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Combating Sentence Construction Problems with 3D Tetrominoes

Shanu Preeya a/p Thannimalai & Azlina Abdul Aziz

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Email: SHANU1505@outlook.com, azlina1@ukm.edu.my

Abstract

As Malaysia combats issues of literacy, geographical gaps and inadequacy of teachers, Malaysian ESL learners weak grasp of the writing skill is also proving to be a hurdle for Malaysia's education ministry. Weak mastery of this skill results in plummeting achievement rates in national examinations. Through this research, the researcher hopes to combat the issues faced by ESL learners in the field of sentence construction. Without a solid foundation of sentence construction skills, accuracy of content in terms of meaning will not be evident. Therefore, the researcher aimed to identify the effectiveness of the 3D Tetrominoes technique in improving the ESL learners' sentence construction skills as well as to elicit their perceptions on the application of the 3D Tetrominoes technique. This qualitative action research was conducted with eight intermediate Year 5 participants from a sub-urban school in Hulu Selangor. Data collection methods included document analysis, interviews and observations which were analysed descriptively. The findings showed improvement in the ESL learners' sentence construction skills and elicited positive perceptions on the use of the 3D Tetrominoes technique in creating fun and effective learning sessions to increase sentence construction skills. It is evident that ESL learners struggle with mastering writing skills, particularly in the area of sentence construction. It is hoped through this research that teachers would diversify their teaching and learning techniques to facilitate ESL learners' learning.

Keywords: ESL Learners, Sentence Construction, 3D Tetrominoes, Effectiveness.

Introduction

English is one of the most widely distributed languages. The influence of the English language is constantly growing at a global level with its use being practiced within monolingual, bilingual as well as multilingual communities across the world. House (1999), as cited in Seidlhofer, Eseryel & Ge (2009), explained that when people from various first language backgrounds, across linguacultural boundaries select English as their mode of communication, the term used is 'English as a lingua franca'. How universal is the English language? The rise of this question brought about Kachru's development of the three concentric circles. "These three circles certainly bring to English linguistic diversity, and let us not underestimate – as some scholars tend to do – the resultant cultural

diversity" (Kachru, 1990). The use of English in a global context can be seen in Kachru's circles which consist of 3 circles: the inner circle, the outer circle and the expanding circle.

English is recognized and utilized as the official second language of Malaysia and is applied in numerous sectors such as law and jurisdiction, business and trade as well as in official registration and documentation matters. Craig (2009) reported that The Third Malaysia Plan (1976 –1980) states that "English will be extended as a strong second language" (para. 1310) as to compensate for the shift in the medium of instruction in schools from English to Bahasa Malaysia. This gave rise to the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Malaysian educational institutions at both primary and secondary levels. The importance of the English language is rapidly emerging and the Malaysian government is getting on board with efforts to improve the English language command amongst Malaysians such as the implementation of the new English language curriculum, CEFR which presents a more native-like exposure to the language with the implementation of a communicative approach.

According to Dipika (2011), 'controversies and problems with regard to language policy and language education still exist in Malaysia.' The teaching and learning of the English language in Malaysian schools is hindered by the rise of various problems related to the English language. In general, the level of the English language proficiency in Malaysia is still in need of a lot of patching up, as stated below by Dr Sharmini Patricia Gabriel in an article in The Star (2015):

"We find that we are not able to teach students critically and creatively like we used to, as their command of the language is limited. ... Singapore uses English as one of its official languages. Here in Malaysia, it is taught as the second or foreign language. People still look at it as an alien language."

Problem Statement

The process of identifying the issue experienced by the Year 5 participants of this research was backed up by observations and feedbacks. The Year 5 pupils were observed over a long time span and eventually realised that the pupils struggled in the area of sentence construction. Feedbacks obtained from other English language teachers also provided similar responses stating that the pupils did show weakness in that particular area. The teachers also explained that the pupils had been taught of the different sentence patterns and they would be able to write proper sentences when done in isolation, however when the aspect of sentence patterns are not stressed on, like when they were to compose essays, they would not be able to use the correct patterns. The teachers have also noticed that the pupils would wrongly position verbs, objects, prepositions and so on. This proved to be a concern to the teachers as the act of writing sentences wrongly would affect meaning and when done accumulatively in essays, would cause loss of marks.

