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Love Grammar: Student-driven Grammar Learning Games

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Abstract: The words “grammar learning” and “boring” are often, unfortunately, associated. Traditional grammar teaching and learning fails to engage students in active and lifelong learning. There is a need for learner-centred approaches that help students learn grammar in a second language or foreign language classroom in a more engaging and enjoyable way. Grammar learning games represent a particularly promising addition to the grammar teacher’s arsenal. Little is known about how student-driven grammar learning games can be used in the class, however, this paper provides an account of a classroom based study, giving an early insight based on a research study that explored the impact that the use of a game-based grammar learning approach had on the grammar learning experience of tertiary students learning Spanish in Australia.

Keywords: Grammar Pedagogy, Game-based Learning, Language Learning, Spanish, Australia

Introduction

AN INTERNATIONAL SURVEY with 17 million teenagers from 32 countries found that two-thirds of their teenagers were bored in class (PISA, 2003), a finding that represents an indictment of current pedagogical methods. When it comes to language instruction, the view that ‘grammar is boring’ is often shared by teachers and students alike (Andrews, 2003; Fitch, 1995). Natolo (2007) examined the use and impact of student-developed grammar learning games based on a six year action research study in an Australian University focusing on student-centred grammar pedagogy by Poyatos Matas (2005). Poyatos Matas (2005) found that advanced language students described their grammar learning experiences as boring and disempowering

The learning experience of many learners has long been dominated by passive learning, with teachers often regarding students as empty receptacles in which they must deposit information (Freire, 1972). In the teacher-centred classroom teachers perceive knowledge as something to be transmitted rather than something to be discovered or uncovered by their students. The ability of students to become autonomous is compromised. There are few opportunities for students to propose critical questions or to manage their own learning processes. The authoritarian teaching structure of teacher-centred classrooms rewards the student’s ability to memorise and copy, teaching strategies that lead to surface learning (Ramsden, 1992).

Learner-centeredness, in contrast, is grounded in the belief that learners need to take control over their learning. If they have the freedom to learn what they really need to learn, then they take more responsibility for their own learning because they are more motivated to learn (Rogers, 1969). The student centred classroom creates a learning environment that

uses a variety of teaching approaches to engage students in active learning to promote deep learning, shifting responsibility from the instructor to the instructed (Biggs, 1999). One path to increasing participation and engagement by students is by the use of games.

A Literature Review: Playing to Learn and Learning to Play

Game-based Learning

Educational philosophers such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel already acknowledged the cognitive benefits of playing games (Chastain, 2004). However, while it is acknowledged that babies and children can learn by engaging in free playing and the use of games, games tend to disappear from the educational system as students age (Fisher, 1992). Games are considered one of the basic tools of education promoting the acquisition of knowledge at any age (Carneiro, 1995a), but adults underestimate the significance of games in their lives (Karapetyan, 2004).

The promise of game-based learning is that it integrates learning and enjoyment (Barroso Gargantilla, 2003). In the context of effective e-learning games, Fua, Sua and Yub (2009) note that the learner's enjoyment acts as a catalyst to motivate learning, and that this enjoyment depends on the levels of immersion, social interaction, challenge, goal clarity, feedback, concentration, control, and knowledge improvement offered by the e-learning games. Playing games is relaxing, helps build self-confidence, facilitates memory functions (Karapetyan, 2004), helps to overcome lack of attention and boredom (Barroso Gargantilla, 2003). In the classroom the game is described as "another world" in which students enjoy and participate voluntarily in an activity that motivates and allows them to be "free" of the class routine for a period of time otherwise understood as habitual in other instances. Games can also have a competitive nature. In Spain, Burguillo (2010) has introduced a framework for Competition-based Learning (CnBL), based on classroom research. He found that using game theory tournaments in his classes helped to motivate students to engage in the lessons more with concomitant performance and outcome benefits.

Games can be used as a tool of language activation as the creativity in games allows learners to use new forms of vocabulary and language structures learned during the lessons, in a more dynamic format, forcing students out of their comfort zone, and creating new contexts in which to use language (Chen, 2005).

A recent study with Chinese and Japanese students found out that the "ideal English lesson" were those containing a variety of teaching strategies that engaged them (Littlewood, 2010). Moreover, Breznak and Scott (2003) explain that in the ideal class students learn in a safe, non-judgemental learning environment where they are actively learning and challenged by a 'winnable' task that involves interaction with peers—and indeed mutual teaching. It is important for teachers to provide opportunities for students to teach one another as a means of enhancing opportunities to learn by doing and is related to student-student and student(s)-teacher interaction (Eres Fernández, 2003).

