

COMMUNICATIVE GAME-BASED LEARNING IN EFL GRAMMAR CLASS: SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTION

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Abstract: The role of grammar instruction is inevitably important for second and/or foreign language mastery. Unfortunately, in practice, many English teachers in foreign language contexts such as in Indonesia still teach grammar deductively; that is, learners are provided the grammar rules and examples, are told to memorize them, and then are asked to apply the rules to other examples. This particular method of teaching is believed to produce learners who cannot use the language communicatively although they have considerable knowledge of grammar rules. It has also been seen as contributing to learners' passive participation and negative feelings towards grammar learning. The aims of this paper are to give an alternative solution to that problem by offering some ideas of game-based activities and to investigate students' perception of the implementation of communicative game-based grammar learning. Using pre- and post-study questionnaire, the research study was conducted with 30 adult EFL learners taking an after-class English course. The findings indicated that these activities were effective in creating a non-threatening and more relaxing grammar classes, changing students' negative perception of grammar learning and improving their perceived communicative skills.

Keywords: *communicative language teaching, game-based activity, grammar instruction, grammar learning*

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of grammar for language learners has been a long debate among the stakeholders; the English language teachers and students, researchers and practitioners. Some argue that grammar is not necessary to be given a special focus on language learning as children learn their first languages without learning the rules of how the words are combined yet they are able to communicate with others. Lewis (1993) asserts that grammar is not the basis of language acquisition, and the balance of linguistic research clearly invalidates any view to the contrary. However, Celce-Murcia (1985) argues through evidences showing that no-grammar teaching will lead to the product of clumsy and inappropriate foreign languages, which means that grammar plays a very important role in language learning. Furthermore, Corder (1988) emphasizes the importance of grammar in acquiring the capability of producing grammatically acceptable utterances in language. Learning grammar can help to furnish the basis of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Regardless of the problem, the role of grammar instruction has been considered crucial to the ability to use language. Furthermore, grammar gains its prominence in language teaching, particularly in English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) contexts, in as much as without a good knowledge of grammar, learners' language development will be severely constrained (Widodo, 2006). As a result, many methods and approaches in teaching grammar have been proposed in order to get the best learning outcomes.

Unfortunately, in practice, many English teachers in foreign language context still teach grammar deductively; that is, learners are provided the grammar rules and examples, are told to memorize them, and then are asked to apply the rules to other examples. This particular method of teaching is believed to produce learners who cannot use the language communicatively although they have considerable knowledge of grammar rules. It has also been seen as

contributing to learners' passive participation and negative feelings towards grammar learning. Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2011) state that learners have generally looked upon grammar instruction as the moments of discomfort and sometimes even terror. Class activities are usually dominated by teachers explaining the grammar rules followed with the instruction for the students to do the exercises in accordance with grammar rules explained. Thus, Baron (1982) argues that most learners portrayed English teachers as unattractive grammar mongers whose only pleasure in life is to point out the faults of others.

In order to change this negative stigma of grammar instruction, English teachers should be aware of the strengths and the weaknesses of various teaching approaches and methods. Furthermore, they must be able to apply and adapt them in such a way that they can work best for accommodating their learners' diversities, but also creating an enjoyable class with interactive and meaningful activities at the same time. In this case, there are some important points that every EFL/ESL teacher must put into consideration in grammar instruction; how to create a teaching approach with interactive activities that make grammar class non-threatening, enjoyable and relaxing yet give positive impact on students' language skills.

This study was firstly aimed to give an alternative solution to that question by providing some ideas of game-based grammar activities. Chen (2005) explains that games are motivating and offer students a fun-filled and relaxing learning atmosphere. Through games, students also have the opportunity to use language in a non-stressful way focusing on both the message and the language. Second, this study was aimed to explore students' perceptions towards grammar instruction after the implementation of the game-based grammar activities. Learners' perceptions have a significant effect in the teaching and learning processes, thus, investigating them can provide teachers important and valuable information to be considered in any kind of pedagogical intervention (Petraki & Gunawardena, 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grammar Teaching Methods and Approaches

There have been many methods and approaches of grammar instruction offered by the experts and each claim to give the most effective outcomes. Savage et al (2010) summarizes six methods and approaches that have a big influence in the evolution of grammar instruction, namely: grammar translation method, direct method, audio-lingual method, cognitive approach, natural approach, and communicative approach.

