

Figure It Out: Creative Language Expressions in ESL Writing Classrooms

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Abstract This study, which investigates ways to enhance students' creative writing skills in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) writing task, utilised a mixed method design. It comprised two phases: Phase One consisted of an experimental group who was given a writing pre-test before playing the game *Figure it Out!* four times with only one level of game cards. The group then attempted a written post-test. The students showed a marginal improvement in their performance; pre-test =11.5172 (m) and post-test =12.3966 (m). These students in the structured interview expressed joy playing the game despite finding it somewhat challenging due to insufficient exposure to creative language expressions. Phase Two consisted of experimental and control groups. This phase incorporated three different levels of game cards. The students in the experimental group had the opportunity to play all three levels of the game. Students in both groups sat for the pre- and post-tests and participated in the written task individually or in small groups. Creative language expressions were taught in a conventional classroom setting for the students in the control group. The students from the experimental group, however, played *Figure it Out!* six times. The results indicated that both groups improved in their post-test scores; the control group scored average means of 16.1471 in the pre-test and 17.8095 in the post-test. However, the experimental group showed a significant improvement in the post-test ($M=18.5294$), $p+.000$ compared to the pre-test ($M=16.1471$). The students in the experimental group shared that the game (*Figure it Out!*) provided them the opportunity to use creative language expressions in the right context and setting.

Keywords Essay writing Skills, Idiomatic/ Creative Language Expressions, Stimulating, Communicative, Language Game

1. Introduction

Language instructors and learners (native and non-native) often view writing as the most arduous skill to master, teach or learn [1, 2]. Other researchers [3, 4] too concurred many learners of writing find this skill to be the most challenging or demanding to acquire compared to other English language skills. Moreover, ESL classrooms often involve learners from varied backgrounds with diverse learning preferences and abilities [5, 6]. The Malaysian University English Test (MUET) is an English proficiency test administered by the Malaysian Examination Council (MEC). This test is a prerequisite for students who intend to further their degree in Malaysian public universities. This English language test comprises all the four skills; Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. The writing component consists of two tasks: guided writing and extended writing. In Task two of the writing component, students are required to write an essay based on a statement or topic given as the stimulus. This task emphasises the use of creative language expressions for better scores. Many non-native learners (NNS henceforth) fail to write well despite eleven years of attending English classes in school [5, 7, 8]. They are unable to present ideas and elaborate them clearly using a rich lexical repertoire. This difficulty

continues at higher learning institutions where students often find it difficult to obtain a good grade like Band 5 or 6 (reflecting proficient writers) in the writing task of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). Higher bands help students secure seats to pursue degrees especially in the TESL and Law courses. Although students may score well in other subjects, failure to enroll in their desired course is due to low proficiency in the English language. These circumstances reinforce the need for educators to find ways for learners to help them acquire effective writing skills by exploiting creative language expressions to communicate better and with greater precision. Indeed, writing clearly and proficiently is a requisite for adults [8, 9]. O'Neill and Gravois (9) further stressed that mastering the reading and writing skills is considered vital to be successful in civic life and global economy.

Writing is considered a necessity in a larger context of life beyond the classroom, not just another section to cope with in standardized national examinations. While it is definitely important for teachers to equip students with writing skills that will help them excel in national examinations, it is also central to get the students ready for the workforce and world economic system. In the United States there have been lamentations that students are not writing enough [11,12] and that they are delimited to "prescribed school writing requirements" instead of "stretching [students] into areas that can be readily applied in the real world" (p. 7) [11].

If becoming a real-world writer is a predictor of academic success, then there is a need to help learners become accomplished in this skill. Researchers have acknowledged that games are effective alternatives to mundane forms of learning in the language classroom. Playing an educational game not only helps learners to re-engage immediately in a lesson after lengthy class hours but also optimises language learning. Consequently, a fun and appealing learning environment enables students to become independent and organised writers [12, 13]. Researchers [14] postulated that group work and game-based activities in ESL classrooms increase learner participation in groups, leading to improved writing competencies as they offer more creative opportunities for learners to actively interact and broaden language acquisition outside the classroom.

A research [15] expanded the list of potential advantages when using games in the classroom by stressing they reinforce learning as well as focus on grammar in a communicative manner. Moreover, games are exceptionally student-centred as the teacher functions as a facilitator. Language games are easily adjusted according to age, level of proficiency, and interests and employ all the four skills. They make language lessons less intimidating for students with low confidence, whose main concern is getting the language structures wrong. Participating in language games not only reduces learning anxiety through greater participation among learners but also enables them

to form a strong rapport with other players. It also develops an emotional bond with the language [15]. Hence, it can be concluded that language games in classrooms encourage all learners to engage actively in learning.

