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Promoting Language Learning Skills to Young ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

One of the most frequent problems ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers face is how to promote English among young ESL learners. One viable way is to transform English from a school subject into a medium for authentic communication. This transformation encourages young learners to use the language not only for meaningful exchanges, but also as a tool for self-expression and creativity. When they are able to use language in a creative and original way, they become involve in the process of communication and language production. The purpose of this study is to explore how language games can be utilized to promote language learning among a group of Primary Six students. The students participated in a language camp which provided them with the opportunity to use written English in a useful and creative way. Feedback from the students showed that they felt that the activities carried out during the camp were meaningful and enjoyable. The paper ends with some ideas how teachers can use such language programs to promote other language skills or work with different groups of learners.

Keywords : Language learning   Language games   Young ESL learners

Introduction

Should all learning should be serious and solemn in nature? If learners are enjoying themselves, are they really learning? It is possible for learners to enjoy themselves and learn at the same time, such as learning through activities and games. Many ESL educators have advocated language games for language learning because studies have shown that well-chosen activities are invaluable as they give learners a break from tedious drills (Ersoz, 2000; Chen, 2005; Ellis, 2005; Shin, 2006). At the same time, games allow learners to use the language in real contexts (Ersoz, 2000).

Background to the Study

One of the most frequent problems ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers face is how to transform English from a school subject into a medium for authentic communication among young ESL learners. This transformation means young learners use the language not only for meaningful exchanges, but also as a tool for self-expression and creativity. When they are able to use language in a creative and original way, they can construct their own meaning through the language. Then, they become involved in the process of communication as well as language production, thus they would remember what they learnt (Shin, 2006).

However, young learners tend to have a short attention span but a lot of physical energy (Brumfit, Moon & Tongue, 1995, as cited in Loukia, 2002). They enjoy activities which involve crafting or some movements. Such activities offer learners situations for language practice as well as expanding their energy for self-expression and creativity. Games and activities are, therefore, important considerations especially when teaching young language learners.

In light of the above discussion, we decided to investigate the perceptions of a group of Primary Six students who participated in a language camp that incorporated some interesting games for language learning. This paper describes the activities that were carried out as well as feedback given by the participants. Finally, it shares some implications of the activity and suggestions on how these activities can be carried out with other groups of learners or other language skills.

Review of Literature

Byrne (1995) gave the definition of games as "a form of play governed by rules.... it should be enjoyable and fun". Similarly, Hadfield defined games as "an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun" (Hadfield, 1990). In this study, games are defined as any activity engaged for diversion or amusement. In particular, language games refer to simple activities of language learning and the actions into which the use of the language is woven. They are not just a diversion, a break from routine activities, but a way of getting the learner to use the language in the course of the game (Deesri, 2002).

Many ESL educators have advocated games for language learning because the games serve a number of benefits for both learners and teachers alike. Firstly, games arouse the learners' interest as it adds novelty to what learners might not find very interesting. Sustaining interest can mean sustaining effort (Thiagarajan, 1999; Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 2005). This is important as learning a language involves long-term effort. In addition, the emotions aroused when

playing games add variety to the sometimes dry, serious process of language instruction (Bansford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Secondly, games give learners a reason to communicate (Chen, 2005). This is because games provide a context for meaningful communication. As an example a game to learn spelling can provide meaningful communication as students seek to understand how to play it and as they communicate about the game: before, during, and after the game (Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 2005). This meaningful communication provides the basis for what Krashen calls comprehensible input, that is, what students understand as they listen and read, interaction to enhance comprehensibility (Krashen, 1985). Moreover, through games, learners get to practice different language structures while playing instead of just repeating phrases back mindlessly. Such practice gives them more motivation and stimulation to learn the language (Prasad, 2003). Many games are played outside of class so they provide a means for learners to use the language outside of class time (Ellis, 2005). As the duration of a language lesson is short, it does not allow for much opportunity to practice the language. Therefore, games come in handy as one way to extend the lesson time. Thirdly, games makes learners pay more attention to the lessons and exert mental effort in memorizing the rules so they would be able to play well and not let themselves or their teammates down. Finally, games often have a hands-on element, such as cards, spinners, or pieces, which connect with bodily/kinesthetic intelligence (Gardner, 1999). The physical movements keep everyone focused and stimulated. Making occasional movements prevent students from feeling bored and increases the participation level. In this way, teachers can use games to control the atmosphere in the class. If the students are a little bit unruly, the teacher could use calming games to settle them down or if the teacher wants to pick up the pace, an exciting game would definitely do the trick.

