Proceeding Paper
Enhancing ESL Writing Instruction Using Headgram †

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Abstract: Language instructors have long focused on improving students' competency. The greatest methods for involving students in the classroom are constantly evolving to meet the demands of the students. To accomplish the goal, new strategies and methods have been developed. As a result, some form of motivation is required to make sure that students are inspired and involved in the class so that it will be more meaningful. In light of this context, the researchers suggest the use of a board game called Headgram. Headgram is a board game developed by the researchers of the present study. A total of 62 students enrolled in the Integrated Language Skills III at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Cawangan Pulau Pinang were chosen as participants of the present study, and they played Headgram. This preliminary study is set out with the purpose of examining the students' perception of Headgram and to learn whether Headgram has helped the students perform better with their writing skills. In doing so, an action research study was conducted, and information was acquired using a combination of methods, including semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews and 15 questions on pre- and post-tests. The results of this study indicate that the students enjoy Headgram, though it is a challenging game, and Headgram effectively encourages a sense of enjoyment while enhancing students' writing abilities—specifically, sentence structure. Further, it was revealed that Headgram encourages students to work well as a team. Future studies might concentrate on the opinions of the teachers in order to have a balanced viewpoint, whereas the current study concentrated only on student responses using Headgram. Additionally, since technology is a cutting-edge tool, it would be amazing if Headgram became accessible online in the future.

Keywords: ESL; writing; board game; news headlines; UiTM

1. Introduction

By concentrating on student learning outcomes, the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015–2025 underlined the significance of English language proficiency among higher education students. It is thought to be important for educators to change the nature of their teaching and learning process, particularly in the context of ESL. ESL consists of four skills: speaking, reading, writing, and listening. Of the four skills, mastering writing is crucial for college students because it is a skill that is required in all occupations [1]. Employees must specifically possess strong writing abilities because the workplace necessitates documentation. According to Zhu, having strong writing abilities is crucial in the corporate sector because they are valued as a competence. Therefore, it is crucial for students to have strong writing skills in order to boost the employment rate for students in higher education. The ability to communicate effectively through writing is crucial in today's globalized environment.

The most difficult skill to learn and teach in an ESL classroom, according to [2], p. 470, is writing. Additionally, students should develop writing literacy as it is an essential ability, particularly at the higher education level [3]. Despite the range of writing strategies that teachers have created and used in their classrooms, a unifying goal is to ensure that students

understand that they write in order to carry out specific intentional purposes. This has resulted in a difficult task for both students and teachers: teaching and learning writing.

Due to the difficulty of writing for both teachers and students, students eventually responded negatively. One of the factors contributing to students' lack of English language proficiency is their low motivation to learn the language. Notably, social interactions in the classroom are related to students' motivation for and disengagement from their English learning [4]. Social interactions allow teachers and students to communicate ideas in ESL classes, which may enhance student learning. In order to improve student learning, it is important to provide a joyful and relaxing classroom environment.

Reiterating this, writing has traditionally been seen as intimidating by both students and teachers, which has led to low motivation to improve writing skills, particularly among students pursuing higher education. According to [5], ESL writing courses need to make thoughtful use of effective instructional approaches that emphasize writing for meaningful goals, mastery of pertinent genres, and growing students' skill. Given this context, the authors of the current study believe that an intervention and creativity are required in the teaching of writing skills. In order to escape the passive learning process, the researchers of the present study created a board game.

Newspaper headlines from the local newspapers were included into the creation of the board game. It should be emphasized that news headlines can grab readers' attention by summarizing the crucial information [6]. Ref [7] also noted that news headlines use distinct grammar rules compared to standard English, which will help students master the different elements of speech and writing grammar. In addition to textbooks, there are a variety of other important and authentic teaching resources, and newspapers are one of them. Ref [2] asserts that reading newspapers improves language abilities as well as knowledge and adds to the fun and interaction of learning. Additionally, a blend of interactive and didactic aspects must be used in order to successfully teach [8]. In light of recent game aficionados, games are infused and included into the teaching and learning process to promote enjoyment and joy regardless of the nature: conventional or modern, offline or online. Furthermore, teaching languages is not an exception.

The board game, called Headgram, was created to test players' ability to accurately rearrange newspaper headlines and to promote cooperation among participants. Teamwork is becoming a key component of gameplay, according to [9]. Each player may have a more positive and joyful experience as a result of the group's active participation. They will learn from one another as they play the game, working together to defeat the other groups. The researchers are of the opinion that this board game could serve as an engaging and stimulating ESL classroom exercise while also helping students improve their writing and grammar.

The goal of the current study is to learn how students view Headgram as a tool to improve their writing abilities. The goals of this study are to find out whether Headgram has helped students enhance their writing skills and to emphasize students' perceptions of Headgram. There are two research questions that correspond to the objectives of the study:

(1)   What is the students' perception of Headgram? and
(2)   Does Headgram help improve the students' writing performance?

