

Teaching Grammar through games for an effective EFL learning

Enseñando gramática a través de juegos para un aprendizaje efectivo del inglés como lengua extranjera

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Abstract:

English is a means of communication among countries around the world; consequently, learning it has become a necessity in order to be able to communicate globally in domains such as government, law courts, health care, the media and the educational system (Crystal, 2012). Thus, many schools in Mexico offer EFL classes to young learners, with English teachers, most of them non-native, making an effort to carefully plan their classes and apply effective strategies to develop the four macro language skills, vocabulary and grammar. Grammar can be challenging for young learners, who tend to find grammar rules complex, frustrating and boring. However, language games can be a useful tool in EFL learning, as they are fun and motivating, helping to create a relaxing environment where students can learn easily and enjoyably (Gozcu & Caganaga, 2016). This study aims at confirming games as an effective strategy for teaching grammar to young learners in a second level EFL Saturday course in a language school in Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico. The results prove that, in the context of the study, games are helpful and versatile, usable at all stages of the lesson and teachers can adapt or design them based on their young students' needs, to help improve their language learning outcomes.

Keywords:

English as a foreign language, grammar, games, strategy, young learners

Resumen:

El inglés es un medio de comunicación entre países alrededor del mundo; como consecuencia, las personas deben aprender la lengua extranjera como una necesidad de tener una segunda lengua para poder comunicarse en dominios tales como gobierno, leyes, salud, los medios y el sistema educativo (Crystal, 2012). Por eso, varias escuelas en México ofrecen clases de inglés a niños, con los maestros, la mayoría de ellos no nativos, haciendo un esfuerzo para planear sus clases cuidadosamente y aplicar estrategias efectivas para desarrollar las cuatro macro habilidades, vocabulario y gramática. Este último elemento puede ser retador puesto que los niños tienden a pensar que las reglas gramaticales son complejas, frustrantes y aburridas. Sin embargo, los juegos pueden ser una herramienta útil en el aprendizaje del inglés, por ser divertidos y motivantes, ayudando a crear un ambiente relajante donde los estudiantes pueden aprender de forma fácil y agradable (Gozcu y Caganaga, 2016). Este estudio pretende confirmar a los juegos como una estrategia efectiva para enseñar gramática a niños en un curso sabatino de segundo nivel de inglés en una escuela de idiomas en Tapachula, Chiapas, México. Los resultados demuestran que los juegos son útiles y versátiles, pudiendo ser usados en todas las etapas de una lección y los docentes pueden adaptarlos o diseñarlos con base en las necesidades de sus jóvenes aprendices para que puedan mejorar su aprendizaje del inglés.

Palabras Clave:

Inglés como lengua extranjera, gramática, juegos, estrategia, jóvenes aprendices

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learners currently studying on a second level EFL Saturday course in a specific Mexican teaching context.

Introduction

English is a global language and for many countries worldwide, it is the mother tongue; on the other hand, English is not the first language in many others. For this reason, English has become an official or alternative language for some of these countries that have another first language, such as Spanish, Italian, French, etc. English has become an important medium of communication among countries around the world, and it is necessary for many people to learn it as a second language, especially to be able to communicate in domains such as government, law courts, health care, the media and the educational system (Crystal, 2012).

Consequently, there is generally growing interest in taking English classes to develop second language skills. Fortunately, numerous educational institutions in Mexico now offer English classes to people of all ages. In Chiapas, a southern State in Mexico, many non-native English teachers make an effort to prepare their classes effectively, planning lessons carefully and aiming to use effective strategies to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Within this non-native context, learning a foreign language can be complicated, even for young learners, since they do not have enough opportunities to practice English outside their classroom (Al Zedjali, 2009, as cited by Al Hosni, 2014)

Learning English is not easy for people who are not exposed constantly to the foreign language in their social interactions with other speakers in conventional social domains. They must develop their four language macro skills: speaking, reading, writing and listening from scratch in a non-English speaking context, and teachers are responsible for supporting learning in the best possible way (Hayes, 2009). However, it is common for teachers to focus more on one skill than the others, or to concentrate more on other elements, such as grammar, vocabulary or functions, in spite of their own beliefs (Sato & Oyanedel, 2019). In contexts such as my own, this is the case with grammar, especially when teaching English to young learners, as teachers tend to believe that children often find grammar rules and structures complex, frustrating and, worst of all, boring. Nonetheless, this is no excuse for avoiding grammar in English lessons because there are strategies that can help young learners to learn grammar more easily. Designing games is one of these strategies (Hong, 2021). This study aims to confirm the effectiveness of games in teaching grammar to young

Teaching English as a foreign language to young learners in Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico

In Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico, the Autonomous University of Chiapas offers Saturday courses in EFL to young learners at the Language School, Campus IV, in a program called "English for Kids". These classes are given every Saturday from 9:00 am to 1:00pm with a course duration of 15 sessions per semester. The objective of these courses is to help young learners to develop the English skills required to reach B1 level according to the European Framework of Language Reference at the end of eight levels.