There are also a number of basic observable contributors to this issue. Firstly, the English teachers mentioned that some of the pupils, although at an intermediate level of proficiency, experience confusion when it comes to identifying the word classes of certain words, mostly gerunds. Park (2005) loosely defines gerunds as "major lexical categories (generally noun, verb, adjective) which show morphological or syntactic properties of one of the other categories." The participants, Year 5 ESL learners are unclear as to when a word is being used as a noun and when it is being used

as a verb. This is a tough battle to combat, however it comes with the learners' ability to identify correct sentence structures. Gerunds appear to be confusing to the participants. Another instance is when the participants come across unfamiliar words. This is a normal situation for young ESL learners. They are seen to refer to the dictionary most of the time for the meanings of the words, after which they would often be able to classify it either as a noun, verb or adjective. Therefore, this is not so much of a problem for the participants as they just need to surpass the level of unfamiliarity towards certain vocabulary items with the assistance of the dictionary.

Apart from that, based on observations, it is apparent that the participants have a weak grasp of the different sentence patterns. They do not focus on the format of the sentence patterns they have been previously exposed to. Instead, they rely on their mother tongue and tend to translate from Bahasa Malaysia to English as they write. This is when the following cases are evident in their writing: "I stomach is very the pain." [*Perut saya sangat sakit.*] In some cases, even informal forms of Bahasa Malaysia are used, which subsequently affects the structure of their sentence in the English language. An example would be as follows: "You want go to where?" [*Kamu nak pergi ke mana?*]

These are direct and personal observations that were made by and provided to the researcher as a result of active teaching and learning experiences with the aforementioned set of learners. However, there is a very clear research gap in relation to this area – sentence construction as there is a very limited number of studies that have highlighted and answered the questions related to sentence construction skills amongst ESL learners, especially not at the primary level. Most of the research done either presented and discussed the issue in a more generalized form alongside the inclusion of other linguistic aspects or discuss it with relevance to learners of secondary or tertiary levels. It is never discussed in isolation partially due to the fact that sentence construction is a skill that requires understanding and mastery in various other linguistic areas such as vocabulary, word classes, and sentence patterns. This is supported by Muhammad, Almas & Muhamad (2016) who stated in their study about ESL learner's writing skills that syntactical errors are one of the many skills that undergraduate learners struggle with. If ESL students at the tertiary level still struggle in this aspect, pupils at primary and secondary levels definitely do struggle with it as well.

Based on these observations and findings, the researcher has planned to guide the participants in forming accurate sentences without having the need to translate from their mother tongue. The researcher expects to apply the 3D Tetrominoes technique with the intention of helping the participants of this study to understand the concept of sentence construction. There are two research questions proposed by the researcher: (a) How effective is the application of the 3D Tetrominoes technique in helping pupils improve their sentence construction skills?; (b) What are the pupils perceptions on the use of the 3D Tetrominoes technique in improving their sentence construction skills?

Literature Review

Writing, amongst the other three language skills, is one of the most challenging skills to master. Ellis (2003), as cited in Rai & Siti (2016), writes that every child learns his mother tongue based on the listening, speaking, reading and writing order. She also emphasized that "It is a fact that writing is the most complex skill to master." Skills such as listening and speaking are honed through verbal means

as learners converse with one another. These two skills go hand in hand as proper use of these skills indicate accuracy of response through a more communicative approach. The remaining two skills – reading and writing, however, offer a slightly more cognitive and structured approach whereby critical thought processes take place in order for the learner to experience successful reading and writing experiences.

The teaching and learning of the writing skill in Malaysia does appear to be a daunting task for ESL teachers as the skill requires strong grasps of key aspects of language learning such as syntax, pragmatics, morphology and semantics. The writing process consists of a large variety of conventions, which heightens the level of difficulty of the learning process. This is explained by Ali & Yunus (2004) in Lim, Melor & Amin (2017) who write that "writing demands the writer to choose the choice of vocabulary carefully and have a comprehensive knowledge of grammatical patterns in order to be able to write sentence structures that are pertinent to the subject matter." This situation requires learners to already have prior knowledge on common vocabulary items as well as basic grammar rules, which are often inadequate for ESL and EFL learners.