While the benefits of game-based learning may be emerging in the literature, part of the problem of integrating game-based learning into the curriculum lies on the lack of teacher training in this area, as well as the lack of good examples of practice (Tragazikis & Meimaris, 2009). This study represents an early exploration of the use of games in facilitating the learning of grammar, and documents the processes and impacts the technique has on tertiary

students of a Spanish language class. Uniquely, it increases the student-centred focus of a game-based approach to grammar learning by having the students themselves design the games and delivery them in class.

Grammar Learning and Games

The teaching of grammar in the language classroom remains mainly teacher-centred—the teacher takes the role of the “knower” whose role is to teach their knowledge to students (Chan, 2001). Traditional grammar teaching approaches maintain students having a passive role, where the teacher controls the access of a limited amount of grammar learning resources (Blyth, 1997). The approach naturally limits the degree to which students are able to apply the lessons learnt promptly in class.

Grammar games promptly introduce students to the applied side of language learning. The games allow students to persuade and negotiate their way to desired results (Chen, 2005). However, most common learning games used in language classes are games provided by the teacher, ready-made, to students: cognitive games, guessing games, board games and role play games (Rinvolucrí & Davis, 2005; Cerrolaza, Cuadrado, Díaz, & Martín, 1999). The most common language games nevertheless alter class dynamics creating communicative interaction in the target language. A step further in bringing the student to the centre of the grammar learning process is to have students create custom games to overcome grammar learning problems.

Student-driven Grammar Learning Games

The literature on student-driven grammar learning games is sparse. Kavaliauskienė (2002) provides an example from the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) context, showing how students were encouraged to create tasks to help students focus on the usage of appropriate tenses within a context. Her learners were required to teach their classmates. Thus, roles were altered and students assumed the teacher’s traditional role of developing a task and carrying it out. Students were required to include realia in their activity; and discuss their points for a particular tense without the aid of their teacher.

In the context of university teaching, Poyatos Matas (2005) conducted a six years study of classroom-based research that explored grammar learning and teaching as a student-centred process. As a result she developed the *Reflective Autonomous Grammar Learning Approach* (RAGLA), an approach that deploys autonomous grammar learning. She found that the use of students investigating a particular Spanish grammar topic and teaching it to their peers facilitates a communicative approach to grammar study, as this helps students studying a second language to learn

“about the rules and the use of grammar in an autonomous, reflective and enjoyable manner. It has as an objective that the students increase their grammatical knowledge by investigating their own grammatical problems and create a game opportunities so other students can learn in an interesting manner” (*ibid*, p. 2).

The development of student-driven grammar games based on realia, or texts that have been developed for native speakers, has additional benefits for the learners (Poyatos Matas, 2005).

The exposure to realia helps to improve the confidence of the learner in the target language and encourage their development of language learning techniques that entail active language use (Little, 1997).

The type of grammar games that were seen as useful to learn grammar by the participants included board games, guessing games, computer games, matching games, puzzles, and song games. Collectively, these games appeared to aid students in integrating grammar into language production in a seamless and enjoyable manner, a finding supported by Karapetyan (2004).

Even though grammar game-based learning has many positive aspects, there are some factors that could affect student response to this approach, such as students' perception that game-based tasks are inherently less task (i.e. language learning) focused, and time wasting. Silva Labrada (2005) also notes that students may use their mother tongues during the games, as well as experienced fear of making mistakes whilst playing grammar-related game. Carneiro (1995b) argues that games may lose pedagogical power if a teacher uses them to excess.

Aims and Research Methodology

The study investigated the autonomous student grammar learning experience arising from a grammar game-based approach to advanced language learning course. The grammar game based learning approach being used involved the students in elaborating Spanish grammar learning games in Spanish language in a Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) environment. The student taking the role of grammar peer tutor needs to identify and research a grammar theme first. It takes considerable preparation in order to prepare a grammar game that will help others in the class to learn that particular grammar theme.

The study described here used a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Ethical clearance was obtained from the authors' university before conducting the study. A number of tools were used to collect data and triangulate the findings (Jick, 1979). Student surveys and face to face interviews were conducted to document the grammar learning experience of the participants. In addition, their grammar games were observed and analysed. The data collected was interpreted following quantitative and qualitative analysis procedures.