Grammar Translation Method (GTM)

GTM focuses on the use of students' native languages in the study of grammar. Its main advantage is explicit teaching of grammar rules that describe the language functions, while its drawback the lack of communicative practice resulting students' barely speaking in the language learnt (Savage et al, 2010).

Direct Method

Direct method is known as the opposite of grammar-translation method as no native languages are allowed to use in classrooms to encourage students to speak in the target one. Through this method, learners understand grammar rules from the examples, which is regarded as one of its weaknesses, besides the minimum focus it gives on reading and writing (Savage et al, 2010).

Audio-lingual Method

Audio-lingual method emphasizes on oral production which is drilled through the memorization of a series of dialogues and the rote of practice of language structures. The belief is through much practice, students will develop fluency; however, in reality, this method tends to make students memorize the dialogues but cannot produce their own sentences in the target language when they need it (Liu & Shi, 2007).

Cognitive Approach

The cognitive approach considers the conscious study of language rules as central to the learning of a foreign language and practice will be meaningful if learners understand the rules involved in practice. Using this approach, students are encouraged and helped to first have a clear understanding of a grammatical rule before practicing and using it in meaningful contexts. The limitation of this approach is its emphasis on analyzing structure and on pronunciation without giving much focus on communicative practice (Savage, Bitterlin, & Price, 2010).

Natural Approach

It aims at developing learners' communicative competence through less emphasis on practice and more on exposure to language input. The focus of lessons in this approach understanding messages in the foreign language, and place little importance on conscious learning of grammar rules (Richards & Rodgers, 1999) which becomes the flaw of this approach.

Communicative Approach

Communicative approach, also known as communicative language teaching (CLT), aims to make communicative competence the goal of language teaching through activities that involve real communication and carry out meaningful tasks (Liu & Shi, 2007). The teaching of grammar can be managed either deductively or inductively depending on the kinds of grammatical points, however it should be given within a context. One of the weaknesses of this approach is its focus on communicating as it may result in ignoring grammar (Savage et al, 2010). Another weakness is its feasibility to be applied in EFL context since CLT was developed mainly in the context of English Second Language (ESL) teaching (Wei, 2011).

CLT and Game-based Activities

The teaching of grammar, particularly in the context of EFL such as in Indonesia, has traditionally been dominated by the grammar-translation method (GTM) where the use of mother tongue is clearly important to elicit the meaning of target language by translating the target language into native languages. As a result, many EFL learners know grammar rules but could not use the target language to communicate. To solve this particular problem, CLT was first introduced in 1970's. However, since it was developed in the context of ESL teaching, EFL teachers usually feel reluctant to apply this approach in their classrooms for some reasons.

One of them as diagnosed by Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2011) is "the hard fact that most teachers face is that learners often find it difficult to make flexible use of the rules of grammar taught in the classroom. They may know the rules perfectly but are incapable of applying them in their own use of the language" (p. 71). Chung (2005) argues that communicative approach will be easier to apply only when learners have the fundamental knowledge of language. He further argued "for societies whose first (and second) language is not English, there is still a need for structural practices so that the foundation of linguistics knowledge can be built up before further communicative task are given" (Chung, 2005, p. 35).

To address the issue of its flexibility, CLT has been interpreted in some contexts through various manifestations. EFL teachers have been trying to find all possible means and ways to apply CLT through different activities as practical "vehicles" for learning English, promoting learning, and supporting learning processes (Richards & Rodgers, 1999). Among those activities, games are much used in EFL classrooms as many researchers, who are teachers and educators themselves, have reported positive finding of using game in English classrooms for learners of all ages. For young children, games can stimulate them to learn English and bring the target language to life.

