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The Grammar Odyssey

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Abstract

This paper presents a study of an innovation project titled 'The Grammar Odyssey', which is a language board game that is specifically designed for beginner and intermediate levels of learners. The board game is a handy device for learning the English grammar items, which integrates fun, simplicity and practicality in order to motivate players to learn grammar. Having mentioned this, learning the English grammar items does not stop at the classroom environment. In fact, language acquisition continues to adulthood even after years of leaving the school, college or institution. Hence, the sample of this research encompassed 22 adult staff members aged 28-57 years old from various administrative and support departments at Universiti Teknologi MARA Sarawak, Malaysia. This research aimed to identify their acceptance and feedback towards the learning of grammar items through the use of the language board game. Based on the survey conducted on the staff's feedback after playing the board game, a huge majority of the participants responded positively to the board game, stating that it was a useful, practical and fun tool for learning the English grammar. Thus, using the right approach to learn grammar is essential to help learners of all ages and levels acquire the skills effectively.

Keywords: English language learning, grammar, board game, adult learners

Introduction

Grammar learning is often associated with dreariness and lack of learners' motivation. Research has shown that traditional grammar teaching and learning has failed to motivate learners to actively engage in grammar lessons and lifelong learning (Matas & Natolo, 2010). Learners often complain of learning the complex grammar rules and having to do dull grammar exercises in the classroom. What is more unfortunate, students tend to portray the English teacher as an "unattractive

grammar monger whose only pleasure in life is to point out the faults of others" (Baron, 1982: 226). Nevertheless, teaching the grammar lessons may not be boring if the right approach is applied. Learning English grammar in the form of a board game may take away this dullness, but instead offers a non-threatening and useful activity for language learning. When the game aspect comes to the centre where learners or players believe that they are engaging in a game, this allows the learning process to take deliberately in a fun environment.

Problem Statement

Learning English grammar is certainly not an easy task for many non-native speakers of English. With the complicated sets of rules to acquire and apply in other components of English, namely, reading, writing, listening and speaking, it is indeed a challenging task to master. For instance, many Malaysian learners are incapable of applying the different parts of speech and English tenses correctly in their writing and speaking particularly. As a result, they tend to produce erroneous structures, which leads to poor performances in the language. It is common to see Malaysian learners of English make glaring mistakes in their grammar attempts. In addition, the fact that grammar learning is frequently perceived as boring, there is a need for a fun and meaningful approach that could help students learn grammar in a more engaging and enjoyable way. Hence, it is crucial to implement an effective pedagogical approach to learn and teach grammar so as to aid learners acquire the grammar skills.

Objective

The first objective of this study is to promote the use of board game as a learning tool especially in mastering the English grammar. Board games have been known as popular traditional games for family members and friends. Playing the board games during family gatherings or other social functions always brings warm thoughts and happy times. Nevertheless, in this age of online gaming and smart phone games and applications, many people have slowly forgotten about traditional board games. Board games are worthy toys to play for all ages including the adults, and there are a number of reasons why these are still highly recommended. Hence, for this reason, we have come out with a language board game called 'The Grammar Odyssey'.

The second objective of this survey study was to solicit users' evaluation and feedback about the usefulness of the board game, targeting the adult learners. It is a language board game that is specifically designed for beginner and intermediate levels of learners. The board game is a handy device for learning the English grammar items, which integrates fun, leisure, simplicity and practicality in order to motivate players to learn and enjoy grammar. 'The Grammar Odyssey' specifically emphasizes the English parts of speech and tenses that essentially form the pillars of English components. We believe that using this board game as a learning tool could possibly motivate and enhance grammar learning in learners.

Literature Review

Like children, adults enjoy learning when it is perceived as fun. According to Zimmerman (2004), a "game is a voluntary interactive activity, in which one or more players follow rules that constrain their behaviour, enacting an artificial conflict that ends in a quantifiable outcome." Rinvolucri (1995) also stated that, "games are often associated with fun. Games can lower anxiety, thus making the acquisition of input more likely. They are highly motivating, relevant, interesting and comprehensible." Thus, games not only engage students' interest in the classroom, but they also keep them involved.