2. Methodology

Action research is used in the current study by means of a mixed-methods approach. Teachers frequently use action research to examine their instructional strategies or investigate an issue and its solutions. Additionally, because it follows a step-by-step approach, it is a methodical and organized research method. According to Johnson, an action research project should include the following five components: (1) defining the question, problem, and area of interest; (2) planning the data collection; (3) gathering and analyzing the data; (4) describing the potential uses and applications of the findings; and (5) reporting the results and formulating a plan for action with others. This study examines the efficacy of Headgram in teaching ESL writing as a preliminary action research study. The fact

that action research projects range in complexity from straightforward and informal to intricate and formal is interesting to observe. This served as the catalyst for the researchers of the current study to conduct modest, informal action research as a starting point. The qualitative instrument is individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews, which are set to answer the first research question, i.e., the students' perception on Headgram. The quantitative instrument is used to address the second research question of the current study. Pre-test and post-test were the instruments utilized for the quantitative component. There are two distinct writing-related test items for both the pre-test and post-test.

2.1. Headgram

In order to teach sentence construction through newspaper headlines, the researchers of the current study developed a board game called Headgram (see Figure 1). The use of educational games in second language writing instruction is beneficial. Headgram is designed to encourage kids to learn grammar in an entertaining way by fusing words, headlines, and syntax. To ensure that real resources are used in teaching and learning, the headlines in this board game were drawn from headlines in a local newspaper. Headgram may be played in a group of four because it was designed to foster teamwork among pupils. Each of the three levels, basic, intermediate, and advanced, have five news headlines. Each set of words will be placed on a magnetic board, and each group will have one minute to arrange them. Teachers should explore the answers and how they differ from the original headline as a follow-up activity, as well as the significance of using the right parts of speech, because different word placements convey varied emphasis.

Figure 1. Headgram set.

2.2. Participants

Students taking Integrated Language Skills III at UiTM, Cawangan Pulau Pinang are the participants of the present study. There are 62 students from three distinct Integrated Language Skills III classrooms. It was necessary to obtain the students' consent prior to treating them as study participants, and only then was that consent granted. Five of the students agreed to participate in the semi-structured face-to-face interview. The students were coded using pseudonyms to guarantee their confidentiality. As the researchers are the instructors of the three classes, they had a good view of what was going on during the exercise.

2.3. Data Collection and Data Analysis

To restate, this study employed both qualitative and quantitative approach. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews with students who have participated in Headgram are part of the qualitative approach. Questions on their experiences playing Headgram and the usefulness of the game in teaching grammar and writing skills are part of the interview

protocol. Five students in total consented to having their responses videotaped. The videos were verbatim transcribed. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze qualitative data using Nvivo12, and the results were displayed in diagrams for easy reference.

Pre- and post-tests were employed for the quantitative technique. Notably, pre- and post-tests are frequently employed in behavioral research, especially to gauge how an intervention or course of treatment has changed subjects [10]. The pre-test and post-test were used to evaluate the pupils' progress after playing Headgram. Prior to playing Headgram, the students took the pre-test, and the post-test was given to them after they played Headgram. A total of 15 questions were taken from newspaper headlines for the pre- and post-test. A Google Form was used to administer the pre- and post-tests. Students' marks for both the pre- and post-tests were totaled up and the mean score was computed. The mean scores of the pre- and post-tests for the respondents were compared, and the results were translated into percentages. The respondents' pre- and post-test mean scores were computed using Microsoft Excel 365. The mean scores were compared to determine whether any improvements had been made.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are shown in accordance with the research questions. The first research question looks into how informants feel about Headgram. The second study question assesses if there have been any improvements by comparing the mean score on the respondents' pre- and post-tests.

3.1. Informants' Perception on Headgram

Regarding the students' perception, the five informants in the current study provided excellent feedback on Headgram. When asked about their perception playing Headgram, informants A and C stated that it was challenging, whereas informants D and E thought it was exciting. Figure 2 below displays this information:
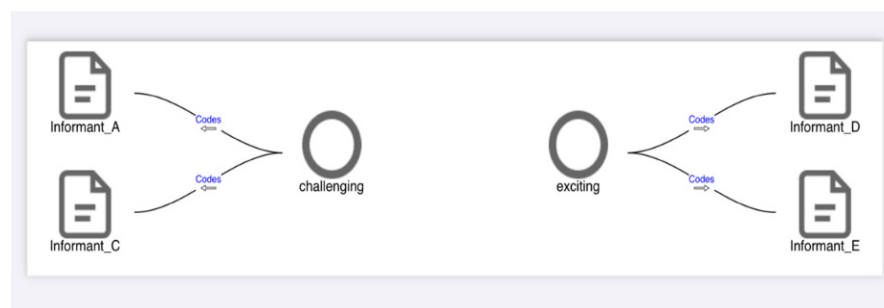

Figure 2. Informants' experience.