In addition, language games encourage incidental learning of key vocabulary and language structures, thus empowering players to gain much-needed language practices. Singh [2] Vlachopoulos and Makri [16] claimed that games not only enhances learning but also develops practical life skills for future employment and spectrum of essential skills such as social, critical thinking, creativity and collaboration. Language board games incorporating creative visuals make learning appealing, exciting and motivating [17-19]. In fact, board games foster interactive learning and allow learners to experiment through trial and error, thus enriching the minds of learners in challenging and stimulating or thought-provoking ways. Studies [19, 20] provided evidence for increased levels of enthusiasm, enjoyment and motivation through creative activities but not much is known about how efficacious such a technique is in higher learning institutions and the learners' perceptions of this approach to increase language acquisition. This disparity has led to a need to investigate the effectiveness of enhancing writing skills through the use of games within the higher education setting. Hence, this study aims to develop students' writing task in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) by using creative language expressions especially similes, metaphors, idioms, hyperboles and proverbs through a language board game. The MUET marking descriptors for writing reinforce that use of extensive vocabulary and language expressions enable students to score higher bands in the written and oral tasks.

As such the researchers have set out to answer the following question:

What are the effects of language games on ESL learners' writing abilities?

2. Methodology

This study adopted a mix method to elicit data and consists of three phases.

2.1. Phase 1

A survey on the students' preferred style of learning to improve students' grasp in the English language was conducted using a Google form. The survey indicated that students preferred language games to improve their writing skills. This prompted the researchers to develop a board game called *Figure it Out!* (Figure 1). This game provides learners the opportunity to explore and exploit creative language expressions to produce visual appeal, establish mood, clarify concepts and reinforce observations in both the written and spoken skills, thus making the writer and

speaker proficient, engaging and convincing.



Figure 1. Figure It Out!

2.2. Phase 2

In this phase the researchers tested the impact of the game (Figure 1) on improving students’ writing skills. There was only one group consisting of 29 students. These students were from the foundation programme, who were preparing for their MUET. The students were given pre- and post-tests to assess the impact of the game on their written skills. After having completed a pre-test, the students played *Figure it Out!* four times before sitting for the post-test. One example of an expression used in this phase was ‘to have a finger in every pie’. The learners, in the structured interview, expressed joy in playing the game although some found it slightly challenging as they lacked the exposure to creative language expressions. There was no control group to compare the impact of the game on students’ improvement.

2.3. Phase 3

Feedback from students enabled the board game to be upgraded (Figure 2). The board comprising 40 colour-coded squares was equipped with 120 instead of 80 game cards which focused on creative language expressions. These were divided into five categories and players used visuals clues to analyse the expressions in teams or pairs. The *Lifelines*, represented by red hearts, on the original board became resources for players to seek assistance if they were unable to respond correctly. The three *Lifelines* options included the following: discussing the responses with individuals outside the team, surfing the internet, or using a dictionary. The *Lifelines* were later replaced with chance cards (*Whoo Hoo!* cards), which provided players “immunity” or “rewards” to progress in the game without facing penalties. Students were given the option to play based on their level of English language proficiency. Once Level 1 of the game was completed with

at least 75% of correct responses, students were allowed to advance to Levels Two and Three. One example of an expression used in Level Two was ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ and in Level 3 the phrase ‘cat among the pigeons’ was introduced. There were control (30 students) and experimental (31 students) groups in Phase 3. These students follow a fixed timetable for grammar classes in semester one and the MUET is taken in semester two. Both groups were selected randomly. They sat for the pre- and post-tests which required them to write an essay on the impact of social media on ESL learners. The learners in the control group were taught writing skills through conventional classroom teaching methods by working individually and in small groups with the instructor’s guidance. With the experimental group, however, the students were given opportunity to play the board game *Figure it Out!* six times with the instructor functioning as the facilitator.

For the analysis of the quantitative data, SPSS Version 20.0 was used. The percentages and descriptive statistics were calculated and discussed to answer the research question. Paired sample t-test was calculated to compare two sets of scores between the experiment and control groups while independent sample t-test was computed to compare the sets of post-treatment speaking scores between the two groups to answer the research question. It was pertinent to gauge students’ anxiety level at the initial stage.