Decades of research on learning and teaching as well as recent experiences and testing of board games designed for learning have also proven that they are ideal tools to encourage, empower and educate language learners. A well-designed board game would be able to create an engaging atmosphere, and also provide a non-threatening, playful, yet competitive environment in order to focus on content and reinforce learning. According to Treher (2011), "the board itself provides a visual metaphor to help connect information". Game elements, discussions, and problem solving with fellow team members about the content are vehicles for learning. Additionally, tailoring a board game with good questions, problems to solve, and situations to consider allows players to think through and apply what they learn (Treher, 2011). Similarly, Harmer (1991) stated that, "games are a vital part of a teacher's equipment, not only for language practice they provide, but also for the therapeutic effect they have. They can be used at any stage of a class to provide an amusing and challenging respite from other classroom activity and are especially useful at the end of a long day to send students away feeling cheerful about their English class".

In relation to adult learners of English, they often misunderstand the fact that learning grammar should be done in a serious manner. Playing games and having fun in class is often perceived as not learning. However, adult learners may find that the inclusion of games in language learning may accelerate their acquisition of English. In addition, games energize tired adults and subsequently enhance their ability to retain the target language aims. On top of that, language games encourage interaction and this helps learners to practise the target language (Judson & Egan, 2013).

One of the most prominent benefits of using games to learn grammar is the fact that it is fun and engaging that could potentially lower learners' affective filters (Krashen, 1982). Once the affective filter is lowered, it will be easier for learning to take place. Thus, language games provide a safe and non-threatening environment which fosters learning. Moreover, language games give learners the assurance that making mistakes and taking risks are acceptable. When this happens, learners will be able to absorb more input in the part of their brain that acquires language.

In a study by Lee (1995:35), students view games positively by saying that games are "a welcome break from the usual routine of the language class" and they are "motivating and challenging" as well. Additionally, Ersoz (2000) mentioned that games are valued due to their ability to increase interest and pleasure when learning. Hence, language educators can utilise games to help their students practise the target language in a fun and engaging manner. Likewise, Uberman (1998) in her study confirmed the fact that language games bring the elements of excitement and meaningfulness. Based on the researcher's observation, the students displayed enthusiasm when learning language through games. Uberman (1998) also argued that games are an effective method for helping students learn the target language. Unconsciously, learners will practise the language.

In another study, Metom, Alfred and Joe (2013) investigated the use of games to teach English grammar at UiTM Sarawak, Malaysia. The researchers invented a language board game called 'Mind Your Grammar!', which is a fun and practical language tool that helps beginner students of English learn grammar. A total of 81 students were involved in this survey study, who were selected from the Pre-Diploma Program of Business Management Faculty from Part 1, Session 2013/2014, UiTM Sarawak, Malaysia. The respondents were primarily selected based on their low proficiency in English as the language board game specifically catered for the beginner level of learners. The findings revealed that incorporating games in grammar lessons is an effective approach in motivating the students to learn. The activities in the game motivate them to communicate with others in English, as well as enhance their grammar skills while having fun with the language. This provides them a platform to practise their grammar skills when engaging in the board game. According to Metom et al. (2013), "the use of board games is more pleasurable and meaningful as learners can practise their grammar skills in their interaction with others."

Furthermore, in a study by Khonmohammad, Gorjian and Eskandari (2014), the researchers examined the use of games in influencing students' motivation in learning English grammar among young learners of English language in Iran, utilising an experimental method. The study involved 40 female students studying at the second grade of junior high school in Adab Rahnemaei School in Khorramabad, Iran. The learners were divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. At the beginning of the experimental period, the students sat for a pre-test on grammar. The control group was instructed following the suggested method as presented in their course book titled 'Right Path to English', in which the book adopts the audio lingual oriented type. On the other hand, the experimental group was treated based on different games for teaching grammar although they also used the same materials in the course book. Both groups sat for a post-test, whereby the data were collected and analysed utilising the Independent Samples t-test. The findings revealed that the students in the experimental group were significantly more motivated to learn grammar as compared to the control group.

The researchers concluded that language games can motivate learners in learning grammar by providing enjoyment and fun.