Sentence Construction
In terms of the teaching and learning of the English language, the KBSR curriculum stressed on the teaching and learning of grammar items and rules in isolation. The KSSR curriculum, however, encouraged English teachers to teach grammar items contextually under the KSSR curriculum. Warid (2015) provided a summarized comparison of the aims of KBSR and KSSR for the teaching and learning of the English language. He wrote that KBSR was aimed at providing ESL learners with basic skills to communicate orally and in writing, in and out of school whereas KSSR was aimed at equipping ESL learners with the language skills needed to enable them to communicate in various contexts. The increased emphasis placed on communication skills stresses more on fluency than accuracy. This could be one of the reasons why ESL learners' sentence construction skills are still in need of improvement due to the fact that grammar is no longer taught in an explicit manner. Therefore, English teachers are unable to isolate the teaching of sentence patterns to strengthen learners' sentence construction skills.

Without a doubt, however, one of the most impactful contributors to the issue of ESL learners experiencing challenges with their sentence construction skills is the effects of instant messaging as well as the influence of social media trends which has now manifested itself into a form of culture amongst individuals of the younger generation. Verheijen (2013) describes instant messaging as "the online exchange of text messages between two or more individuals (i) using a mobile phone application or an Internet application, (ii) through a social networking site or (iii) within an online game." These growing form of tendencies amongst the younger generation is not only imposing behavioural and attitudinal changes, but they also alter the conventions of a language. These informal modifications in language use affects learners' use of the language as a whole. Evident examples can be seen during speaking and writing as these skills are more product-based skills. With the influence of social media, for instance, the younger generation speak and write abbreviations. An example would be replacing the phrase 'by the way' to a much shorter version of 'btw'.

Another example would be the use of informal slang-based terms and catchphrases such as "Bruh", "Gucci" and "Dope", as well as acronyms such as "BRB", "TTYL" and "TBH" which are viewed as hip and trendy. Each term carries a different meaning and are used in specific situations based on the context. Zahid & Mehmood (2013) found from their research that the results showed that the way people converse and write has been impacted by text messaging. This form of abbreviated language that is said to save time and be more convenient also provided a similar opinion in Shazia *et al.* (2013) who write that "Learners have a tendency to use it as an officially accepted and standard language and thus make different errors from incorrect spelling to even ungrammatical sentence constructions." This not only proves the negative impact instant messaging and social media has on the younger generation. It also paints the picture that young ESL learners are not bothered to put in effort to pay attention to their sentence patterns and structures as they write due to their habitual acts of not having to focus on them when texting.

Intervention: 3D Tetrominoes

As mentioned in the previous section, an inadequate amount of researches have been conducted to discuss the battles ESL learners face in the area of basic sentence construction. Many researches related to sentence construction discuss it at a more advanced level whereby they would focus on sentence combining. Ney (1981); Strong (1976): Weis (1985) as cited in Saddler (2005) agree that this process "provides direct, mindful practice in manipulating and rewriting basic or kernel sentences into more syntactically mature or varied forms". This technique focusses on the more advanced task of forming compound, complex and highly-informative sentences. Besides that, there are many studies conducted unto learners of the secondary and tertiary levels, emphasising on paragraph structuring and creative writing. There is a very limited number of researches, if any, concerning particularly on the accurate comprehension and application of the different sentence patterns to construct the correct types of sentences.

As a proposed solution to overcome this issue, the researcher has developed the 3D Tetrominoes game which is based on the popular Tetris game. By far, there has been no implementation of this game in the teaching and learning of ESL. The aim of this game is based on the 'divide and conquer' strategy whereby the different syntactic terms of a sentences – subject, verb, object, complement and adverbial, are colour coded and also categorized based on the shape. This would mean that every syntactic term will be assigned to a fixed shape that is of a fixed colour. The sentence patterns that will be focussed on in this research are: SVO, SVC, SVA, SVOA as these are the common patterns used at the primary level. Studies by Evertts (1967); Strickland (1964); Strang & Hocker (1965) as cited in Stock (1979) showed similar results. Their results showed that the most common sentence patterns used by Grade Two to Six pupils were SV and SVO.