Selection of Language Activities

As with other learning activities, careful attention must be paid to the difficulty leve and types of games selected (Jacobs, 2009). Part of the appeal of games lies in the challenge, but if the challenge is too great, some students may become discouraged According to Jacobs, the challenge can be of two kinds: understanding how to play the game and understanding the language content *(ibid)*. Some games promote both types of understanding, for example, demonstrating to the learners how the game is played or using online or print resources like the dictionary. With regards to the types of games, Hadfield (1999) explains two ways of classifying language games linguistic games and communicative games. Linguistic games focus on accuracy such as supplying the correct antonym. On the other hand, communicative games focus on successful exchange of information and ideas, such as two people identifying the differences between their two pictures which are similar to one

another but not exactly alike. In all cases, correct language usage, though still important, is secondary to achieving the communicative goal.

For this study, we considered several things when selecting activities for the camp. For young learners, Shin (2006) suggested a balance between different kinds of language activities to keep them focused on the lesson, thereby increasing the amount of language learning. Therefore, we chose language activities with a mix of quiet and noisy exercises, different language skills as well as individual, pair work, small group and whole class tasks. Apart from that, we wanted to include activities which give the students plenty of practice using the language learned. We did this by categorizing the activities under the 4 major themes, "Let's make, let's shake, let's show, let's go!" This allowed us to incorporate many activities that build on the learners' knowledge and recycle language throughout the program. Hence, learners would be able to scaffold their learning of English. All language skills were covered during these activities but in keeping with the objective of the camp, each segment required some form of written output from the students.

Rationale for the activities

A language camp is a program designed to sustain learners' enjoyment and motivation in language learning through a number of language activities, done outside the classroom routine. The rationale for carrying out the camp is so it gives learners a break from the mediocrity of the learning English as a school subject and the opportunity to practice their language skills in situations that are meaningful and fun.

Description of the current study

The English in Camp was conducted over two days at UiTM City Campus Johor Bahru. The objective of the camp was to provide them with the opportunity to develop their written skills. The camp involved 36 students and 4 teachers from Sek Keb Seri Kampong Tengah, a primary school in the district of Kluang. The students were in Primary Six and their ages ranged from 11 to 12 years old. All of them were Malay and spoke Malay as their mother tongue. The students learnt English Language for 3 ½ hours a week. They also used English to learn Mathematics and Science. The students' English proficiency level ranged from mid to high-beginner, based on the results of a test that was carried out earlier by their English teachers.

Research objectives

1. To explore the use of language games for language learning among young ESL learners.

2. To describe the perceptions of young ESL learners regarding the use of games for learning English.

Research Questions

1. How can language games be utilized effectively to promote language learning among young ESL learners?
2. What are the perceptions of young ESL learners in using games for learning English?

MethodologyData was collected using a self-administered survey questionnaire. The students were asked to list out three things they enjoyed and three things they did not enjoy during the camp. Additional space was provided for them to share their thoughts. The questions were prepared based on the researchers' observation of the activities throughout the program and were written in simple language to suit the ability of learners to express themselves. The questionnaires were distributed at the end of the two-day camp. A short briefing was given so that the students understood the instructions and questions. The students were given 30 minutes to answer. All 35 questionnaires were completed and returned. The school teachers were also asked to complete the questionnaires as their insights would be useful for improving future language camps.

Procedure

In the following section, the method and rationale of selection as well as the procedure of the language activities are described in detail.

Let's shake - Haiku Writing

In this activity, students were taught to write haikus. Haikus are short poems, written based on a 5-7-5 syllable structure. We decided to include haiku writing because, in keeping with the purpose of the language camp, we believe many of the same skills practiced in writing haikus can be used in writing narratives. For example, the use of strong verbs in haikus, is a valuable skill to employ when writing a narrative. Students learn to select specific words to convey meaning. This skill can add clarity to a narrative. In addition, writing haikus and writing narratives is similar because both, as writing processes, go through many drafts before they are finished. Apart from giving greater awareness of the process of writing, haikus provide opportunities for students to develop the ability to take responsibility for and take control over their writing (Atsushi, 2008). Finally, a haiku is, after all, a language

game as Myers (2009) noted that to create a haiku is to engage in an old language game. Haikus introduce a different and fresh approach in playing language games. This is done by activating students' creative understanding through a creative visualization process by relating real life with language learning (ibid).

