Teaching Grammar to Young Learners through Games: Having Fun in Grammar Class

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Abstract: *Conducting English language classes with young learners is quite challenging for language teachers. Although they know a lot of grammatical rules but their application is difficult for them. Another point is that grammar needs to be taught in context and the students are not accustomed to this. Finally, they get bored with a traditional school like teaching approach. Games are excellent ways to have young learners practice various grammar rules. In this paper, we have discussed some ideas regarding games that sometimes may be incorporated in English language classes of young learners and can easily be played for grammar practice. These games also help achieve the objective of grammar lessons. This paper seeks to review the literature on teaching English grammar encompassing an overview definition of grammar and teaching grammar approaches, as well as definitions of games, classifications of games and the influence of using games on the language learners' performance. Prior researches on teaching English grammar through games have also been examined. This study combined both qualitative and quantitative research approaches in an effort to obtain accurate outcomes and sufficient information from the participants towards using games in young learners' English grammar classes. In order to measure the students' language attitudes towards the classes of teaching grammar through games, a student questionnaire based on the students' experiences of attending & teachers' perception using games in grammar classes in The University of Information Technology & Sciences, Prime University, Southeast University and East West University were administered to the students. The final data were analyzed using percentages to measure the differences in the performance and attitudes of the participants, and the results were then reported. This paper introduces the benefits of some interesting games in teaching young learners grammar and also suggests incorporating them at the tertiary level in Bangladesh.*

Keywords: grammar, young learners, games, motivation, second language, fun.

Introduction

Although some teachers of English see language games as time consuming or classroom techniques for fun, games have a special role in any foreign language teaching programme because they facilitate foreign language learning, especially

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for young learners. With the introduction of communicative language teaching, English language teaching and learning has become much more demanding for teachers and learners just like any other innovation that poses challenges for its users. Games have become crucially equal important for English language learners and teachers not only because they provide enjoyment and relaxation, but also because they encourage students to use their language in a creative and communicative manner. [1]

It should be borne in mind that language learning is a challenging task requiring constant effort, especially for young learners. Games encourage learners to direct their energy towards language learning by providing them with meaningful contexts (Wright, Betteridge and Buckby, 1984).

Therefore, it is important that teachers should not see games as time fillers or tools designed for fun only, but integrate them into their foreign language teaching programmes. It is possible to come up with many descriptions proposed by various researchers about the nature of games. Rixon (1991, p.3), for example, describes games as "form of play governed by rules." Likewise, Hadfield (1990; Quoted in Deesri, 2002, p.1) describes games as "an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun." According to Haycraft (1978, p. 94), "Games are an agreeable way of getting a class to use its initiative in English." However, games are described by Gibbs (1978; Quoted in Rixon, 1991, p. 3), as "Games are activities carried out by cooperating or competing decision makers, seeking to achieve, within a set of rules, their objectives."

Classifications of Games

Classifying games into categories can be difficult because categories often overlap. Hadfield (1999) explains two ways of classifying language games. First, language games are divided into two types:

linguistic games and communicative games.

☐ Linguistic games focus on accuracy, such as supplying the correct antonym.

☐ Communicative games focus on successful exchange of information and ideas, such as two people identifying the differences between their two pictures which are similar to one another but not exactly alike. Correct language usage, though still important, is secondary to achieving the communicative goal.

Second, Hadfield (ibid.) classifies language games into many more categories. Together with the classification of games as linguistic games or communicative games, some games will contain elements of more than one type.

Sorting, ordering, or arranging games. For example, students have a set of cards with different products on their classes, and they sort the cards into products found at a grocery store and products found at a department store.

Information gap games: In such games, one or more people have information that other people need to complete a task. For instance, one person might have a drawing and their partner needs to create a similar drawing by listening to the

information given by the person with the drawing. Information gap games can involve a one-way information gap, such as the drawing game just described, or a two-way information gap, in which each person has unique information.[2]

Guessing games. These is a variation on information gap games. One of the best known examples of a guessing game is 20 Questions, in which one person thinks of a famous person, place, or thing. The other participants can ask 20 Yes/No questions to find clues in order to guess who or what the person is thinking of.[3]

Search games: These games are yet another variant on two-way information gap games, with everyone giving and seeking information. Find someone who is a well known example. Students are given a grid.

The task is to fill in all the cells in the grid with the name of a classmate who fits that cell, e.g., someone who is a vegetarian. Students circulate, asking and answering questions to complete their own grid, and help classmates complete theirs.

Matching games: As the name implies, participants need to find a match for a word, picture, or card. For example, students place 30 word cards, composed of 15 pairs, face down in random order. Each person turns over two cards at a time, with the goal of turning over a matching pair, by using their memory. This is also known as the Pelmanism principle, after Christopher Louis Pelman, a British psychologist of the first half of the 20th century.[4]

Labeling games: These are forms of matching in that participants match labels and pictures.