Underpinning Theories

There is a number of underlying theories that support and strengthen the aims of this research. They serve as a pathway that guide the research through the process of answering the research questions. All of the theories used as a basis for this research interlink with one another so as to create a stronger platform for the researcher.

The first underpinning theory for this research is the Game-based Learning (GBL) Theory. Shaffer *et al.* (2005), as cited in Plass, Homer & Kinzer (2015) explains that GBL is "a type of game play with defined learning outcomes". This theory simply emphasizes on the use of games – digital or traditional, to evoke various thought processes, provide a sense of competition and achievement as well as to encourage learners' participation in the learning process. "Game experience, whether naturalistic or provided in a given study, also provides a context for promoting reasoning and strategy use." (Blumberg *et al.* 2013) Most games are based on strategies. Therefore, the use of games within the learning process is able to inculcate creative and critical thinking skills amongst learners. This theory is gaining popularity in terms of use amongst educators as it provides positive results. Therefore, it is hoped that, with the basis of this theory, the 3D Tetrominoes technique will be proven to be an effective tool for teachers to help overcome sentence construction issues.

In conjunction with the use of the GBL theory, the Sociocultural Theory is also adopted in this research. This theory was proposed by Lev Vygotsky and focusses on the practice of collaboration within the learning process. "The task of psychology, in Vygotsky's view, is to understand how human social and mental activity is organized through culturally constructed artifacts." (Shayer 2002; as cited in Turuk 2008) One of Vygotsky's most influential findings are the Scaffolding process and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which refers to the process of peers providing guidance to one another as well as the concept of the maximum level of potential a learner has yet to achieve. Turuk (2008) explains that "learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers." The act of peer-support initiates a drive within learners that motivate them to try to overcome their problems and fears in the learning of ESL. Through this intervention, the participants will learn from one another and the researcher will look out for evidence of the more proficient team member coaching his less proficient partner throughout the sentence construction process. This is in line with Abraham (2008) who wrote that purposefully organized groups tend to allow faster and more efficient learning alongside encouraging better retention and positive experiences with regards to the learning process.

The following theory involved in this research is the Constructivist Theory under John Dewey. This theory consists of five key elements with regards to the course of teaching and learning: activating prior knowledge, acquiring knowledge, understanding knowledge, using knowledge, and reflecting knowledge. (Zahorik 1995) All of these key elements under the Constructivist Theory are reflected in the methodology of the intervention as pupils work on forming sentences based on their prior knowledge of word classes, sentences patterns and various contextual knowledge and then analysing and reflecting on the sentences they have created in their Tetris Journal. This theory enables the participants to think based on their existing prior knowledge and participate in the activity with minimal guidance from the instructor as the instructor plays the role of a facilitator. This is in accordance to what Ültanır (2012) in his statement that Constructivism has been "transformed into a role in which the intensive power of the teacher has been lifted, illuminating the learner as a significant part of the learning process."

Methodology
This research is an action research that utilizes the Kemmis and McTaggart's model. Alrichter et al. (2002) explain that the term 'action research' consists of three points: (a) action research is about the reflection upon and improvement of personal practices; (b) action research closely links reflections and action; (c) action research is publicising these experiences to those who are interested in the respective practice. A more pragmatic description of an action research is the diagrammatic model of spiraling cycles which consist of four stages each – planning, acting, observing and reflecting.

The data for this research was collected through document analysis, semi-structured interviews as well as observations. This research applies the purposive sampling method. This technique, also known as judgment sampling, according to Tongco (2007), "is the deliberate choice of an informant due to the qualities the informant possesses." The participants selected for this research fall short in their sentence construction skills based on in-class observations, prepared exercises, feedback from other English language teachers, as well as previous academic achievements.