The present study focuses on a second level English class labeled as "2 SE", with 22 students, 14 female and 7 male. The participants are all young learners aged between 8 and 10. This course was given from January 28th to June 10th 2023, and provided a total of 72 hours of language input. An important characteristic of this class is that, even though the learners are in the same English language group, they have achieved different grades in their elementary schools. These range from 4 students in 3rd grade, 15 in 4th grade and the remaining 3 in 5th grade. Moreover, two students were diagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and they all have difficulty in paying attention, often interrupt the teacher and are easily distracted. The children's parents informed the teacher about their condition at the beginning of the course.

Being such a heterogeneous group, the class struggled with English grammar learning for various reasons. The students made mistakes while completing exercises although they had had previous practice. With the teacher's assistance, the students were able to answer correctly, however, when they worked on their own, especially in exams, they repeatedly made the same grammar mistakes. According to Derakhshan & Karimi (2015), this may be due to any of a number of different obstacles which commonly interfere with the correct use of grammar. Some of these include interference from their mother tongue, lack of attention and the stage of cognitive development of the students. When learners of a foreign language want to write or speak in the target language, they tend to rely on their first language structures. If these structures are different, then frequent errors may occur in

the second language, for example, when using English for speaking and writing (Bhela, 1999, as cited by Derakhshan & Karimi (op.cit).

In the light of the above, the main problem when teaching English as a Foreign Language to “2 SE” is that grammar is perceived as complicated by young learners of between 8 and 10 years old. Since they are still formally studying the grammar of their mother tongue at their elementary schools, they struggle to learn English grammar and to create sentences to express themselves in the target language. They tend to find learning grammar from books or exercises boring and this affects their interest and attention levels, and, ultimately, their entire learning process. Because of their age, they tend to prefer more dynamic and motivating activities. Saleh & Althaqui (2022) affirm that games are useful tools to motivate students to participate more when they speak and work on different topics, because young learners, especially those with kinesthetic learning preferences, prefer to be more on the move rather than sitting still. They add that games can be adapted or specially designed to suit the topic they are learning, and also to their age and needs, making them into an effective learning tool and providing helpful techniques for supporting young learners. In other contexts, they have been observed to increase engagement, improve knowledge absorption and retention, giving learners the opportunity to see real-world applications. For instance, Cheung & Ng (2021) mention that students need to focus on the teaching content in order to complete the tasks in the educational game, enhancing their learning motivation.

Bearing this in mind, this study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of grammar games in supporting young learners' EFL learning process in large groups. By the end of the study, it was hoped to provide answers to the following questions, in relation to the participant group: (1) What are the benefits of using games in the EFL learning process of 2nd level Group SE young learners in the program “English for Kids” of the Language School, Campus IV, in Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico?; (2) What kinds of games can be implemented as a tool to teach and practice grammar with these young students?; and (3) Are grammar games effective for teaching grammar to these young students in large groups?

The relevance of this study is based on the fact that, according to previous research in other contexts (Gozcu & Caganaga, 2016; Haiji & Kim, 2109; Mezoued & Lebdaï, 2019; Diurayeva & Shegay, 2020, Cheung & Ng, 2021, Hong, 2021, Jasanska, 2022), games can be considered a valuable tool for teaching grammar to young learners in large groups in an EFL context. There may be a series of benefits and, in particular, the results may show evidence of progress in the young learners' English grammar learning.

Learning English in a globalized world

Language plays an increasingly essential role in the lives of countless human beings, as it becomes a powerful tool for communication, especially when interacting with other speakers to achieve a common goal. Chenxu (2022) claims that language is also influenced by globalization, as learning a second language other than one's mother tongue opens up the opportunity to become part of a wider community with a different culture, and to enhance our understanding of the wider world around us. The same author also mentions that being multilingual has further advantages, such as helping the person in their academic development, improving their memory and brain functions, and helping them to extend their understanding of the languages they already speak. A second language also opens doors to better job opportunities and brings economic benefits to the bilingual or multilingual person, who is more likely to find better career prospects, become more mobile geographically and have greater chances of being promoted to higher-level jobs (OECD, 2020).

It is well-known that learning English as a second language has become increasingly important nowadays, largely thanks to globalization. Yeates (2001, as cited by Yalcin, 2018) defines this term as an extensive network of economic, cultural, social and political interconnections and processes beyond national boundaries. Within this global context, English has become increasingly the most widely used language around the world and this is no coincidence since English is the native language of three countries with strong economies which have allowed them to promote globalization around the world: the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada (Ritaningrum, 2015, as cited by Putra, 2020). For the rest of the countries, English is the most preferred as a second language. For example, two individuals who come from different nations (e.g. Mexico and Sri Lanka) cannot use their mother tongues to communicate, as they are uniquely different from each other; consequently, they use English to convey meaning, to be able to interact with each other. This is the reason why many people around the world want to learn English as a foreign language so that they connect with others on an international level, as communication is the main aim of learning any language, and globalization makes English an acknowledge passport to better education and employment opportunities (Ahmad, 2016).

Teaching English to Young Learners in a Mexican Context

It has been concluded that English has had a big impact in recent years, becoming known as the global language, and, as mentioned above, leading countries with other first languages to promote it as an enabler to access the advantages of globalization (Crystal, 2012). This is

certainly the case of Mexico, a country that shares one of the longest borders with the United States of America. However, English as a foreign language teaching has not been implemented in the best conditions for either teachers or learners (Raguseo, 2014; Librado & Santos, 2020; Benzerroug 2021) and this is particularly true in the region of Soconusco, Chiapas, a southern state of Mexico.