Headgram is challenging because it "tests...how to handle our sentences...like simple sentences to the expert one," according to informant A. Furthermore, informant C said that the game is challenging because "we need to finish the sentence in the time allotted". Informants D and E praised Headgram's excitement despite the game's difficulty. Informant D distinctly exclaimed, "Yes! The game is fun for me because it's so exciting". These findings support [11]'s observation that newspapers may not only increase knowledge, but also make learning fun and interactive. In order to make learning more dynamic and engaging, it is crucial to include some enjoyable and interactive features in classrooms. In terms of Headgram's usefulness, the informants stressed that it has assisted them in both grammatical and sentence construction improvement, as shown in the following Figure 3:
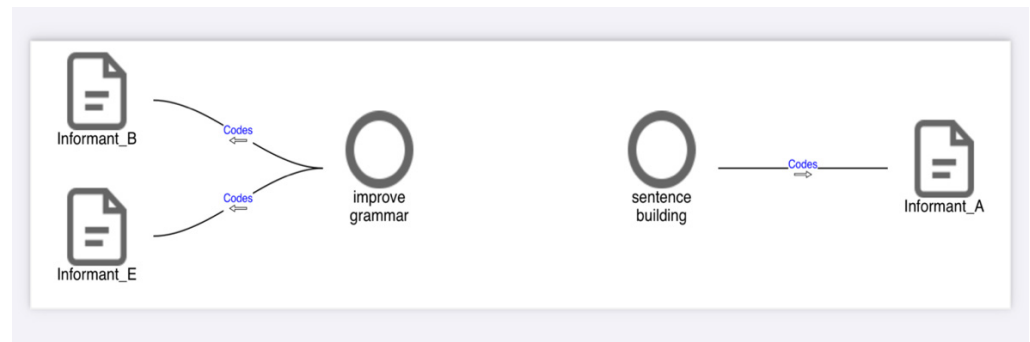
Figure 3. The effectiveness of Headgram.

Informant E added that "(this game) is wonderful and I wish we can play it every time since it can assist us in learning, advances, and so on,". Informant B underscored "I think this game improve our language." Informant A, however, made a point of underlining how Headgram improves sentence structure when she stated, "it improves our…how to organise our phrases…like simple sentences to the expert one." This implies that Headgram can improve pupils' writing skills, namely sentence structure and grammar. Notably, it has been demonstrated that using newspaper headlines to teach grammar and parts of speech to students is effective. It is also noteworthy that informant B said Headgram has, to some extent, encouraged the students to cooperate while playing. He claimed, "Headgram forces us to collaborate as a group." Teamwork is essential for learning in groups since peer learning also occurs, making it more than just a crucial component of a game.

3.2. Respondents' Pre- and Post-Test Mean Score Comparison

Figure 4 displays the mean score for the respondents' pre- and post-tests. Since the mean score before the test and the mean score after the test differ by 35%, it can be said that the respondents' mean scores have improved overall. Pre-test scores on average were 17.6%, and post-test scores on average were 52.6%. It is safe to say that Headgram has, in some manner, enhanced the responders' writing abilities.
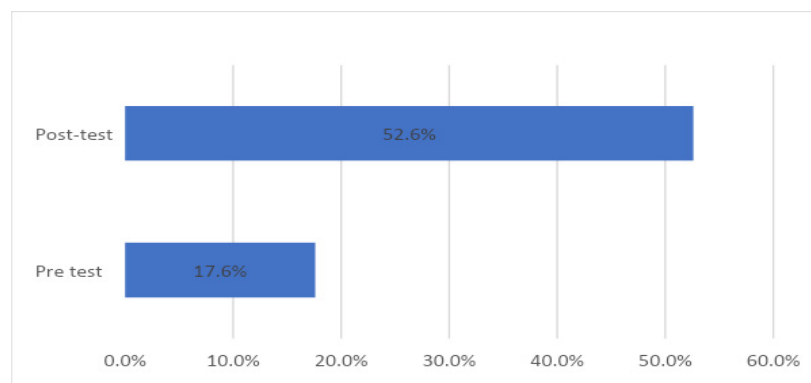
Figure 4. Respondents' mean score comparison.

4. Conclusions

It is important to highlight that the current study is a pilot project to evaluate the efficacy of utilizing Headgram in an ESL writing classroom. The preliminary feedback obtained shows that Headgram has effectively addressed the objectives described in the present study. This study also demonstrates how Headgram has improved students' writing skills, particularly in the construction of sentences and the application of grammar from authentic materials When compared to traditional grammar courses, which usually emphasize practice and rote memorization, Headgram provides students with an interesting way to understand how different sentence construction elements, from punctuation to word

order, work. As a result, it gives students the opportunity to study, as well as comprehend, the delivered lesson in a style that may inspire them immensely.

Undoubtedly, the thrill of educational games, such as Headgram, instils in students a spirit of competition and challenge that could result in a more engaging and supportive learning environment. The researchers expect that academicians would recognize Headgram's potential for improving students' linguistic skills in an amusing way. The game components included in Headgram do raise the students' level of involvement while they participate in the activity. Additionally, Headgram is said to be able to foster extraordinary collaboration that encourages collaborative tasks in order to accomplish a shared objective [12].

Future research may focus on the instructors' input in order to have a balanced perspective, as the current study focused only on students utilizing Headgram's feedback. Additionally, it would be fantastic for Headgram to be accessible online in the future because technology is a modern tool.

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