A total of eight participants were selected as the sample group for the purpose of this research out of a total of 74 Year 5 pupils in a sub-urban school within the Hulu Selangor district. The participants are of an intermediate level with an average to slightly above average grasp of the English language. However, they still experience problems in various areas concerning the English language, sentence construction being one of the many. One of the main reasons as to why the researcher has selected Year 5 pupils is to prepare them for their writing tasks so that they will be equipped for the upcoming UPSR examination.

The demographics of the participants are as displayed in Table 1.0 which states each participant's gender, race, as well as each participant's proficiency level along with their Mid-year examination grade for the Writing paper (Paper 2).

Table 1.0   Demographics of participants

Participant	Gender	Race	Proficiency (Grade)	Learning preference
Participant A	Male	Malay	Intermediate (B)	Enjoys learning through games
Participant B	Male	Malay	Intermediate (B)	Enjoys singing English songs
Participant C	Male	Malay	Average (C)	Enjoys playing group games
Participant D	Male	Malay	Average (C)	Prefers working in groups
Participant E	Female	Malay	Intermediate (B)	Enjoys playing group games
Participant F	Female	Malay	Intermediate (B)	Likes reading English storybooks
Participant G	Female	Malay	Average (C)	Enjoys learning through games
Participant H	Female	Malay	Average (C)	Enjoys learning through games

A general overview of the application of the 3D Tetrominoes intervention is provided in Figure 1.0.

START

Recap

Participants recap the different word classes and sentence patterns

Sentence Formation

Participants will be given a large number of phrases to be correctly matched to the coloured Tetrominoes. Participants then arrange the Tetrominoes in a straight line before they run out of time.

*This step will be modified in Cycle 2 based on the end-product of Cycle 1

Presentation

Each pair presents their respective sentence.

Assessment

Teacher corrects each pair's sentence if

continued…

…continuation

Participants write ... live Tetris Journals.

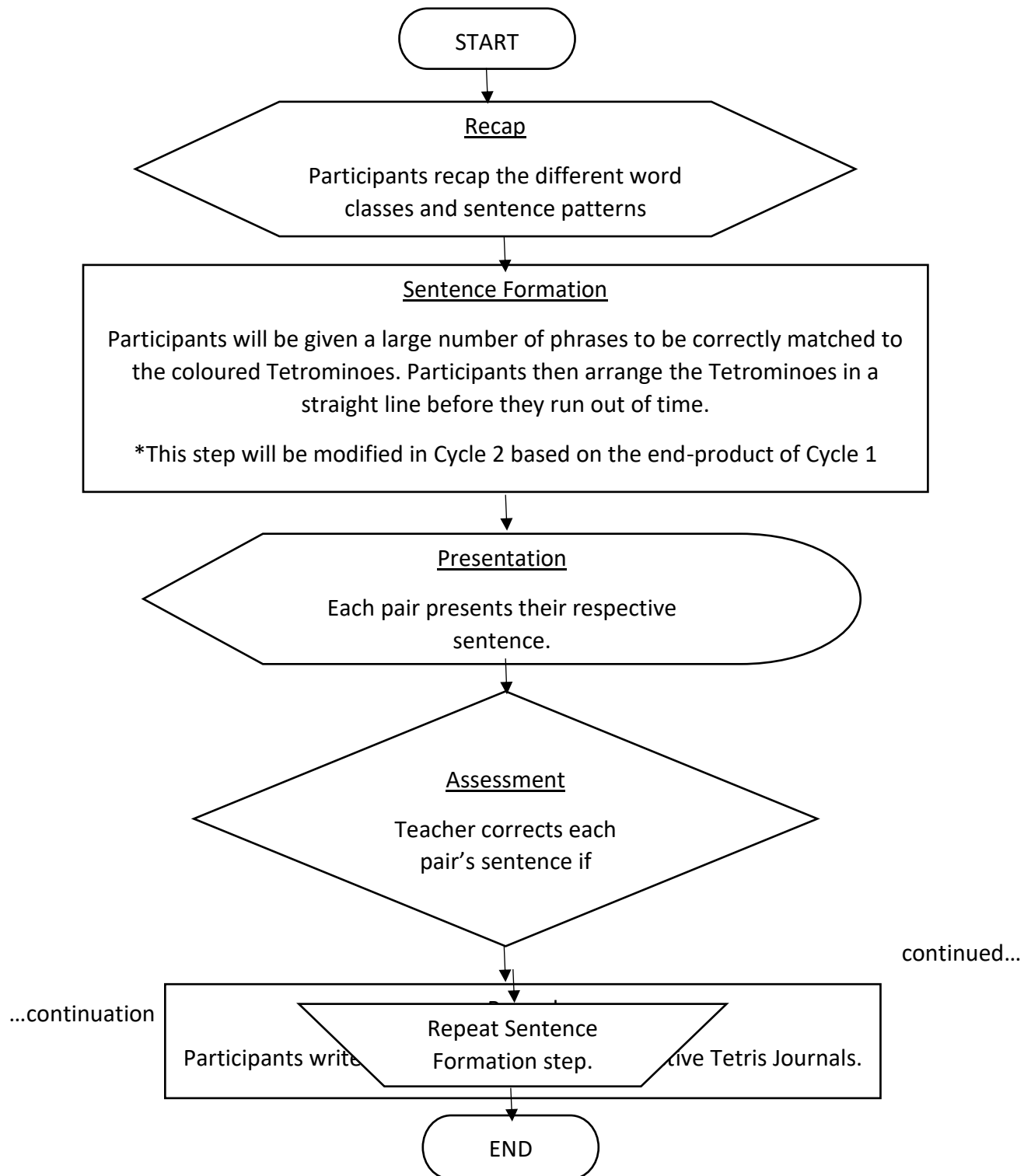Repeat Sentence Formation step.