Games also make children learn without their noticing (Mei & Yu-jing, 2000) and allow them to learn English while enjoying

themselves (Kim, 1995). For adults, games allow students to gain learning experiences in a more energetic way: more drilling/controlled practices, better memory, and class spirit, and realize their performance via game points, a natural way of learning, competition, and motivation (Case, 2008). Similar to this, Chen (2005) explains that games are motivating and offer students a fun-filled and relaxing learning atmosphere. Through games, students also have the opportunity to use language in a non-stressful way focusing on both the message and the language.

Based on the aforementioned studies, the author believes that the use of game-based grammar activities in English classrooms can transform grammar lesson which was considered as a boring and torturing one (Widodo, 2006; Tuan & Doan, 2010; Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011) to be an interesting and relaxing one and change Indonesian EFL learners' negative perspectives of grammar learning to positive ones. Furthermore, as games can be used to give practice in all language skills and in many types of communication, using game-based activities in grammar learning is hoped to help promote students' language skills, particularly their communicative one. In the present study, the author thus introduced four grammar games that she created to her classroom.

METHOD

Using qualitative research method, this study was intended to be a pilot of game-based language learning. The author acted both as the participatory researcher and the teacher of an after-class English course at a state university in Medan, Indonesia from February to May 2017. Thirty 2nd semester students (20 female and 10 male) taking the English course taught by the researcher became the participants to answer the questionnaires, however only ten students who wanted to volunteer themselves were recruited as participants in the interview phase.

As for the ethical considerations of the study, an informed consent letter was submitted to all participants before their

participation in this study. The consent letter was designed to provide sufficient information about the study for the participants, comprehension of the aims of research and voluntary participation of the participants. The issues regarding anonymity and confidentiality were also taken into consideration and explained to the participants.

An open-ended questionnaire to find out students' perceptions of grammar learning was used in this study. The questionnaire was distributed twice during the study; once in the first meeting of the class (pre-study questionnaire) and the other the last meeting of the class (post-study questionnaire). A follow-up interview was conducted with ten participants who wanted to volunteer themselves. This interview phase was aimed to get more in-depth explanation on students' perceptions; thus, by employing volunteer-based participants, it was hoped those who involved in this phase had given broadened answers to the same questions given in the questionnaire.

The interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed in full. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire and answer the questions during interview in either Indonesian or English as they wished. For the purpose of the research problem, the open-ended questions are posed to the participants. They deal with students' opinion on grammar lesson before and after the implementation of game-based grammar activities and whether learning grammar can help improve their ability to communicate in English.

The data collected from questionnaire and transcribed interviews were analyzed by using content analysis for purposes of classification, summarization and tabulation. Direct quotations by the interviewed individuals were used and consistency within the opinion was analyzed to ensure inner reliability. To maintain the trustworthiness of this study, once the data were interpreted, the researcher did a member checking process. The data interpretations were shared with the participants to give them the opportunity to discuss and clarify the interpretation and contribute new or additional perspectives on the issue under study.

FINDINGS

The Practice of Game-based Grammar Learning

The researcher developed three types of game-based grammar activity and used them in this study, namely; Guessing the Word, Board & Dice Game, and Run & Guess. The first two activities were always done inside the classroom while the last one outside the classroom because it needs a big space for students to run around. These three activities can be modified to adjust them with the topics of discussion.

Guessing the Word

Guessing the Word is best played with the topics of parts of speech. Instead of asking students to memorize new vocabulary, this activity allows them to practice their speaking and writing skills while learning new words of different parts of speech. There are two ways of doing this activity. The first one is by dividing students into groups and each group chooses a representative to take a category to play. S/he writes down five words related to the category chosen. The other members of group will guess those words within limited time. The group who can guess the most correct answers within the least time will be the winner. The other is by assigning students into groups and each group sits in a circle. Each member of a group will be given a card containing words to guess but not allowed to see it. The other group members will be clue givers for the words. The winner is the person who can guess the most correct answers within the given time. This activity can be followed up with individual work of writing a short paragraph using the words and sharing his/her work with other group members who should give feedback on their friends' works.

