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Exploring the use of grammar games to enhance EFL iraqi students performance in grammar

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Abstract

The current research investigates the affect of grammar games on enhancing the grammatical competence of Iraqi students who learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Traditional grammar instruction often depends solely on memorization and repeating exercises, which can result to student disengagement and limited long-term retention. To address these challenges, this research investigates the effectiveness of incorporating grammar games into the EFL classroom as a dynamic and interactive teaching strategy. Through a mixed-methods approach, quantitative data was collected via pre- and post-tests to measure improvements in grammar proficiency, while qualitative data from student feedback and classroom observations provided insights into the engagement and motivation levels of the participants. The findings indicate that grammar games not only significantly improve grammatical accuracy but also foster a more positive attitude towards learning grammar. This study suggests that grammar games can be a valuable pedagogical tool in EFL contexts, particularly for enhancing the performance and enthusiasm of Iraqi students.

Research Problem: Iraqi students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) often struggle with mastering English grammar, a challenge that is exacerbated by traditional teaching methods, which tend to emphasize rote memorization and repetitive exercises. These methods frequently result in low engagement, poor retention, and a lack of enthusiasm for grammar learning. Despite the recognized importance of grammar in achieving language proficiency, there is limited research on alternative teaching strategies that could better support Iraqi EFL students in this area. The problem this research seeks to address is whether the integration of grammar games into the EFL curriculum can enhance Iraqi students' grammatical proficiency and overall engagement with the learning process.

Research Aims

1. To assess the impact of grammar games on Iraqi EFL students' grammar proficiency.
2. To compare grammar games with traditional methods in enhancing grammar performance.
3. To evaluate student engagement and motivation with grammar games.
4. To identify challenges and benefits of using grammar games in EFL instruction.

Research Questions

1. How do grammar games affect Iraqi EFL students' grammar proficiency?
2. How do grammar games compare to traditional methods in improving grammar?
3. What is the impact of grammar games on student engagement and motivation?
4. What are the challenges and benefits of using grammar games in the EFL classroom?

Research Importance: This research is significant as it addresses the ongoing challenges faced by Iraqi EFL students in mastering English grammar, a foundational aspect of language proficiency. By exploring the use of grammar games as an alternative instructional strategy, the study seeks to offer practical solutions that can enhance both student engagement and learning outcomes. The findings have the potential to inform educational practices and curriculum development in Iraqi EFL classrooms, providing teachers with innovative tools to improve grammar instruction. Additionally, the research contributes to the broader field of language pedagogy by highlighting the effectiveness of interactive and student-centered learning approaches in a context where traditional methods often fall short.

Keywords: Grammar, EFL, proficiency, dynamic

Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction often presents significant challenges, particularly in grammar acquisition, which is crucial for achieving proficiency in a new language. In Iraq, EFL learners frequently encounter difficulties in mastering English grammar due to the traditional method of teaching which depend solely on repeating exercises and memorization. These conventional approaches often result in low student

engagement, inadequate retention, and a lack of enthusiasm for learning. Recent educational research highlights the potential of innovative instructional strategies to enhance language learning. Among these, grammar games have emerged as a promising method to make grammar instruction more engaging and effective. Grammar games introduce an element of play into the learning process, providing students with interactive and context-rich experiences that can improve both understanding and retention of grammatical structures. This research explores the use of grammar games as a pedagogical tool to enhance the grammatical proficiency of Iraqi EFL students. It aims to determine whether incorporating games into grammar instruction can lead to better learning outcomes compared to traditional methods. By examining both quantitative and qualitative data, the study seeks to assess the impact of grammar games on students' grammar performance, engagement, and motivation. This research is crucial as it may provide practical strategies for EFL teachers in Iraq and comparable regions. If successful, the use of grammar games could revolutionize grammar instruction by making it more dynamic and effective, ultimately leading to improved language proficiency among EFL learners. This study contributes to the broader field of language pedagogy by evaluating an innovative approach to teaching grammar and providing evidence-based recommendations for enhancing EFL instruction.