Exchanging games: In these games, students barter cards, other objects, or ideas. Similar are exchanging and collecting games. Many card games fall into this category, such as the children's card game

Board games: Scrabble4 is one of the most popular board games that specifically highlights language.

Role-play games: The terms role play, drama, and simulation are sometimes used interchangeably but can be differentiated (Kodotchigova, 2002). Role play can involve students playing roles that they do not play in real life, such as doctor, while simulations can involve students performing roles that they already play in real life or might be likely to play, such as a customer at a restaurant. Dramas are normally scripted performances, whereas in role plays simulations, students come up with their own words, although preparation is often useful.

Another distinction among games is that between competitive games and cooperative ones (Jacobs, in preparation). Research suggests that learning, as well as affective variables are enhanced by a cooperative environment (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne; Slavin, 1995). Millis (2005) outlines a number of advantages of cooperative games, such as appropriate anxiety levels and more constructive feedback.

According to Lee (2000) (cited in Pham, 2007), games have been classified into ten kinds:

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☐ Structure games which provide experience of the use of particular patterns of syntax in communication

☐ Vocabulary games in which the learners' attention is focused mainly on words

☐ Spelling games

☐ Pronunciation games

☐ Number games

☐ Listen-and-do games

☐ Games and writing

☐ Miming and role play

☐ Discussion games

Another classification of games by McCallum (1980) consists of seven kinds:

☐ Structure games

☐ Vocabulary games

☐ Number games

☐ Spelling games

☐ Conversation games

☐ Writing games

☐ Role play and dramatics

It is shown that the classifications of games from the above linguists are common in a way that each kind of games focuses on a language item or a skill for the purpose and the content of the lesson. Therefore, teachers should be careful of choosing the most suitable game for each lesson so that learners and teachers can benefit the most from these games.

The advantages of using games in language teaching and learning

"Language learning is hard work. Effort is required at every moment and maintained over a long period of time. Games help and encourage many learners to sustain their interest and work."[5]

"Games help the teacher to create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful. A little different, according to Richard-Amato (1996: 10), even though games are often associated with fun, we should not lose sight of their pedagogical values, particularly in foreign language teaching and learning. Games are effective as they create motivation, lower students' stress, and give language learners the opportunity for real communication. Yet, there has been much prejudice that games are just for fun, not for educational purposes. [6]

Conversely, Kim (1995: 23) disagrees with the above prejudice. He says that there is a common perception that all learning should be serious and solemn in nature and that if one is having fun and there are dissimilarity and laughter, then it is not really learning. This is a misconception. It is possible to learn a language as well as enjoy oneself at the same time. One of the best ways of doing this is through games.

Though different in the viewpoints, the linguists want to emphasize the ultimate aim of using games in teaching in that teachers want a better lesson in which their students benefit much. Some of the common advantages of using games in language teaching and learning language are recapitulated as follows: [7]

Teachers should be well aware of their roles while using games in their classes. Since it is rather difficult to find a game that meets all the needs of the learners, careful preparation of the teacher is necessary. McCallum (1980, pp. x-xi) suggests that the teacher should organize the game before the instruction. The teacher may need some extra equipment or materials to play the game and most of the time these equipments and materials are not available in the classroom. Before explaining the rules to the class, the teacher should first understand how the game is played. Especially, when working with children, the teacher should always be prepared to adapt the game to the givens of the class. After choosing the game, the teacher should explain its rules to the learners in a direct and non-complicated way. Especially, for young learners, it may be necessary to use the mother tongue because if these learners cannot understand how to play the game, there is no educational purpose in playing it. Therefore, demonstrations may be beneficial because they can help young learners understand the rules clearly and easily. Moreover, the teacher is not recommended to interrupt a game to correct the mistakes of young learners. According to Celce-Murcia (1979, p. 54), "interruptions should be as infrequent as possible so as not to detract from the student's interest in the game. An alternative to immediate correction is to make note of errors and discuss them when the game is over". In other words, as sudden interruptions may distract learners' attention, it is better to wait until the game is over to discuss and correct the mistakes of the learners. In addition, appropriate class organization. [8]

There are many advantages of using games in the classroom:[9]

1- Games are a welcome break from the usual routine of the language class.

2- They are motivating and challenging.

3- Learning a language requires a great deal of efforts, games help students to make and sustain the effort of learning.

4- Games provide language practice in the various skills such as speaking, writing,

listening and reading.

5- They encourage students to interact and communicate.

6- They create a meaningful context for language use.

Having reviewed the importance and features of games from various angles, the primary aim of this study was to the opinions of Bangladesh English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers and Learners on the use of games in their English language classrooms. For this aim, the following research questions were addressed in the study:

(1) What are Bangladeshi English as Second Language (ESL) teachers' and learners' beliefs about the value of using games in language classrooms?

