MASTERING THE ENGLISH TENSE/ASPECT SYSTEM THROUGH INNOVATIVE VERB DIAGRAM AND BOARD GAMES

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ABSTRACT – *Learning the different English tenses and aspects is often a struggle for EFL learners. When a verb is poorly conjugated or the auxiliary is wrongly matched, the meaning changes and renders the sentence meaningless. This paper discusses an innovative teaching method that uses a verb diagram called tense-o-gram, which literally means tenses on a diagram, to teach English tenses, aspects and two sentence constructions. It is accompanied by an enrichment activity using verb tense board games. The findings show that tense-o-gram is definitely an effective cognitive organiser while the board games add excitement to otherwise a dull grammar exercise.*

1. INTRODUCTION

To acquire the English language, mastery of English grammar is a must. Yet, learning and applying English grammar learnt have been proven very difficult to EFL learners [2]. Students writings, be it at secondary or tertiary levels, are saddled with grammatical errors. The primary reason lies in the complexity of the English tense system which is not easy to comprehend and remember and the big difference in the grammatical rules between English and the learners' first language [3], making the transfer of linguistic knowledge from L1 to L2 challenging as they have to reconfigure or remap their L1 linguistic knowledge to fit the L2 system [16].

The challenges of teaching English grammar to EFL learners have continued to be researched and discussed by not only researchers in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) but also by teachers on the frontline. Grammar instruction, in particular the English tense system, has remained the same and traditional which is focusing on accuracy of form and usage [12]. Teachers insist on spending some class time on teaching the rules of English grammar despite the contention by the advocates of communicative language teaching (CLT) that explicit instruction on grammar is going against the natural order of acquisition. Nevertheless, both explicit instruction on accuracy of form and usage in class and implicit input from CLT seem to have had moderate to little impact to EFL learners' acquisition of English grammar [11; 1]. Students are still very weak in mastering the complex English tenses and aspects at lower secondary level [11] and the trend continues to students at the tertiary level [23]. Hence, the question of what else can teachers do to teach the English grammar explicitly or implicitly or both with more impact?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The traditional way of teaching English verb tenses is to focus on one or two items in the tense system at the time [13; 6] before moving on to the next item. For example, the present simple and past simple tenses are taught first. The forms, rules and sentence samples are given following the introduction of these tenses and exercises and drills in the form of pen and paper come right after that. Having mastered the simple tenses, learners will proceed to chapter two which deals with the progressive tense. In other words, to learn the simple aspect of the English tense system requires a minimum of three to four weeks. Yet, EFL students, especially adult learners need to use a combination of tenses and aspects in any writing and speaking task almost immediately. Thus, there has to be a way in which the English tenses and aspects could be presented in a more complete form and at a glance to help

EFL learners see the differences in constructions.

The English tense system is extremely complex with different conjugations and rules to be remembered and understand [2, 14]. This huge amount of information to be processed all at once in a matter of seconds naturally overloads an EFL learner's short term memory. A better strategy in remembering the many tenses and aspects in English language is to make use of the information processing theory. Atkinson and Shiffrin [4] identify two types of memories; short-term and long-term memories. Selected information from a reading text or lecture is transferred into the short-term memory. As this memory has a small capacity to hold information, some information may be lost before it is transferred to the long-term memory. Chunking of information is a technique to hold as much information as possible in the short-term memory [14] before the transfer. One way to chunk big amount of information is by using visual representation. Visual representation works because visual images stored in the long-term memory can be easily recalled and accessed [2]. Since using models has been proven successful to teaching English to second language learners [8, 22, 17, 21], and using visual representation helps learners to visualize, organise and remember the details of information, a verb diagram called *tense-o-gram* is designed and used to teach the English tenses and aspects.

In addition to that, pen and paper exercises and drills are no longer effective for gen-Z who populate the current classrooms. These digital natives require fun, fast and goal-oriented learning environment. Game-based learning (GBL) or gamification is an innovative approach designed to increase learners' engagement and motivation [5]. A review of studies on game-based learning (GBL) reveal that GBL is effective to increase knowledge acquisition of various subjects as well as has positive affective outcomes [9] on learning. In learning a foreign language, a few studies demonstrated that GBL facilitates vocabulary learning. Hitosugi, Schmidt, and Hayashi [9] found that vocabulary recalled from a game play was significantly higher than those learnt from a textbook. In addition, GBL offers learners with immersive space where active and meaningful learning thrives. This study was guided by the following research objective:

To examine if there is a significant difference in students' knowledge of construction of selected verbs tenses and aspects before and after using the verb diagram and game-based learning approach.

3. METHODOLOGY

Verb Diagram:

The word *Tense-o-gram* is derived from the words 'tense' and 'diagram', which literally means tense on a diagram. It is basically a diagram that arranges the many English tenses and aspects on different lines to help learners form a visual representation of the English tense system, [18, 19, 20, 21]. *Tense-o-gram* is made up of four different lines representing three different aspects in the English tense system, which are the prefect, simple, and progressive, and one passive construction. Two vertical lines that cut through the four horizontal lines represent the past, present and future tenses. A straight line in the middle of the diagram represents the simple aspect. Another is a wavy line resembling the sea wave represents the continuous/progressive. A concave line above the straight line represents the perfect aspect and the line below the wavy line is the convex line which is followed by the preposition *by*. This line represents the passive construction. The English sentences starts with a subject, followed by the verb which could tell time, aspect and agreement, and finally the object or complement to complete the sentence. To construct passive sentences require close attention since the agent of the verb is placed after a verb. The preposition *by* is put in the brackets to show that the agent is optional. In summary, there are basically three different aspects and only one passive construction of English verb tense system highlighted in the diagram which students need to know in order to sufficiently

understand and use in their own writing or speaking activities.