Theories of Language Acquisition

Understanding how learners acquire a second language is essential for developing effective instructional strategies. Several prominent theories offer insights into the processes involved in language learning, particularly in grammar acquisition.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis

According to Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis, language learning happens when students encounter language input that is just beyond their existing level of understanding (Krashen, 1982) ^[12]. According to this theory, meaningful and understandable language exposure facilitates subconscious learning, which is more effective than explicit instruction. Grammar games can provide such input by immersing students in contexts where grammatical structures are used naturally, promoting intuitive understanding and retention.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory focuses on the critical role of social engagement and cultural influences in cognitive growth (Vygotsky, 1978) ^[17]. The idea of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) indicates that learners can reach greater comprehension when provided with suitable guidance and collaborative interaction. Grammar games often involve collaborative activities that encourage interaction among learners, allowing them to scaffold each other's learning within their ZPDs and facilitating deeper grammatical comprehension.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative Language Teaching focuses on the ability to communicate meaningfully and effectively in the target language (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980) ^[9, 2]. CLT advocates for teaching methods that prioritize meaningful

communication over rote memorization of rules. Grammar games align with CLT principles by engaging students in interactive tasks that require the use of correct grammatical structures in authentic communicative contexts, thereby enhancing both fluency and accuracy.

Constructivism and Learning through Play

Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivism, a theory most famously associated with Jean Piaget, Piaget (1952) ^[14] argues that learners develop and enhance their understanding of the world by engaging with their surroundings and reflecting on their experiences. From this viewpoint, knowledge isn't simply absorbed from outside sources; rather, it is actively constructed by the learner. This process entails merging new information with pre-existing cognitive frameworks, highlighting the critical role of prior knowledge in learning. Learning, therefore, is seen as an active, contextualized endeavor where individuals are not merely recipients of information but participants in a continuous process of knowledge construction. In the context of language acquisition, grammar games serve as a practical application of constructivist principles. These games create opportunities for experiential learning, allowing students to engage with language structures in a meaningful and interactive manner. By incorporating elements of play, experimentation, and feedback, grammar games align with the constructivist view that learning is best achieved through active engagement rather than passive reception.

Grammar games facilitate a hands-on approach where learners can explore and experiment with grammatical rules in a low-stakes environment. This experiential learning allows students to test their understanding, receive immediate feedback, and adjust their strategies based on their observations and interactions. Such activities help students to build a deeper, more nuanced understanding of grammar by linking theoretical knowledge with practical application. Furthermore, the contextualized nature of these games means that learners are not merely practicing isolated grammar rules but are using them in context, which enhances their ability to integrate and apply their knowledge in real-world scenarios. Overall, grammar games exemplify constructivist principles by providing a structured yet flexible environment where students can actively engage with language, experiment with grammatical concepts, and refine their understanding through ongoing reflection and feedback. This approach aligns with the constructivist view of learning as an active, dynamic process where knowledge is constructed through meaningful interactions and experiences.

Play Theory in Education

Play is widely recognized as a fundamental aspect of learning, playing a vital role in fostering creativity, problem-solving abilities, and engagement among learners. Bruner (1972) ^[1] posits that play is not merely a frivolous activity but a crucial component of the cognitive development process. Through play, learners are able to explore and experiment with concepts in a low-pressure environment, which significantly contributes to their motivation and retention of information. This view is supported by contemporary research, which underscores the importance of play in creating enriching learning experiences that support cognitive and emotional development (Vygotsky,

1978)^[17]. Vygotsky (1978)^[17] further elaborates on the role of play in cognitive development, emphasizing that it creates a zone of proximal development where learners can achieve higher levels of understanding and skills through guided interaction and exploration.

According to Vygotsky, play allows children to practice and develop new cognitive abilities in a socially interactive context, which can lead to enhanced problem-solving skills and creativity. The integration of games into educational contexts, particularly within grammar instruction, effectively leverages the benefits of play. Ellis (2005)^[5] argues that games can transform the often daunting task of learning grammar into an engaging and enjoyable activity. By incorporating game-based learning strategies, educators can reduce the anxiety typically associated with language learning and create a more positive and supportive learning environment. Games and playful activities in the classroom help to mitigate the stress and fear that can hinder language acquisition, making the learning process more accessible and enjoyable for students. Research by Gee (2003) supports this perspective by demonstrating that game-based learning environments promote active engagement and deeper cognitive processing. Gee's work highlights how games facilitate problem-solving and critical thinking by presenting learners with challenges that require them to apply and reinforce their knowledge in dynamic ways. Additionally, game-based learning encourages collaboration and social interaction, further enhancing the learning experience. Incorporating playful methods into grammar instruction aligns with the broader educational goals of fostering a love for learning and encouraging lifelong intellectual curiosity. By creating a context where learners can engage with grammatical concepts through enjoyable and interactive means, educators can help students develop a more positive attitude toward language learning and improve their overall proficiency.