END

Figure 1.0 Conceptual framework of 3D Tetrominoes

Findings and Discussion

As a result of the implementation of the 3D Tetrominoes technique, the findings obtained from test scores, observations and interview sessions have proven that the 3D Tetrominoes technique is an effective tool in improving the participants' sentence writing skills. The main focus of this research is how the 3D Tetrominoes technique guides the participants' in developing their sentence writing skills by using the correct sentence patterns. The analysis of data has enabled the researcher to come up with a summary of the participants' learning experiences throughout the practice of the 3D Tetrominoes technique.

The results show changes in four major aspects: participants' learning effectiveness, achievement, interest levels, and attitude towards learning. These four areas correlate with one another and in a way and show a very interdependent relationship. After the implementation of the 3D Tetrominoes technique, the participants were able to comprehend each element of a sentence and place them in the correct order.

The implementation of this game-based intervention had prepared the participants with necessary basic skills of sentence construction through its step-by-step procedure. This is aligned with Lee (2012) who stated in his research that well-developed games are equipped with "educational and pedagogical values and are meaningful when players learn and produce chunks of language from it". This research has achieved exactly that by the end of the second cycle when the participants were eventually seen to be able to confidently build sentences independently without having to rely on the colour-coded blocks. The 3D Tetrominoes technique had been carefully planned out in order to provide learners with a gradual learning experience that enables them to master the concept of word classes prior to understanding sentence patterns and eventually to construct sentences based on their overall comprehension. A research conducted by Gónzalez, Salazar, Bautista, & Villota (2018) had also proven the fact that students displayed better results when they participated in games which is an observation that is not unfamiliar in the field of teaching using games.

Based on the obtained research findings, the implementation of the 3D Tetrominoes technique was an effective method not only in increasing the participants' understanding of the selected sentence patterns, but also in reinforcing their knowledge of the various parts of speech as well. The participants were able to view words based on the different contexts in which they were used. This form of vocabulary expansion takes place when learners are exposed to numerous definitions of words when they are utilized in different situations. For example, the word 'talk' was not only comprehended by the participants in its verb form, but also in its noun form. This improvement in vocabulary knowledge was evident in their tests as well as during the application of the 3D Tetrominoes technique. Toma, Alexandru, Dascalu, Dessus, & Trausan-Matu (2017) also writes that "If words are not exercised, they do not end up in long-term memory and are easily forgotten". The more often learners get exposed to new vocabulary, the higher the possibility of them internalizing those words. This was an added advantage for the participants considering the fact that their vocabulary was somewhat limited to more commonly used definitions of words. Successively, in accordance to the participants' improvement in their sentence writing skills, they have also displayed improvements in reading comprehension whereby they were able to make better meaning

out of a group of sentences due to their enhanced understanding of words and the various sentence patterns.

