

VIEWS OF TURKISH EFL STUDENTS WITH REGARD TO LEARNING GRAMMAR WITH GAMES

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the views of elementary level Turkish EFL learners with regard to learning Grammar with games. Three dimensions were discussed in the study: students' assessment of learning grammar with games, their views about the challenges in the application process and their suggestions with regard to the application. This case study was conducted on 49 students at the Faculty of Education, Cumhuriyet University. The data was collected via semi-structured interviews to get profound insight about the students' opinions. Descriptive analysis method was used for the analysis of the data obtained. As a result of the study, it was concluded that learning grammar with games was effective in learning English in that it increased students' motivation, changed their attitudes to English classes positively, increased their self-confidence and thus led to better and more retainable learning in grammar as perceived by the students themselves and the researchers.

Key Words: English grammar, learning English with games.

INTRODUCTION

In general, game is the name given all the activities used as a tool for learning, creativeness, experiencing, communication and getting ready for adulthood and a way to express feelings, getting rid of bothers, and source of happiness which are done freely and which provide pleasure, develop and entertain children and support every area development in children (Poyraz, 1999). For a healthy mental and physical development, game is a need for children just like food. Entrepreneurship, creativeness and naturalism can be developed via games. Yörükoğlu (1979, p. 108) expresses his ideas about games as follows

"Game is the most natural way of learning for children. Games provide an environment for children where they can test what they hear and see and consolidate what they have learnt. Children sharpen their senses and develop their kinesthetic skills through games. Game environment is the experiment room for children. It is such an experiment room that the child freely engages in numerous trials on his/her own. S/he makes and spoils and freely applies various possibilities. In his/her small world s/he sets the rules and changes them."

Following from these definitions, game is one of the most effective learning processes which may or may not serve a certain purpose, in which children participate willingly and enjoyably. Besides, games are the basis of physical, cognitive, linguistic, emotional and social development and a part of real life in which children can express themselves (Karadağ and Çalışkan, 2005).

Games, language games in particular, can be a good alternative to teach grammar in EFL classrooms. Miscellaneous exercises, activities and tasks are employed in foreign language classrooms to enhance foreign

language learning to yield better results. Foreign language teaching with games can be an alternative method in EFL classes as it enables language learners to enjoy language learning experience and acquire knowledge and skills in a fun way. Besides providing learners chances to improve their English, such a learning environment can also help them develop their cooperation and socialization skills and self-confidence in the target language.

Grammar of the target language is one of the most important language areas to be mastered by EFL learners to have a good command of spoken and writing language. It is now a well-established fact in EFL that language learning is not memorizing the vocabulary items and the rules in the grammar of the target language but ability to use them in appropriate contexts for communication purposes. The ability to use the language appropriately to achieve certain communicative objectives requires fluency and accuracy which can be enhanced by learning the form and function of grammar items in L2 in real-life like contexts. The emphasis on communicative aspect required language classrooms to go beyond grammar-translation method with an aim to improve learners' communicative competence. Following from the recent trends in EFL, games can be incorporated as integral elements of communicative and tasks based classes to achieve fluency in equilibrium with accuracy.

Though not very widely used, grammar games in EFL classes have always been one of the most favorite language practice activities for learners and teachers alike. So far, several books including collections of grammar games (Rinvoluceri, 1995; Zaorob & Chin 2001; Kealey & Inness, 2008) have been written and many studies have been carried out to reveal the role of grammar games in EFL classes. In a study by Şahhüseynoğlu (2007) it was revealed that educational games are effective on improving pre-service English language teacher trainees' critical thinking and reading skills, and besides they improved their speaking skills as games provide a real medium of communication. In a more recent study, Constantinescu (2012) examined the role that the computer games might play in teaching, learning and practicing English grammar and concluded that computer games can contribute to successful language learning and teaching experiences as they can bring fun in ELF grammar classes, which can be long and, sometimes, boring.

