



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i2/12259>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i2/12259

Received: 09 December 2021, **Revised:** 12 January 2022, **Accepted:** 08 February 2022

Published Online: 24 February 2022

In-Text Citation: (Zakaria et al., 2022)

To Cite this Article: Zakaria, N., Anuar, N. A. K., Jasman, N. H., Mokhtar, M. I., & Ibrahim, N. (2022). Learning Grammar Using a Card Game. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(2), 464–472.

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Vol. 12, No. 2, 2022, Pg. 464 – 472

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www.hrmar.com

ISSN: 2222-6990

Learning Grammar Using a Card Game

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Abstract

Learning grammar may be perceived as challenging and difficult by many ESL learners. One effective way to attract them to learn grammar is by incorporating games in the lessons. This study involves the use of a language card game titled 'Jester', which is inspired and adapted from Donkey and Joker games. The current study aims to examine university students' attitude towards Jester and how Jester helps them in learning Adjectives. The methodology comprises a mixed method research design using a questionnaire and structured interview. The data from the questionnaire were analysed descriptively and the responses from the interview were used to triangulate the data. The study revealed that the respondents had a positive attitude towards the use of Jester in the grammar lesson. The findings imply interesting implications on the use of language games in the ESL classroom.

Keywords: ESL, Grammar, Language Game, Learning

Introduction

English language learning is not an easy task. The learning process can be dreary and challenging especially when it comes to grammar. The complexity of English grammar can be a challenging issue especially for ESL learners. This will be more daunting for weak students in learning English grammar. Many solutions have been proposed in helping ESL learners to learn and master English grammar. One of them is by incorporating the element of games in teaching and learning process. Using games will make the lesson to be more fun, fascinating and engaging. These will lead students to be more active and motivated to learn. According to Wright, Betteridge and Buckby (1984), language learning is a long and weary process that requires effort and motivation along the process. The usage of games may help in sustaining the learners' motivation and work. Using games in learning grammar will also help the learners to have more effective and meaningful learning (Littlewood, 1999). The use of game in learning will create meaningful context of language learning.

Many ESL learners perceive English grammar as scary and complicated. This is due to the complexity of the grammar rules themselves as well as the dull teaching and learning process experienced by the learners. Most ESL learners have difficulty in understanding and applying the correct use of tenses as well as different parts of speech. They struggle in

understanding the rules and most of the times fail to comprehend them at all. Thus, an effective approach is needed in helping the students to grasp the lesson effectively. Students need lessons that will give them the chance to engage themselves in it. Using game is no doubt an effective approach in making the lesson more creative, engaging, fun and beneficial for the students (Paris & Yussof, 2012; Metom et al., 2013; Irfan et al., 2019).

Grammar is the important pillar of every language as it lays the groundwork for effective communication. Without good grip of English grammar, the intended message might be failed to be conveyed. For most cases of written discourse, poor grammar could disrupt the flow of the writing thus halted the involvement of the story. Notwithstanding, for many L2 learners, learning grammar could be a dreary and exasperating journey as constant effort is needed in order to understand the concept alone. Accordingly, the right approach in teaching grammar will benefit the students especially the L2 learners in many ways. It is realistic for the educators to allow the L2 learners to explore both form and function of the language rather than focusing on either one. Adult learners especially not only need to understand but apply what they have been taught in L2 classes in their everyday life. Having said this, the introduction of grammatical rules using activities that are meaningful is believed could elevate the learners' interest and level of understanding.

Since decades, there has been a movement away from the traditional methods of teaching English grammar to using a more active approach through games. Ashok, Revathi and Saminathan (2013) [6] reported that learning through games was more appealing to the respondents compared to the conventional methods. This paper proposes an integrative approach for teaching English Grammar to L2 learners in order to help them to meet the challenge of the English curriculum. This approach will serve as a platform for the L2 learners in experiencing a true language environment so they can grip a better English grammar in a meaningful context. As fulfilling social purpose is one of the functions of the language, therefore, educators need to shoulder the responsibility of building up an authentic environment for social interaction among learners (Lightbown & Spada, 1993) [7]. Through stimulating communicative activities, grammar rules are planted. Thus, the many interesting features embedded in Jester can become a great helping hand to the learners in acquiring grammar rules more naturally. Various studies have proven that educational games embedded in lessons were positively accepted and favoured by the respondents (Metom et al., 2013; Phuong & Nguyen, 2017; Lien & Minh, 2017).