Board & Dice Game

The purpose of Board & Dice Game is to make students practice spoken English through a fun competition. Students sit in groups of four. Each member of groups takes turn to throw the dice and moves

his/her token as many steps as that appears on the dice but can only stay there if answering the question or doing the instruction written on the board correctly. The winner is the first who can reach the finish line. This activity can be done with any topics of grammar such as Parts of Speech, Tenses, Passive Voice, and Conditional Sentences. For example, teachers can write some verbs on the board and students should use those verbs in particular tense or particular type of conditional sentence. Teachers can also write sentences on cards and students should change the voice of the sentences correctly in order to advance their tokens on the board.

Run & Guess

This last activity should be done outside the classroom, which most students find enjoyable and fun as it allows them to have the class in a different atmosphere. Run & Guess makes students practice their speaking skill while enjoying physical exercise in an open area. As a preparation before doing this activity, the teacher should write questions on cards and place them separately. Students are divided into groups. All members of the groups will take turn to race to the questions. If they know the answers, they can run back to their groups to share the answers. If the answers are correct, the next player can run and do the same thing. This activity is done within a limited time so when the time is over, the group with the most correct answers will be the winner. It is applicable to most topics of grammar such as wh-questions, active-passive voice, and direct-reported speech. If there is enough time, it can be followed with written exercise like that in *Guessing the Word* activity.

Students' Perception of Grammar Learning

Most participants (n=28) wrote negative comments as the response for the first question (What do you think of grammar lessons?). Out of the 30 statements in the responses, 25 pointed out that grammar lessons were difficult to learn, 20 indicated that too many rules to memorize and exercise to do in grammar class and 17

showed that grammar class was either boring or frightening, as seen in the following excerpts.

"I don't like grammar because it is so difficult, just like Mathematics. We have to remember the formulas and make many sentences using those formulas."

"I think learning grammar is so boring. The teacher explains the lesson and the students do the exercises. It is always like that."

Two other participants gave neutral comments about grammar lesson, while not explicitly stating that they liked them.

"Grammar lessons are not difficult if we understand the rules and practice using them a lot."

However, the analysis of the data from the post-study questionnaire revealed a totally opposite result. All students (n=30) gave positive responses for the same question in post-study questionnaire with reasons such as 'I could play while learning grammar', 'I like learning grammar', and 'I want to learn grammar everyday'.

"I think we played and laughed a lot during the class yet I learned much how to make correct sentences."

What is common in these responses is that according to the students, grammar class was really fun, and the game-based activities made grammar class entertaining and relaxing:

"I did not know that grammar class could be this fun. I thought grammar was only about rules and written exercises."

"I like the games because they make grammar lessons so entertaining..."

Students' Perception of Communicative Skills

The second question that was posed to the participants was regarding the students' perception of the relationship of grammar

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learning with their communicative skills in English. In the pre-study questionnaire, only 7 students answered 'yes' and indicated that learning grammar could help improve their ability to speak and write in English.

"Grammar is actually important to help us speak English because it provides rules to use the language correctly."

The rest of the participants (n=23) responded 'no' to the question and pointed out that grammar did not have much influence in their speaking and writing ability. 20 students stated that learning grammar made them afraid of making mistakes when speaking, 18 students believed that people could speak English without necessarily learning grammar, 12 students said that learning grammar only helped them write correct sentences but not speak English fluently, and 5 students indicated that it was not necessary to learn grammar at all.

"Actually I can speak English when talking with my friends but I'm always afraid to speak with my teachers because I'm afraid that they notice when I make grammatical mistakes."

Meanwhile, the result from the post-study questionnaire showed that 29 out of 30 participants responded 'yes' for the second question. Students mentioned a variety of reasons showing that learning grammar has helped them improved their communicative skills, particularly the speaking one. The most frequently cited reason with 20 participants is that learning grammar gives them much opportunity to practice their speaking skill and as a result they gain more confidence to use their English to speak with others. Some opinions of participants are quoted as follows:

"Learning grammar through games improves my speaking ability."

"I like the games because they make grammar lessons so entertaining and I can practice my English skills; speaking, listening, reading, and writing."

"I think I speak English better and more fluently now. I'm not afraid of making mistakes anymore."