In another study, Zhu (2012) pointed out the value and importance of using games in developing students' communicative ability. The researcher introduced eight types of games and made some suggestions with regard to using games. Affective factors influence learning either positively or negatively, in line with this Zhu (2012, p.802) argued that the first aim of using games in class is to create a situation where students' affective filter is lowered so that the comprehensible input could be taken in. Zhu (p.804) claimed that teachers are to be cautious about time, choice, preparation and management of games in class to reach their educational objectives.

Azarmi (2011) carried out a quantitative study on sixth and seventh grade ELF students for a term and found out that the students in the experimental group in which games were used outperformed the control group. In a study by Yolageldili and Arıkan (2011) in which the views of Turkish EFL teachers working in primary schools about games were explored, it was revealed, in line with the current literature, that Turkish EFL teachers appreciate the effectiveness of using games in grammar teaching but do not use them as frequently as expected. Gaudart (1999) examined some of the tried and tested games, reactions of the teacher trainees to the games, and discussed possible problems teacher trainees will face when using games in secondary schools in Malaysia and concluded that games are conducive for foreign language learning and their educational value cannot be denied by even the most staid teacher.

In a more recent study, Lawrence and Lawrence (2013) examined the attitudes of student teachers towards using the grammar games for teaching English. Based on the analysis of the data collected from student teachers in Tirunelveli district, they found that majority of the student teachers had a favorable attitude towards the using grammar games for teaching English at the secondary level, and that female teacher trainees favored games more than their male counterparts. As it can be understood from the results of the studies mentioned above, it is undeniable that games have educational value. However, we must bear in mind that there are advantages and disadvantages of using games and that certain criteria are to be met when using games in EFL classes.

Constantinescu (2012, p.112) stated that there are several points to be considered when choosing language games:

- “Games should have an aim. They are used to motivate students, not only for fun.
- Games should focus on the use of language. By their means students have to learn, practise, or refresh language components
- The content should be appropriate. It should fit the curriculum, be correct from all points of view and not to promote wrong values (e.g. violence).
- Games should be technically easy to use in the classroom.
- Games should be in accordance with students’ age and level of knowledge.
- Games should keep all of the students interested.
- It is advisable to use short games; otherwise students may lose their interest.”

In foreign language learning games can be considered as a framework to provide a meaningful context for language acquisition. Constantinescu (2012, p.114) states that educational games improve students’ understanding of written and spoken English (they get accustomed to learning words and structures in a context, they learn correct pronunciation and spelling).

Constantinescu (2012, p.115) states the following with regard to advantages of games:

- “Games build up learners’ English repertoire in a familiar and comfortable environment (even for students who may have special needs), where they feel confident. More than this, English is widespread used with computers.
- Games increase motivation and desire for self improvement.
- Challenge and competition are key factors for any game and students pay more attention to completing the task.
- Interdisciplinary approach. Students use knowledge from other classes, too.
- Games develop students’ ability to observe.
- Games have clear rules and objectives.
- Games develop critical thinking, problem solving, and imagination.
- Games offer new and dynamic forms of teaching/ practicing which replace the traditional worksheets.
- Games are adaptable for different levels of knowledge.
- Educational games are easy to understand and use.
- Educational games do not take long time to be played in the class.
- There are many online educational games which are free of charge.
- Immediate feedback both for the students and the teacher.
- The results are more visible (sometimes both visual and acoustic) and have a stronger impact.
- The working time is usually known from the beginning and it is respected
- Games facilitate collaborative learning but, in the same time, students may learn at their own speed and cognitive level.
- Games may be used in the classroom as rewards for students.”

Besides games can boost motivation as they are challenging. They have both competitive and collaborative aspects, which can be used to take account of different learning styles and individual differences in the class. Games can encourage students to be more active during class. Games can be motivating as they provide more chances to learners to be active participants as the constructors of knowledge in ELF class. Their creativity and critical thinking skills can be improved as they are to be strategic in using the knowledge and skills they have. They can find innovative ways to use knowledge and reflect upon their learning process. Therefore, games are to be considered as valuable part of effective foreign language classrooms.