According to Schwartz (2012) [10], more positive emotions are engendered when the learners play while learning. In-class practices or activities often are less meaningful as the learners are unable to engage with the activities. As there are a lot of fun elements in Jester, it is believable that the students could sustain their interest while engaging in the game. This takes after the theory of meaningful learning which could lead to better long-term retention than rote learning (Brown, 2001). When the L2 learners are immersed in the game, they will simply focus on doing well in the game rather than pay attention to standard learning. This helps them to learn without any fear of making mistakes. The enjoyable element in the game played by the learners will serve as a catalyst to get them to practise the language aspect more frequently, hence improving their language acquisition and proficiency. This is also

parallel with the findings from Paris and Yusoff (2012); Paris and Yusoff (2013); Metom et al (2013) where stress-free environment promotes learning more effectively.

Ghazal and Singh (2016) claimed that game-based learning can be very useful in enriching language learning in mainstream classrooms when carefully blended with text-based instruction. Thus, the gamified methods are designed with rules and instruction for the players to follow until the game completion. This enables language learners to produce language in order to complete tasks and win the game. Previous studies (Viray, 2016; Musa et al., 2016, Al-Jarrah et al., 2019) found that respondents in the experimental group who were exposed to board games scored better academic performance as compared to the control group who was not exposed with board games in their learning session. Squire and Jenkins (2003) agreed that games will be good for learning as collaboration among the players will be encouraged and they also provide contextual content.

This study is believed could become one of the means to improve the L2 learners' grammar mastery skill. As the game enables the players to play with the words at the same time ensuring the sentences still possess correct syntax with heavy integration of adjectives in all the constructed sentences. The learners also are in charge of composing their own sentences and be creative with their vocabulary. The gap in this study is using card games to teach grammar on part of speech, particularly on the acquisition of adjectives. This approach is to see whether the lower intermediate L2 learners could benefit from this game. The main objective of this research is to explore the effectiveness of Jester in helping students to learn Adjectives. Jester is a language card game that exclusively focuses on Adjectives and tailored for beginner language learners. This research is done based on the following research questions: a) What is the students' attitude towards Jester? and b) How does Jester help students to learn and understand English grammar better?

Body

In this section, the methodology and findings of the study will be explained in relation to the research questions investigated.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative approach with a descriptive research design in order to answer two research questions investigated in the study. In total, 115 respondents completed and returned the questionnaires. The respondents came from two streams of studies. The first field is Business Management which included 54 students (46.2%), while the second field is Engineering which included 61 students (53.8%). In terms of distribution of gender, there were 55 male students (47.9%) and 60 female students (52.1%) from both fields. All respondents were Semester 2 students and they had passed their pre-requisite English subject in Semester 1. Their results for Semester 1 was shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Results for Semester 1

Grade	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
A	18	15.4
B	81	70.1
C	16	13.7

This study investigates the use of Jester game to help students learn about Adjectives. In order to collect the data, the researchers explained the rules of the game to the respondents before they could play the game themselves. After they had played the game, a self-administered survey questionnaire was distributed for them to answer in order to learn more about the respondents' attitude towards Jester and how it helps them learn about Adjectives. The items in the questionnaire were adapted from (Metom et. al., 2013; Sasidharan & Tan, 2013). The questionnaire was divided into two sections – (A) Background Information and (B) Attitude Towards Jester. A five-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree) was used to respond to several statements relating to, for example, how they perceive Jester and how it helps them in learning. After the questionnaires were completed, randomly selected students were chosen to answer some interview questions to gain further information about the game.

Data from the questionnaires were tabulated and analyzed using SPSS 20. Tests were done for each section to assess the internal reliability of the items. The Cronbach's Alpha value for section B was .655. The descriptive statistic was then used to compare means of the items. For the interview questions, emergent themes were analyzed from the responses. For the purpose of this paper, only a selection of the results are presented and discussed in the following sections.

Jester Game

Jester Game is inspired by the concept of both Joker and Donkey games but it has been improved to a challenging and fun language game. There are 53 cards which consist of various pictures and its descriptions as well as one 'You Are It!' card. The players have to match the picture card with its description and avoid being the player that holds the 'You Are It!' card at the end of the game. The answer key is also provided for reference. The objectives of this game are to help students learn and apply the use of Adjectives and to reduce the anxiety in learning English. Below are the descriptions/instructions on how to play Jester.

1. Best played with 3 to 4 players.
2. A dealer will distribute the cards to all players.
3. The player who gets the "You Are It" card has to maintain a poker face.
4. Before the game starts, all players will remove all matching cards (pictures with their descriptions; if any) to the centre.
5. Whenever players want to put matching cards to the centre, they need to form a simple sentence using any adjectives on the card. If they fail to form a sentence, they have to keep the matching cards and try again in his next turn.
6. The first player will start by selecting one card from his left and check if there is any match with the cards in hand. If it is a match, then the player will put the matching cards at the centre. Then, the second player will continue by choosing a card from his left i.e. the first player.
7. The same step will be repeated until all cards are matched.
8. The player who manages to match all the cards in hand first is the winner. The last player who holds the "You Are It" card is the loser of the game.



