LEARNING GRAMMAR THE 'MONSTER' WAY
'MONSTER BACK TO SCHOOL-PARTS OF SPEECH BOARD GAME'

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Abstract

Learning grammar can be difficult for learners but this can be changed through interactive activities. Language games are an excellent way to make learning grammar fun among learners Although the use of language games is not a new tool in the teaching and learning of grammar, employing the right game for a specific grammar item is vital. Hence, this study aims to experiment, using a language game - 'Monster Back to School -Parts of Speech Board Game, in efforts to enhance the learning of the parts of speech more effectively. This game is designed to provide practice in identifying the parts of speech in the English Language, from word level, through sentence level to making decisions on whether the parts of speech have been correctly identified. By playing this game, it is believed that learners will be able to engage and learn grammar in a fun-filled way. Methodology comprised quantitative and qualitative methods, using a questionnaire and interview, with the participants, who were college students. The results of the survey demonstrate the effectiveness of the game in the identification and learning of parts of speech. The pedagogical implications are that suitable language games can enhance grammar competence.

Introduction

Due to the changes in the perspectives of English language teaching and learning with the emphasis on the communicative approach during the last few years, grammar has been pushed to
the background. However, the structural view in the early twentieth century focused on linguistic competency. During that period, it was found that learners were unable to communicate in the language (Kolln & Hancock, 2005), hence giving rise to the communicative approach. One of the aspects of grammar which is important is prepositions. Prepositions pose difficulties to English as a Second Learner, learners, as the majority of the prepositions in English have 'multiple meanings'(Koffi, 2010,p 299). This poses problems for ESL learners. Added to this is the fact that prepositions are mostly monosyllabic and learners may not be able to recognize these in rapid, naturally occurring speech. Lam (2009) states that 'assumptions of semantic equivalence between first and second languages' often result in perpetual errors (p 3). The consequences of this, with regards to grammar teaching and learning is that grammar is not an easy aspect to handle and more interesting ways must be found to help in the teaching and learning process of grammar. Hence it is essential for teachers to have interesting activities to motivate students to learn grammar. For this reason, one such means is language games which can be a refreshing and engaging way to introduce grammar into the classroom. The researchers asked teachers and students at random about their knowledge in grammar and the majority reported that their grammar was "poor". This was confirmed with the interviews conducted with students and the teachers who participated in the current study. In addition, a grammar test was administered to the students where the total possible score was twenty. The results of the average scores were below ten. The researchers of this study found that students' knowledge on the parts of speech was particularly lacking, especially in the area of prepositions. It was these random

interviews and tests that inspired the researchers to design the 'Monster Back to School -Parts of Speech-Board Game. The game was to facilitate learning in engaged ways with the provision of the fun element for students to be able to identify and understand the parts of speech, with an emphasis on prepositions; a very important component in language learning. The very name of the game, using the word "Monster" was in itself an attraction to learners and out of the norm

Problem Statement

Due to the changing curriculum backdrop of the education system with emphasis on the mastery of language skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing albeit of the knowledge of grammar per se, grammar got left behind and many students in school lack grammatical knowledge. This was confirmed via the random interviews conducted with students and teachers. Furthermore, grammar learning is always perceived as a boring lesson when taught using the textbook, chalk and talk methods. Hence, the traditional teaching and learning methods are not successful in motivating learners to engage actively in grammar learning (Matas & Natolo, 2010). In addition, Marcos, Tan and Khazriyati (2007) found that learners from six rural schools had difficulties using correct English grammar in their writings. Furthermore, a study by Nor Hashimah et.al (2008), showed that the most obvious weaknesses of the students' language ability lay in grammar. A study by Saadiyah and Kaladevi (2009), indicated that students generally have problems applying correct grammatical rules in their writings. Games have been found to make grammar lessons more interesting, enjoyable, motivating and effective (Metom et al, 2016). This study proposes a board game where the focus is to help students to identify and recognize the parts of speech in a more engaging, motivating and competitive spirit. It is hoped that this would be a step towards bringing grammar back into the classroom. in a fun way, with the results of a better understanding of this aspect – parts of speech.