The haiku session was carried out over one hour and was done in the classroom. First, we introduced the students to haikus. To guide them, the students were shown a few examples of haikus. The structure of the haikus and themes were explained. Then, they were asked to do simple exercises to identify the number of syllabus in each line of the haikus given and finally guess what it means. Lastly, the students were asked to write their own haikus.

Let's make - Card attack

In this activity, students were required to use the simple sentences and haikus that they created earlier to create a Father's Day card. We included Card Attack as it tapped on the students' creativity and experiences in the process of creating the cards. Creativity is an essential element necessary for learning. Students learnt faster and better when they are in a relaxed atmosphere (Ubermas, 1998). This was evident during the card activity. In addition, students who perform poorly on traditional learning methods are turned on to learning when classroom experiences incorporate artistic activities (Kohl, 2008). As learning is a creative process, it follows that students should be involved in making information relevant by linking prior knowledge and new knowledge in an individually meaningful format. Starko (1995) attributes this meaningfulness to the individual's creativity. It was not surprising then that during this session, the students came up with cards that were artistic as well as personal with beautiful haikus dedicated especially for Father's Day.

The Card Attack was carried out over 1 ½ hours in the classroom. Students were required to use simple sentences and haiku to create a Father's Day Card. They were provided with A4 colour papers, magic pens, glue, scissors and also pictures and wordings that can be used to create the cards. Then, they were given samples of Father's Day haikus. The students took 35-45 minutes to create the card. Finally they were asked to present their work.

Let's Show – Blog writing

Blogs have become extremely popular in the past few years and have been increasingly promoted as a form of alternative assessment not only in writing classrooms for native speakers but also for second language learners (Fellner & Apple, 2006). In fact, blog writing provided opportunities for authentic learning based on the learner's needs, interests and talents. In relation to this, Son (2008) in

his study also found that students showed positive attitudes towards online language activities like blogging, during and outside of class time. Thus, we incorporated blog- writing as part of the activities because we felt blogs can work successfully for teaching writing.

Blog writing was carried out in the computer lab on the second day of the camp. Sudents were given instructions on how to create a blog about themselves. They used pictures taken from a folder provided by the facilitators and were asked to use simple sentences to create short paragraphs about themselves. Finally, they were given the opportunity to print their work. The activity lasted for 1 ½ hours although it could have stretched to 2 hours as the participants were engrossed with their blogs.

Let's Go – Treasure Hunting

Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences proposes different and autonomous intelligence capacities that result in many different ways of knowing, understanding, and learning about our world (Gardner, 1999). An activity like treasure hunt stimulates multiple intelligences such as verbal-linguistic intelligences, bodily-kinesthetic intelligences, interpersonal intelligences and naturalistic intelligences. This can move the learning process more effectively as students are exposed to several ways of learning in order to explore a specific content. Treasure hunt also encourages participants to interact actively (Yu, 2006). In order to solve the treasure hunt tasks, learners need to get assistance from their friends, teachers as well as strangers. This created an excellent opportunity for them to use English with a purpose thus we made the decision to include Treasure Hunt.

The duration for Treasure Hunt Game was 1 ½ hours and was done outside the classroom. It was presented differently from other ordinary classroom activities. First, the students were divided into groups and later were asked to sit in their groups given. Then each group received A4 papers, markers, magic pens, scissors and glue. Next, in their group they listened to their teacher instruction. The students were asked to find five items around them that they found interesting within 2 minutes. After the two minutes ended, they sat in their own groups again until the next instruction was given. Finally, using the five items as props, they were asked to create and perform a three-minute-story.