However, we must bear in mind that it is the teacher’s responsibility to arrange games in a way to emphasize their educational value. The instructions are to be given clearly, and rules and scoring are to be explicitly stated at the beginning. Besides, for each game teachers are to have clear educational purpose and assessment tool in mind. The students can be asked to reflect about the experience and note down what they have learnt, the problems they faced in the game. It is the teacher’s duty to provide feedback about the general mistakes during games after it is over.

The Aim of the Study

The main aim of this study is to determine the views of elementary EFL learners about learning grammar with games. Within the scope of the study, three dimensions were handled: students' evaluation of learning English grammar with games, the challenges they faced during the application process and their suggestions for application. The study also aims to determine the level students think they can use the grammar they learnt in this instruction period in productive skills, namely; writing and speaking. To this end, answers for the following questions were sought:

1. What are the views of the students with regard to learning English grammar with games?
2. What are the views of the students with regard to the challenges they faced in the application process?
3. What are the students' suggestions with regard to the application?

METHOD

This study, which attempts to determine views of elementary EFL learners with regard to learning English Grammar, employed a case study model, which is one of the qualitative research paradigms. The essential characteristics of qualitative inquiries are the definition of the problem- which is not necessarily be at the beginning of the study-, examination of environmental factors within the framework of participants, data collection from a determined small group of respondents, and the use of non-numerical and interpretive approaches to reach descriptive stories of participants and their environments (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006). In this case study, horizontal and in-depth examinations were made rather than discussing limited numbers of variables with rigid rules (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

The study sample included 49 elementary EFL learners majoring in Pre-school education at the Faculty of Education, Cumhuriyet University in the fall term of 2013 and 2014 education year. The group was chosen by the researchers as one of the researchers was teaching the class. In spite of the fact that they have been learning English for 7 seven years, they were at elementary level. At the beginning of the term, the 56 students were given an English proficiency exam at intermediate level and 7 students passed the exam and exempted from the course. As a result, a total of 49 elementary level students were left in the class. Some students failed to attend all the games and thus data were collected from only those who took part in all game activities (n=35). The students were informed about the study and learning grammar with games before the application process and participated in the study upon their consents.

Procedure

The study was conducted by one of the researches in his classes. Games from a grammar games book were adopted and used to practice grammar point covered in the week. The researcher as the teacher of the class met the students 3 class hours a week during 2 hours of which he taught the grammar point and conducted the game activities for consolidation in the last hour. The researcher provided the instructions and displayed how the game is played with a sample group in front of the classroom. New vocabulary in the game activities were covered and written on the board by the teacher, which remained on the board till the game activity ended as a scaffold for students experiencing difficulty with the vocabulary in the game.

The instruction period lasted for 5 weeks and one class hours were allocated for teaching target grammar point each week. The students practiced the Simple Present Tense, Adverbs of frequency, the Present Continuous tense, the Future Tense, Present Perfect Tense. The activities and relevant images were taken from Zaorob and Chin (2001) with small procedural amendments.

Considering the scope of the article, it will be sufficient to mention the procedures for only one of the games. The game is called "Time and again" aims to practice the use of adverbs of frequency (every day, more than once a day, quite often, almost every day, about once a week, sometimes, a couple of times a month, once or twice a year, not very often, hardly ever, seldom, never), to make students practice asking questions in the Simple Present Tense using "How often.." and use target vocabulary in the activity cards.

At the beginning of the game, the teacher as the researcher wrote the target adverbs of frequency on the board and studies their meaning by providing their L1 equivalents and taught their pronunciation with

repetitions. Later on the pictures of the activity cards were shown and their meanings in English were discussed with the students.

