

## *The Teaching of Grammar through Storytelling among L1 Malay Learners*

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### **Abstract**

English language teachers have always been trying to find new and interesting methods of teaching English grammar in the ESL classroom. Storytelling, although an aged-old method, can captivate students' attention, interest and imagination. This method is also known as an analogy. Generally, students find learning grammar a fearful experience because of the various grammar rules which they have to memorize and apply in communicating fluently in English. The objectives of this research are to investigate the feasibility of the use of storytelling in a grammar ESL class and determine the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the ESL grammar lesson. Two groups of 25 students each (N=50) are conveniently selected using the convenient sampling method to facilitate the study. The participants are L1 Malay students who have enrolled in the ELC 120 English diploma course. This is an experimental research where the groups are divided into a control and experimental group. The experimental group will be treated with storytelling while the control group will use the incidental method recommended in the syllabus. A pre and post test will be administered and a comparison of both treatments should help determine the effectiveness of storytelling. A set of questionnaire will also be distributed to all the participants to gather information on their perception of learning grammar through storytelling and to determine the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of teaching grammar. It is hoped that this valuable information will aid English language teachers in the teaching of grammar.

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## **Introduction**

Grammar has always been a difficult area to master in second language learning. It becomes even more challenging when the grammar rules of the students' first language are very different from the grammar rules of the target language. Most researchers agree that the reasons why students find it difficult to acquire the grammatical components of a language, was due to the fact that they were influenced by their first language or mother tongue. Second language learners are frequently in search of shortcuts or ways to memorize grammar rules. As stories tend to attract almost everyone's attention, the idea of introducing grammatical terms and their rules in a story form could facilitate the process of grasping these rules among second language learners.

Native speakers of English naturally pick up the grammatical components and therefore the teaching of grammatical rules to native learners is not emphasised. In a second language learning classroom however, the scenario is different whereby students need to grasp the grammatical rules for them to be confident in the language. Soo and Nor Haniza (2014) found in their study that storytelling or analogy can be a successful tool for the acquisition of English verb tenses especially among second language low proficiency learners.

## **Problem Statement**

Students find learning grammar a fearful experience because of the various grammar rules which they have to memorize and apply in communicating fluently in English. Storytelling may be able to lure or captivate students' attention. This study will therefore look at two research questions:

1. Is it feasible to use storytelling in a grammar ESL class?
2. What are the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the grammar lesson?

## **Objectives**

The objectives of this research are:

1. to investigate the feasibility of the use of storytelling in a grammar ESL class and
2. to determine the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the ESL grammar lesson.

## **Literature Review**

Everyone loves stories. A well-told story not only holds students' attention but also provides a platform for fun learning. Harrasi (2012) claimed that stories can inject enthusiasm among learners and thereby, instil the element of amusement among learners to learn a language in a more meaningful way. In a study conducted by Reid (1995) it was found that there were differences in teaching and learning styles and the students' cultural background can influence their favoured learning styles. Further, it was noted that visual learners enjoy learning through the use of visuals such as mind maps, charts, tables and graphs more. For such learning styles language instructors need to focus more on employing the usage of teaching tools that consist of pictures

and to make learning more interesting, animated pictures would be a good choice. There are more visual learners as compared to auditory and kinesthetic learners. For language learning to be meaningful, Larsen-Freeman (2001) emphasized that the challenge lies in understanding meaning and use. Generally, students are able to state the rules of a language but very often unable to use and apply these rules in authentic situations. If this scenario keeps repeating, language learning will not be successful. Therefore, there is a dire need for language teachers to prepare their lessons in such a way that learning becomes meaningful. It cannot be denied that meaningful learning leads to language acquisition. The present study thus, seeks to determine if storytelling can be used as a tool to assist in the grammar learning process and to enable effective application of grammar rules to be grasped by learners, especially L1 Malay learners.