Figure 1: Jester Card Game

Results and Discussion

The findings presented here focused on the respondents' attitude towards Jester. The result of the descriptive statistics is summarized and presented below.

Students' Attitude towards Jester

The results in Table 2 showed the mean value for students' overall attitude towards Jester game. In general, the respondents had a positive attitude towards the game with the mean value of 4.29. The finding is parallel with the previous studies conducted by Metom et al (2013); Phuong and Nguyen (2017); Lien and Thi Minh (2017) where the respondents also favoured the use of games in their lessons.

Table 2: Mean Value

	Frequency (N)	Mean
Total	115	4.2991

In general, from the interviews conducted, the most frequent response about the game was they enjoyed playing the game because they liked the concept of the game where they had to carefully choose a card from another player and had to avoid the 'You Are It' card. The most intense moment for them was during the last round which determined the loser of the game who was holding the 'You Are It' card. Instead of learning grammar in a traditional method, they enjoyed the use of card game which was new to them. This finding is supported by Ashok et al (2013) where the respondents preferred lessons that included games compared to traditional approaches in teaching and learning.

The Use of Jester in Learning English Grammar

Based on the overall positive attitude towards Jester in Table 2, a further look on specific items was done to investigate how Jester helps the respondents to learn English. Item 9 showed that most of the respondents agreed that they learnt something new when they played the game. It was further investigated through interview sessions conducted with some of the respondents. From their responses, it was recorded that they learnt new adjectives

from the description cards and it improved their vocabulary. When they were immersed with the game play, they forgot that they were actually learning something while they were playing. This non-threatening environment made the students felt at ease and thus, they were able to grasp meaningful lessons from the game (Swartz, 2012; Paris & Yussuf, 2013; Metom et al., 2013).

Another response related to this item was the respondents reported that they also learnt from the sentences made by their friends in the game. This was also concurrent with the findings for Item 10, where most of the respondents also agreed that they learnt from their peers while playing. The learning process also took place through their communication with the team members. Item 14 showed that 82% of them agreed that Jester encouraged them to communicate in English with their friends. Other response recorded from the interviews was they spoke in English while choosing cards from other players. Collaborative learning through social interaction is therefore promoted while playing Jester (Squire & Jenkins, 2003; Metom et al., 2013).

For Item 11, 88.9% respondents agreed that playing Jester can improve their grammar skills. This was true and parallel with the responses from the interview which they mentioned when they had to construct a complete sentence using one of the adjectives, they actually learnt how to use Adjectives correctly. Furthermore, when they made a wrong sentence, they knew what they have done wrong with the help of their team members and the answer key. This finding is in accordance with previous studies from Viray (2016); Musa et al (2016); Al-Jarrah et al (2019) where they reported improved students' performance in post-test results for the experimental group. Even though the present study did not observe such improvement in the sense of students' test results, the ability of the respondents to construct a complete sentence using adjectives and self-learning (did self-correction) could also be considered as a significant achievement as well and worth to be highlighted.

Table 3: Percentages of Items 9, 10, 11 & 14

No	Survey Items	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
		n	%	n	%	N	%	N	%	n	%
9	I learn something new when I play the game.	54	47.9	52	44.4	9	7.7	0	0	0	0
10	I learn from my friends while playing the game.	50	43.6	55	47.9	9	7.7	1	0.9	0	0
11	I can improve my grammar skills when I play the game.	45	39.3	57	49.6	13	11.1	0	0	0	0
14	The game encourages me to communicate in English with friends.	43	37.6	51	44.4	19	16.2	1	0.9	1	0.9

Conclusion

This research investigates the university students' attitude towards Jester and how Jester helps them in learning Adjectives. Based on all the points and facts that have been discussed throughout this research, it is shown that students have positive attitudes towards Jester. Furthermore, Jester has successfully boosted students' interest in learning grammar. Apart from the grammar element, this study contributes to a finding that students enjoy learning English language via games. This is due to the 'play and learn' environment that elevates their interest in mastering the target language. Overall, the result indicated that students learn something new through the games as they could make sentences by using adjectives and improve their vocabulary. This study also contributes to a significant finding as the students are able to construct complete sentences in English.

The findings of this research may indicate that grammar is a universal skill that students need to master. Hence, it is proven that games can help students to learn better and grasp the content in a less threatening way. In this study, Jester acts as a medium for students to learn in a natural setting while having fun at the same time. In addition, collaborative leaning and independent learning are also embedded in this game. Therefore, this would imply that the use of language games has to be given more emphasis in ESL classrooms so that students may use the acquired skills when they write and speak in English language. Future research may emphasize on looking at other language elements. For instance, part of speech and tenses are other aspects that students can learn by using games. Besides that, further research could also employ an experimental research method where the achievements of pre- and post-tests of control and experimental groups are compared to measure the effectiveness of the game.

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