The Secretariat of Public Education in Mexico (SEP, for its initials in Spanish) launched the latest educational reform in 2017, one of the main goals of which was to introduce the teaching and learning of English at all levels of compulsory education in Mexico: from preschool to high school education (Librado & Santos, 2020). The SEP mentioned that the reason behind introducing English from very early stages is that...

The Secretariat of Public Education wants you [students] to be bilingual when you finish your high school education so that you can express yourself in Spanish and English in a natural way. Thanks to your knowledge of English, you will be able to communicate with more people in the world and discover new cultures. (Librado & Santos: 2020:126).

Since then, teaching English to young learners has been a priority in Mexico. Even though English has been included in the curricula of Mexican schools since 1960 (British Council, 2015), it has not received adequate consistent attention, to achieve successful academic results. All over the country, many Mexican public and private schools offer courses in English as a second language; however, most of the programs do not consider their students' context and necessities. Santos & Weathers (2016) affirm that teachers think the creators of English programs need to be more in touch with the reality of Mexican public schools. This implies, for example, knowing more about young learners and taking into account that specifically in Chiapas, people are not exposed to as much English as the people in the northern states.

As established above, in the context of globalization, learning English is an important skill that will help young learners achieve their full potential in later life; if they master appropriate techniques, they can learn the foreign language quickly and effectively, in a practical and useful way (Octaviana, 2017).

Learning English as a second language at an early age forms a solid basis for further linguistic education and improves their memory, thinking, perception and imagination, as Stakanova & Tolstikhina (2014) state. An early start provides maximum learning time for language learning, exposing young learners to the culture of the countries where the target language is spoken. They also

add that children who learn a foreign language at preschool or primary school levels do not struggle with coping with language learning in the higher education levels, growing up tolerant and sympathetic to other cultures.

Language learning should not be stressful for children, it should be fun and stimulating. Young learners require a focus on different aspects of the language, approaches to learning, and positive relationships to both the learning material and their teachers and classmates to create a good social learning environment (Vassileva, 2008). Likewise, teachers should have efficient classroom management skills, so they can help their students feel motivated to learn a new language, especially one that they are not very familiar with in their everyday lives. In order to achieve this, teachers must definitely be aware of their students' characteristics so that they can carefully plan their lessons; select, adapt or create their materials; implement appropriate teaching techniques and strategies; create a relaxing, helpful learning environment based on their needs and behaviors. For instance, young learners have a lot of energy but minimum concentration, so it is better to engage them in physical activities within a concrete environment (Uysal & Yavuz, 2015). This means that teachers have to search for different solutions and improve their ways of teaching to motivate their young students.

In general, young learners of this age-range display similar characteristics. Bermejo, Cruz, Cancino & Girón (2019) mention that an important characteristic of young learners is their relationship with their environment, how the school becomes a new place for them, and how they need to adapt to all the elements around them, such as new people, new places, new activities, new feelings, etc. Another important characteristic that the authors mention is the social structure of young learners' communities, that is to say, children tend to feel better creating groups that help them engage with the same gender, to build confidence in themselves. A third characteristic is their competitive attitude because children are very active in showing who finishes their activities first when they compete with other learners and this is good for the development of future professionals; on the other hand, competitiveness might cause emotional and physical problems if their attitude is not managed appropriately (Bermejo et al., op.cit).

In a similar way, teachers must take into account that learning a second language is not the same as learning a mother tongue. Suryantari (2018) claims that learning a second language is a process of internalizing and making sense of the new language *after* that which has been established as first language. He also explains that L2 is learnt after the student can speak and has absorbed L1 knowledge, which influences second language learning.

And this process is also different for children. Cameron (2003, as cited by Octaviana, 2017) mentions that..

There are some obvious differences: children are often more enthusiastic and livelier as learners. They want to please the teacher rather than their peer group. They will have a go at an activity even when they do not quite understand why or how. However, they also lose interest more quickly and cannot keep themselves motivated on tasks they find difficult. Furthermore, they do not have the same access as older learners to metalanguage that the teachers can use to explain grammar and discourse. The children often seem less embarrassed than adults at talking in a new language, and their lack of inhibition seems to help them get a more native-like accent. (Cameron 2003, as cited by Octaviana, 2017:126)

With young learners, there are three other factors involved in second language learning (Steinberg, 2001, as cited by Suryantari, 2018): (1) a psychological factor, which includes intellectual processing which consists of explanation and inductions process, memory, and motor skills; (2) the social situation, which consists of the natural and classroom situations; and (3) the psychological variables, which consists of the EFL community context, motivation, and attitude. Being a teacher who understands the developmental stages of the learners and is able to identify the preferred learning styles of the students has essential elements to create a positive learning environment conducive to learning a second language effectively. Unlike adolescents and adults, children tend to learn a second language naturally and unconsciously. Young learners can imitate pronunciation and relate topics to their daily lives, they prefer to work entertainingly; consequently, the best for students is to learn the foreign language through situations that happen continuously and not based on grammar textbooks. The most effective way for a child to learn a language, according to Lust's research, is by total immersion. Placing the child in situations where they are surrounded by the second language will allow them to pick up on the grammatical knowledge faster and better (IMPACT, n.d.).

