Enhancing Learners' Sentence Constructions via "Wheel of Grammar"

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to strengthen students' foundation of grammar in sentence construction. The problem statement is that students are unable to perform well in the English language classes, particularly in constructing simple sentences. Thus, this research examined whether 'Wheel Of Grammar' (WOG) is able to help students in constructing grammatically correct simple sentences. The rationale is to ensure students' confidence in the use of basic rules of Subject-Verb Agreement in sentence construction. Fifteen Form 5 students were chosen as sample based on their diagnostic test and first middle-semester examination results to avoid any biasness. The research used mixed-method design where quantitative data from pre- and post-tests were used to measure the outcome. To triangulate data findings, responses from the informal interviews and classroom observations were taken into consideration. The students' response reflects the improvement in sentence construction. They were able to apply correct basic rules of Subject-Verb Agreement, the right usage of tenses and Verbs-To-Be in the tasks. Grammar lessons became less stressful as they could easily search for answers in a fun and creative way.

Keywords: Grammar, simple sentences, Wheel of Grammar, Subject-Verb Agreement, tenses

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, English Language is taught as a second language and every child is given a guarantee that he or she will master it within a certain period of time (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, 2012). Education in Malaysia emphasises on an individual's academic achievements as

important for his or her success in life . The country's education philosophy is aimed at developing an individual's potential holistically and integratively apart from being knowledgeable and able to contribute to the harmony of the family, society and the nation (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, 2012). In order to be at par with the others and to keep pace in an increasingly competitive world, it is essential for learners to have a firm foundation in grammar. Crystal (2012) claimed that English language will certainly connect one with more people compared with any other languages, thus, serving as a motivation to learn it but it takes a great effort to master it. Having a good foundation in basic grammar is the biggest challenge for today's learners. In fact, lack of knowledge in grammar, vocabulary and generic structure are the main reason for lack of proficiency in the target language this (Kee, 2013; Ali & Yunus, 2004).

The study was conducted at SMK Kanowit whereby majority of the 1313 students are Ibans. Thus, it is common to see Malay, Chinese, Bidayuh, Kenyah, Kayan, Melanau, Indian and Dusun student conversing in Iban language among themselves and with their teachers even during English language classes. Due to this, students are unable to perform well in the English language classes. They have difficulty constructing simple sentences and this is clearly a major problem. Secondly, they face great difficulty in scoring good results in the examinations due to inadequate exposure to the language. Three factors have been identified as possible causes.

First, most of the students are still confused with the rules of Subject-Verb Agreement (SVA). Second, they are unsure when to use the present and past tenses. In addition, they tend to omit the use of the Verbs-To-Be (VTB) whenever they construct sentences. As a result, related skills such as reading, speaking and listening are also hampered, causing them to gradually lose interest and confidence in using the language. The best way to improve students' English proficiency is to expose them to the language as early and as extensively as possible (Kim, Curby & Winsler, 2014).

From the researcher's own experience in teaching and observing other colleagues teaching SVA and VTB, it is clear that students usually learn the rules better through deductive instruction. Based on this method, teachers introduce and explain the rules and functions of grammar before expecting them to complete given tasks as a way to practise the concept learned. Farrell and Lim (2005, cited in Hacer & Mehmet, 2014:5) supported this practice. They noted that teachers in Singapore believed that learners are able to use correct grammar faster as a result of deductive teaching as the method involves direct teaching and explanation of rules for grammar structures, drilling and error correction. Hence, this method was favoured. Another pull factor is that the SVA and VTB rules introduced in textbooks in primary and secondary schools are usually in the form of tables. This can slow down the learning process as most students find it distasteful. As it is important for students to see the necessity of having

a strong foundation in SVA and VTB when constructing simple sentences, a change must be made in the way SVA is taught to trigger not only learners' motivation but also to strengthen their knowledge on basic grammar. This statement is further supported by Quora (2014) who claimed that studying grammar using other strategies will help students to learn it faster and better with less effort. In other words, learning grammar will not only provide students with an understanding of the nuts and bolts of English but also provide them with a deeper understanding of the English language itself—a language learned unconsciously through constant practice.

In order to prove this, the researcher has designed a grammar-learning device specifically focusing on SVA and VTB, known as the Wheel of Grammar (WOG). The idea of designing this device came from the researcher's personal experience when observing nurses at the Mother and Child Clinic who used a Wheel Calendar to check the due dates of expected mothers. Using different colours to indicate the Present Tense, Past Tense, Singular Verb and Plural Verb, students will have a stress-free time to construct grammatically correct simple sentences.

The main objective of this study is to analyse 15 Iban students' perception on the use of WOG as a stimulating tool in improving their foundation on SVA and enabling them to construct simple yet grammatically correct sentences. Students will need to build their own WOG so that they have the hands-on experience with the rules and functions of SVA and VTB when labelling the columns and organising the wheels. This research attempts to answer the following research question:

> How does the 'Wheel of Grammar' help improve students' understanding of Subject-Verb Agreement in constructing simple sentences?