Masterman and Ernesto (2006) in a study involving 12 French students found that exposure to explicit grammar knowledge showed improvement in some but not all aspects of language. To these French students, learning English by understanding grammar rules is a way of confirming their language forms in production. However, Ellis (2006) explained that the teaching of grammar can be carried out via any instructional methods as long as that particular method attracts learners' attention to specific grammatical forms either to understand or, process or produce what they have internalized metalinguistically. In addressing the issues in grammar teaching, he provided a number of insights which include (1) meanings and not just forms should be emphasised when teaching grammar (2) grammatical structures that are problematic to learners should be given attention and (3) learners who are taught grammar should already have acquired some ability to use the language. In line with that, Soo and Wong (2012) examined the acquisition of the grammar component of English pronouns by L2 speakers of English and found that among the reasons why students found it difficult to acquire a language was due to the fact that they were very often influenced by their mother tongue. Therefore, students actually rely on previously acquired knowledge from their L1 to help them produce language forms in L2. However, not all rules in L1 are similar to L2 and this is when these learners need basic grammar rules in English. Rules sound fearful but ESL learners feel secure when they have rules to fall back on when constructing sentences in the English language. Hence, in order to make the learning of grammar rules interesting, stories in which these rules are indirectly explained should be employed as a method of teaching. Storytelling can be an avenue for role-playing in which complete involvement is experienced in the learning process and as a result learning is more effective.

Uddin and Ahmed (2012) agreed that English should be taught through inductive and contextual approaches for learners to internalize grammar and acquire a language. However, they explained that in Bangladesh, English grammar is taught separately and deductively through the memorization of rules. Since grammar is learnt deductively, learning is receptive instead of productive. Storytelling however, will enable students to learn grammar rules through discovery. Learning through storytelling is self-directed and learner-centered where grammatical items are described or illustrated using analogy to enable better understanding of the grammatical items in a creative and interesting way. According to Federici, Montemagni and Pirrelli (1996), analogy is important in the acquisition of language but has been regrettably ignored. In investigating the usefulness of analogy in

language acquisition as a cognitive domain, Gentner and Namy (2006) found that comparison of two things can emphasize similarities which enhance better understanding and clearer learning. In the same vein, Gentner and Markman (1997) explained that such analogical processing involved relational similarities. According to Gentner (2003), relational focus arises when comparisons are made based on implicit correspondence between their conceptual representations. This is explained in the structure-mapping theory in connection to analogy. Correspondingly, Bartha (2013) asserted that analogy is the similarities found in two objects or systems of objects that can be used to clarify or provide better understanding of a concept or theory. On the other hand, analogical argument is a direct and clear representation of analogical reasoning that cites accepted similarities between two systems to support a conclusion or deduction. This shows that storytelling as a method of teaching grammar that can help students to understand the rules of grammar since the example or comparison used to explain the rule is common and accepted in the students' mindset.

### **Research Methodology**

This study used an experimental research method and the sampling size was based on a non-random convenient sampling. Two groups of 10 students each (N=20) were conveniently selected to facilitate the study. The participants were L1 Malay students who have enrolled in the ELC 120 (Integrated Language Skills: Listening) English diploma course. In this experimental research, the selected groups were divided into a control and experimental group. The experimental group was treated with storytelling grammar while the control group used the incidental method recommended in the syllabus. The story created for the purpose of this research was entitled 'The English Story'. An extract of the story about the various parts of speech which was recorded into a video can be seen below:

Once upon a time, there lived a man in England called Mr. English. Mr. English fell in love with a beautiful woman and decided to marry her.

During their honeymoon, Mrs. English became pregnant. Mr. English was overjoyed. All their relatives were overjoyed. They were all excited to help name the firstborn of the English family.

Finally, Mr. English thought very deeply and decided to name his son, **Noun**. He felt that this was a suitable name because in English, the names of people, animals, places and things are called Nouns.

A pre-test and a post-test were administered before and after the lessons. Comparison of both treatments helped determine the use of storytelling as an effective tool and identified the factors that contributed to its effectiveness. A sample of the pre-test and post-test is as follows:

Identify the parts of speech of the underlined words. Circle your answers.

1. Ali went to the post office by bicycle.

- A. adjective
- B. verb
- C. conjunction
- D. noun

A survey was also administered with a questionnaire of 20 questions to get feedback of the students' classroom experience of learning grammar using the storytelling method. A sample of the survey items are as follows:

### B. Perception of Storytelling

For questions 1-5, tick at the appropriate box.

1. Did you enjoy the story?

Yes

No

2. Is the story able to help you understand the parts of speech?

Yes

No

3. Are you able to remember the concept of the various parts of speech?

(For example, verbs represent actions)

Yes

No

### Findings

The data collected from the pre- and post-tests were tabulated and compared to see if the use of storytelling was effective in enhancing students' understanding of grammar rules. The general analysis of the scores is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Pre-Test and Post-Test Results

	PRE TEST	POST TEST	DIFFERENCE
<b>Experimental group</b>	6.57	8.14	+1.57
<b>Control group</b>	-	7.28	-

Table 1 shows the difference of +1.57 in scores for the experimental and control groups. The positive mean score indicates that the use of storytelling was effective in this study. Although the use of storytelling was only experimented at a preliminary round, it provided a better perspective on the prospects of storytelling as a tool for classroom teaching of grammar.