To put it briefly, games are a practical and efficient tool that should be used to foster interest in learning English. The use of games is a way to make the lessons more interesting, enjoyable and effective. Moreover, using games is also a way of teaching which may be used in conditions where ordinary approaches may not achieve the objective of the lessons especially when attention is hard to get and harder to keep (Alemy, 2010). By using games, it enables the teacher to create various contexts in which students have to use the language to communicate, exchange information and express their own opinions (Wright, Betteridge & Buckby, 2005).

Methodology

'The Grammar Odyssey' is an education tool invented to attract learners' interest to learn English grammar by integrating a simple, useful and fun approach. This language game consists of a game board, two dices, four game pieces of different colours as the movers, an answer booklet with explanations on the grammar items, 500 question cards for the beginner level (orange cards), and 500 question cards for the intermediate level (purple cards) (see Figure 2). The board game illustrates a spiral comprising 100 spaces, marked with numbers from 1 to 100. The spaces in the spiral consist of images of rockets, comets and question marks (?), whereby they represent their specific functions. The board game is named 'The Grammar Odyssey' as it depicts a journey in acquiring grammar knowledge.

Participants

It is noted that this language board game is not exclusively designed for young learners only, but it also caters for all age groups. For this purpose, an evaluation study was conducted through a focus group experiment involving working adult learners. The participants were selected purposively among the support staff members of UiTM Sarawak, Malaysia. The head of the department was contacted to nominate the staff for a voluntary session scheduled on 24 May, 2016, which took place at UiTM Sarawak campus. Twenty-two (22) administrative and support staff members had agreed to participate in this study. This selected group of adult learners aged from 28 to 57 years old, with a various range of educational and racial backgrounds, adult responsibilities and job experiences. They were also considered lifelong learners with multiple responsibilities such as career and family, who like any other learners, also require continuous educational training to improve their professional and personal endeavours.

Research Instrument

This survey study utilised a set of questionnaire adapted from Metom et al. (2013). The questionnaire comprises two parts: Section A and Section B. Section A consists of the respondent's profile (i.e. age, gender, race, profession and educational level),

whereas Section B consists of ten items relating to the participants' feedback after playing the board game. A validity and reliability test was also conducted to ensure the psychometric relevancy and consistency of the measured items in the evaluation survey.

The participants were given a briefing on the purpose of the study and how the grammar game is played. The game can be played by 4-5 players. Before playing the board game, the participants were given options to choose from the two levels of game cards; either to choose the beginner level or the intermediate level in accordance with their language proficiency.

Some examples of instructions and questions as stated on the game cards are as follows:

For beginner level:

Instruction: Choose the correct answer for the statement below:

She is an _____ person.

honest

honesty

honestly

For intermediate level:

Instruction: Fill in the blank with the correct verb in parentheses.

I *(arrive)* _____ home at about 6 o'clock yesterday and *(sit)* ___ down on the sofa to watch my favourite show.

The game commences by rolling the dices, in which the highest score will kick off first. A player who lands on the space marked with '?' will have to pick a card and answer the question stated on it which relates to a grammar item. The player who gives the correct answer to the grammar question will have another chance to roll the dices and continue playing. However, if the answer given is incorrect, he or she will miss a turn. The game also includes features whereby landing on the bottom of any rocket will help the player to move upward. However, if the player lands on the tail of a comet, he/she will move downward and lose a turn. The player who reaches the space marked '100' first will become the winner.

After playing the game, the participants were given an evaluation survey form comprising ten questions that measure the usefulness of 'The Grammar Odyssey'. The participants' feedback was measured by five-level Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Agree) to 5 (Strongly Disagree). A sample item as stated in the evaluation survey form is as follows: *I enjoy playing 'The Grammar Odyssey'*. In order to ensure the usefulness of the evaluation survey, the validity and reliability test was conducted. Additionally, a factor analysis was also performed to statistically identify the possibilities of usefulness factors of 'The Grammar Odyssey'. The findings of the evaluation survey are discussed in the following section.

