

The Impact of Board Games on EFL Learners' Grammar Retention

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Abstract: Grammar lessons are usually perceived as complicated and boring by many students. Since teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) nowadays focuses more on language skills of reading, speaking, listening and writing rather than language knowledge, grammar lessons are popularly integrated into skill lessons or even ignored in EFL classes. Therefore, EFL teachers all over the world are seeking for effective ways to help learners recall and use grammar knowledge they have learned. The current study aims to investigate the effects of board games on EFL learners' grammar retention and explore their attitudes towards the implementation of board games in grammar classes. With an experimental research design and the participation of fifty adult Vietnamese EFL learners, the study reveals that board games had significant effects on EFL learners' grammar retention and learners had positive attitudes towards the use of board games in grammar classes. The study results imply certain pedagogical implications and recommendation for teaching grammar to EFL learners all over the world.

Keywords: adult learners, board games, grammar retention, attitudes

I. Introduction

Learning a new language is like building a house and learners are builders. If the house is not built carefully, it can collapse easily. In other words, a second or foreign language needs to be learned in a serious manner in order to bring effective outcomes. It has been widely agreed that each language has its own grammar and possessing good grammar knowledge is an important step for learners to a good language user. However, English grammar seems to be very difficult for many Vietnamese learners in the context that communication skills are more focused than grammar knowledge in the classroom by both teachers and learners. Many students claim that they feel bored with grammar lessons and do not want to spend time on learning them. They just want to improve their communication as fast as possible. Moreover, English learning program and testing format are changing toward integrating grammar into reading or writing skills in the tests. In addition, teaching grammar in traditional ways cannot motivate students to learn. In such teaching and learning contexts, grammar classes become too heavy for students.

Different solutions have been proposed to help EFL learners all over the world be more interested in grammar lessons and one of which is using board games to help students recall and use grammar structures. A board game is a tabletop game that involves counters or pieces moved or placed on a pre-marked surface or "board", according to a set of rules. In grammar teaching, board games can be used to help learners practice grammar rules during a lesson, review some grammar structures by the end of the lesson, or recall grammar knowledge after several grammar lessons. For whatever usage, board games are considered to be effective games to increase learners' motivation and help them pay more attention to their grammar learning process [1]. Moreover, Paris and Yussuf [2] claim that board games can create an enjoyable environment of learning and dismiss the fear of being judged of the students.

Few studies have been conducted the effects of board games on adult learners' grammar retention, which is the gap that the current study seeks to fulfill. Two following research questions were investigated in the current study.

1. What are the effects of board games on EFL adult learners' grammar retention?
2. What are adult learners' attitudes toward the use of board games in the grammar class?

II. Literature Review

1. Grammar and the role of grammar in EFL teaching

Grammar has been defined by various agents. According to Batson [3], grammar is multi-dimensional and has a variety of meanings. In the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, grammar refers to the study of the transformation from words into sentences, which is called as syntax, and the words forms-morphology. Similarly, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines grammar as the study of rule using about word form adjustment and associate sentences. Supporting this idea, Higgs [4] defines grammar as a system for converting meaning into language. In addition, Ur [5] states that grammar is the approach of language managements and word combinations to have meaningful units. In addition, in the context of EFL

teaching, Ur [5] asserts that grammar does not only affect the language unit combination but also its meaning. From the above definitions, grammar can be defined as an important set of rules and is an indispensable component of a language.

Every language has grammar and grammar is considered a necessary part of any language. According to Pathan, Aldersi and Alsout [6], grammar can help learners achieve the higher levels of language proficiency because it is the structural system that supports communication and learners learn it to communicate better. Crystal [7] also supports that if learners are clearly conscious about how grammar works, they can guide the meaning and the effectiveness of the language using. Maugham [8] advises learners to understand grammar and use them grammatically. With these ideas above, it can be seen that grammar plays an important role in EFL learning and teaching grammar is an important job for EFL teachers.

2. Methods to teach grammar

Grammar has been taught differently in popular approaches and methods in the history of EFL teaching methodology [9]. These approaches and methods include (1) Grammar Translation Method; (2) Direct Method; (3) Audio-lingual Method; (4) Total Physical Response; and (5) Communicative Language Teaching Approach.