The Participants

The participants consisted of an entire third year class of advanced Spanish learners. While the sample is a convenience sample, it has the benefits of representing an entire sub-population, however, like all such populations, it has limitations: in this case, only females had enrolled in the course. The participants were aged between 18 and 31 years old. Their cultural and linguistic background was diverse. Eight of them were born in Australia, while five participants were born in non-Spanish and English speaking countries.

The Student Survey

The format of the questionnaire employed a combination of close and open ending questions to obtain quantitative and qualitative data from the students. The questionnaire contained

questions which collected information on: (a) demographic variables; (b) views on the role of the teacher in grammar learning; (c) views on autonomous language learning; (d) the student experience teaching peers through the use of grammar games; (e) the student experience as a learner of their peers' grammar learning games; and (f) the student experience with peer evaluation.

The survey was piloted with a former advanced Spanish student. The 14 participants in the study completed the survey. The questionnaires were codified and reduced, and a pattern matching approach was used to facilitate its interpretation (Yin, 1994). This approach entailed discovering patterns within the data that could present reasons for an event. The themes that emerged from the analysis were identified compared and developed into the findings discussed here. Following the questionnaire, a semi-structured interview was conducted to gather more in-depth information from the participants.

Student Interview

This instrument was also piloted with an advanced Spanish language student. Once it was recorded, timed, transcribed and analysed, several modifications were made. The interview further explored each participant's point of view regarding the development, learning and teaching of their own Spanish grammar game. Interview questions were classified into the following six themes: (a) student's previous grammatical learning experiences; (b) the development and presentation of the student's Spanish grammar learning game; (c) the participation of the class in the student's grammar game; (d) the student's participation in their peers' Spanish grammar games; (e) general evaluation of the student's autonomous Spanish grammar learning; and (f) student's experience with peer evaluation. All the participants were interviewed. Once transcribed, they were perused for trends, categories, and classifications to be developed using qualitative analytical techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

The students work in pairs in the development of their grammar games and a total of seven games were produced. The grammar focus of the games was the structure, meaning and use of: past tenses in Spanish, the verb "to be", accents, prepositions, present subjunctive, and object pronouns.

All participants included realia in their games to document examples of grammar usage. They were asked to do so to increase the level of exposure to grammar use in meaningful context. Ten students used grammar books and internet websites as sources of realia to find examples of grammar use. Other sources mentioned included Spanish journals, magazines, comics, songs, printed and online newspapers, and novels. The interviewees expressed that they enjoyed finding and providing examples of grammar in realia because it helped them to see how language is used in real life by native speakers.

The questionnaires and interviews helped to explore students' previous learning grammar learning experiences, as well as and their learning experience using the grammar game based learning approach.

Traditional Versus Autonomous Grammar Game Based Learning Experiences

The results confirmed that most students had experienced a traditional textbook approach to grammar learning in the past. The group reinforced the impression in the literature that grammar learning had been both passive and disengaging. The interviews also indicated that students had not been previously engaged in the learning process, lacking input into the content of their grammar study. Their teachers had followed set curriculum and taught them something different each week. The role of the student was to memorise and repeat the grammar rules in exercises or exams. Those who said to have experienced the use of games in their previous grammar learning mentioned that the game was part of the textbooks they were using provided by the tutor. Not surprisingly, they had never experienced developing a grammar learning game before.

Twelve interviewees preferred the autonomous grammar learning approach that they experienced in the course rather than the traditional way of learning grammar, with two students believing, on the balance, the approach was not beneficial. This latter two argued that the amount of work and time involved in producing grammar games outweighed the benefits of the approach in grammar learning. On the whole, however, students judged the cost-benefits of the approach in the positive direction, as one of the participants explained during the interview:

“By learning and playing the grammar game made by students you are learning at the same time. Students will become bored if they sit at the desk because they need to interact with others and forget that they are actually learning”. (I-S3)

These students appreciated having to research a grammar theme of their interest. They also liked delivering a grammar game to teach that topic to their peers, and that they could learn from their peers. The main three reasons why they preferred this approach was because they have ownership over the grammar content and learning processes, they were active learners, and they have fun while learning grammar. However, two students expressed their preference for textbooks and passive learning because learning with a grammar game-based learning approach was more time consuming.