Figure 2. Upgraded version of Figure It Out!

2.4. Framework

2.4.1. Proposed Framework for the Incorporation of Gamification in the ESL Writing Classrooms

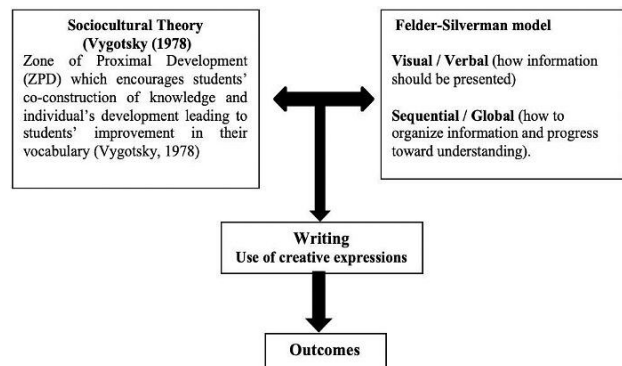


Figure 3. Proposed Framework for the Incorporation of Gamification in the ESL Writing Classrooms

The theoretical framework for the study is drawn from Vygotsky's [21] Sociocultural Theory and the Felder-Silverman Model (1988). Vygotsky [21] argues that language learning takes place when people interact socially and social interaction plays a central role in the development of children's cognition. He explains that "education is realised through the student's own experience, which is completely determined by the environment, and the role of the teacher then is limited to directing and guiding the environment" [22]. He posits that these criteria facilitate individual cognitive growth and knowledge acquisition through peer interaction and modelling.

The Felder-Silverman Learning Style Model has been recognized as the most popular theory for gamification [23]. The model differentiates learning through four dimensions: Sensing / Intuitive (how to take formation), Visual / Verbal (how information should be presented), Active / Reflective (how information is processed) and Sequential / Global (how to organize information and progress toward understanding). However, in this study, only the Visual / Verbal and Active / Reflective dimensions were employed.

Figure it Out! incorporates a reward system where *Rocket Launchers* and *Whoo Hoo!* cards motivate players to be continuously and actively engaged to maximize language learning experiences. The game play increases learner's responsiveness of how creative language expressions work in context and expands the use of these expressions in their writing task. Therefore, an amalgamation of the Sociocultural Theory and Felder-Silverman Learning Style Model in teaching creative expressions through *Figure it Out!* is expected to create meaningful interactions in a naturalistic and fun-filled educational setting to build the students' co-construction of knowledge, thus leading to an increase in students' lexical density [21].

3. Results and Discussion

Figure it Out! is able to function as an interactive and independent learning tool to enhance students' writing skills through the use of creative language expressions to make unfamiliar objects, settings and situations more relevant. It also encourages the use of creative language expressions to reflect artistic self-expression in conversations.

Table 1. Pre-test and Post-test score in Phase 1

	Mean	SD	T	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference (Language)
Pre-test	35.971	5.44576	16.976	.000	11.51724
Post-test	47.987	4.82139		.000	12.39655

Table 1 shows the results of learners in Phase 1. There was a significant improvement in students' writing grades.

The mean values of the pre- and post-tests grades showed $M=35.971$, $SD = 5.44576$ to post-test $M=47.987$, $SD = 4.82139$, $t(17.976)$, $p=.000$.mean 12.3966. Hence, playing the board game was beneficial in helping learners to grasp creative language expressions and use them accurately in their essays. A board game is a valuable and practical tool to stimulate learners' interest in learning a language [24]. It does not only make the learning process engaging but also creates a platform for players to experience joy and healthy competition.

In the interviews, pertinent feedback was obtained. Learners indicated that different levels of questions were required to ease them into the game, as some were unable to respond to the task on the game cards. There were comments that the board was unappealing as too many images created visual clutter. Many of the images were also considered more appropriate for younger learners. The "Snake and Ladder" concept as reward and penalty was also banal or cliché. With regard to data, there was only one group which played the game four (4) times. The feedback obtained and observations made prompted the researchers to upgrade the board game by including three (3) levels of difficulties, developing more game cards, setting a theme for the board, incorporating strategy cards to increase reward-win ratio and providing QR codes to reinforce learning. Control and experimental groups were selected to compare the levels of improvement.

In Phase 2, the results showed an increase in the writing grades of the control and experimental groups. The control group exhibited an insignificant improvement (pre-test; $m=16.5238$ and post-test; $m=17.8095$ at $p=.377$). Although the students did not play the board game, there was indication of some improvement through conventional teaching and learning practices in the classroom.