Limitations

In this study, the language camp was conducted over a short period of time and carried out by only one group of students. Therefore, the findings do not attempt to represent all groups of learners. It is, therefore, not possible to generalize the
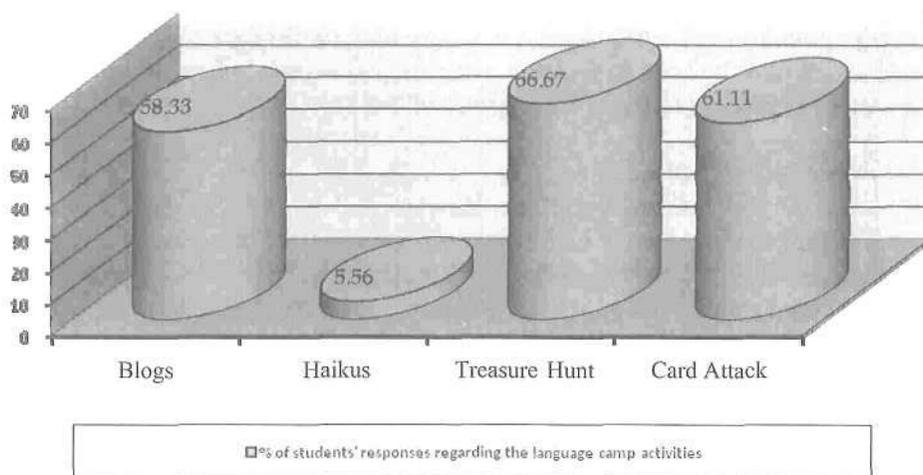
findings. However, the study does provide an insight of how language games can be utilized to promote language learning skills to young learners.

Students' responses

At the end of the program, the students were given time to write down their thoughts about the experience they had during the camp in an open ended survey questionnaire. There were two guiding questions: What they enjoyed doing at the camp and what they did not enjoy. Their responses were summarized and categorized below.

Findings and discussion

The objective of the study was to explore the use of language games for language learning among young ESL learners and to describe the perceptions of the learners regarding the use of such activities for learning English. The graph below depicts the percentage of students' positive responses regarding the language camp activities.

Graph 1: Students positive responses regarding the various language camp activities

Data suggest that the majority of the students enjoyed most, if not all, activities in the language camp (Graph 1). Most of them found the activities to be different from the chalk-and-talk of the classroom. All 36 students agreed that the activities were enjoyable and engaging. The activities also encouraged them to speak in English and

participate in the activities actively. The students' responses are further elaborated in the following paragraphs. Several related anecdotes are also included:

Enjoy physical activities

Young learners enjoy activities that involve some movement. From the survey, 67% (24) of the students mentioned that they enjoyed 'treasure hunt' as it involved physical activities and was carried outdoor. This is not surprising as much of young learners' understanding comes through their hands, eyes and ears so their physical world is dominant at all times (Gardner, 1999). In the survey, students commented that they *"enjoyed doing outdoor games in the English in Camp."*

Enjoy new experiences

Young learners enjoy new experiences. In their responses, the students expressed great enthusiasm learning in a new environment which was different from their normal classroom. The following are some excerpts from the students' comments:

> *"I am happy studying here because there is Miss D whom is very nice and good teacher. She always smile to us. In fact, I feel comfortable as there is air-conditioned in the class. I very like with the balloon that had been given to me as it's cute. Miss Dydy taught me many things that I don't know. I wish I can come here again next time."*

> *"I enjoy doing blog"*

> *"I am very enjoy made a blog at computer lab"*

Graph 1 suggests that the majority of the students preferred treasure hunting because it was carried out outdoors. They were not restricted to their places at the tables and they could enjoy the freedom to move about. 58% (21) of the students also mentioned they enjoyed blog writing as it was done in the computer lab. To some of them, it was a whole new experience as they only dealt with exercise books or worksheets the conventional way back in school. Thus, it can be suggested that the relaxed and informal atmosphere of a language camp lowered the students' anxiety level and this enabled them to acquire new experiences with language learning which was not always possible during a typical lesson (Nguyen & Khuat, 2003).