2.1 Grammar Translation Method

This method has been used by many teachers for many years. The major goal of learning a language with this method is to read, understand and translate its literature. The learners need to know the rules before they can understand the language such as the sentences. Besides, the learners need to achieve high proficiency level of translating and reading and writing accuracy. Therefore, grammar plays an important role in language learning according to this viewpoint. The position of grammar in a lesson used Grammar Translation Method is featured by Prator and Celce-Murcia [10] as long complicated explanations of the details of grammar; the instruction not only focuses on the form, but also inflection of words; and the content of texts as exercises in grammatical analysis is not paid a lot of attention. With this method, teachers emphasized and teach grammar deductively [9]

2.2 Direct Method

The Direct Method is also an old method in which language is learnt and taught naturally. The language use and practice will come before the grammar rule introduction. The context needs to be provided for meaning understanding; therefore, the learners are provided with examples and they have to figure out the rule or generalization of grammar structures from the examples provided in the lesson [9].

2.3 Audio-lingual Method

The Audio-lingual Method is an oral-based approach developed in the 1940s and was popular in the field second language teaching in the 1950s and 1960s. The goal of this method is to help students to be able to use the language communicatively. Grammar is taught inductively through given examples and no explicit grammar rules are provided. With this method, learners have chances to practice the use of grammatical sentence patterns.

2.4 Total Physical Response

Total Physical Response is a language teaching method which was developed by James Asher, a professor of psychology at San Jose State University, California. It is based on the theory that the memory is enhanced through association with physical movement. In other words, Total Physical Response can be understood as a language teaching method built around the coordination of speech and action. In this method, instructors give commands to students in the target language, and students respond with whole-body actions. It allows students to react to language without thinking too much, and reduces student anxiety or stress.

Asher [12] claims that with this method, "most of the grammatical structure of the target language and hundreds of vocabulary items can be learnt from the skillful use of the imperative by the instructor". Therefore, students learning with this method can use grammar in their daily life communication.

2.5 Communicative Language Learning

Communicative Language Teaching was developed in the 1970s. Learners' communication ability is its main objective in language teaching and learning. To acquire that goal, learners need knowledge of the linguistic forms, meanings, and functions. Accordingly, the grammar aspect is given in admeasurement before the communicative activities occurs. Larsen-Freeman [9] states that with this teaching approach grammar is taught as a means to help learners convey their intended meaning appropriately. The teaching of grammar can be managed either deductively or inductively but focuses on meanings and functions of forms in situational

context and the roles of the interlocutors. The teachers spend less time to teach structures of the language and more time to encourage the students to use the language.

3. Benefits of games on language teaching and learning

Richard-Amato [13] states that games are not only related to fun but also have pedagogical values in second language teaching. Games have many advantages because they provide motivation, help students reduce stress, and give them the occasion to practice communication. In addition, because language learning is hard work and requires effort at every moment and over a long period of time, games support learners' interest and work [14]. Several specific benefits of using games in language teaching and learning are elaborated as follows.

3.1 Games motivate learners

Games are considered as one of the best solutions for teachers to motivate EFL learners because games are amusing, interesting and challenging. Uberman [16] cited Hansen to claim that games can give shy learners more opportunities to express their opinions and feelings. In other words, many shy students forget their shyness and do not feel fear when they join fun games. Moreover, games help students find interest during the class [14, 17].

3.2 Games promote learners' interaction

Interaction is one of the important aspects which affects the nature of classroom pedagogy and classroom behavior. Jacobs & Kline-Liu [18] states that teachers can use many games played in pairs or small groups in order to provide the environment for their learners to work together. In many games, students must play in small groups and take turn or encourage their partners to take turn and complete the game. They are competitive while playing since they want to have a turn to play, to score points and to win. In the class, learners will definitely participate in the activities. Therefore, that is a good chance for them because they are more willing to ask or answer questions, communicate and discuss the topic with their partners and think creatively about how to use language to achieve the goal.

2.4.3 Games improve learners' language acquisition

Beside the motivation and interaction created by games, the lessons can be acquired better thanks to games [19]. When playing games, students are stimulated and encouraged to use new knowledge from the lessons. They can learn and have fun at the same time. Then they can acquire the new language and realize that they must use the language to communicate with their partners [20]. In addition, Richard-Amato [11] emphasizes "Games can lower anxiety, thus making the acquisition of input more likely." Similarly, Wierus and Wierus [21] state that students can remember grammar knowledge faster and better in an easy and relaxing atmosphere.

2.4.4 Games increase learners' learning achievement

According to Zdybiewska [22], games are a good way of practicing language because they provide a model of what learners will use the language for in real life. In addition, games can be introduced as a means for enabling greater comprehension. Riedel [23] highlights the advantage of games in improving learners' achievement with the claim that "when schools use the games, the student benefits speak for themselves - a greater desire to learn and higher test scores."