The teacher asked a group of students to play the game as a demo for the whole class. After that the teacher asked the students to form group of fours and provided them with a set activity cards (n=15) and frequency of adverbs cards (see the Appendix A). The teacher asked each group to shuffle and deal frequency cards out evenly and place activity cards face down in the middle. Then, the first player starts the game by picking up an activity card and asking a question about the activity beginning with “How often?”. The first player (and others in turn) direct the question to whom s/he thinks will answer using one of the frequency card the first player himself/herself has. Then, the next player picks up an activity card and asks a question and the game goes on like this till the player who gets rid of all of his/her frequency cards first is announced as the winner.

The target language output for the game is follows:

A: How often do you do your homework?

B: I seldom do my homework.

The students were asked to reflect on the learning experience and note down challenges and suggestions about the learning experience after each class hour. The students’ views were taken by the researcher immediately after all the activities had been finished. Solutions and suggestions were discussed and shared among students as a part of feedback. The following procedural steps were followed during the implementation of the study:

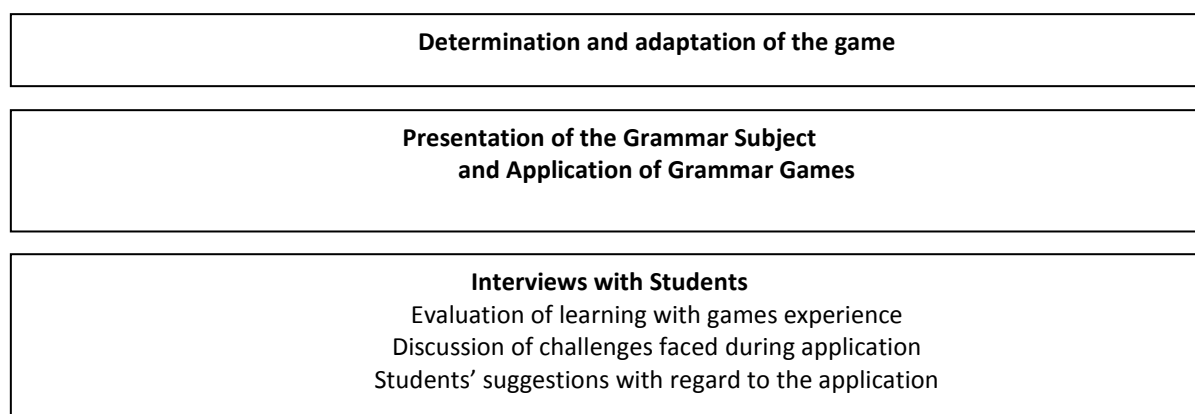


Figure 1: The Procedure of the Study

Data Collection

In the study, semi-structured interview was conducted with students to reveal their views about learning English grammar with games. With this aim in mind, an interview form was developed by the researchers. Relevant literature was reviewed and expert views were taken for the validity of the interview form. After all the game activities were finished, the interviews were made with volunteered students among the participants, whose consent was taken by informing them that their names will be kept confidential and that their comments will be used only for the study.

Data Analysis

For the analysis of the data, descriptive analysis method, which is one of the qualitative data analyses methods, was used. In descriptive analysis, the aim is to present findings in an organized way with interpretations. Later on, these descriptions are explained and interpreted, causal relations are discussed and conclusions are drawn (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005).

After interviews are completed, voice records were transcribed. Transcribed interviews were thoroughly read by the researchers to look for patterns that make sense. To achieve reliability, the transcripts were independently coded by two of the researchers. Later on, the authors discussed their ideas and agreed on the

classifications. In the remaining part of the report, after the analyses by one of the authors were checked by the other author, disagreements were discussed and related changes were made. Amendments were made upon consensus before theme series are constructed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, the results of the analyses of the interviews with students are presented. The findings were classified under three themes: students' evaluation of learning grammar with games, challenges faced during application and their suggestions with regard to the application. Detailed information about each theme is given below.