The importance of teaching grammar

All English learners are faced with the challenge of learning the extensive range of grammatical concepts and categories as well as the rules governing their effective use. This includes various categories that students can discover during the process, such as identifying tenses, articles, relative clauses, modal verbs, etc. De Oliveira & Schleppegrell (2016) state that grammar refers both to

what people consciously know about language (grammar rules, for example) and to how to correct their language when speaking or writing. In a person's mother tongue, this knowledge about language becomes subconscious and it is developed as they grow up interacting in a language community. On the other hand, the learning of the grammar of a second language may imply studying and practicing the structures and their rules to be able to express meaningful sentences, making communication possible. Thornbury (1999) argues that there are two main purposes of language derived from two kinds of grammar meaning. The first purpose is called the representational function of language and this reflects the way people perceive the world, and is conveyed by verbs, subjects, objects, adverbials, tenses, and aspects. The second purpose is called the interpersonal function of language and it is typically reflected in the way people use grammar to ease the task of getting actions done, this means, how grammar is used to fine-tune the meanings that people wish to express adequately. Whichever the purpose of language, it is easy to conclude that grammar has an essential role in the learning process of a second language, since learners must master the actual structure of the target language and how its linguistic units, such as words and phrases, are combined to produce sentences (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, as cited by Burton 2020). Young students may learn many words, but if they have not internalized the EFL grammar, they will lack structures or guides to how words are organized to build sentences; consequently, they will fail in communicating their ideas (Shakir & Mahmood, 2021).

Now, teaching grammar has been subject to debate as there are different aspects that have influenced beliefs about the way to teach it and what exactly should be taught. Rossiter (2021) explains that one example of how to teach grammar is based on Chomsky's theory of universal grammar, where he suggests that children's brains are all wired up to understand grammar by intuition. However, this can become an elitist approach because only certain profiles of learners are likely to be able to work out the rules by themselves. Conversely, there have been other approaches to teaching grammar, but they have been more traditional in the sense that they teach the structures and their rules in a deductive way, revealing a belief that it is important to teach grammar in a way students can easily recognize and enabling them to acquire the basic knowledge of grammar they need to communicate in the foreign language (Thornbury, 1999). For this reason, the understanding and use of different approaches and methods has been important for EFL teachers when teaching grammar (Djurayeva, Ayatov & Shegay, 2020).

Over the years, there have been many approaches to teaching English as a second language, and they all have

dealt with grammar teaching in different ways. Some of these approaches are (Thornbury, 1999:21):

- Grammar Translation, where there is a focus on students doing exercises involving translation into and out of their mother tongue.
- The Direct Method, in which learners are believed to pick up the grammar in much the same way as children pick up the grammar of their mother tongues, simply by being immersed in the target language.
- The Audiolingual Method, which consisted of a graded list of sentence patterns that, although not necessarily labelled as such, were grammar-based in origin, forming the basis of repeated pattern-practice drills.
- The Natural Approach, which does not include either a grammar syllabus or explicit rule-giving, attempting to replicate the conditions of the first language acquisition process.
- Communicative Language Teaching, which involves learning and understanding how to use grammar and vocabulary of the language to achieve communicative goals, and how to do this in a socially appropriate way.
- The Task-based Learning Approach, which focuses on setting a goal for students and then following three steps (pre-task, task, and language focus) to achieve that goal, using the target language they are learning to communicate with their peers.
- The Deductive Approach, which focuses on instruction before practice and involves rules, principles, concepts or theories, first presented then applied.
- The Inductive approach, which allows teachers to tailor their lessons to the different learning styles of students using games to teach grammar.

As can be appreciated, there have been various ways of teaching grammar as the theory of second language learning develops based on research findings, having an impact on pedagogies for teaching foreign languages. However, there is a distinguishable division between approaches which are more traditional and teach grammar deductively, making grammar rules explicit and having students memorize them through extensive practice and drills and those which are focused on effective communication as the priority and therefore teach grammar inductively, making grammar implicit in the forms of communication and having students interact using phrases and language functions along with the grammar structures.

Regardless of the approach used for teaching grammar, EFL teachers nowadays have access to a diverse range of techniques and resources that are available and can be matched with the teaching method or approach and, more especially, to the students' needs. Table 1 summarizes popular current approaches to grammar teaching and the techniques and resources that EFL teachers can implement in their lessons.

Table 1. Current approaches to grammar teaching (Taken from Rama & Agulló, 2012, as cited by Lopez, Martinez, Jiménez, Pérez, & Mateo, 2019, p.4).