In short, games are considered as useful tools and should be employed regularly in EFL teaching contexts with various benefits of motivating learners, promoting interactions between and among learners, improving their language acquisition and increasing their learning achievement.

III. The Study

1. The participants

Fifty participants who are adult learners from an English center in Vietnam involved in the current study. Most of them were either graduate students or office workers with the age ranging from 18 to 30. These participants had low level of English competence and their English grammar was not good. The participants were randomly assigned into two groups namely the experimental group (EG) and the controlled group (CG). The only difference between the two groups during the intervention is that board games were applied to teach grammar to the experimental group but not in the control group.

2. The grammar course

The grammar course in the current study was a supplementary course for learners who were following communication classes in the language center. The seven grammar points learners learned in the seven-week course included English articles, nouns, simple present tense, adverb of frequency, simple past tense, possessive adjectives, and *be going to* versus *will*. Board games were applied three times in the experimental group during the third, fifth and seventh week of the course.

3. Research instruments

The instruments used in the current study included a questionnaire for the experimental group and a pretest and a post test of grammar for both the control and experimental groups. Each test has 2 parts of 20 multiple choice questions and 10 error identification items in the form of sentences. Grammar structures tested in the two tests belong to the seven grammar points taught in the course. Regarding the questionnaire, the twenty-five participants in the experimental group were required to choose one from a five-point Likert scale for ten items inquiring their interest in grammar learning and their evaluation of the effectiveness of board game implementation in the grammar course.

4. Data analyses

In the current study, nonparametric tests were used to explore the effects of board games on learners' grammar retention and attitude instead of parametric ones for two reasons. First, the number of students in each group is only 25, which is a small sample size. Second, normality tests conducted with the data from the grammar tests and questionnaire revealed some extreme outliers, which may interfere the strength and correctness of parametric test results. In fact, it has been claimed that for nonnormal densities, rank-based tests-such as the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test and the Kruskal-Wallis test-successfully control Type I error probabilities and are more powerful than their parametric counterparts [27].

IV. Findings

1. The effects of board games on EFL learners' grammar retention

The pretest of grammar was implemented with the two groups in the current study to explore whether the learners in the two groups were statistically different from each other in term of the grammar knowledge that were going to be taught in the course. The Mann-Whitney Test revealed that there was not a statistically significant difference between the two groups in performing the pre-test ($U=216, p = .062$).

After the seven-week grammar course, learners did a posttest of grammar. The Mann-Whitney Test indicated that there was a noticeable dissimilarity in grammar level between the two groups in the post- test ($U=133, p = .00$).

Table 1 presents the summary statistics about pre- test and post-test of the control group and the experimental group.

Table 1: Score ranks of the pretest and posttest of the control and experimental groups

Test	Group	N	Mean rank
Pretest	Control	25	21.66
	Experimental	25	29.34
Posttest	Control	25	18.30
	Experimental	25	32.70

A Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test indicated that the posttest ranks of the experimental groups were statistically higher than pretest ranks, $Z = 4.37, p = .00$. Meanwhile, the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test with the control group showed that posttest ranks of the experimental groups were statistically lower than pretest ranks, $Z = - 4.29, p = .00$.

It is worth noticing that the control group had statistically lower ranks in the posttest as compared with those in the pretest. It could be the case that the participants in the control group lost their interests in the grammar lessons where there were no activities to help them recall and use grammar knowledge they had learned. Consequently, they did not do well in the posttest because they could not retain the grammar knowledge and apply them in doing the test. One factor which should be included in discussing this finding is that all these participants were adult learners who attended their grammar course in the evening, right after they finished their work and study. They may have felt tired during the lesson and were not be able to acquire the knowledge well from the teacher's long explanations of grammar.

Meanwhile, the learners in the experimental group gained significantly higher scores in the posttest as compared to the pretest. Since learners in this group also have similar features to those in the control group in term of evening class time after finishing their work, getting similar grammar points taught and being in the same age group, it can be concluded that board games had a positive impact on the participants' grammar retention.

The findings of the current study were in line with the claim that games enhance learners' acquisition of new language [20, 21, 22]. These findings, thus, shed some lights on what EFL teachers should do in their grammar classes and eliminate the doubts of some people that games may do more harm than good to EFL learners. Board games, in fact, helped learners retain their grammar knowledge well although the course was short-term.