All of the students said in the questionnaires and interviews that the use of this grammar learning approach allowed them to decide the grammar content that they needed to learn, as well as how to learn it, when and where. As one of the students mentioned:

“Learners assume the roles of researchers and teachers, and the teacher is the facilitator in our Spanish grammar learning”. (I-S5)

The main reason why most students chose a particular grammar theme was because they were having problems with a particular Spanish grammar topic. Other students also mentioned that was because they thought or knew that others were also struggling with that grammatical issue, as this student explained:

“Ser y estar [the verb “to be”] was a difficult grammar point that I always had problems with. I had spoken to other students which also have problems with it so my partner

and I thought it would be beneficial for everyone in the class to learn more about it.” (I-S10)

The majority of the students emphasized the importance of taking responsibility for their own grammar learning, as one student said:

“It’s a student’s responsibility. Learners can’t always have the teacher telling them what to learn or do by sitting in a lecture or have a teacher dictate information to them.” (I-S7)

They liked the levels of independence and interactivity promoted by the approach, as this student said:

“In the traditional way, teachers spoon-feed students and I enjoy the independence this method provides students.” (I-S12)

However, the participants thought that learner autonomy should be introduced at secondary school level so it did not become a shock when reaching university level, because for some changing learning habits and driving their own grammar learning was scary at the beginning, as this student explained:

“It came as a shock because not many other courses have this method. It definitely benefits us.” (I-S1)

When the students were asked about the characteristics that an autonomous grammar learner should have, seven themes emerged. Determination to learn autonomously, good time management skills, willingness to ask their teacher and peers questions, interest in learning, ability to analyse and improve areas of weakness, a goal-orientated approach, and patience.

A number of students, not just the two dissenting voices, were able to identify a number of problematic aspects of the autonomous grammar learning approach. These clustered in three themes. First, the lack of experience and preparation of students to learn autonomously, second, the procrastination that some learners suffer, and finally, the teachers’ unfamiliarity with helping students in the autonomous grammar learning approach. They suggested that these issues could be overcome by having a relaxed learning environment, include as many interesting materials as possible to support learners, and providing teacher training in this area.

With regards to the role of the teacher in the student-driven grammar game-based learning class, they saw her in these main roles: a language use model, and grammar advisor. Additionally, the teacher was seen as a source of learning motivation.

In the interview, as in the survey, participants expressed a range of key advantages to this grammar game learning approach. The technique was more enjoyable, it made grammar learning easier, the technique provided a different and interesting way to learn, and felt more real to students, provided a chance for students to control what they learnt, and encouraged student interaction with their peers, while retaining teacher involvement should it be required.

Grammar Games Leading to a Community of Supportive Grammar Learners

All the participants reported that the student-driven grammar learning games were a useful tool to learn their Spanish grammar topic for three main reasons. They found it a fun way to learn and teach Spanish grammar in a manner which engages the whole class. Preparing grammar learning games promotes deeper learning, but this deeper level of learning arises in an atmosphere of fun and engagement. As noted earlier, the students worked in pairs to create games, and results indicate this approach was positively received. The majority of participants found that working in pairs was an advantage increasing collaboration, reducing the strain of creating games, and increasing student enjoyment.

All students believed that their peers enjoyed their grammar games. Some of the students used Power Point to support the delivery of their game, and others developed a digital game. One of the digital games was so popular that everybody wanted a copy of it, as this student explained:

“Our grammar game was a computer game and it was fun for everyone because it was new and different compared to the other games. It got my classmates learning at the same time. They definitely enjoyed it because they all want a copy of it.” (I-S13)

Student Attitudes towards Learning Grammar with Student-driven Games

The students felt motivated when they played the different grammar games. They all found the grammar learning games presented by their peers well presented and explained. The whole class mentioned that they looked forward to each lesson as students would use incentives to make their grammar learning game presentations more interactive for their peers. The classroom atmosphere was collaborative and supportive, with most students reporting that they enjoyed delivering their games idea to the classroom. None of the students used the words “boring” or “stressful” to describe the classroom atmosphere during grammar games. The respondents also enjoyed speaking in Spanish about grammar because they were using what they have learnt from researching and developing the game content and structure for their grammar game. They also became highly familiar with their grammar topic as a result of the deep learning involved in both creating and delivering their grammar game to the class. The feedback provided to the game creators was positive, with most participants expressing appreciation for the feedback. However, two participants said that they preferred the feedback provided by the teacher, as they felt it was more correct.

The students also enjoyed participating in the grammar games and twelve of these students reported to feel less stress than when presenting their own grammar games. The majority of them also reported to feel happy and motivated. None of the students used the words “stress” or “bored” to describe their participation in the grammar games class lead by other students.