Approach or Method	Techniques and Resources
Traditional Grammar Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation-practice-production cycle • Continuous drillings for practice • Deductive teaching • Grammatical structures are dressed up into communicative functions
Task-Based Language Learning (TBLT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inductive way of teaching grammar • Focus on form after providing enough input through enabling tasks • Naturalistic repetition
Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Focus-on-form	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reactive/proactive focus-on-form • Sequential/integrated sequence • Unobtrusive activities • Input modifications
Content-Based Instruction (CBI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on form through activities which are related to the topic in question • Grammar taught within context, inductively or deductively • Learning by using

It is evident that a variety of approaches, methods, techniques and resources for teaching grammar are now available to students. It is a matter of learning the students' needs, their learning goals, their learning context and selecting the appropriate tools that will help learners to master the structures of the foreign language. The next section will discuss the use of games as a potentially effective tool for teaching grammar to young learners in an EFL context.

Using games to teach grammar to EFL young learners

Games are intended to be entertaining, especially for children, and they involve following a set of rules. In the language teaching context, games are organized activities with a particular task to complete or objective to achieve, a set of rules, involving competition ~~between~~ ^{between} players, and communication between players in spoken or written language (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). As classroom activities, games aim to provide opportunities for learners to practice the target language, learning it at the same time they are having fun in the classroom. Hadfield (1990, as cited by Gozcu & Caganaga, 2016) agrees that the purpose of using games in an EFL class is to create a fun language-learning process where the classes are neither traditional nor boring for the learners. He also mentions that games must have three important

elements: rules, a goal, and an element of fun. Games can be used at all stages in the progression from controlled to free practice; they can even be useful as diagnostic tools for teachers, enabling them to identify areas of difficulty and to plan appropriate remedial action. Many educational researchers recognize games as material for classes that can be used to create a helpful environment for students to learn easily and enjoyably. For example, Jasanská (2022) states that games can provide meaningful experiences with a language, allowing students to remember information more easily. In Morocco, Haiji and Kim (2019) asked a group of high school teachers about their use of grammar games in the classroom and their apparent effectiveness. In their research, 50 high school first-grade students were divided into two groups; the first group learned grammatical items using games and the second learned the same items without any game; after the instruction finished, all learners sat a grammar test. Their findings show that the participating Moroccan EFL teachers have positive attitudes towards the use of grammar games in the classroom, since the students who learned grammar through games did better than those who did not. This can be taken as evidence that games are in the context of the study, providing an effective context for students to practice the target language. These researchers recommend that games should be widely practiced in EFL schools, since in their context they are clearly a good means to enhance grammar learning.

Similarly, Mezoued & Lebdaï (2019) carried out research into the use of structure games to teach grammar in secondary schools in Algeria. Two classes of a population of 62 young learners in a middle school were organized into an experimental group and a control group. The results of their data analysis revealed that there was a significant statistical difference between both groups in favor of the experimental groups who received the treatment which proved that use of educational games enhanced student's grammar learning in their context. Meanwhile, in Chiapas, Mexico, Hernández Roblero (2012) tested the effectiveness of games as tools for teaching grammar and vocabulary to young learners in an elementary school in the community of La Concordia, with 42 students of the 5th grade, aged around 10 years old. The results he obtained seemed to show that games were helpful when teaching English grammar, since the learners enjoyed the games and their rate of grammar retention was high. He concluded that games should become a regular part of EFL teachers' lessons.

As can be appreciated, all these pieces of research seem to demonstrate that educational games increase young learners' motivation, interaction, and collaboration in the language classroom, providing a positive and engaging classroom atmosphere. Moreover, it was also found that

using games requires access to suitable classrooms, enough class time, and adequate equipment to obtain the desired results. Fortunately, there is a variety of games that can be selected or adapted for implementation in the EFL lesson, according to the students' specific needs. And this becomes especially relevant when teaching grammar to young learners, as they have specific needs in a context where English is spoken as a foreign language, that is, they are exposed to the target language only during the time they are in class.

Rinvolucrí (1984:1-2) classifies games into four types:

- (1) Competitive games. These include traditional games like "noughts and crosses", "double or quits", etc., which have been adapted to highlight a specific grammar point.
- (2) Collaborative games. These games require warm cooperation among students rather than competition. The teacher generally remains in the background and plays the role of a facilitator.
- (3) Awareness activities. They require students to think and feel about human relationships. Indirectly, they practice grammar, focusing on what they are saying, not on the form they are using.
- (4) Grammar through drama. During these activities, students play a sketch or make a role play or do some mimics, practicing grammar through movement while being active.

As can be seen, there are different kinds of games that can be used to teach grammar to young EFL learners. It is a matter of matching the appropriate game to the students' learning needs and the context in which the course is being implemented. Games can help practice and reinforce young learners' understanding of grammar rules in a fun and memorable way, resulting in more effective memorization and better retention. Additionally, collaborative and awareness-type games contribute to the development of students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as they are often required to use grammar in context to complete game objectives.

In a language classroom, teachers need to have a plan in mind regarding how they can present a topic, how the students will become interested in the class and the materials used in the lesson. For instance, using an English textbook during the entire lesson can be tedious for young learners; this is why teachers need to select the appropriate strategies and methods to apply in class according to the students' learning needs and context. Games are generally used to escape from the monotony of a coursebook, fill extra class time, and review for a test. However, games can also provide learners with a meaningful way of practicing new grammatical structures and notions in context. Unlike completing exercises from a textbook, games can provide learners with an

opportunity to use language authentically, making learning more meaningful and memorable (Teacher's Corner, 2017).