More participation in a stress-free environment

The nature of some games creates a stress-free environment. The variety and intensity that games offer may lower learners' stress and anxiety (Richard-Amato,

1988) and encourage reticent learners to take part (Uberman, 1998). We observed that this is especially so when games involved small groups. The students were more likely to take part and communicate with each other. Below are some examples of the students' comments:

> *"I can learn more about English and in the same time improve in it. I enjoy learning with our facilitators."*

> *"I love using tongue twisters to learn names of objectives"*

> *"I enjoy creating a simple Father's Day card using simple sentences"*

> *"I can learn more about English. I can improve my English and grammar"*

Enjoy learning from each other

Young learners are highly cooperative. We observed that during the blogging session, students who were more computer savvy readily helped their friends to write or print blogs. The session became wholly student-centered with the facilitators acting only as guides. Apart from building group dynamics, such whole class participation, encourages students to focus on language use rather than the language itself. (Yin & Jang, 2000) In fact, one of the students wrote: *"I enjoyed creating a simple Father's Day Card with a group"* which suggested that the student enjoyed learning from their friends.

Effort

Young learners are ready to work hard. During the games, we acknowledged the efforts of chosen students by giving them candies, colorful stickers and pencils. This gesture created a friendly competition among the students; hence they put in a lot of effort in all the activities. Such show of recognition also keeps students involved and interested. (Ying & Jang, 2000). This was also mentioned by one of the students in his comments: *"I enjoyed doing in the English in Camp as I got treats that the trainers give"*.

Meaningful application

For many students, learning English is not a key motivational factor but activities with real life application can provide a lot of stimulus thereby increasing the students' motivation. Games bring real world context into the classroom, and

enhance students' use of English in a flexible, communicative way (Nguyen & Khuat, 2003). The language camp context made English immediately useful to the students because it brought the language to life. For example, many students mentioned that they enjoyed "Card Attack" where they were asked to write haiku and create greeting cards to give' to their fathers on Father's Day. Based on the students' feedback, the activity was deemed to be interesting:

> *" can learn more about English"*

> *"I wish that I can come here again and can learn more English lesson here with the lecturers"*

> *"I am very enjoy make a card for my dad"*

High expectations for success

In their responses, many students also shared their hopes for success in language learning. Some aimed for an improvement in their vocabulary or grammar and others targeted getting high grades for their English examinations. They were aware of the outcome of their efforts and were motivated to achieve their goals. Below are some of the excerpts from the students:

> *"Miss Sha and everyone don't forget me at Kluang. Happy go lucky. Pray for me to get 5A'1 in UPSR examination 2008"*

> *".... I hope I can get A in examination and to the university. I hope I can come again at here with my friends."*

> *"I hope I will come here again and meet with my lovely teacher Miss Sha. I hope all teachers at here wishing for me to get 5'A in UPSR"*

> *".... I enjoy studying with you and hope we will meet again. I also hope that I can get 'A' in my English"*

Enjoy freedom of creativity

The students enjoyed writing haikus and creating cards. 61% (22) of the students responded that they liked card attack activity as it encouraged them to think creatively as there was opportunity for them to decide and think artistically. Hence, it was not surprising that they were eager and creative in presenting their work later in front of their friends. The activities provided the students with the freedom to use the target language creatively. At the same time, haiku writing developed their skills

to show how successfully they can express themselves and how well they can communicate to their friends (Itsushi, 2008).

Dislike of role-playEven though the activities were deemed enjoyable by many of the students, there was a student who commented that she did not particularly enjoy the role-play during the treasure hunt. She had written "*disliked doing story and action*".

Some implications

The overall response for the language camp was positive. However, we felt that there were a few ideas that can be incorporated to improve such programs in future. First, the language camp can be extended to a longer period in order to reinforce concepts and provide more practice. Secondly, more physical language activities can be included to keep the students interested. Thirdly, activities based on communication should form the base of the language camp program as this promotes the use of language in meaningful ways.

Next, language activities are very effective for students to gain understanding of language. To develop the language skills of older students, we suggest that teachers include sketch and readers' theatre. Such activities not only encourage students to practice and internalize the language, they would also be able to communicate naturally.

Lastly, thematic units can create a broader context and allow students to focus more on content and communication than on language structure. When planning a variety of activities, it is important to have them connect to each other in order to support the language learning process. We suggest that teachers use a series of lessons revolving around the same topic or subject to provide language practice in the various skills like speaking, writing, listening and reading.

Conclusion

The use of games should be encouraged for language learning among young ESL learners. With careful planning and consideration, teachers can effectively utilize language games to create situations for authentic communication to complement classroom teaching. Apart from that, students have more fun learning and

participating. Games provide them with enjoyment and help them do better and feel better about themselves.

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