Evaluation of Learning Grammar with Games

With regard to learning grammar with games students stated that they learnt the grammar points better, had fun learning foreign language and thus their motivation and self-confidence in English increased and that learning with games can possibly lead to longer retention of the knowledge acquired. One of the students stated the following sentences to indicate that he understood grammar points more easily:

"I understood tenses better in this class. I learnt more easily..... I think that it (game activities) should not be only employed at the end of the class but every time."(Mehmet)

One of the students stated that they were pleased with this application and attended classes more eagerly during the application:

"First of all, in this class questions like "How much time do we have left ?" were reduced to the least.....I have not played any language learning game before. But now I see that many things could be taught in this way."(Ayla)

Some of the students stated that grammar practice with games increased their success and they think that learning with games will yield longer retention.

"I think English should be learnt in this way.....I understood the topic better. I think I will remember (the topic) for longer period of time."(Maşide)

"It increased our learning and it was catchier."(Merve)

"I think the things we learnt would be more long lasting as we studied them practically."(Nurgül)

The students also stated that their motivation increased their attitudes toward English class changed positively and their self-confidence increased. The participants emphasized that learning grammar with games motivated them to study and learn used the following sentences to indicate that they willingly took part in the games and become aware of their learning processes:

"It increased my self-confidence.....My speaking skill improved and the classes became more entertaining."(Aliye)

"If the classes go on like this, we can learn English more easily in a fun way."(Asım)

"We should always do it."(Tuğçe)

"It was better when we did it practically. I think I can ask and answer questions. I liked it very much."(Pınar)

"The classes made me think that I can come over English."(Emine)

"Our motivation increases when games and grammar are intertwined and thus learn better."(Esin)

"If we go on like this, I think I can talk easily."(Habib)

When the students' statements are considered, it is understood that learning grammar with games made students enjoy foreign language learning, increased their perception of success and self-confidence in English class, and motivated them to learn the language. Furthermore, they stated that it increased retention of what has been learnt and their attitudes toward the lesson changed positively. In addition to gains in the grammar

points, students stated that their speaking skills and vocabulary knowledge increased. Based on the students' responses, it can be argued that learning grammar with games is effective in foreign language learning.

Challenges Faced During the Application Process

In their responds with regard to the problems they had during the process, the students shared their feelings and previous language learning experiences. For example, one of the students stated the following with regard to her feelings:

"I would be better if grammar structures were written as a summary on the board. I think I would understand better if they were written on the board more concretely."(Aysun)

Some of the students indicated that they had a problem to make sentences as they did not know some vocabulary items.

"It would have been better if we wrote the Turkish meanings of the words on the board" I had difficulty in learning the vocabulary."(Ayla)

"The number of unknown vocabulary is a little bit more...I am having a little difficulty."(Tuğçe)

Yet another student stated that *"it would have been better if we knew more vocabulary. At least, we would make sentences more actively."*(Asım)

Some of the students said the following:

"I had difficulty making sentences but I think it was beneficial."(Aliye)

"I had difficulty in the Simple Past tense (game) because I did not know the V2 forms of the verbs."(Ayşe)

Some of the students stated that the number of groups was a problem:

"...but there was a lot of confusion and noise as the number of the groups was too much."(Havva)

As it is seen, the students stated that they had difficulty in vocabulary and sometimes in the grammar structures. Besides, the number of the groups and the design of classroom was a problem for the students. The problems the teachers as the researcher observed will be mentioned in as suggestions in the conclusion.

Suggestions with Regard to Application

The students made suggestions with regard to the effective English grammar learning with games. These suggestions focused on the pace of the game activities, choice of games, the number of the groups and the number of sessions and the quality of information and instruction provided about the games.

