

## Spell-O-Drama: Redesigning Spelling Lessons

Mohd Naquiuddin Zulkarnain<sup>a</sup>, Sulaila Bakar<sup>b</sup>, Alim Marzuki<sup>c</sup>, Ahmad Suhairi Mohamed  
Suhaimi<sup>d</sup>, Azlini Razali<sup>e</sup>

*Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA Pahang, Bandar Tun Abdul Razak Jengka, Pahang  
Malaysia*

<sup>a</sup>mnaquiuddin@uitm.edu.my; <sup>b</sup>sulaila@pahang.uitm.edu.my; <sup>c</sup>alim0352@pahang.uitm.edu.my;  
<sup>d</sup>ahmad.suhairi89@gmail.com; <sup>e</sup>azlini@pahang.uitm.edu.my

**Abstract:** Motivating language learners is very challenging; more so if the language is not his or her mother tongue. Unlike learning one's mother tongue where it is learnt with no conscious awareness of its grammar pattern, learning a second language or a third is an uphill task. These learners are required to execute mental gymnastics trying to recall all the grammar rules taught to them and only some are able to emerge with a real sense of success. The rest fail! A learner can be successful in acquiring the second language if the learners can be made to realise that a language is a tool communication rather than an object to be analysed. Hence, the learning process of acquiring the language must be enjoyable and active. Spell-O-Drama is a language game developed to not only enhance a learner's spelling ability but also his comprehension and vocabularies. In order to vouch the effectiveness of the game, questionnaires were distributed to 60 Year Six students from Sekolah Kebangsaan Mahmud in Raub, Pahang. The researchers are inspired to bring forth Spell-O-Drama based on their prior experiences interacting with rural school pupils. Spell-O-Drama is solely developed to spark interest and enjoyment in the pursuit of acquiring English.

**Keywords:** English language, Spelling, Active learning

### Introduction

At the risk of sounding unsympathetic to the pains many learners of English have gone through and are going through in learning how to spell English words, it is time for language educators to come up with innovative ways of teaching spelling. To 'spell' is defined as to write or name the letters that form a word in correct sequence. Is good spelling important? Noah Webster - the writer of Webster Dictionary stated that "spelling is the foundation of reading and the greatest ornament of writing". Thus, good spelling is curial for literacy, and it makes writing easier by allowing the writer to focus on ideas to be presented.

Learning how to spell is as important as learning how to write, read, and speak. In Malaysia, English is taught as a second language and sometimes a third language. Raymond (2018) stated that a learner of English had a hard time in mastering the English language especially those who were not exposed to English since they were young. In addition, not being able to visualise the importance of learning and mastering another language hinders these young students to stop them from enjoying the process of acquiring English. Therefore, Spell-O-Drama, which was created based on a game show in the USA, to spark interest and enjoyment in teaching spelling.

This paper presents satisfactory findings on Spell-O-Drama; a twisted spelling bee. The earliest known evidence of the first spelling bee dated back to 1850 in the United States of America. A spelling bee is a competition in which contestants are asked to spell a broad selection of words, usually with a varying degree of difficulty. On the other hand, Spell-O-Drama is a spelling bee which requires each contestant not only to spell the given word but also to spell it backwardly. Instead of being given a word orally to spell, each contestant is given a picture card in which they have to spell the picture given backwardly. Spelling a word backwardly raises the challenge and the drama. It is a game-based activity designed in a fun learning method that has successfully broken down the students' emotional filter in learning; thus, encourage even unmotivated students to enjoy learning.

The game Spell-O-Drama is not merely a spelling game. It is a game that challenges the ability of the student to:

1. Know the name of the objects on the cards
2. Know the spelling of the objects

3. Know how to spell the objects backwardly

Treiman (2013) stated that good spellers are familiar with the patterns and constrain of English spelling use that knowledge to help them remember specific letters in specific words. As might be expected, we cannot and must not deny our students the chance to acquire the basics of English learning in order for them to attain satisfactory results in their public examinations. The economic growth of our country depends on the highest of human capital resources. Mastering English through a dynamic language-based game such as Spell-O-Drama can lead to a better and active language experience and simultaneously the students become more proficient English users. At the end of the day, a more proficient English user is produced.