Impact of Grammar Game based Learning on Other Aspects of Language Learning

Thirteen participants reported in the questionnaires that they learnt Spanish grammar more efficiently and enjoyably in a games context than through a traditional approach. The student who preferred the teacher to teach grammar said that this was because it was less time-con-

suming for her. Moreover, participants answered that their use of Spanish grammar in their writing, speaking and reading had improved as a result of their engagement with grammar learning in this course. The majority of the participants suggested that language teachers should use student-driven grammar learning games in their classrooms because it is motivating, interactive and engaging. Most participants expressed the view that developing a grammar game had pedagogical advantages, delivering a deeper understanding of their Spanish grammar topic through ‘forcing’ students to fully understand the topic in order to create their activities.

“Yes, I was saying that yesterday to another student from my class, that I’ve actually learnt more under this method with the grammar games than being in two years of classes. I was able to go out and learn for myself whereas in a classroom situation sometimes it will come in one ear and out the other”

Having to use extracts of realia developed for native speakers (material auténtico), such as newspapers and books also had broader pedagogical benefits, as this student mentioned:

“Because you have to look for material auténtico [authentic material] and you’re reading articles, you not only learn about grammar but also about the culture. Also...it’s good because you’re searching, reading and practicing Spanish at the same time.” (I-S4)

Limitations of the Study

However, these findings need to be considered carefully, as the sample was small and there was a striking gender imbalance. Thus, the results of this research cannot be truly representative and further research should be conducted to add to the existing body of literature in this new promising area. But on the other hand, it is a naturalistic enquiry that exploits a whole, naturally-existing sub-population, and there is no a priori reason to anticipate that this class would be fundamentally different to any tertiary advanced language class.

Conclusions

The use of game-based learning appears to offer a powerful approach to overcoming a significant pedagogical hurdle in the second language learning classroom. The study reported here explores the use of game-based learning to overcome the challenge of learning Spanish grammar at tertiary level (Natolo, 2007; Poyatos Matas, 2005).

What is unique about the grammar game-based leaning approach described here is that it empowers tertiary students over their learning grammar through engaging them actively in the development and delivery of grammar games for their peers. The approach takes the concept of classroom immersion to a deeper level, encouraging students to develop conceptual mastery over a traditionally difficult topic, but in a collaborative and enjoyable environment. This approach incorporates a reflective element that leads to deep learning (Biggs, 1999; Ramsden, 1992), as students not only choose the grammar learning content of their games but they also reflect on their learning experience, with the help of the formative feedback collected from peers and the teacher on the quality and impact of their grammar

learning game and presentation. The grammar game-based learning approach provides a transformative learning experience (Elias, 1997) that changes their basic world of students on what grammar learning is, from boring to self-empowering. To summarize it in the words of one of the students:

“I prefer this method because it gives students the opportunity to find their space, their role in the class, be active participants in class and develop their learning and teaching strategies at the same time. Students can have fun, which is also very important!” (I-S13)

While fulfilling the grammatical outcomes contained in an advanced language classroom, student-driven grammar games offer students exposure to a number of other important course-related outcomes, not purely content-related. These students, as the previous comments reflect, make the learning experience enjoyable which can have significant second-generation effects.

In summary, this article uncovered a number of positives of a game-based approach to grammar learning. First, like in other studies reported here (Natolo, 2007; Poyatos Matas, 2005), students held very positive attitudes towards grammar game based learning. Far from finding grammar ‘boring’, they ‘loved’ grammar learning and could not wait to go to their Spanish language class to play — and, not entirely incidentally, learn. Second, students welcomed the opportunity to work autonomously in a Peer Assisted Learning environment. Third, the students acknowledge level of ownership and deeper learning in their Spanish grammar learning experience when using this student-centred grammar learning approach, as students study drives the choice of grammar topics based on their grammar learning needs. Fourthly, the results indicate broader benefits for the language student, including an increase in confidence arising from autonomous learning, and providing the nascent teacher with classroom experience.

More broadly, these findings support the view that real learning is self-discovered, personally appropriated and assimilated in experience (Rogers, 1969). Even though these initial findings are promising to support a shift in the grammar teaching culture from teacher-centred to student-centred, the field of game-based learning appears to be fertile ground for further research.

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Michelle Natolo

Michelle completed her Honours thesis in the area of grammar learning pedagogy, and she is currently undertaking doctoral studies at Griffith University, Australia.



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