Literature Review

Games are a useful strategy to promote students' language proficiency (Richard, 1996). This acknowledgement dates back to the early nineteenth century to present day studies. Present day studies are cited in this section to show the importance and success of games, as a useful strategy in enabling language learning among ESL learners. Yet, using games as a teaching aid in language classrooms is not a prominent feature in Malaysian schools. According to Munaindy S.(NST, April 13, 2016), 'some teachers cite time factor, personal commitment, money and work as some of the reasons for not doing this (preparing/using teaching aids). Muniandy describes a teacher in her school, Jamilah Tumin, who uses teaching aids for almost all of her language lessons. Games have been listed among the modern teaching aids and are not confined to charts and pictures alone. According to Muniandy, Jamilah's students are excited and enjoy learning through the many games that Jamilah has prepared.

A study by Jasmi & Tamuri(2011) also concur with the fact that teaching aids are not fully utilized in the classrooms. In fact, their study shows that teaching aids (in the Arabic language classroom) refer mainly to textbooks. Harun et al., (2015) posits that teaching aids can improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning, improve knowledge and skills, complementing the teachers' methods that are constantly changing over time.

Hadfield (1990) defined games as 'an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun'. According to the Freebase definition of board games, counters or pieces are moved or placed on a pre-marked surface or "board', according to a set of rules. The board game in this study is called Monster Back to School. It has the characteristics listed out in Hadfield and the Freebase definition. The game has a specially designed board with tokens which represent the players. These tokens will be moved along the board. This game has a goal – that is to be able to identify the Parts of Speech correctly, as required in the question cards. In addition, the fun element is to get to the Finish line as quickly as possible. The only way to do this is to get the answer correct. Hence, the quest and motivation for getting the answer correct. This is where the learning points take place, either incidentally or purposefully. In any case, learning becomes a part of the

game. This is the intention of the researchers. Hence, language games are a platform to pave the way for an alternative way to make learning grammar fun among learners (Chen, 2010; Metom et.al, 2013; Eskandari et.al, 2014). Games also introduce an element of competition into language-building activities which provide valuable impetus to a purposeful use of language (Prasad,2003). Games have been found to be successful in the teaching and learning of the poetry genre as well (Vijayarajoo et al. 2019). In Vijayarajoo's research, a board game was designed to infuse a fun way of learning poetry in secondary schools. Data showed that the students and teachers benefitted from the game and the learning process was enjoyable. Hence, board games are not restricted to just grammar teaching and learning.

An action research conducted by Huyen and Nga (2003) showed that the students liked the relaxed atmosphere and the researcher reported that the students seemed to 'learn more quickly and retain the learned materials in a stress-free and comfortable environment.' When learners are placed in a game-based context, instead of focusing on the correctness of linguistic forms, attention is shifted to winning the game, hence easing the anxiety of negative evaluation and helping to generate speech fluency (Chen,2005). This is echoed in the present study where the researchers found that the learners were eager to win the game and were far less anxious of negative evaluation while generating fluency. The researchers also found that some of the benefits of using games in language learning, included the fact that games are learner-centered, increase learning motivation, reduce learning anxiety, integrate various linguistic skills (parts of speech, in the current study), construct a cooperative learning environment and foster participatory attitudes among the students.

Hence, it has been established that traditional teaching and learning methods are not very successful in motivating learners to engage actively in grammar learning (Matas & Natolo,2010). Games have been recommended to make the grammar lesson more interesting, enjoyable, motivating and effective (Metom, et al 2016). Based on previous studies as shown in the literature, it can be concluded that learning grammar can be fun if there are interesting activities to motivate students.

Methodology

This research uses mixed methods. The questionnaire was analyzed in percentages while the interviews were analyzed according to emergent themes. The questionnaire was adapted from a previous study undertaken by the researchers themselves.

Hence, the research instruments used were the questionnaire survey and the interview. The respondents were diploma students taking English during the Interim session, in a local public university. A notice was posted for volunteers to participate in the present study. Eleven students responded and for convenient sampling for the pilot project, these eleven respondents were taken. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: Section A, B and C. Section A comprised the respondents' demographic information (gender, age and faculty). Section B consisted of ten items relating to the respondents' perceptions of grammar (parts of speech), while Section C consisted of twenty items on the respondents' perceptions on the Monster Back to School board game. The analysis reports and discusses mainly Section C of the questionnaire, as the focus of this paper is the perceptions of students towards the game.

