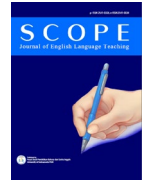




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Research Article

The Effectiveness of Using Syntax Games in Fostering Students' Ability to Learn English: Perspectives from EFL Teachers

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KEYWORDS

Learning English;
Students' Ability;
Syntax Game.

ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this study was to explore the effectiveness of using syntax games in fostering students' ability to learn English from the viewpoints of EFL teachers working in a private Islamic junior high school in Padangsidempuan. The study's findings and the data gathered from a questionnaire showed that the EFL teachers have a variety of ideas about using games to teach grammar that are comparable to those discussed in the current literature. According to the study, although the EFL teachers acknowledge that games are a useful tool for teaching grammar, they do not employ games as frequently as one might anticipate in their classrooms.

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INTRODUCTION

Games have an important role in foreign language teaching programs because they make studying foreign languages less complicated, particularly for young students. This is true despite the fact that some English instructors view language games as time wasters or fun classroom activities. English language practice and learning have become much more challenging for educators and students since the arrival of communicative language teaching, as any innovation provides challenges for its users (Daulay, 2021). Games have gained significant importance for English language learners and educators, not only because they offer entertainment and relaxation but also because they encourage students to use the language in innovative and expressive ways (Daulay et al., 2023).

It should be remembered that learning a language is a difficult endeavor that calls for consistent work, particularly for beginning students. By offering them relevant contexts, games motivate students to focus their efforts on language acquisition (Wright et al., 2015). Consequently, educators should incorporate games into their foreign language instruction curricula rather than viewing them as fun add-ons or time wasters. Different scholars have put forth various explanations for the nature of games. For example, games are a "form of play governed by rules" (Rixon, 2014). Similarly, games are defined as "An activity with rules, a goal, and an element of fun" (Hadfield, 2016). "Games are an agreeable way of getting a class to use its initiative in English," claims Haycraft (2018). In contrast, games are defined as "activities carried out by cooperating or competing decision makers, seeking to achieve, within a set of rules, their objectives" (Gibbs, 2017).

Games offer language teachers many benefits when they're used in the classroom. One such benefit is that learners are motivated to learn the language when they are engaged in a game. McCallum (2019) emphasizes this point by suggesting that "games routinely stimulate student interest; a well-delivered game can be one of the highest motivating strategies." Additionally, Avedon (2020) argues that "games spur motivation and students get very absorbed in the competitive aspects of the games; moreover, they try harder at games than in other courses." In other words, games stimulate students' interest in classroom activities, and as a result, students become motivated and willing to learn.

Another advantage related to games is that students' anxiety towards language learning decreases as games are employed. In language classes, learners feel pressured because they think that they have to master the target language that is unknown to them. Games are beneficial in this regard because they reduce anxiety, increase positive feelings, and improve self-confidence since learners aren't afraid of punishment or criticism while practicing the target language freely (Crookall, 2018).

Games are student-focused activities requiring the active involvement of learners. As claimed by Crookall (2018), learners and teachers change their roles and relations through games, and learners are encouraged to take an active role in their learning process. As a result, games provide learners with a chance to direct their learning. From an instructional viewpoint, creating a meaningful context for language use is another advantage that games present. By using games, teachers can create contexts that enable unconscious learning because learners' attention is on the message, not on the language. Therefore, when they completely focus on a game as an activity, students acquire language in the same way that they acquire their mother tongue, that is, without being aware of it (Cross, 2020).

Games give students a chance to practice their language skills by bringing real-world scenarios into the classroom. It is claimed that, regardless of how artificial they may be, "language use takes precedence over language practice in games, and in this sense, games help bring the classroom to the real world" (Celce-Murcia, 2019). In other words, games establish a link between language learners and real-world language usage by placing them in authentic scenarios. Furthermore, McCallum (2019) notes that there are numerous benefits to playing games, including the fact that they draw students' attention to particular vocabulary words, grammatical constructions, and patterns; serve as a review, enrichment, and reinforcement mechanism; involve learners who learn quickly and slowly equally; can be modified to meet each student's unique age and language proficiency; foster a culture of healthy rivalry by giving people a creative outlet for using their natural

language in a relaxed setting; are adaptable to all language learning contexts and skill levels; provide immediate feedback for the teacher; and ensure maximum student participation for a minimum of teacher preparation.