Participants & procedure:

Fifty-three lower secondary EFL students aged 14 years old at a neighboring public school took part in the study. Prior to the study, a pretest on English grammar was administered by the English teacher on the school premise. The pretest and posttest consisted of four sections; section A was on identifying and naming the verbs in the sentences provided, section B was on conjugating verbs given into tenses and aspects given, section C was 12 multiple choice questions on choosing the correct conjugated verb to complete a sentence and section D was on conjugating given verbs to complete a cloze passage. Section A and B were designed to answer research objective 1 and section C and D to answer research question 2. The total for both pre and posttests is 77 marks. The posttest was administered two days after the study.

Students gathered in a hall and a lecture using a verb diagram called *tense-o-gram* was given on two tenses (present and past), three aspects (simple, perfect and continuous), and two sentence constructions (active and passive) for 40-50 minutes. The lecture highlighted the construction of each tense and aspect as well as called attention to the correct usage of the different tenses and aspects. Emphasis was given on tricky aspects such as present perfect and past continuous. Later, a short pen and paper exercise was carried out to familiarize the students with the verb diagram. To ensure the understanding and recall of the variety of tenses and aspects using tense-o-gram, an enrichment activity using six verb tense board games took place. Each of the games was played by four to five students in a group for 15 to 20 minutes. The board games were named Match-it, Aux-it, Perfect Castle, Wheels of Verbs, Tense-o-gram Real Estate, and Spot the Tense. As the study was conducted during class hour, the students managed to play only two types of the board game activity each which lasted for about 40 minutes.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of students' performance in two grammar tests given before and after the treatment in the form of *tense-o-gram* lecture and *tense-o-gram* board games are shown in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics & Paired Sample *T*-Test on Overall Pre and Post Grammar Tests of Form Two EFL students

TOTAL MARKS	N	MEAN	SD	DF	*T*-VALUE	P-VALUE
Pre Test	53	29.30	7.43	52	-7.668	.000*
Post Test	53	41.49	12.01			

*Significant difference at $p < 0.05$

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics & Paired Sample *T*-Test on knowledge of conjugation and structure of verb tenses in Pre and Post Grammar Tests of Form Two EFL students

TOTAL MARKS	N	MEAN	SD	DF	*T*-VALUE	P-VALUE
Pre Test	53	19.62	5.69	52	-8.764	.000*
Post Test	53	30.96	9.52			

*Significant difference at $p < 0.05$

Tables 1 and 2 present the results of pre and post grammar tests which were designed specifically to assess the respondents' knowledge of the 8 verb tense-aspect constructions. The results indicate that these young respondents scored significantly higher after the treatment. The mean before the treatment was at 29.30 (SD: 7.43) while after the treatment the mean jumped to 41.49 (SD: 12.01). T-test shows that this difference is significant at $p < 0.05$. Similar result was obtained in Table 2 which looked into specific questions that assessed the respondents' knowledge of conjugation and structure of the verb tense-aspects. There was a huge improvement in the students' knowledge of conjugation and construction of the eight verb tenses only after 50 minutes of lecture and 40 minutes of board games.

The findings above suggest that the many variety of English tenses and constructions which often appear on different pages of a textbook and taught separately confuse EFL learners to no end. Evidently, when at least eight different constructions were displayed on a single diagram, learners are able to differentiate one construction from the other. When English verb board games ensued as a replacement for pen and paper drills, it excited the students as they tended to be competitive to score marks or end the game ahead of others. This excitement motivated the students to win thus urging them to recall accurate constructions of the 8 tense-aspects learnt from the lecture. With the verb diagram, recall for the eight constructions was effortless as visual representation which carry loads of information did not overload the short term memory.

The students could be seen visualizing the diagram mentally while playing the six verb-tense board games. They were able to conjugate perfect and passive verbs with 70% accuracy during the board game session. A 40 minutes pen and paper grammar drills would have worn the students out yet a 40 minute session of grammar drills in a form of board games managed to keep the students fully focused and excited. They could also be seen to help partners construct correct forms when the latter were confused. This is made possible to a large part by the visual representation of the English tenses and aspects in the form of verb diagram. What is more interesting is that, the students managed to conjugate simple present, simple past, present continuous, past continuous, present perfect, past perfect, simple present passive and simple past passive in one sitting. The opportunity to see all the conjugations and usages of the many tenses and aspects as well as active and passive sentences on one verb diagram enables the students to see the similarity and differences of the auxiliary and verb form used. The abundance of information is simplified with the use of different lines to represent different tenses and aspects. The visual image of the verb diagram which facilitates recall is a helpful resource in assisting teachers to teach the English tenses-aspects that prove problematic to EFL learners [15]. Meanwhile, board games for learning and internalizing English verb forms and usage have a huge potential in intrinsically motivating EFL learners. This study is consistent with other GBL studies that strongly suggest that board games are ideal learning tools for complex and abstract ideas and concept [7].

5. CONCLUSIONS

English verb tense is the 'heart' of English sentences. One single verb when conjugated into a few different constructions gives different meaning. The different conjugations, meanings, rules and usage usually take up a quarter of a grammar book. Having *tense-o-gram* in their short-term memory, learners can visualize the different lines, match the correct auxiliary with certain forms of the verb, and produce logical sentences. *Tense-o-gram* is definitely an important and effective teaching tool for English language teachers in teaching the English tense system as it captures all the fundamental English verb tenses and aspects and arranges them onto different lines in a single diagram. In addition, GBL is a definitely the way to go in teaching and learning of the English grammar to complement the traditional method which will never go out of fashion.

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