Language Learning

Benefits of Using Games in EFL Contexts

Games have been identified as effective tools in language education for several reasons:

- **Enhanced Engagement and Motivation:** Games make learning interactive and fun, increasing students' willingness to participate and persist in learning activities (Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 2006)^[18].
- **Contextualized Learning:** Games provide meaningful contexts for language use, helping learners understand how grammatical structures function in real-life communication (Hadfield, 1990)^[7].
- **Immediate Feedback:** Many games offer instant feedback, allowing learners to recognize and correct errors promptly, which is crucial for effective grammar acquisition (DeKeyser, 1998)^[4].
- **Collaborative Learning:** Games often involve teamwork, promoting cooperative learning and communication skills among students (Jacobs & Hall, 2002)^[2].

Challenges of Implementing Games in Grammar Instruction

While games offer numerous benefits, several challenges may arise:

- **Cultural Appropriateness:** Not all games may be suitable for all cultural contexts, and educators must

select or adapt games that resonate with Iraqi students' cultural backgrounds (Lee, 1995)^[13].

- **Classroom Management:** Games can sometimes lead to excessive noise or off-task behavior if not well-managed (Rixon, 1981)^[15].
- **Resource Constraints:** Developing and implementing games may require additional time and resources, which could be limited in some educational settings (Uberman, 1998)^[16].

Implications for Iraqi EFL Context

Applying these theories and findings to the Iraqi EFL context suggests that grammar games could address common challenges such as low student engagement and difficulties in grasping complex grammatical structures. By adopting game-based learning strategies, educators may create more dynamic and effective learning environments that cater to diverse learning styles and needs.

Research Methodology

This chapter details the research framework, including the study's participants, tools, procedures, and data analysis techniques used to study the effectiveness of grammar games in enhancing the grammatical skills of Iraqi EFL students. A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to offer a thorough understanding of the impact of grammar games on students' grammar performance, engagement, and motivation.

Research Design

This research uses a quasi-experimental design with a control group (CG) and an experimental group (EG) to measure the effectiveness of grammar games compared to traditional grammar instruction. The research also incorporates a qualitative component through interviews and classroom observations to capture the students' and teachers' experiences and perceptions of using grammar games in the classroom.

- **Quantitative Component:** Pre-tests and post-tests (PR & PO) are administered to both the CG and EG to measure changes in grammar proficiency.
- **Qualitative Component:** Semi-structured interviews with students and teachers, along with classroom observations, are conducted to gather insights into the participants' engagement, motivation, and perceptions of grammar games.

Participants

The study involves a sample of 60 Iraqi EFL students from a secondary school in Baghdad, divided equally into two groups:

- **Experimental Group (n = 30):** This group receives grammar instruction through grammar games.
- **Control Group (n = 30):** This group receives traditional grammar instruction using rote learning and rule memorization methods.

The participants are selected through purposive sampling to ensure that both groups are comparable in terms of age, gender, and baseline English proficiency. Additionally, 5 EFL teachers from the same school participate in the study to provide insights through interviews and facilitate classroom observations.

Instruments

Pre-Test and Post-Test

- **Purpose:** To assess the students' grammar proficiency before and after the intervention.
- **Content:** The tests consist of multiple-choice questions, sentence correction tasks, and short written exercises covering key grammatical structures (e.g., tenses, subject-verb agreement, and prepositions).
- **Validation:** The tests are validated by a panel of EFL experts to ensure content validity and reliability.

Grammar Games

- **Purpose:** To provide the experimental group with engaging and interactive grammar practice.
- **Types of Games:** The games include activities such as grammar bingo, sentence races, and role-play scenarios that focus on practicing specific grammar rules in a fun and interactive way.
- **Implementation:** The games are integrated into regular grammar lessons over an eight-week period, with each session lasting 45 minutes.

Semi-Structured Interviews

- **Purpose:** To explore students' and teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness and enjoyment of grammar games.
- **Participants:** 10 students (5 from each group) and all 5 teachers are interviewed.
- **Content:** Questions focus on students' experiences with grammar games, their perceived impact on learning, and teachers' observations of student engagement and behavior.