On the other hand, there are those who are against using games in the language classroom. For example, Le, Tran, Nguyen, & Xuan (2023) reported that the participant teachers in their research did not enjoy having educational games in their lessons because preparing the materials and the equipment for games is time-consuming and laborious. Likewise, Jaaska & Aaltonen (2022) mention that lack of time, insufficient competence in designing learning-oriented games and a fear of losing authority in front of students are common barriers for adapting games in an educational context. However, these studies did find a positive outcome from students, showing interest, engaging in the activity and making some progress.

To conclude this survey of existing research, Hong (2021) mentions that games allow learners to learn, practice and grasp grammar and sentence structure in a wide range of contexts. He also states that games create excitement, bringing fun to the class making a relaxing and enjoyable atmosphere to help students learn grammar very easily. Similarly, Saraswathi & Biswas (2018) claim that grammar games have the advantage of providing opportunities for meaningful use of language, practicing the four macro skills. He adds that games are useful at all levels of learning, offering genuine information gaps motivating students to apply their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, learning at the same time they are having fun. All these advantages make the use of grammar games in teaching grammar to young learners very effective, interesting and quick.

Methodology

The research method for the current study was the mixed-method approach. Creswell & Creswell (2018) explain that this approach to an inquiry involves collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, interpreting the two types of data, comparing and contrasting interpretations and looking for patterns. The two approaches may involve differing philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks. However, if similar conclusions can be drawn from both perspectives, this can strengthen The combination of both approaches is relevant as it provides more opportunities to understand what happens in the study; Tenny, Brannan and Brannan (2022) explain that qualitative data can help expand and deepen the understanding of the data or results obtained from a quantitative analysis, as qualitative data tends to be gathered by means of open-ended questions without predetermined responses while quantitative data usually includes closed responses that permit a wider field of the

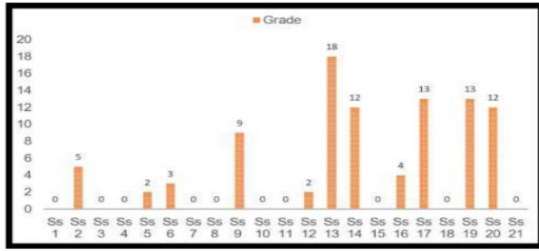
study in some ways, though the depth of responses may be less.

As mentioned above, the participants were 22 students, 14 female and 7male, in a second level EFL group, equivalent to A1 level (CEFR). They were young learners of between 8 and 10 years of age, taking a Saturday EFL course with a total of 72 hours of language input. They were taught grammar using different types of games during their EFL lessons. Then they were tested in order to determine the effectiveness of the use of games in teaching grammar to these young learners. The data collection instruments were: (1) a diagnostic exam, applied at the beginning of the course to get information about students' previous knowledge and their learning needs, so this could be used as the basis for the development of the course activities; (2) progress tests, four of them applied every three units during the course to prepare and allow students to practice before the achievement test; the exam results were also helpful in monitoring the students' progress; (3) an achievement test, applied at the end of the course to evaluate students' use of the grammar taught during the twelve units of the course. All these data collection instruments provided for the quantitative data required for the mixed-method research. Regarding the qualitative data, (4) participant, free observations were made both of individual and group behaviour and language performance, in every class of the course, to learn more about the students and identify the situations that affected the development of the students' learning process. Observation data in relation to students' academic performance was also used to determine the learners' needs so that the class could be tailored to their strengths and weaknesses, as the course evolved.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data obtained from the different types of tests that were applied for this research was analyzed. Figure 1 shows the results obtained from the participants in a 20-question diagnostic test applied at the beginning of the course. This test was based on the vocabulary and grammar content of the syllabus the students completed in the previous course. This is because the purpose of this diagnostic exam is to detect their strengths and weaknesses, and focus on the areas they need improvement. The highest score was 18 out of 20 by one student, while the lowest score was 0 correct answers out of 20 by 10 students. This outcome led the teacher to teach grammar deductively and use collaborative games, since these young learners could help each other through teamwork.

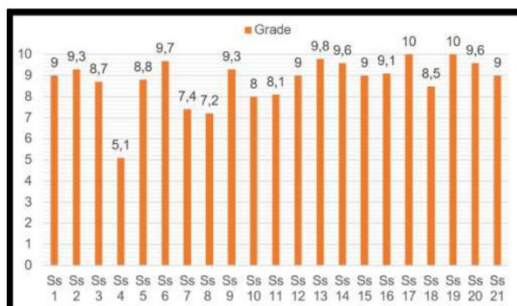
Figure 1. Results of the diagnostic exam.



Once the course started, the teacher administered four progress tests, one for every two units, with a possible highest score 10. These tests were applied after teaching the vocabulary, the grammar, and the topics contained in the respective units and after having practiced with competitive and collaborative games. In the first progress test, eight students obtained a score of 9, nine learners got 8, and four students obtained 7. For the second partial exam, there was no evident improvement, perhaps because the scheduling of these units required the adjustment of the course content to the course calendar. This affected the amount of practice time students had as it was less than that allowed for the first partial period. In the second partial exam, two students achieved 10, 7 learners got 8, while three obtained a score of 7. The third partial exam showed an important improvement, as more learners obtained the highest score of 10 (3), 8 students achieved a score of 9, four students were awarded an 8, and the same number of learners (4) scored 7. For the fourth and final partial exam, an important change was appreciated. Even though there were fewer students with the highest score of 10 (2), the average score for the group was higher, with 11 learners obtaining a score of 9, and 5 students a 9.