Table 2. Results of Control Group in Phase 2

	Mean	SD	P
Pre-test	16.5238	2.42114	.377
Post-test	17.8095	2.52228	

In the experimental group, there was a significant improvement. Pre-test grades in Table 3 show $m=16.1471$ while post-test grades reflect $m=18.5294$ at $p=.005$. This reveals that students in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group. Additionally, the control group had statistically lower grades in the post-test compared to those in the experimental group. Perhaps the students in the control group had lost interest due to the conventional writing lessons which impeded recalling and using the creative language expressions learned.

Table 3. Results of Experimental Group in Phase2

	Mean	SD	P
Pre-test	16.1471	1.81801	.005
Post-test	18.5294	4.22962	

Not surprisingly, *Figure it Out!* has helped the students to master the use of creative language expressions in the right context. This is shared by [17,18] who emphasize that language games and creative visuals on board games make learning appealing, exciting and motivating. The board game encouraged the students to acquire the language expressions through a fun-filled and less intimidating T n L technique.

Table 4. Comparison of Language Score between Control and Experimental Groups in Phase 2

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Post-test control	10.4118	22	2.09341
Post-test experiment	12.1471	17	2.31006

When the marks scored for language component specifically in Table 4 were compared, the experimental group showed greater improvement. The control group scored a mean value of 10.4118 in their post-test whereas the experimental group obtained a mean value of 12.1471.

It is apparent that the students in the experimental group scored significantly higher marks in the post-test language component compared to the post-test in the control group. Hence, it is evident that the experimental group scored better in the language component because they used the expressions they were exposed to when they played *Figure it Out!*

This game allowed students to play in small groups and increase learner involvement. This consequently led to improved writing skills as participating in the game offered possibilities and opportunities to interact actively in real, significant situations, and expand language learning beyond the classroom [23, 25]. Language games assist learners in remembering large chunks of information and relate it to real world experience [26, 27]. Thus, board games provide a conducive learning environment for students to learn new information in meaningful contexts.

In the structured interviews, Respondent 15 shared that the board game helped players to remember creative language expressions and phrases more effectively. In addition, the overall responses from a questionnaire to the statement, “I can remember creative language expressions and phrases longer after playing board games” reinforced this view. Nearly every player indicated that he or she is able to recall the expressions exposed to beyond game time.

In short, the board game is a catalyst for effective language acquisition among ESL learners. It encourages ESL learners to use creative language expressions in their written work to obtain higher grades in their written tasks to meet the aspiration of the country and the national education philosophy to develop competent and proficient English language speakers and writers.

4. Conclusions

The results of this study are significant to improve ESL students’ writing skills at higher learning institutions. English language instructors expressed that using *Figure it Out!* not only improves students’ writing skills but also reduces learners’ speaking anxiety in the classroom. When learners’ anxiety reduces, confidence increases thus enabling them to focus on acquiring new knowledge to improve language performance. Undoubtedly, *Figure it Out!* has made English language learning more enjoyable and gratifying.

The findings also indicate that the participants have a positive attitude towards the use of board games in writing classes. These findings are similar to those identified by Paris and Yussouf [28] and provide empirical evidence on the benefits of employing games in language classrooms as claimed by [9, 27]. EFL teachers, therefore, may consider using games, especially board games in their lessons since they do not only increase learners’ lexical density but also motivation. The board game encourages learners to communicate in English confidently and it is evident that students were able to perform in the subsequent game rounds better and use these expressions in their writing tasks in the correct context.

This study gives an impact to the field of communicative English by stressing the effectiveness of learning English language expressions using the board game *Figure it Out!* to master vocabularies. Integrating language games in the ESL classroom can strengthen teacher-learner rapport. Consequently, students will eventually appreciate and learn the language through exploration. In addition, board games offer variety to otherwise conventional classroom exercises. They do not only encourage lively discussions but also build critical thinking skills.

5. Limitations

A limitation of the study is the sample size, where only 29 and 22 learners in each group respectively participated in this research. This is a small sample size and intervention was carried out only six times. Further studies should be conducted with a larger sample size and for a longer duration. In addition, a delayed post-test should be administered several weeks after the post-test to gauge if the language board game has far-reaching/extensive effects on ESL learners’ grammar and creative expression retention. The results of these studies will provide clearer implications and suggestions for ESL teachers all over the world on what can be done with board games to help learners do better in their writing skills.

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