Before playing the board game, brief instructions were given to the players on how to play the game. The rules of the game were also printed on the box for them to refer to. After playing the game, all the respondents were given the questionnaire to fill. Participants' responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). After responding to the questionnaire, the respondents were interviewed individually.

Results and Discussion

Findings of the Questionnaire:

Part C of the questionnaire focused on the students' perceptions of the Monster Back to School board game.
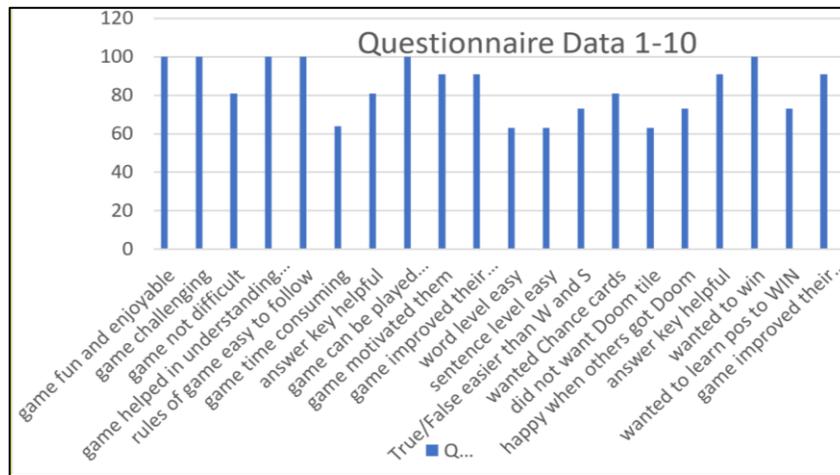

Table 1: Questionnaire responses: Part C

All 11 participants agreed that the game was fun and enjoyable while being challenging. The majority of the participants (9) responded that the game was not difficult, hence, making the game suited to the level of the participants. All the participants agreed that the game helped them to learn effectively, confirming the earlier responses on the game being challenging, yet not difficult. While all the participants found the rules of the game easy to follow and the answer key useful, the majority (10) found the game to be time consuming. There were many cards, hence many questions to be answered correctly, before one could move and reach the finish tile / the last tile to indicate the game is completed. The majority (10) of the participants agreed that the game could motivate them and others to learn the parts of speech. The majority of the participants (10) also agreed that the game helped them to improve communication with other players. There were also 10 'Chance' cards and 10 'Doom' cards in the game. Chance, as the name denotes, held opportunities for players to go ahead, from 2 to 10 steps. Doom, on the contrary, put players at a disadvantage where they had to move backwards from 2 to 10 steps. These two elements of 'Chance' and 'Doom' provided the added dimension of anticipation and excitement in the game. As for the 'Chance' and 'Doom' cards, the majority (10) wished to land on the Chance tile while the majority (10) were disappointed if they landed on the Doom tile. All the participants wanted to win the game, hence the majority (9) of them wanted to learn the parts of speech.

Findings from the Interview

The interview data formed the qualitative part of the research methodology. 11 students were interviewed after they had played the Monster Back to School, Parts of Speech Board Game (MBTS) and after they had filled out the questionnaires. The interview data is reported and interpreted against the questionnaire data. For question 1, all 11 respondents stated that they enjoyed the game. The first theme that emerged was joy. The reasons for their enjoyment are seen in the subsequent interview questions. In question 2, the majority of the respondents elaborated and stated that the most interesting part of the game included the ways in which the game enhanced their ability to think, increase their knowledge of grammar and their ability to identify the parts of speech. The subsequent theme was knowledge where 9 out of 11 respondents stated that the game enhanced their knowledge in the parts of speech. This can be said to be an elaboration of question 1, on the ways they enjoyed the games. Apart from that, some responded that what made the game interesting was getting the correct answer. If the answer is correct, the students can move to the next round. If the answer is incorrect, the player would skip the next turn. This was a natural attribute most

students have when playing games. This healthy competitive spirit is present where games are concerned, as opposed to traditional ways of teaching. Hence, by playing games, a bi-product is learning made easier, competitiveness in a fun way and a more motivating medium. Hence, the third theme that emerged was 'competitiveness and winning'. This theme was closely linked to knowledge as it was a prerequisite to winning the game. Another interesting part of the game was the chance it afforded them in communicating with each other (3 said that). Others mentioned 'nice to talk', 'enjoy talking', 'free to talk', 'teacher no scold'. These responses were translated to the fourth theme of communication with peers. This showed that students like to talk (confer with) to each other while taking part in the game which indicates the preference to be in proactive communication with one another in less formal settings. Discourse among peers is important where much learning takes place. Interaction among students was very much valued as told by the students themselves during the interview. This is in contrast with the lack of interaction during teacher-centered classrooms.

