertain and promote fluency" (p.28). It is opposed to traditional language learning that stresses grammar drill and limits the overall practice of using the English language through interaction.

Language games also allow ESL learners to work with partners and in groups, giving them more opportunities to use the language themselves (Willis & Willis, 2013) and progressively improving fluency. A clear example of a game is role-playing which needs learners to be creative and spontaneous. In addition, ESL learners experiment, explore and cooperate through playing games (Mubaslat, 2011/2012). They develop their language skills by interacting with others and learning from mistakes. Based on these studies, it implies that language games which constitute of learner-centredness and 21st-century teaching and learning styles, focusing on learners' independent learning are highly recommended to replace the traditional teaching method as to promote and develop ESL learners' fluency (Adeng & Shah, 2012) in using the target language. Learners are able to lessen anxiety, build self-confidence and portray positive emotions and behaviours as they are unafraid of using the target language interactively (Adeng & Shah, 2012).

2.3 Language Games To Motivate Learners

Motivation needs to be instilled for ESL learners to have the drive to learn the grammar of a second language or a foreign language. Briewin et al. (2013) claim that some learners "are motivated because they know the importance of grammar in constructing sentences" (p.252). Therefore, most of the time, they are aware of the needs to improve their grammar abilities to be fluent in English, however not necessarily prepared to directly learn the rules. As teaching and learning strategies are among factors that influence learners' perseverance to learn grammar, language games as TBLT will fit in the scenario perfectly. The motivating elements in language games can be connected with Flow Theory that is a motivational theory developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihaly in 1975 (Oppland, 2016). It refers to a mental state experienced when doing challenging activities in a comfortable zone between boredom and anxiety, as well as find pleasure while completing the task, ensuring the activity is not too difficult or easy to avoid frustration and boredom (Franciosi, 2011). When learners are learning using language games, the Flow Theory is established because they receive a motivation boost to concentrate on finishing the games. As those games are based on particular grammar aspects, learners would learn to solve the grammar problems in order to complete the games and compete with others. The hands-on learning will not

only enable them to explore and delve into the rules but also, act as a motivation to understand the language better (Chambers & Yunus, 2017) and improve language skills (Chik, 2012). In other words, they are given the platform to be critical and active when learning English (Baharudin & Yunus, 2018).

Adeng & Shah (2012) also agree that “games are motivating and entertaining way of teaching grammar” (p.28) and “learners are entertained and get involved in acquiring it” (Thekes, 2011, p.2). It consists of activities that challenge learners yet still can be accomplished which involve optimal emotional, motivational experiences and learning (Oppland, 2016). To further explain, the Flow Theory addresses how one experiences educational contexts and how it influences learning and motivation (Oppland, 2016). Hence, the extrinsic and intrinsic motivations gained by learners participating in language games are the reasons language games would work very well in grammar lessons which is supported by Godwin-Jones (2014) that “self-generated and self-directed discovery can further the kind of intrinsic motivation that commits users to learn more” (p.13). Namely, as games enhance classroom environment, it motivates learners who play certain games to learn, more than learners who use traditional learning methods (Mubaslat, 2011/2012). It diminishes the fear of learning a grammar form of another language, of which ESL learners become less anxious when games are employed (Franciosi, 2011). Baharudin & Yunus (2018) assert that “games promote an independent learning among the learners consequently, motivating them to be more confident in learning” (p.107) as they are in charge of the situations and not vice versa. Besides, participation, cooperation and interaction with others are among the sole reasons for successful language learning through games (Adeng & Shah, 2012) and group tasks (Savignon, 2017).

3. Discussion

The paper explores the teaching and learning of grammar using language games by highlighting the advantages and related past studies on learners’ fluency, interest and motivation. The main concern for ESL learners’ lack of interest, fluency and motivation is due to difficult, boring and traditional methods of learning grammar. Hence, this paper points the need to expose learners to the use of language games; both digital and non-digital or physical games when learning grammar. Although, there have been debates comparing the effectiveness of traditional grammar learning and the ones using games. It draws a conclusion that language games are an effective and advantageous option when learners are not cooperative or interested in grammar lessons because games create engagement, connection and in-context learning. It also saves more time as learners are directly exposed to using grammar in context and developing fluency in creating sentences. Language games are fun (Adeng & Shah, 2012) and learners are motivated to learn grammar whenever fun and exciting elements are included (Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, 1975 in Oppland, 2016). Gradually, ESL learners are able to improve their grammar fluency as they practise through playing games (Briewin et al., 2013).

4. Conclusion

This paper has shown that teachers’ used of language games as an approach to enhance ESL learners’ grammar understanding and acquisition as it directly develops their interest, fluency and motivation in the learning process. Mastering grammar is important to digital generations today as it shows competency and is useful in daily interaction with people. Similarly, the proficiency in

using grammar in context builds better confidence. Hence, grammar should not be taught or learnt in isolation but through meaningful methods where ESL learners can relate easily to its usage. Last but not least, it is believed that language games will help educators to create fun learning materials to arouse learners' interest, fluency and motivation as well as to suit their proficiency level and learning styles. It definitely makes learning grammar easier and more relatable for ESL learners.

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