Advantages of Using WOG in Enhancing Learners' Grammar in Constructing Simple Sentences

There are a number of advantages in using WOG in enhancing students' grammar foundation in constructing simple sentences. These advantages are fundamentally important to sustain their interest in improving the quality of their sentence-building skills.

First, it is believed that the WOG will be able to enhance learners' foundation in grammar specifically on their knowledge and understanding of SVA in order to improve their writing skills, particularly in constructing simple sentences. Thus far, the learners' most frequent mistake in writing is to translate directly from their mother tongue into the English language. As stated by Kee (2013), "learners find it difficult to express their thoughts in English as they lack English proficiency and because they usually think in their mother tongue" (p. 92). As a result, their ability to use correct grammar is severely affected. By designing their own WOG under the researcher's supervision, learners will have hands-on

experience with the rules and functions of SVA when labelling the columns and organising the wheels.

Second, frequent reference to the WOG is of paramount importance for the learners to have a vivid understanding of the rules of VTB when constructing simple sentences. Through the exercises prepared in the form of handouts, learners are able to apply the correct rules and functions of SVA. For instance, when writing simple sentences with reference to their WOG, learners will also know when, why and how to use the past and present tenses. This is important as learners cannot make new sentences if they do not know the rules; they should analyse the rules in order to make new sentences by repeating and memorising the given ones (Wharton, 2007:4).

Third, by using the WOG in a variety of enrichment activities such as exercises done on task sheets and sentence-building games, it can help to sustain learners' interest in the learning process. It is hoped that learners can gradually build their interest in using the language, particularly in sentence-building since this will not only be very beneficial in improving their writing skills, but also help in enhancing and developing their speaking, reading and listening skills. In addition, the learning environment must be kept fun and enjoyable as it facilitates unconscious learning among students giving them confidence in using the language (Yunus et. al., 2011). As Scarcella (2009) suggested, "English Language development

occurred in natural stages over time through the learners' exposure to English" (p. 209).

METHODOLOGY

The focus of this research is to enhance learners' foundation in SVA as well as how well they are able to construct simple, yet correct sentences apart from those printed on the WOG. A mix-method approach was used where the researcher collected both qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously through classroom observation, learners' responses and learners' pre- and post-test results on SVA tasks. The respondents selected were 15 Form Five Iban learners from an Arts class who were weak in their English. The selection of the learners was based on their results in the diagnostic test and first middle-semester examination to avoid biasness. Following is the description of the innovative project:

The coloured stickers on every piece of 'wheel' indicate certain rules. For example, **PINK** from the first and second wheel must be paralleled, and it indicates the **PLURAL VERBS**. **GREEN** indicates the **SINGULAR VERBS**. **BLUE** from the second and fourth wheels must also be paralleled, and this shows the **PRESENT TENSE**. **ORANGE**, on the other hand, indicates the **PAST TENSE**. In order to use the WOG, learners are only required to rotate the wheels to *align the colours in the wheel in order to form grammatically correct sentences*.

PINK	PLURAL
GREEN	SINGULAR
BLUE	PRESENT TENSE
ORANGE	PAST TENSE

i. To draw a **[Singular] Simple-Present-Tense** sentence, learners align a **GREEN** sticker from the first and second wheels. Eg: **[She] [is]** ii. Learners may choose an activity of their choice from the third wheel. Eg: **[She] [is] [watching television]** iii. The second wheel **[BLUE]** must be paralleled with the fourth wheel. Eg: **[She] [is] [watching television] [now].**	

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses classroom observation, learners' observation and results of the pre- and post-tests on SVA and VTB tasks using the WOG.

Classroom observation

Throughout the lesson, an observation was carried out to ensure that the learners were clear of what to do and able to use the WOG in constructing simple sentences, differentiating the present and past tenses in the subjective and objective tasks as well as applying the correct rules and functions of SVA and VTB in their sentences.

The analysis of the observation showed that the weak learners were unsure of the function of the WOG, but after being coached and monitored by the researcher, they were

able to have hands-on experience on the 'wheel'. Colours were used as guides as they represent the rules clearly. Throughout the learning process, unconsciously they read out the simple sentences built through the WOG softly and even coached their friends confidently. Their self-discovery learning was well-used as the WOG is attractive and simple to understand.

Learner Response

From the interviews carried out randomly, the leaners found that the WOG has greatly helped them to understand the rules and functions of SVA and VTB (Singular and Plural Forms, and Present and Past Tenses). Learners also felt very motivated and had fun in completing the tasks. This was evident in the response given by a learner:

> *The SVA rules on the 'Wheel of Grammar' have taught me to construct simple sentences step by step.*

Using, learners were able to match the SVA correctly without any difficulties, including a male student who was colour-blind. As he was not able to complete the tasks on his own, he was paired up with another learner who later guided him on how to use the WOG. His response was:

> *Because of my colour-blindness, I am unable to use the 'Wheel of Grammar' effectively. But with a friend's guidance, I come up with my*

> *own alternative in understanding the rules of SVA better—that is through the sentence pattern.*