Results and Discussions

Respondents' Profiles

Based on the survey results, 22 staff members from different administrative and support departments of UiTM Sarawak had participated in this study. They encompassed 15 males and 7 females aged from 28 to 57 years old with different administrative and support positions, namely, 1 administrative clerk, 4 civil assistants, 2 clerks, 1 community nurse, 2 drivers, 2 general workers, 2 hostel supervisors, 2 library assistants, 3 operation assistants, 1 science officer and 2 unspecified positions. They were composed of 15 Malays, 3 Melanaus, 3 Ibans and 1 Bidayuh. It is noted that Sarawak's population consists of many ethnic groups. In addition, in terms of their educational qualifications, majority of the participants held the school certificate of SPM (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* – Malaysian Certificate of Education) with 68.2% of them, while 4.5% of them held the certificate of STPM (*Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia* – Malaysian Certificate of Higher Education). In addition, 9.1% of the respondents had a diploma degree, whereas 4.5% of them acquired a bachelor degree. In addition, 9.1% of the staff members obtained other educational qualifications.

Table 6 shows the participants' feedback after using 'The Grammar Odyssey'. In general, the findings revealed positive acceptance of the participants to the grammar game. Precisely, for survey item No. 1, 63.6% of the respondents agreed that they enjoyed playing the board game, whereas 31.8% strongly agreed. Meanwhile, 4.5% of the staff members chose to be neutral. For survey item No. 2, 72.7% of the users agreed that they liked the fun and colourful features of the board, while 27.3% of them strongly agreed on this matter. For survey item No. 3, 54.5% of the participants strongly agreed that they learned something new when playing the board game, while 45.5% of them agreed on this item. As for survey item No. 4, 72.7% of the staff agreed that they sometimes discussed the answers with their friends while playing the game, while 27.3% of them strongly agreed that they also did the same too. For survey item No. 5, 59% of the respondents agreed that they could improve their grammar skills when playing 'The Grammar Odyssey', while 31.8% of them strongly agreed on this survey matter. However, 9.1% of the participants were neutral on this part. For survey item No. 6, 72.7% of them agreed that the board game encouraged them to communicate in English with their friends, 22.7% strongly agreed on this matter, while 4.4% responded neutral. For survey item No. 7, 59.1% of the participants strongly agreed that using the board game was a fun way of learning English grammar, 36.4% agreed on this matter, whereas 4.5 chose neutral. For survey item No. 8, 63.6% of the staff members agreed that the questions in the board game were clear and could be easily understood, 31.8% strongly agreed on this matter, while 4.5% responded neutral. For survey item No. 9, 63.6% of them agreed that they would play the board game with their friends and family members, 27.3% agreed on this item, while 4.5% chose neutral. Finally, for

survey item No. 10, 63.6% of the participants agreed that the board game was a practical and meaningful way of learning English grammar, 31.8% of them strongly agreed on this matter, while 4.5% chose neutral.

In general, majority of the UiTM staff members responded that the language board game made learning grammar fun and effective, and it enabled them to practise their grammar skills. They also expressed that this innovation project was an effective tool in enhancing their grammar knowledge while having fun with the language. The items discussed particularly reflect the usefulness of 'The Grammar Odyssey'. Thus, a further exploratory factor analysis was performed to investigate the psychometric pattern of the particular items statistically.

Validity and Reliability

As mentioned in the methodology section, a validity and reliability test was conducted to ensure the psychometric relevancy and consistency of the measured items in the evaluation survey. First, to establish the face validity, the survey instrument was designed carefully by referring to the existing sample of the program evaluation form. Second, the evaluation form was later checked by four experts (a native speaker of English, two academicians and a support staff from UiTM Sarawak) to obtain the content validity of the evaluation measure. The questions were refined accordingly to the feedback given by the experts. Third, a reliability test was conducted to check the consistency of the evaluation measure items. Based on the internal reliability analysis, the evaluation measure was found highly reliable and consistent at Cronbach's alpha (α) value of .919 ($\bar{X}$ = 16.92, s^2 = 16.415 & s = 4.052) (more than the cut-off value α = .070) (Igbaria, Parasuraman & Badawy, 1994).

Exploratory Factor Analysis

The Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was accounted for .805, which shows the sufficiency of sample (p < .5), while the Measure of Sampling Adequacy (MSA) score was less than cut-off point of .5. The result suggests that those items with anti-image correlations scored less than the cut-off point of .5 in the weighting scale.