2. Learners' attitudes toward the implementation of board games in grammar classroom

Learners' attitudes toward the implementation of board games in the grammar classroom were explored using a questionnaire of 10 items. The items in the questionnaire were divided into three groups. The first group included 3 items asking for the learners' general idea about the use of board game. The second group consisted of 3 items that explore learners' attitude toward the relationship between board games and learning grammar. The last group consisted of 4 items stating the benefits of board games in learning grammar.

Regarding learners' general idea about using board games in grammar classes, most students agree with the three items in the questionnaire (see Table 2).

Table 2: Learners' general idea about using board games in grammar classes

Item	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
Board game is an interesting method.	92	0	8
I prefer the use of board game as compared to other methods in learning grammar.	80	8	12
I was never exposed to the teaching of grammar by using board games.	32	48	20

More specifically, 92% of the participants agreed that using board games in teaching grammar is an interesting method. In addition, 80% of participants stated that they prefer board games to other methods in grammar classes. When being asked whether they were exposed to the use of board games before, only 32% of participants agreed that they were, 48% disagreed and 20% were not sure whether the activities that their previous grammar teachers used in the classroom were board games or not.

About the participants' attitudes toward the relationship between board games and learning grammar, nearly 100% of the students have positive answers. The data for the three items were shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: students' attitudes toward the relationship between board games and learning grammar

Item	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
Board game motivates grammar learning.	100	0	0
Board game is a useful method.	100	0	0
Board game helps improve grammar.	92	4	4

All of participants think that board games can motivate them in grammar learning. Among 100% positive attitudes, 24% of participants strongly agree with the statement and 76% voted for agreement. With the participants' idea about the useful of board game in teaching grammar, the overall response to this question was very positive. In addition, 100% of the participants voted that board game is a useful method in grammar classrooms. In response to the statement "Board game helps improve grammar", most of those surveyed indicated that they agreed with the statement. Although more than 90% of participants have positive attitude, there are some negative idea about that statement. The response rate was 4% at neutral and the same percent at disagree. These results suggest that the overall attitudes of the participants toward the relationship between board games and learning grammar are positive.

Regarding the benefits of board games in learning grammar, the participants' perceptions are listed in Table 4. The benefit that received the most agreement from the participants (92%) in the current study is that they help learners feel confident to use the grammar points learners have learned. The three next benefits were agreed by the same percentages of participants, with 88% of agreement.

Table 4: Benefits of board games in learning grammar

Item	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
When I play board games, I feel confident to use the grammar points that I have learnt.	92	0	8
Board games help me to remember grammar rules.	88	0	12
I can remember grammar points longer after playing board games.	88	0	12
When playing board games, my friends and I can correct grammar errors for each other.	88	4	8

When the participants were asked whether board games can help them to remember grammar rules, the majority commented that they agree and totally agree. Besides, only a small number (12%) of respondents indicated that they have neutral idea about that issue. In addition, the overall responses to the statement "I can remember grammar points longer after playing board games" was very positive. Nearly 90% of participants think that they can remember the grammar points longer after using them in playing board games. However, a minority of participants (12%) indicated that they have neutral attitude about using board games and remembering grammar points.

The last benefit is about peer error correction with board games in grammar classes. The results, as shown in Table 4, indicated that similar percentage of participants (88%) agreed that they could correct grammar errors together when playing board games. Only one participant (4%) disagreed with this board games' usefulness. In addition, 8% of participants had neutral idea about this benefit.

The results of this study indicated that the participants had positive attitudes towards the use of board games in grammar classes. These findings were in line the findings of previous work by Paris and Yussof [2] and provided empirical evidences for the benefits of implementing games in language classrooms as claimed by various researchers such as Higgs [4], Uberman [16], Riedl [24]. EFL teachers, therefore, may consider implementing games, especially board games in their lessons since they do not only enhance learners' grammar retention but also give them positive reflections.

V. Conclusion

The current empirical study reveals that the use of board games is beneficial to adult learners' grammar retention. In addition, the majority of participants had positive attitudes about the board games per se and the benefits they will bring. However, the limitations of the study are that there were only 25 adult learners in each group of participants, which is a small sample size and the intervention was implemented for seven weeks only. Further study should be conducted with a larger sample size and in longer term. In addition, delayed posttest should be administered some weeks after the posttest to see whether board games have long effects on EFL learners' grammar retention. The results of these studies will provide better implications and suggestions for EFL teachers all over the world on what they can do with board games to help learners better in grammar lessons.

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