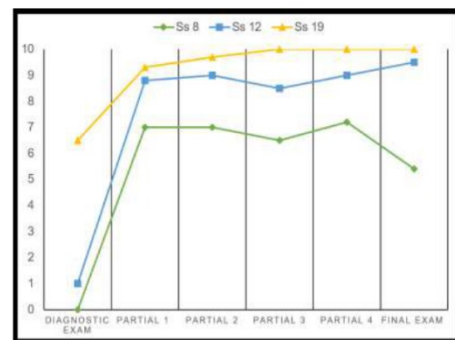
At the end of the semester, the final exam covering all grammar points in the course was administered. As can be observed in Figure 2, the highest grade of 10 was achieved by three young learners, eight students scored 9, three students scored 8, and four students scored 7. Something important is that only two students failed the test with a score of 5.

Figure 2. Results of the achievement test.



After administering, analyzing and interpreting the results of all progress and achievement exams, the researchers acquired an overview of the students' learning progress. The results of three students serve to exemplify the main trends, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. The learning progress of 3 students during their 2nd English level course.



The lowest score of Student No. 8 in Figure 3 was scored in the diagnostic exam, but her highest score was that of the fourth partial. Even though she did not score higher than 7, her progress from 0 to 7 is significant. Progress in her behavior was also observed, as at the beginning of the course, she would frequently interrupt the teacher, she had difficulty waiting for her turn during the games, did not finish the assigned tasks on time and was easily distracted. During the course, she improved her behavior, respecting turns and collaborating with her classmates; however, the student's mother reported to the teacher that Student 8 had been previously diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and had received treatment.

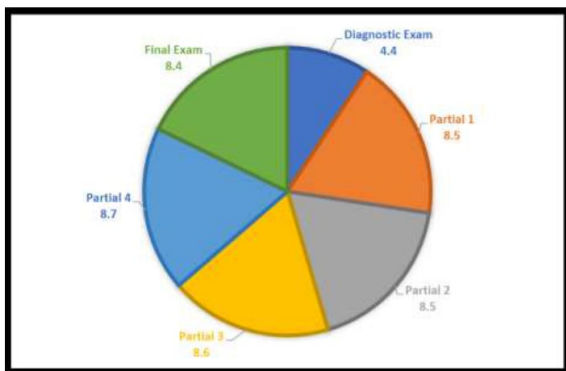
Student No. 12 in Figure 3 is a male young learner that demonstrated significant progress. His highest grade was 9 in the fourth progress test while his lowest was 1 in the diagnostic exam. Despite being hyperactive, this young learner was hard-working, always playing enthusiastically and seeming highly motivated. He could finish first and then he disturbed his classmates, but his progress from a score of 1 to a score of 9 is highly relevant.

Likewise, Student No. 19's progress is shown in Figure 3. This female student always demonstrated her intelligence through her behavior, as she always paid attention and she was very participative in class. She often had questions for the teacher and enjoyed the competitive games. Her noticeable progress can be seen in her scores, where she achieved 10 in the last two partial exams and the final exam, while her lowest score was 6 in the diagnostic test.

Finally, the results obtained by all the group can be appreciated in Figure 4. The average score obtained by all the class in every test is shown here.

It can be seen that their lowest performance was in the diagnostic exam; this may have happened due to the lack of English study during vacation before beginning the next course. Then, a steady increase can be observed in the first three progress tests, being the third the highest score obtained in general, 8.5 out of 10.

Figure 4. Average scores obtained by young learners of the 2nd English Level group E.



The qualitative data for this research was collected from the free observations during the entire course. These observations were focused on two aspects of students' learning behavior in class: their performance during the games, and their academic performance during the course. For the former aspect, it was observed that students respond more effusively to games in which they work in teams, grouping with the classmates they spend more time together. It was noticed that more experienced students with EFL learning helped their weaker classmates so they could do well in the game and have their teams win. The games in this research were carried out during the practice stage of the lessons; consequently, there were a few mistakes that students made. When corrected, the students did not show any stress nor shame of being corrected, as they were motivated to continue with the game and do it better the next time to win the game. For example, in a game where students had to write on the board the action their classmate was miming, using the correct form of the verbs in present continuous, they made mistakes with the -ing spelling at the beginning. Once corrected, they paid more attention to the spelling so they could get points to win the game. As for the second aspect, it was observed that learners had an insight of the grammar structure they were studying after some controlled activities, such as completing worksheets, and a collaborative and competitive game. It was noticed that the learners in this research did not make the same mistakes when producing a written text or when participating in speaking

activities during the production stage. To illustrate this appreciation, three students were struggling with the use of the auxiliary verb "do/does" when making questions in present simple. After answering some worksheets, they played a game in which learners had to jump to the right if they believed the auxiliary "do" was correct in a question the teacher presented, or to the left if they thought "does" was the right answer. It was observed that the topic became clear to them as they did not make the same mistake very often. This less frequent occurrence of mistakes leads to the belief that their academic performance had improved.