### **Vocabulary Learning and Fun Learning**

Vocabulary is essential because it is related to all four skills in a language. The inability to increase vocabulary could impede daily interaction especially when it comes to conveying messages. Huyen and Nga (2003) stated about boredom faced during vocabulary lesson among Vietnamese students. The situation happened because of the unchanged learning habits such as memorizing the words, listening attentively and passively from the teachers' explanations and learning by heart. The students are having difficulties to learn because of feeling burdened when learning vocabulary in class. Rahayu (2009) mentioned about the feeling of being burdened among students when they have to memorize a lots of words as well as their meaning. In Malaysia, one of the techniques that are commonly used by the teachers to teach vocabulary is instructing the students to list unfamiliar words in a notebook. The students are required to find the definitions from the dictionary and they have to write the definition and example of the listed words. Some students may find this method interesting and are able to increase their vocabulary. However, there are many ways to teach vocabulary and they depend on many factors such as students' characteristics, needs and motivation (Rahayu, 2009). The common traits that can be found from the mentioned researchers are boredom and burden among the students in learning vocabulary. The vocabulary lesson should be made more interesting in order to cope with the problem faced by the students. One of the ways to make vocabulary lesson more interesting is using game which promotes better environment for students to learn.

It is undeniable that playing game is interesting and fun, the teachers and lecturers can integrate their lesson with games to increase the students' motivation to learn. Ellis and Brewster (2002, p.172, as cited in Rahayu, 2009) claimed that games are not only improve the language skills, pronunciation and vocabulary, they are also fun and motivating. They also stated that some games are competitive where the players work in a team or an individual works alone to be a winner. Cooperative games require a team of players or a pair of player works together to achieve a shared goal. If the teachers are able to successfully integrate the games in their lessons, it could increase the students' motivation to actively learn and participate in the class. However, even though some researchers believe that using games in learning vocabulary or teaching is effective, Ericsson (2006) found that the activities which related to solitary deliberate practice are more effective than working with others. Duckworth, Kirkby, Tsukuyama, Berstein and Ericsson (2011) hypothesised that working alone is more effortful and less enjoyable because the finalists of the National Spelling Bee competitions were given access to word lists and dictionaries which lead them to study solitarily. Thus, found that the higher gritted spellers perform better than the spellers who are higher in openness to experience. Regardless the differences of the findings found by the researchers, it does not mean that the lesson should be limited to by using chalk and board or solely based on teachers' explanation and the teachers must be able to differentiate the nature of the games itself to be able to reap benefits of integrating games in the lesson

### **Spell-O-Drama**

One of the complex written language skills is spelling, which requires a number of language abilities and sufficient knowledge of spelling rules (Staden, 2010). It is important to spell the words correctly because being unable to spell the words correctly might prevent a reader to understand the message clearly. Thus, it is crucial for a writer to be competent in spelling to avoid any distraction when conveying his or her written message (Bandar, Sabariah, Ain and Ramiza, 2017). They also claimed that many language researchers and teachers describe English spelling as a daunting task for learners

who are not using English as their first language. An effort has been made by The Academy of Language Studies, UiTM Pahang to promote a fun learning series which could help them to acquire English proficiency skill. The first Spell Champ programme which is a rendition of the well-known NST/RHB ‘Spell It Right’ contest was held on 10 February 2012 for MDAB students in UiTM Pahang (Sulaila, Norzie Diana, Azlini and Kamisah, 2012).

Another effort is made recently by The Academy of Language Studies, UiTM Pahang to help the students to learn in a fun, yet challenging way. The Spell-o-Drama programme was held in July 2018 with a new objective which is moving away from the conventional spelling bee, the participants have to spell the words backward. This new programme still shares the similar objectives of the original Spell Champ programme, but, the Spell-o-Drama programme is a twisted version of the spelling bee programme. The level of the difficulty has increased because the participants have to spell the words backward. Regardless of the difficulties faced by the students to spell, this programme is able to maintain its nature which is promoting a fun and challenging way of learning English.

### 3. Satisfactory Survey Findings

A simple satisfactory survey was carried out after the programme to evaluate its outcomes as it is effective and useful for students. A set of questionnaires was distributed to the students to fill it up in order to see their views about the programme. 5 items were asked based on their opinion about the programme.

Predominantly, the students gave positive feedback towards the programme. The following data shows the results in more detail:

**Table 1:** Perceptions on the Spell-O-Drama Programme

No	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
		%	%	%	%
1.	‘Spell-O-Drama’ is really exciting	40.5	43.2	8.1	8.1
2.	‘Spell-O-Drama’ is really challenging	48.6	32.4	10.8	8.1
3.	‘Spell-O-drama’ has boosted my self confidence in using English	45.9	40.5	8.1	5.4
4.	‘Spell-o-drama’ has helped me improve my English vocabulary	51.4	40.5	8.1	0
5.	‘Spell-O-Drama’ has motivated me to learn English more	48.6	32.4	16.2	2.7

Based on the table, the question ‘‘Spell-O-Drama’ is really exciting’ shows fifteen (40.5%) respondents answered ‘Strongly Agree’ and another sixteen (43.2%) respondents said ‘Agree’. It may as well be said that the program is really exciting for the very most of them, if not all. This shows positive feedback from the participants about the programme.