Only one participant responded 'no' to the second question in the post-study questionnaire. S/he pointed out that learning grammar through games gave him/her opportunity to speak but s/he did not really know whether his/her communicative skills had improved because s/he did not get direct feedback from the teacher when s/he used her English during the activities.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data revealed that there was a big difference of students' perception of grammar learning before and after the game-based activities applied in grammar class. There are three differences that will be elaborated in this part.

Firstly, students' negative perspectives of grammar learning which was considered difficult and boring changed drastically into positive ones seeing grammar as entertaining and enjoyable class to attend. Prior to the implementation of game-based grammar learning, most students found that grammar was boring, monotonous, and not fun. These negative responses were similar to those found in a number of previous studies investigating students' perceptions of grammar instruction (Incecay & Dollar, 2011; Loewen et al., 2009; Rasch, 2016). These studies revealed that most students, although agreed that grammar was important in learning English, reported to have negative feelings towards the subject.

Furthermore, they also believed that grammar was a difficult subject to learn as they needed to memorize rules and apply them into sentences. There were two reasons that could be inferred to explain why students had negative responses towards grammar learning. The first one was related to the content of the subject. The student found that the level of difficulty in learning grammar lesson resembles that of Mathematics where there was no place for mistakes. Thus to avoid any mistakes, students need to memorize the formulas like those found in 'hard science' subjects.

Meanwhile, the second reason was more related to the way how the lesson was presented in the classroom. This traditional grammar teaching method is a common practice in Indonesian EFL classrooms as many English teachers still use the grammar translation method (GTM), through which teachers explain the grammar rules followed with the instruction for the students to do the exercises in accordance with grammar rules explained (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011). Meanwhile, the analysis of the data from the post-study questionnaire revealed a totally opposite result. After taking the grammar class using game-based activities, all of the students stated that grammar class was fun as they could play yet learn grammar rules at the same time. The finding indicating games helped make grammar lessons entertaining, relaxing, and enjoyable was also reported in the study by Yolagedili & Arikan (2011) who found that the use of game in grammar instruction helped students lower anxiety towards grammar learning, feel relaxed and be enthusiastic to learn.

Secondly, grammar class involving game-based activities had successfully changed students' opinion of the importance of learning grammar to improve the four language skills; listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In the pre-study questionnaire, most students did not find grammar class helpful in improving their communicative skills. This opinion of the disintegration of grammar from other language skills was also explained by Oxford (2001) as a result of the use of GTM. She believed that this method would not ensure adequate preparation for later success in academic communication, career-related language use, or everyday interaction in the language (Oxford, 2001). On the contrary, the data from the post-study questionnaire showed that most of the students believed that learning grammar was important to improve their English fluency because grammar is integrated and cannot be separated from the four language skills.

Finally, game-based activities were perceived to provide more opportunities for students to practice their English communicatively and to be exposed to English speaking environment which eventually

helped them improve their communicative skills, particularly their speaking one. The result also indicated that these activities increased students' confidence in using the language as they reported themselves to gain confidence to speak in a game-based learning atmosphere. This finding is similar to that of Laurian-Fitzgerald (2015) who finds that games have a great impact on self-confidence motivation as well. Students in her study felt more confident to speak and to express themselves in a friendly and game-like atmosphere.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted in the context of a pilot of game-based language learning. The aim of this study is to investigate whether game-based language activities can change students' negative perspectives of EFL learning, particularly grammar learning. Although the findings indicate radical changes of students' perspectives of grammar learning, this study was carried out under several limitations. First, the limited number of participants of this study is one of them. Distributing questionnaire consisting two open-ended questions and interviewing ten participants only about their past and current experiences of grammar learning are certainly among its limitations too. Finally, since these activities were relatively new to be used in the grammar class, these could be interpreted as preliminary findings regarding their effectiveness in changing students' negative perception of grammar learning.

Furthermore, for being able to fully investigate the influence of the use of game-based activities on students' perception of grammar learning and the effect of these activities on the improvement of students' language skills, more comprehensive study with larger numbers of individuals and different research approach is needed. Using different demographic groups, researchers can also examine the possibility of different perceptions that may occur between the male and female students and also among Indonesian EFL students with different majors. Further studies may utilize instructors so as to

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provide a broader picture of the influence of game-based grammar activities on their perception of grammar instruction.

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