Some of the students made the following suggestions with regard to the game activities:

"We could have started with a larger group and then we could consolidate it (the topic) in smaller groups."(Ayla)

"Groups of two or three would enhance communication."(Maşide)

"I would be better if we played them as a whole class."(Hayriye)

"...besides better groupings can contribute to the effectiveness of the games."(Gülhan)

"It would be better if the class were a little slower."(Tuğçe)

"We can play games about vocabulary as well."(Zeynep)

"It would be better if the copies were colorful."(Remziye)

As it can be understood from the students' suggestions, for a more effective application it would be appropriate to provide more detailed instruction about games and their objectives. Vocabulary items and grammar points are to be written on the board and stay there till the activity ends, and the games are to be played in smaller groups. Besides, the pace of the game is to be tuned to the level of the students.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

When students' statements with regard to the evaluation of learning grammar with games are considered, it is understood that the students had fun learning the foreign language with games and it encouraged them to reflect on their learning experience and improve themselves, motivated them to study EFL. Besides, the students stated that the application motivated them to study and increased their self-confidence. The students think that they can be more successful and use linguistic knowledge in speaking as well. Moreover, they think that the grammar points learnt with games will be more long lasting.

The students stated that learning with games was more effective compared to traditionally conducted classes as they played games and acquired new knowledge as they had fun. The students in the study agreed on the idea that more detailed information is to be provided about the procedure and objectives of the games. Besides, they stated that grouping is another important factor for the effectiveness of language learning games.

As a result of this case study, the following are research and application suggestions with regard to the use of games in foreign language can be made:

- Longer periods of application such as a whole term or academic can increase students' exposure to more games and different kinds of games, which is expected to reveal the effectiveness of learning with games more clearly.
- The instructions and objectives of the games are to be clearly stated and the game is to be exemplified in front of the class.
- The seats in the classrooms can be arranged in a way to increase group interaction
- The materials can be printed colorfully on hard paper so that they can be reused. Besides, colorful pictures with comic strips on them can be anchor language points in the long term memory of the learners.
- Summary of grammar structures and new vocabulary with their L1 meanings are to be written on the board and be available during activities.
- New games can be developed so that students can learn different grammar subjects or skills in a foreign language more easily.
- Besides descriptive studies which examines the experiences of learners and teachers other types of qualitative research paradigms can provide in-depth insights about the processes in teaching and learning a foreign language with games.
- In this study, elementary level EFL students were taught grammar with games. The study aimed to reveal the effectiveness of learning grammar with games. Further studies can examine the effectiveness of games in foreign language teaching by focusing on other areas and skills in language learning in EFL learners at different levels and in different contexts.

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APPENDIX A

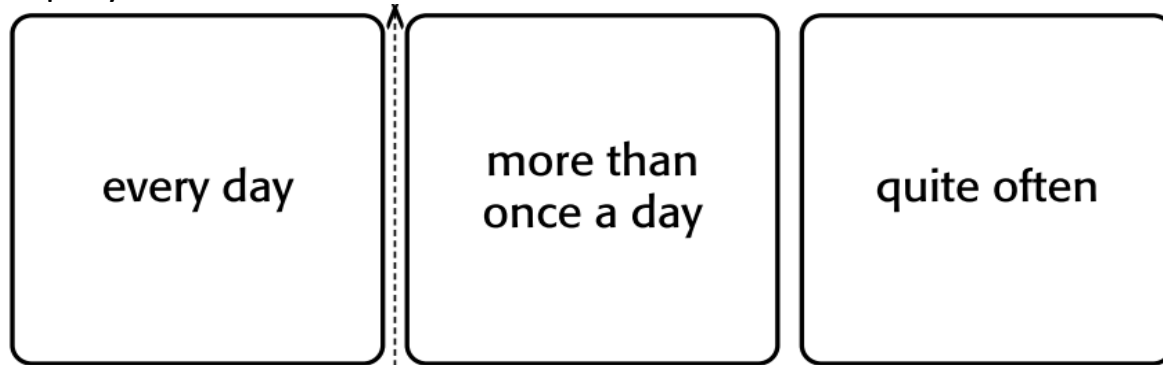
Examples of Activity Cards and Frequency Cards

Activity Cards



(From Zaorob and Chin, 2001)

Frequency Cards



(From Zaorob and Chin, 2001)