These comments were in line with Section C, question 20 of the questionnaire, where the majority of the respondents agreed that the Monster Back to School board game had helped them to improve their communication skills. Hence, the interview responses provided a rich and thick description of what could not be captured in the questionnaire.

A cross reference to question one of Section C, of the questionnaire, showed that the majority of the participants found playing the game to be fun and enjoyable.(the game made them think as reported above) The reasons were echoed in the first interview responses. The interview enabled the participants to elaborate on their questionnaire responses and helped in triangulating data.

Question 3 was about the most challenging part of the game, where the majority responded that getting the correct answer posed much challenge. This trend was expressed in terms of getting the correct answer to the different questions. Some also felt that falling on a Chance or Doom tile would also influence their chances of winning or losing the game, as explained earlier. Hence, the opportunities for possibilities and anticipation in the game provided a sense of excitement among the students which stimulated their minds, in contrast to the mundane and routine classroom experience of learning grammar from the textbook.

Question 4 of the Interview was about whether the participants enjoyed learning through games. Their answers were unanimous in that all the participants said that they enjoyed learning because of the game. A cross reference to question 4 of Part C in the questionnaire showed that the respondents preferred learning grammar through games. This data, tallied with the interview responses where the participants said that they preferred playing the game over traditional modes of textbook learning, as they loved to play, socialize and be actively involved in the learning process, as opposed to being in a traditional classroom context, as passive listeners to the teacher/ authority.

Responses to question 5 of the interview confirmed the research gap again, as the majority of the students responded that the problems they faced playing the game was that they were not sure of the parts of speech, which was the crux of the game. The aim of the game was to help students to learn the parts of speech in a fun way. Three students mentioned that the Doom tiles had put them back after achieving a good number of correct answers. One of the students stated that friends had helped with the answers. Some of the participants' responses included 'I couldn't identify which part of speech it is', 'I didn't know how to identify the adverb', 'confusing', 'because I don't know which is Noun, Verb or something…', 'I am confused with the preposition and conjunction and adverbs', 'have problem in understanding the words [parts of speech]'.

For Question 6, the majority of the participants (9) said that they referred to the answer key. The answer key provided answers to the questions on the cards. This helped them in their learning process. When they got the answer wrong, they wanted to know why. Hence, the answer key became a teaching/learning tool within the game. Hence, it can be said that the majority of the students benefitted from this knowledge, which helped them to play the game, with a better understanding of the parts of speech.

Question 7 of the interview was on whether the participants got any help from their friends or lecturers. Seven of the participants said that they did receive help, mostly from their friends, who were also participants of the game as well as the friends who were watching them play the game. This was part of the communication where shared learning took place.

Question 8, received a unanimous response- that all the participants found the rules of the game easy to understand. Only one participant replied, 'not too easy and not too difficult'. The conclusion drawn was that the rules of the game that were devised, were easily comprehensible and hence suitable for the participants.

Question 9 was on whether the participants preferred learning grammar through games or textbooks. All the participants chose games over textbooks, to learn grammar. Some of the reasons listed from the participants' responses were: "easy to remember and understand", "much more fun and less stress", "because I am kinesthetic", "don't like reading", and "fun and easy to get knowledge". Hence, games were a preferred way of learning and in keeping with question 4 of the interview question.

The last question was on whether the participants thought that the present Monster Back to School game would benefit them. All the participants responded with a 'yes' unanmiously and their reasons were encapsulated by the words and phrases such as these: "fun, increased learning, don't like to read, textbooks hard to understand, boring textbooks, boring teacher, the class is sleepy with textbooks, everybody like to play games, if teacher beside me, I will be pressured…'. These responses show that the students were happy to play the game, and the fact that they learned either incidentally of purposefully, through the medium of play and enjoyment was one of the major benefits of the game. Hence the comparisons between the Questionnaire and the interview helped to give a clearer picture of learners' perceptions of learning grammar through a game.