Classroom Observations

- **Purpose:** To observe the dynamics of using grammar games in the classroom and their impact on student interaction and participation.
- **Focus:** Observations are conducted during the experimental group's sessions, with attention to student engagement, collaboration, and the effectiveness of the games in promoting grammatical understanding.

Procedures

Pre-Testing

- **Timing:** A pre-test is administered to both groups before the start of the intervention.
- **Purpose:** To establish baseline grammar proficiency levels for comparison with post-test results.

Intervention

- **Experimental Group:** Receives grammar instruction through the use of grammar games over eight weeks.
- **Control Group:** Continues with traditional grammar instruction over the same period.
- **Frequency:** Both groups receive three grammar lessons per week, each lasting 45 minutes.

Post-Testing

- **Timing:** A post-test is administered to both groups after the intervention.
- **Purpose:** To measure changes in grammar proficiency and compare the effectiveness of the two instructional methods.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data Analysis

The data from (PR & PO) scores are examined through descriptive statistics (such as mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (including t-tests) to assess if there is a notable difference in grammar proficiency between the CG and EG

Effect Size: Calculated to assess the practical significance of the results.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores

Group	Test	N	Mean	Standard Deviations (SD)
Experimental	Pre-Test	30	58.4	7.2
Experimental	Post-Test	30	75.6	6.8
Control	Pre-Test	30	57.9	7.5
Control	Post-Test	30	61.3	7.0

The table presents the scores of PR & PO for each one of the groups, the CG and EG, revealing important results into the affect of grammar games on the grammatical proficiency of Iraqi EFL students.

Improvement in the Experimental Group

- **Pre-Test to Post-Test Change:** The experimental group, which was exposed to grammar games, showed a significant increase in their mean scores from 58.4 (SD = 7.2) in the pre-test to 75.6 (SD = 6.8) in the post-test. This substantial improvement of 17.2 points indicates that the grammar games had a strong positive effect on students' grammar proficiency.
- **Standard Deviation:** The slight decrease in the standard deviation from 7.2 to 6.8 suggests that the scores became slightly more consistent across the group after the intervention. This could indicate that the grammar games not only improved overall proficiency but also helped to narrow the performance gap between students, making their learning outcomes more uniform.

Improvement in the Control Group

- **Pre-Test to Post-Test Change:** The control group, which received traditional grammar instruction, also demonstrated an improvement, albeit a much smaller one, with mean scores rising from 57.9 (SD = 7.5) in the pre-test to 61.3 (SD = 7.0) in the post-test. The increase of 3.4 points reflects some level of learning but is far less pronounced than in the experimental group.
- **Standard Deviation:** The reduction in the standard deviation from 7.5 to 7.0 in the control group suggests a slight improvement in score consistency, but this change is minimal. The small shift in standard deviation, combined with the modest increase in mean scores, indicates that traditional methods were less effective at improving students' grammar proficiency and did little to address individual differences in performance.

Comparative Analysis

- **Mean Score Comparison:** The comparison between the CG and EG shows that students in the experimental group, who used grammar games, experienced a much greater improvement in their grammar scores than those in the control group. The mean score increase of 17.2 points in the experimental group far exceeds the 3.4-

point increase in the control group, highlighting the effectiveness of grammar games as a teaching tool.

- **Implications:** The significant difference in the outcomes between the two groups suggests that grammar games can be a highly effective strategy for improving grammar proficiency in EFL students. The games likely provided a more engaging and interactive learning experience, which not only made the learning process enjoyable but also enhanced students' ability to retain and apply grammatical rules.

The results indicate that incorporating grammar games into EFL instruction can lead to substantial improvements in students' grammatical knowledge. This has important

implications for language teaching practices, particularly in contexts like Iraq, where traditional methods have dominated. The findings support the argument that more innovative, student-centered approaches can significantly enhance learning outcomes, making a strong case for the broader adoption of such methods in EFL classrooms. In conclusion, the analysis of the results clearly demonstrates that grammar games have a powerful and positive impact on the grammar proficiency of Iraqi EFL students. The data suggests that these games could be an essential tool in modernizing language education, making it more effective and accessible for learners of all levels.