To sum up, games have great pedagogical value, providing language teachers with many advantages when they are used in foreign language classes. The review of the studies related to language games indicates that games are crucially important in foreign language teaching and learning in a variety of areas. The major aspects mentioned in the literature include using games in teaching grammar to young learners (Nedomová, 2017; Bekiri, 2018; Hong, 2019); factors to consider while choosing games; deciding which game to use (Nedomová, 2017; Rixon, 2014; McCallum, 2019); deciding the time to use games (Lee, 2018; Rinvoluceri, 2020); the role of the teacher in using games to teach grammar to young learners; teacher's preparation (McCallum, 2019); the role of the teacher as a facilitator (Celce-Murcia, 2019); class organization (McCallum, 2019); learner participation (McCallum, 2019; Lee, 2018); and the effectiveness of using games in teaching grammar to young learners (Amato, 2018; Gunn & McCallum, 2020; Deesri, 2019; Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 2018).

The fact that games are the most suitable instructional activities for young learners is obvious because they are a natural part of their existence. Nedomová (2017) argues that "young learners are not able to pay their attention for more than 10-20 minutes, and after that, they start to be bored and tired." When grammar teaching is too dependent on rules and memorization, they start to lose their interest and motivation. Teachers know that young learners like being physically active as they learn by doing. Moreover, they are imaginative and creative, and they understand without being aware of it. Besides, young learners use their previous experience, knowledge, skills, and abilities, which help the teacher present new information by enabling children to practice the latest knowledge on top of their previous knowledge (Nedomová, 2017). Therefore, the best way to direct this capacity in grammar teaching is by using games. Bekiri (2018) states that when a lesson includes a game, the game gives the teacher a chance to help learners acquire new forms and lexis in an effective way. It should not be a complicated game but a simple one because it is usually more effective as young learners find it difficult to understand a long list of rules.

Similarly, games should also include praise and encouragement because young learners always love to be the center of attention. In addition to all these, it should be borne in mind that games should be as short as possible because, as mentioned before, young learners are able to pay attention to the games just for a limited time. Hong (2019) gives some suggestions to teachers about using

games for teaching young learners: the quickest way to explain something to a beginner would be to use a few words in their mother tongue (later on, more exposure to English is required); short explanations work better for setting up games than lengthy ones; and it's crucial to avoid playing games for extended periods, as students' interests will start to wane. When a game is at its best, it's best to end it.

Teaching young learners is a very demanding issue that needs consideration. This problematic issue is important because the teacher should come up with the most suitable activities and tasks to teach young learners. As such, games are one of the best ways to direct young learners' energy not only to grammar learning but also to many skills and areas of the language. However, it should be taken into consideration that as they are young learners, teaching them through games requires special effort from the teacher. Hence, two factors, namely, deciding which game to use and deciding the time to use games, need to be explained.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative library research with quantitative data collection through a questionnaire. The library research involved examining books, notes, papers, and other materials that summarize the results of past research (Sugiyono, 2016). This systematic review of publications and papers was used to gather information about the variables under investigation: linguistics, language teachers, and language instruction.

A questionnaire developed by the researchers was utilized in a private Islamic junior high school in Padangsidempuan. The questionnaire comprised fifteen questions divided into three sections:

1. Purpose of the questionnaire
2. Demographic information (age, sex, type of school)
3. Opinions on games and their effectiveness in teaching grammar to younger students.

The third section used a five-point Likert scale with options ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The questionnaire was administered in English, as all participants were EFL teachers. The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire was computed to be 0.72, indicating an acceptable level of reliability (Cohen et al., 2017).

After distributing the questionnaire, the results from the participants were analyzed using a spreadsheet program. The frequencies and probabilities for each query were tabulated and presented in tables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the analysis of data for each item are discussed elaborately in this part of the paper.

Table 1: Teachers' Beliefs about the Pedagogical Value of Using Games in Language Teaching.

#	Statement	Agree	Disagree
1	I believe that games are both fun and full of pedagogical value.	86.67%	13.33%
5	I believe that games should be given a special role in a foreign language teaching program.	93.33%	6.67%
9	I believe that games present many opportunities to the learner to show their skills not only in grammar but also in many language areas.	100%	0%
13	I think that teachers must use games for fun only for breaking down boredom.	53.33%	46.67%

The results show that a great majority of EFL teachers (86.67%) believe in the pedagogical value of games in second language teaching. Nearly all participants (93.33%) agree that games should be given a special role in the foreign language teaching program. All participants agree that games provide learners with a chance to show their skills not only in grammar but also in many areas of language. However, opinions are split regarding whether games should be used only for fun, with 53.33% agreeing and 46.67% disagreeing.