Table 7 shows the detailed results of item-grouping or pattern loadings. Two factors with an eigenvalue of 1.00 or higher were extracted. The rotated factors accumulated 56.62% of the variance. The first factor accounted for 36.30% of the variance with an eigenvalue of 5.944. This factor was labelled as 'learning' as the evaluation items reflected the implicit benefits of 'The Grammar Odyssey'. Meanwhile, the second factor accounted for 26.867% of the variance with an eigenvalue of 1.008. This factor was labelled as 'manifestation' as the evaluation items reflected the tacit benefits of 'The Grammar Odyssey'.

In addition, a further reliability test had also been conducted to check the internal consistency of the newly formed factors to the usefulness of 'The Grammar Odyssey'. First, the *learning* factor (comprising six items) was found highly reliable and consistent at Cronbach's alpha (α) value of .909 ($\bar{X}$ = 10.24, s^2 = 7.031 & s = 2.652). Second, the *manifestation* factor (with four items) was also found highly reliable and consistent at Cronbach's alpha (α) value of .810 ($\bar{X}$ = 6.68, s^2 = 2.894 & s = 1.701). Both factors were found reliable with more than the cut-off value α = .070 (Igbaria et al., 1994).

Usefulness of the language board game

Learning Factor

Based on the participants' highly positive acceptance of 'The Grammar Odyssey', it can be concluded that the board game is a useful tool for teaching and learning English grammar. The board game is a fun tool that helps get the learners to be active in their learning. It activates learners' interest by creating a relaxed, friendly and anxiety-free environment, which makes learning the grammar items an enjoyable experience. Besides, the board game also motivates the learners to communicate with one another in English while playing the grammar game. It also makes language learning more real and offers the players a sense of relevance in learning the English language. In accordance with Celce-Murcia and Macintosh (1979:54), "language use takes precedence over language practice, and in this sense games help bring the classroom to the real world, no matter how contrived they may be". In addition, incorporating games into language teaching and learning provides learners with an entertaining and relaxing learning atmosphere, in which this may lower their stress and anxiety in learning grammar (Krashen, 1982). Integrating games into language learning makes it highly appealing since they are entertaining and simultaneously thought-provoking. Clark (1982) also argued that games can be used as a way to assess and rehearse language lessons in a fun and entertaining way. Moreover, 'The Grammar Odyssey' employs simplicity and practicality in the question items, which makes it a meaningful, friendly and useful language tool for learning grammar. The language board game is also a revision for grammar exercises put in a fun context. Needless to say, the adult learners in this study were given the opportunity to practise and apply their grammar skills again while playing it.

Manifestation Factor

'The Grammar Odyssey' motivates the learners' interest to learn grammar through its fun features which create an enjoyable atmosphere for language learning. It is a practical game designed with fun and colourful features to attract players and indirectly offers a platform for grammar learning to take place. The game could be played with family members and friends that makes it a wonderful experience, giving them relaxed and joyful moments. The board game provides a context for

meaningful language application in terms of English grammar learning, which becomes their major motivation to embark in the learning process. As asserted by Harmer (1998, as cited in Luu & Nguyen, 2010), motivation becomes an internal drive for learners that inspires them to pursue a course of action. This motivation forms the biggest dynamic that influences their acquisition success. The board game captures the payers' attention and participation, and thus motivating them to learn more.

Moreover, the features of 'The Grammar Odyssey' also promote learners' interaction. According to Jacobs and Liu (1996), most game enable the players to play in pairs or groups, enabling them to apply their communicative skills such as disagreeing politely and requesting for assistance from their partner or group members while engaging in the games. In addition, games provide an opportunity for players to be participative and competitive while trying to score points and beat others. The competitive nature of the games offers learners a natural chance to collaborate and interact in English with one another.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, learning English grammar through the board game is one effective, interesting and captivating way that can be applied in any environment, be it at the classroom or at home, or any age group, be it children or adults. Based on the findings of this research, incorporating games into grammar learning in the form of a board game can motivate even adult learners for the useful practice and review of language lessons, which results in enhancement of language learning. 'The Grammar Odyssey' is indeed a useful and practical tool that can be used by all learners regardless of their age groups to learn grammar. The language board game is effective as it creates motivation, reduces learners' anxiety and offers them the opportunity for real language application.

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