Discussion and Conclusion

After analyzing both the quantitative and qualitative results obtained from the data collection instruments, it is possible to affirm that the use of games is important in young learners' English learning process because the students in this research showed an improvement in their grammar learning as a result of teaching grammar indirectly through different kinds of games in the classroom. The grammar games included in the EFL lessons created a good environment in class, leading to a fun language learning process where the classes are not traditional nor boring for the learners. For this reason, games are beneficial because they constitute a main tool that produces a motivational environment for learners; moreover, young learners have some characteristics that allow them feel easily motivated to learn and enjoy games as ludic activities in the classroom. The most relevant characteristic was the competitive attitude (Bermejo et al., 2019), which means that the participants were ambitious to win the competition or finish the activity correctly to obtain a benefit from it. Additionally, a second characteristic that was appreciated during the observations was the children's relationship with the learning environment, as they often collaborated with their classmates and also with the teacher during the games. Regarding the type of games used in the language classroom for this research, the competitive and collaborative games (Rinvolucrí, 1984) were selected as the most appropriate for teaching grammar to the participants in the 2nd level Group E of the Saturday English course in the Language School, UNACH, Campus IV. The reason behind this selection was that the teacher's purpose was to highlight a specific grammar point and it required warm cooperation among students, preferring collaboration over competition. During the semester, the games were implemented every unit, after the topics had been taught.

Games were considered practice activities before applying a test to check the students' progress in their understanding of the grammar structures. For the majority of the games, the class was organized in teams to

stimulate competition between the young learners. This was an important aspect of the games because the students felt excited about finishing first, completing the tasks correctly or answering the questions correctly. Moreover, these young learners also responded positively to the fact that the games provided different challenges in every unit, since the specific grammar point used for the games was from that unit they were studying in class. This confirms that grammar games are effective for teaching grammar to young students in large groups. For this class, competitive and collaborative grammar games were a good match with these students' needs and behavior, as they could learn and play at the same time, dealing with their hyperactivity and promoting team spirit and learning a grammar structure all at once.

As for teachers, they are generally aware that there are many grammar games available, either online or board games. In an educational context, EFL teachers use games as didactic tools to teach or practice grammar, vocabulary and to develop the four macro language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. With games, teachers can adapt or design class activities based on the topics that must be studied in the program, as it was the case for the young learners of the 2nd English level group E of the Saturday courses in the Language School, Campus Tapachula UNACH. They had fun and were able to play with their classmates, since games provided a full environment of security, liberty, and confidence in which they could learn more easily. This progress is also important for the young learners' parents, as they have become more aware that their children need to learn English as the preferred foreign language for it may become an important tool for their future labor lives.

As for the teachers of young EFL learners, they have found a helpful tool in games for teaching grammar; they need to find the best strategies to teach their learners and make sure they keep interested in the class and in learning the target language. In the Saturday English at Language School Campus Tapachula, UNACH, Chiapas, most EFL teachers seem not to worry about how to teach grammar more effectively, focusing more on teaching vocabulary; this may happen because they believe young learners do not need to learn sentence structure at the very beginning of their language learning. This can be easily solved by using games to teach grammar, carefully designed to match the students' needs and taking into account their particular characteristics.

The results of this research suggest that grammar games had a positive impact on the students' grammar learning process and grades. The types of games that were selected according to the results of their diagnostic test and the observation of their behavior was competitive and collaborative (Rinvolutri, 1984). Each game was adapted and designed according to their group learning needs and

based on the grammar in each unit. The young learners in this class were excited when they played the games because they enjoyed the healthy competition and motivated them to answer correctly in order to win the game. They also discovered that collaboration with their peers was beneficial for the team, since they could make better progress through working together and helping each other with the correct answers. This demonstrated that young learners tend to be more competitive and they gradually become aware of their relationship with their classmates in the classroom context, just as Bermejo et al. (2019) have claimed.

Despite the positive results, it is fair to outline the limitations of this study. An important limitation for this research is that it can be difficult to measure progress and perceived learning associated with a game setup (Boughian et al., 2019, as cited by Jasska & Aaltonen, 2022). The data analysis depended heavily on qualitative observations, which can be insufficient for some authors. It is recommended that further research includes more qualitative data that can confirm the investigator's appreciation. For instance, learners' perceptions of how they felt during the games or if they really think the games in the classroom helped them understand the grammar structure to learn can be collected through interviews or a focus group. This could be helpful to confirm the efficiency of games in EFL learning.

Nonetheless, after this investigation, the researchers of this project can recommend the use of games as an effective tool for teaching grammar of a foreign language to young learners. They seem to be highly motivational and they can be used for teaching not only grammar, but also vocabulary and grammar, which at the same time it helps them develop their listening, speaking, reading and writing. Games provide a wide range of versatile class activities, consequently, teachers can choose from a variety of games, selecting, adapting or even designing games based on the topic and the needs of young learners. Thus, teachers can incorporate educational games to their lesson plans, breaking the routine of traditional classes and motivating young learners to learn in a fun way.

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