The WOG is also user-friendly and easier compared to if the rules and functions of SVA are transcribed in the form of tables. Learners agreed that the information in tables in textbooks are too lengthy, confusing and not attractive. The lengthy explanation does not contribute much in increasing their grammar-knowledge level, thus causing them to lose interest in the language (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2012). A learner responded that:

> *I feel that self-discovery learning through the 'Wheel of Grammar' is indeed really fun and enjoyable compared to those (the grammar rules) printed in textbooks where grammar rules are printed in tables.*

Overall, all learners were in agreement that the use of the WOG in learning the rules and functions of SVA is undoubtedly very effective. It gives them the chance to discover the rules. Besides, hands-on learning process motivates them to understand the language better. As supported by Kimberly et. al (2000), learners can rise to the challenge that the activity presents when they are free to choose the way to perform the activity.

Pre- and Post-test Results

The third stage in this analysis was the pre- and post-tests that tested the learners' level

of grammar. For the pre-test, they were asked to answer subjective and objective questions without referring to the WOG. However, for the post-test, they were allowed to refer to WOG. The sets of questions were similar to ensure the reliability and validity of the results.

As for the pre and post-test results, their level of understanding of SVA rules used in the construction of simple yet grammatically correct sentences has improved. This can be seen in the improvement of their post-test results. In the pre-test, 7 learners (46.7%) scored marks between 0% and 39%, 7 learners (46.7%) scored between 40% and 49%, and only 1 learner (6.7%) scored 51%. As for the post-test, 3 learners (20%) scored marks ranging from 60% to 69%, 2 learners (13.3%) scored between 70% and 79% and 10 learners (66.7%) managed to score within the 80% to 100% range.
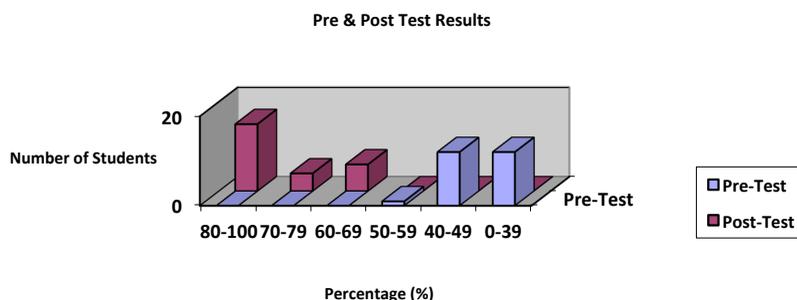

Figure 1. Pre and post-test results

This showed that all weak students need to be given a second chance to learn and understand basic grammar rules because every learner has a different learning style. As stated by Brown (2001), "a teacher must realise that every learner is unique and to cater to the different abilities, (a) teacher must be able to adopt and enlighten the tasks" (p.14). It is unfortunate that these learners are still lacking far behind in grammar when at this age, they should have been able to write error-free sentences. Mohamed Amin Embi (2010:7) suggested that successful language learners must make use of the target language as best as possible which can be in the form of printed materials such as magazines and newspapers or even electronic media like the internet, television, radio, movie as well as mobile phones. Printed cards such as WOG surely falls into this category of printed materials.

There was only one limitation identified throughout this research. One male student was identified as having colour-blind. Due to this, he was not able to match the colours on the WOG correctly. To overcome this, another student was paired to assist him until he managed to see the pattern of SVA on the WOG and apply it to the tasks successfully.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to describe the use of the WOG to improve students' understanding of SVA in constructing simple sentences. Overall, the frequent use of WOG can rebuild better confidence among learners when constructing grammatically simple sentences. Their self-discovery learning process can be more fun, meaningful and enjoyable. Tomlinson (2011) supported this in his research when he stressed that printed materials are interactive and useful for learners as they enable them to receive feedback on the spoken or written language.

It is important to identify the specific aspects of learners' weaknesses in applying correct rules of grammar when constructing simple sentences as this greatly helps teachers to design suitable tasks that fulfil the learners' needs. After the tasks are completed, there must be a continuous monitoring on their progress with regards to their future test results and confidence in using the language in their reading, listening, speaking and writing activities. When learners participate interactively and collaboratively in the lesson, this will direct their focus and attention towards language learning to provide them with broader contexts (Wright, Betteridge and Buckby, 1984, as cited in Yolageldili & Arikan, 2011).

From the perspective of the learners' learning process, it is crucial to understand the reasons that have led to their inability to construct simple yet grammatically correct sentences. It is equally important for a teacher to be a mentor, listener and buddy. Teachers can better understand the students if they put themselves in the students' shoes. Different classroom activities are essential to cater to the learners' different needs so that they do not feel that they are being left out of the learning process. As highlighted by Snell (2004), "students should be encouraged to assess their own learning as well as their notions of how they learn, by giving them opportunities to reflect on the teaching/learning process" (p. 34). If learners enjoy this activity and are able to improve on their grammar, we can be certain that WOG is an activity that would help Malaysian learners to succeed in learning grammar.

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