Apart from evident improvements in a vast array of linguistic aspects, the participants had also displayed very high levels of interest and enthusiasm towards the 3D Tetrominoes intervention. Preceding observations on the learning traits of the selected participants had informed the researcher that they are prone to game-based group activities. Therefore, the introduction of this technique had successfully managed to attract their attention in the learning process. The participants were alert and very focused throughout the intervention sessions. As stated by Tivaraju, Melor, & Jamaluddin (2017), games have the ability to decrease learners' anxiety levels throughout what could often be a stressful language learning process and subsequently encourage the development of positive emotions and higher levels of self-confidence.

They even showed positive attitudinal changes whereby they would take interest in their peer's learning struggles and try to collaborate in order to ensure that they were on the same page in order for them to compete with the rest of the participants. This is a form of healthy competition which is a major aspect in the evaluation of the effectiveness of using games in the language learning classroom. Based on a research conducted by Atin et al. (2020), the participants agreed that games did motivate them to communicate and involve themselves more when the element of competition was incorporated. Instead of applying a confined and isolated learning process whereby learners are required to work on, evaluate and analyze their own learning, which is not an easy task for young learners, the researcher had created a more liberal support-based learning process through the implementation of the 3D Tetrominoes technique whereby learners were encouraged to make mistakes and learn from them together in a way that encourages healthy competition.

In conjunction with the use of the 3D Tetrominoes technique, the researcher was also able to cater to the needs of verbal-linguistic, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic as well as interpersonal learners group of learners due to the 3D Tetrominoes technique's attractive and tactile form. Classrooms usually consist of learners that have diversified learning styles and preferences. It can be very challenging for teachers to find an activity that would appeal to every student as some learners are more passive than others. The application of certain games in the language learning classroom help learners find a common ground. The 3D Tetrominoes technique helped passive participants feel comfortable and encouraged them to participate actively as the technique required the participants to work in pairs. One of the participants mentioned during the post-interview session that the 3D Tetrominoes activity had taught her to understand her partner better and also helped her open up as she was able to have fun arranging the blocks together with her peer.

Conclusion
For many Malaysian ESL learners, particularly those in rural areas, English is more of a foreign language because it carries less weight in their daily lives as compared to the national language – Malay, and their respective mother tongues. The use of the English language can sometimes be underrated within a specific community.

This research focused on the application of the 3D Tetrominoes technique in order to improve the participants' sentence writing skills. However, the versatility of this 3D Tetrominoes technique proves that there is a lot of space for future research to encourage the mastery of other linguistic aspects. For instance, this technique could be applied unto early ESL learners to introduce the concept of spelling. It could also be applied in its original game form for grouping activities to teach synonyms and antonyms. This 3D Tetrominoes technique can be utilized in numerous ways in the field of teaching and learning based on the creativity of the educator. It is hoped that this non-restrictive, flexible nature of the 3D Tetrominoes activity will be able to encourage ESL teachers to in a more liberal manner to help their learners combat the various challenges of the English language learning process. Besides utilizing the 3D Tetrominoes technique to teach the English language, it can also be used across the curriculum to teach subjects like Mathematics according to the creativity of the teacher.

Apart from that, for future research purposes, it would be fascinating to see how this technique fairs when applied to pupils with learning disabilities in special education classrooms. Being very conceptual, interactive, and analytical in nature, this 3D Tetrominoes technique might actually be of aid to these learners as they will be able to follow a step-by-step procedure throughout which could allow them to view and organize concepts clearly.

The creation, implementation, and sharing of various teaching techniques and tools will be able to guide ESL educators in overcoming this issue of lack of awareness of the importance of the English language. Teachers will be able to inculcate interest within their students when it comes to learning the English language. Therefore, the researcher aims to widespread this 3D Tetrominoes technique to guide teachers who are struggling to guide their students with sentence construction skills as well as other linguistic aspects.

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