These findings align with recent research emphasizing the educational value of games in language learning. For instance, Daulay and Adelita (2023) found that using games like Scrabble can enhance students' motivation and vocabulary acquisition. Similarly, Harahap et al. (2023) demonstrated the effectiveness of Scrabble games in improving students' vocabulary ability.

Table 2: Teachers' Attitudes towards the Use of Syntax Games in Grammar Teaching as a Form of Instruction.

#	Statement	Agree	Disagree
2	I believe that I cannot measure students' knowledge of grammar when I use syntax games to teach grammar.	36.67%	63.33%
6	I believe that using syntax games to teach grammar may distract students' attention during the instruction.	43.33%	56.67%
8	I believe that using syntax games in my grammar class can be time-consuming	40%	60%
10	I feel uncomfortable when I don't give the exact rules for every grammar subject.	80%	20%
12	I find it difficult to find a game for every aspect of Grammar.	86.67%	13.33%

The results indicate that most EFL teachers (63.33%) believe they can measure students' grammar knowledge when using syntax games. Similarly, 56.67% of teachers do not believe that games distract students' attention during grammar instruction. Sixty percent of teachers disagree that using syntax games in grammar classes is time-consuming. However, 80% of teachers feel uncomfortable when not giving exact rules for every grammar subject, and 86.67% find it difficult to find a game for every aspect of grammar.

These findings suggest that while teachers recognize the value of games in grammar instruction, they still face challenges in implementation. This aligns with research by Daulay et al. (2021), which found that using games like the Whispering Game can be effective for EFL learners but requires careful planning and execution.

Table 3: The Effectiveness of Using Games in Teaching Grammar to Young Learners

#	Statement	Agree	Disagree
3	I believe that using syntax games can lower students' anxiety towards grammar learning.	93.33%	6.67%
4	I believe that syntax games are not very effective in grammar teaching.	23.33%	76.67%
7	I believe that syntax games encourage, entertain, and teach and promote fluency.	93.33%	6.67%
11	I feel that syntax games are highly motivating, and an entertaining way of teaching grammar, especially for weak students.	86.67%	13.33%
14	I believe that while playing a game, learners are not concerned about focusing on the structures but learn them unconsciously.	90%	10%

A significant majority of EFL teachers (93.33%) agree that syntax games can lower students' anxiety towards grammar learning. Most teachers (76.67%) believe that syntax games are effective in grammar teaching. A large majority (93.33%) think that syntax games encourage, entertain, teach, and promote fluency. Most teachers (86.67%) feel that syntax games are highly motivating and entertaining, especially for slow learners. Ninety percent of teachers believe that learners unconsciously learn grammar structures while playing games.

These results are consistent with recent studies on the effectiveness of games in language learning. For example, Daulay (2023) found that using gamification can enhance students' oral articulation in English, while Harahap and Daulay (2022) demonstrated the positive effect of

gamification on learning motivation for distance learning students.

Table 4: The Frequency of Using Syntax Games for Teaching/Learning Grammar.

#	Statement	Agree	Disagree
15	I use syntax games in my grammar class as much as possible.	63.33%	36.67%

While 63.33% of teachers report using syntax games in their grammar classes as much as possible, a significant portion (36.67%) do not. This suggests that despite recognizing the benefits of games, some teachers still face barriers to implementing them regularly in their classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the effectiveness of using syntax games in fostering students' ability to learn English from the perspectives of EFL teachers in a private Islamic junior high school in Padangsidempuan. The results show that EFL teachers are aware of the educational benefits of using games in the classroom and agree that using games as a teaching tool is beneficial, particularly for younger students. However, despite recognizing the value of games for grammar instruction, teachers do not use them as frequently as one might expect. The majority of participants attribute this to overcrowded classrooms and demanding curricula.

To address this issue, careful planning and professional development for teachers are necessary to ensure the benefits of games are fully realized in foreign language classrooms. Additionally, curriculum developers and material designers should consider incorporating more game-based activities into textbooks and teaching resources. By offering a variety of engaging games, foreign language instruction can be more appealing, and elementary school students can enjoy learning English in a meaningful way.

Future research could explore specific strategies for overcoming the barriers to implementing games in grammar instruction, as well as investigating the long-term effects of game-based learning on students' language proficiency.

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