As for Item 2, ‘‘Spell-O-Drama’ is really challenging’, it can be seen that eighteen (48.6%) respondents choose ‘Strongly Agree’ on the statement and another 51.4% respondents cumulatively answered ‘Agree’, ‘Disagree’ and ‘Strongly Disagree’. Twelve (32.4%) respondents said ‘Agree’ that ‘‘Spell-O-Drama’ is really challenging’ while four (10.8%) respondents ‘Disagree’ and the rest

choose ‘Strongly Disagree’ on the question. This may be the effect of their proficiency in the language itself, as they come various backgrounds of English proficiency. Therefore, for the highly fluent participants, they may think that this programme does not really challenge their ability in the language and vice versa for those that has a lower fluency on the language.

Next, Item 3 which is ‘‘Spell-O-Drama’ has boosted my self confidence in using English’. It is shown that seventeen (45.9%) respondents choose ‘Strongly Agree’ on the statement and fifteen (40.5%) respondents ‘Agree’ with the statement. Informal and fun learning activities that is not limited to a classroom may lead to their confidence in learning English, as it is eventually informal and held outside of their four-walled classroom. This is supported by Sandberg, Maris & de Geus (2011), as they said that the confidence of the learner is positively altered when content of learning is incorporated with game elements. Thus, the students might as well show their ability and confidence without having to be afraid of anything, especially the teachers.

Item 4 which states ‘‘Spell-O-Drama’ has helped me improve my English vocabulary’ indicates that nineteen (51.4%) respondents ‘Strongly Agree’ that this programme helps them to enhance their word bank. None of the respondents’ shows ‘Strongly Disagree’ with this item. This has proven that the programme gives positive impact towards the students’ way of learning. Since the spellers need to carefully identify and understand the pictures which are shown to them, their comprehension skills are totally tested to their limit. This eventually goes well with Shyamlee & Phil’s (2012) statement, that there are numerous techniques which can be used in various degrees of language learning situation; some are applicable for testing and distance education, and some for teaching business English, spoken English, reading, listening or interpreting. In improving the students’ English vocabulary, and their way of learning as a whole, this ‘Spell-O-Drama’ program is only one of the significant methods yet it proves to be relevant for the students in schools.

The final question, ‘‘Spell-O-Drama’ has motivated me to learn English more’ results in eighteen (48.65) respondents showing ‘Strongly Agree’ with the programme. It is a crucial evident that this programme actually motivates them to learn English more throughout their study and life. Nonetheless, one (2.7%) respondent answered ‘Strongly Disagree’ with the statement. This may result from involuntary involvement, or perhaps the unwillingness to attend the programme. It might as well be caused of the student’s ability and fluency in English, as Spell-O-Drama is handled using English as a medium. Otherwise, majority of the students shows positive feedback towards the programme and encourage that this kind of programme will be held again in future. According to Hiew (2012), there are many possible factors that could have contributed to the students’ failure in mastering English language in schools –learners’ methods of learning, motivation, views, teachers’ methods of teaching and/or approach, syllabus and lesson plan, or everything else that matters. Therefore, it is crucial to understand learners’ perceptions and experiences in learning a second language in order to identify the difficulties and restrictions that they encounter in the classrooms. This kind of fun learning activity is where the motivation is expected to come in, and Spell-O-Drama is only one of the programmes which has been held to achieve such English mastery skills for the school students.

## **Conclusion**

‘Spell-O-Drama’ is one of the many ways educators have worked on to help and encourage learners of the second language to have better proficiency. Likewise, it is also a brain teaser that helps learners’ brain and memory to comprehend and manipulate all knowledge, making learning more interesting. It is not easy to catch the attention of learners who have been taught of the grammar rules since the day they enrolled into Primary 1 at the age of 7 years old, much less to those who do not see the reason why they have to learn English which they most probably do not use at all at home. Not to mention the fact that teachers in schools do not have the leisure to execute this kind of approach during class hours since they have syllabi from the Education Ministry that need to be fulfilled. It is indeed a creative approach when one uses the method of the ‘Spell-O- Drama’ in teaching spelling and vocabulary. Once learners are able to recognise the vocabulary, spell it backwards, and in front of audience, ultimately the learners’ self- confidence will be enhanced, making them more competitive. Learners from the rural areas would benefit a lot more compared to their compatriots in the urban area sine majority of learners in rural area are usually not comfortable with using the English language as a tool of communication. Further exploration could also be done in the future to learners of the English

language who are in their secondary education, with probably more advanced and complicated vocabulary so as to increase their word power. 'Spell-O-Drama' is yet another approach that is being used to help learners have better and improved vocabulary and spelling prowess in line with other creative and conventional approaches used. It may seem like a small step for those who have mastered the language, but it is humongous step for learners who are interested but petrified when it comes to the English language. Nothing goes to waste as long as there are significant advances and advantages learners gain from being involve with 'Spell-O-Drama'.

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**Appendix**