Conclusion

From the above analysis and discussion of the data, it can be said that the students enjoy learning through the medium of games in the classroom. One way of bringing grammar back into the classroom is by using games, where learners would be more engaged and find the learning process more enjoyable. What this study showed and confirmed was that the ambience of the classroom and the spaces for student interaction were well received under less formal circumstances which favored greater learning. This may not always be possible but infusing the classroom methodology with such games would facilitate learning in safer and less stressful circumstances, especially grammar. Learners' anxiety of negative evaluation would be reduced and enable learners to generate new and refreshing learning strategies to cope with grammar. Most games are played in pairs or small groups (Jacobs and Liu, 1996), as these small groupings provide opportunities for learners to learn from and apply what they have learnt, with each other. This experimental study confirms that games such as the Monster back to school board game, increased learners' understanding of grammar knowledge, in this case, knowledge on the parts of speech.

Further research should push this game to the digital sphere of learning. These areas should be explored with more research conducted with students using various technological media, which are growing in popularity and accessibility among children in the present era.

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QUESTIONNAIRE

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Dear respondent,

We are doing a small scale research on learning parts of speech in a positive and fun way using a language board game. Please answer the following questions. All information will be kept confidential. Thank you for your time and cooperation.

Section A : Respondent background

Please tick (/) at the appropriate box to answer the question.

1. Gender : Male ☐   Female ☐

2. Age   : 13-15 ☐   18-20 ☐

3. FORM : ☐   UNIVERSITY – Diploma/Degree/Others ☐

Section B: Perceptiosn on Grammar (Parts of Speech)

For each statement please tick (√) in one space only.

SD : Strongly Disagree
D   : Disagree
NA: Not applicable
A   : Agree
SA: Strongly Agree

No	Statements	SD 1	D 2	NA 3	A 4	SA 5
1	Learning grammar is difficult					
2	I am familiar with Parts of Speech of English language Grammar					
3	I can identify a noun					
4	I can identify a verb					
5	I can identify a pronoun					
6	I can identify an adjective					
7	I can identify an adverb					
8	I can identify a preposition					
9	I can identify a conjunction					
10	I prefer learning grammar through games					

Section C: Perception on ' Monster Goes To School (MGTS) -Parts of Speech' Board Game.

For each statement please tick (√) in one space only.

SD : Strongly Disagree
D : Disagree
NA: Not applicable
A : Agree
SA: Strongly Agree

No	Statements	SD 1	D 2	NA 3	A 4	SA 5
1	Playing MONSTER BACK TO SCHOOL game is fun and enjoyable					
2	The MBTS game is challenging					
3	The MBTS game is difficult to understand					
4	Playing the game has helped me understand parts of speech better					
5	The rules of the game are clear and easy to follow					
6	MBTS board game is time consuming					
7	The answer key provided is helpful					
8	MBTS game can be played independently without help from the teacher/instructor					
9	MBTS game can motivate me to learn grammar					
10	MBTS game can improve my communication with others					

For each statement please tick (√) in one space only.

SD : Strongly Disagree
D : Disagree
NA: Not applicable
A : Agree
SA: Strongly Agree

No	Statements	SD 1	D 2	NA 3	A 4	SA 5
11	I found the Word level questions difficult					
12	I found the Sentence level questions difficult					
13	I found the True or False questions easier					
14	I wanted to reach a Chance tile very much					
15	I felt disappointed to land on a Doom tile					
16	I felt happy when the other players landed on the Doom tile					
17	The answer key provided is helpful					
18	I wanted to win the game very much					
19	I wanted to learn the Parts of Speech so that I could win the game					

20	MBTS game can improve my communication with others					

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

No	Interview Questions
1	Did you enjoy the Monster Back To School – Parts of Speech Game?
2	What was the most interesting part of the game?
3	What was the most challenging part of the game?
4	Would you prefer learning grammar through games? Why?
5	What were the problems you encountered while playing the game?
6	Did you refer to the Answer key during the game?
7	Did you get help from friends or (your teacher) while playing the game?
8	Are the rules of the game easy or difficult to understand?
9	Do you prefer learning grammar through games or textbooks
10	Do you think that the MBTS game or other games benefit students? How?