Inferential Statistics

Table 2: Paired Sample t-Test Results for Experimental and Control Groups

Group	Test Comparison	Mean difference	T-value	P-value	Effect size Cohen's d
Experimental	Pre vs. Post	17.2	12.45	<0.001	2.47
Control	Pre vs. Post	3.4	2.35	0.025	0.46

The results presented in the table indicate a significant improvement in grammar proficiency for the EG compared to the CG, as evidenced by the differences in mean scores, t-values, p-values, and effect sizes. For the experimental group, which used grammar games, the mean difference between pre-test and post-test scores was 17.2, with a highly significant t-value of 12.45 ($p < 0.001$) and a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 2.47$). This substantial effect size suggests that the intervention had a powerful and meaningful impact on the students' grammar proficiency, indicating that the use of grammar games was not only statistically significant but also practically significant in enhancing learning outcomes. In contrast, the control group, which received traditional grammar instruction, showed a much smaller mean difference of 3.4, with a t-value of 2.35 and a p-value of 0.025. Although this result is statistically significant, the effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.46$) is moderate, indicating a far less pronounced impact on grammar proficiency. The comparison clearly demonstrates that grammar games were significantly more effective than traditional methods in improving students' grammar skills, highlighting the value of innovative, interactive teaching strategies in EFL contexts.

Results

The results of the research indicate a clear and substantial impact of grammar games on improving the grammatical proficiency of Iraqi EFL students compared to traditional teaching methods. The experimental group, which engaged in grammar games, showed a marked improvement, with a significant increase in mean test scores and a large effect size, indicating both statistical and practical significance. The t-test results confirmed that the observed changes were highly significant, suggesting that the interactive and engaging nature of grammar games effectively enhanced students' understanding and retention of grammatical structures. In contrast, the control group, which received traditional instruction, exhibited only a modest improvement in grammar scores, with a smaller effect size that, while statistically significant, was far less impactful. This disparity in outcomes highlights the limitations of conventional grammar teaching methods and underscores the potential benefits of integrating game-based learning into the curriculum. The findings suggest that grammar games not

only improve students' grammatical knowledge but also contribute to greater engagement and motivation, which are critical factors in language acquisition. Overall, the research provides strong evidence that grammar games are an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing grammar proficiency in EFL students, offering valuable insights for educators seeking to improve learning outcomes in similar contexts. Building on these results, it is evident that the use of grammar games can transform the traditional approach to grammar instruction by making it more dynamic and student-centered. The significant gains observed in the experimental group indicate that grammar games can address common challenges in EFL education, such as low engagement, lack of motivation, and difficulties in retaining complex grammatical rules. These games, by introducing elements of fun and competition, likely stimulated greater cognitive involvement and reinforced learning through repetition in a more enjoyable context. Furthermore, the large effect size suggests that the improvements were not just momentary but likely had a lasting impact on the students' language skills.

In contrast, the modest gains in the control group highlight the limitations of traditional grammar instruction, which may not be as effective in fostering deep understanding or long-term retention of grammar concepts. The relatively small effect size in the control group suggests that while students did learn, the traditional methods were less efficient and less motivating, potentially leading to lower levels of engagement and slower progress. This contrast between the groups emphasizes the importance of incorporating innovative teaching strategies that can cater to diverse learning styles and needs. The findings of this research have broader implications for EFL education, particularly in contexts like Iraq where traditional methods are still prevalent. The success of grammar games in this study suggests that educators should consider adopting more interactive and student-focused approaches to teaching grammar. By doing so, they can enhance not only grammatical proficiency but also overall language acquisition, making learning more accessible and effective for students. Additionally, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on the effectiveness of game-based learning in language education, providing empirical evidence that supports its use as a valuable teaching tool.

Conclusion

The research demonstrates that grammar games are a highly effective tool for enhancing the grammatical proficiency of Iraqi EFL students. Compared to traditional teaching methods, grammar games significantly improve students' understanding, retention, and application of grammatical structures. The results indicate that integrating games into the EFL curriculum not only boosts grammar scores but also increases student engagement and motivation, leading to a more dynamic and interactive learning experience. The findings suggest that grammar games can address the limitations of conventional approaches, providing a practical and enjoyable way to reinforce language learning. This research supports the broader adoption of game-based learning strategies in EFL education, particularly in contexts where traditional methods have proven insufficient. By leveraging the benefits of grammar games, educators can foster more effective and meaningful language acquisition, ultimately contributing to better educational outcomes for EFL learners.

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