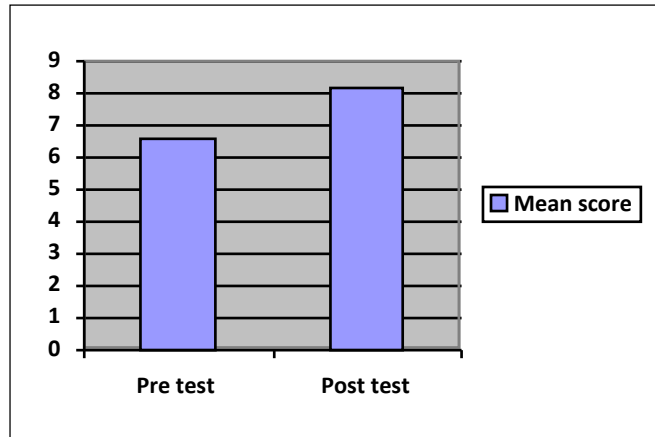


Figure 1. Mean Scores of the Pre-Test and Post-Test of the Experimental Group

Figure 1 shows the comparison of mean scores of the pre- and post-test of the experimental group. The mean scores show that the post-test results were higher than the pre-test results.

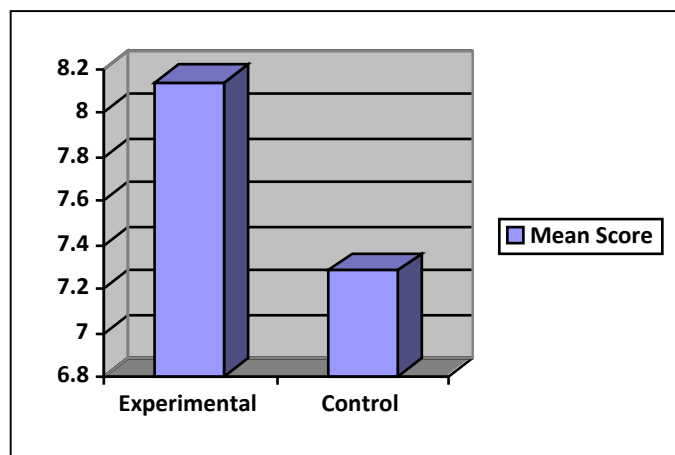


Figure 2. Mean Scores of Post Tests between Experimental and Control Groups

It was found that the experimental group performed better (+1.57) after treatment of a grammar lesson which employed the storytelling technique to explain the parts of speech (Figure 1). The difference between the post-test results of the experimental group and control group show a significant difference of 0.86 as seen in Figure 2.

From the set of questionnaire that was administered, it was found that students agreed that the lesson was more interesting. During the lesson, while the students listened and watched a video of the story, there was laughter in the classroom. Therefore, it is evident that they had enjoyed the contents of the story. Apart from that, the story was able to help students to understand the parts of speech and most of them seemed to be able to remember the concept of the parts of speech after they had been told the story. Once they have grasped the concept of the various parts of speech through the story, the students were better able to construct grammatically correct sentences. However, the data revealed that the students did not think that listening or watching the story once was enough for them to fully grasp the parts of speech. It was discovered that

most of the students had a clearer understanding of the different parts of speech, were able to differentiate between adjective and adverb and also could understand the usage of articles in English sentences. Nonetheless, only half of the students thought they could determine the parts of speech of every word that make up a sentence. The students too reported that the characters in the story had helped them to understand the various parts of speech by understanding the name and its function, as well as the simple explanation and relevant examples given in the story.

## **Conclusions**

From the findings above, it can be concluded that using stories to teach the rules of grammar can be of advantage to both students and instructors. Students tend to grasp the grammar rules better and the instructor is contented with the students' progress and achievement. Furthermore the lesson becomes more interesting creating a favourable environment for learning. For future research, separate stories for different grammar components can be created for the classroom grammar learning. It is hoped that both students and instructors will benefit from this study and make learning grammar more effective and interesting.

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