(2) What are the teachers' and learners' attitudes towards using games in grammar teaching?

(3) What do teachers and learners' think about the effectiveness of using games in teaching grammar to young learners?

(4) To what extent do the teachers of ESL make use of games while teaching grammar?

METHOD

Research Design

This study was designed as a descriptive study with an aim to explore the beliefs and habits of ESL teachers' towards using games in young learners' English classes.

Participants

Twenty six ESL teachers and in the selection of the two hundred and forty participants voluntarily participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to get the most adequate data from the available individuals within the researcher's reach.

The Research Instrument

A questionnaire was prepared by the researchers and was applied in different private universities in Bangladesh. The questionnaire was composed of eight questions. In the first part of the questionnaire, the participants were informed about the purpose of taking part in the study. In the second part, they were asked to fill in the demographic information about their age, sex, and other options. In the third part, they were asked to fill in the option which best showed their opinions about games and their effectiveness in teaching and learning grammar by games.

The questionnaire included a four -point Likert type scale with four options, namely, 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'agree' and 'strongly agree'. Since all of the participants were ESL teachers and learners, the items in the questionnaire were prepared in the light of relevant literature. Since all of the participants were EFL teachers and learners of different universities, the questionnaire was administrated in English.

Data Analyses

After the administration of the questionnaire, the results obtained from the participants were analyzed with the help of a renowned spreadsheet application. The data were tabulated and the frequencies and percentages for each question were presented in tables.

RESULTS

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

(1)Teachers'and Learners' Beliefs about the Value of Using Games in Language Teaching and Learning.

	Perception	SA(4)	AG(3)	DA(2)	SD(1)
Teachers	Games can motivate Students a lot	54%	32%	10%	4%
Learners	Games can motivate Students a lot	52%	28%%	11%	5%

(2) What are the teachers' and learners' attitudes towards using games in grammar teaching and Learning?

	Perception	SA(4)	AG(3)	DA(2)	SD(1)
Teachers	Games promote learners' interaction	41%	35%	15%	9%
Learners	Games promote learners' interaction	58%	20%	16%	6%

(3) What do teachers and learners think about the usefulness of using games in teaching grammar to young learners?

	Perception	SA(4)	AG(3)	DA(2)	SD(1)
Teaches	Games present many opportunities to learners to show their skills not only in grammar but also in many language areas.	61%	22%	15%	2%
Learners	Games present many opportunities to learners to show their skills not only in grammar but also in many language areas.	57%	27%	12%	4%

(4) To what extent do the teachers of ESL make use of games while teaching grammar?

	Perception	SA(4)	AG(3)	DA(2)	SD(1)

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Teaches	Teachers must use games for fun and for breaking down boredom.	41%	39%	13%	7%
Learners	Teachers must use games for fun and for breaking down boredom.	54%	32%	10%	4%

The results of the first question show that a great majority of ESL teachers and learners believe in the value of games in second language teaching and learning. In the second question, a large number of teachers and learners strongly agreed and agreed about positive attitude of using games. In the third and fourth question teachers and learners also strongly agreed and agreed about using games in the ESL classroom. The results of all questions showed that all of the participants had almost the same positive opinion about using games for grammar teaching.

Limitations: There were some limitations about using games in the grammar classroom, according to the teachers. Some teachers shared their opinion regarding this matter. One of the teachers said, "I find it difficult to find a game for every aspect of grammar".

Another teacher said "It is not so easy to incorporate games into the class as there are limited time and vast syllabus for the instructor to complete within the time".

Conclusion and Recommendations

Teaching grammar to young learners is a really hard job. However, that even learning grammar could be funny and interesting should be one of the ways to deal with the grammar teaching. As it has been demonstrated in my bachelor thesis, using various methods in teaching grammar can be more or less worthy and useful with young learners. On the other hand, as it has been stated using games whilst teaching and explaining grammar rules or structures, is definitely very effective and brings them amusement. I tried to point out that whilst playing a game, pupils feel released and relaxed, it helps them with their inhibitions. Learners are highly motivated and the level of stress is at the low level. [10]

In conclusion, a close examination of these results point that teachers recognize the pedagogical value of using games in their classrooms and agree that while teaching the grammar rules explicitly is still important, using games as a form of instruction is also beneficial. Similarly, the participants express that using games is effective in grammar teaching, especially for young learners. [11]

Finally, results of this study further show that although a great majority of the participants favors the effectiveness of using games in grammar teaching, they do not use games as frequently as expected.[12] Most of the participants express that because of the crowded classroom environments and the heavy load of the

curriculum. With accurate planning and information passed onto the teachers, this problem should be dealt with to secure the benefits of games in the foreign language classroom. Lastly, in course books and materials, the use of games can be emphasized and by presenting alternative games, foreign language teaching can be enriched so that students enjoy learning English in a hearty manner.[13]

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