

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

INCORPERATING GAME-BASED LEARNING INTO GRAMMAR CLASSROOMS FOR FIRST YEAR ENGLISH-MAJOR STUDENTS AT HO CHI MINH CITY UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS AND FINANCE

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ABSTRACT: English has a complex set of grammar rules that can present challenges to learners. As a core component of language, grammar plays a crucial role in the learning process, making it a demanding aspect for instructors to teach effectively. Games hold a significant place in EFL teaching, offering valuable support to teachers by establishing contexts where language use becomes practical and meaningful. This paper examines the advantages of game-based learning, employing Educaplay, Quizizz and Kahoot!, highlights the importance of grammar, and suggests practical applications for grammar teachers to enhance both learning effectiveness and enjoyment in grammar-focused classrooms.

KEY WORDS: game-based learning; online games; grammar; classroom/lessons.

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1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, grammar plays a crucial role in learning English, forming the foundation for the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. As a complex aspect of language acquisition, teaching and learning grammar can be quite challenging. According to Ibrahim (2016), mastering grammar is essential for achieving higher proficiency in English. Similarly, Pradeep (2013) emphasizes that grammar is a fundamental element that cannot be overlooked in English teaching and learning. Students with strong grammar skills are better equipped to use English accurately. Consequently, various methods and approaches have been developed to enhance grammar learning outcomes.

However, in practice, many English instructors in foreign language contexts still rely on deductive teaching methods. This involves providing learners with grammar rules, requiring them to memorize these rules, and then applying them to exercises. Such traditional “chalk and talk” approaches often result in dull, teacher-centered classrooms, leading to passive learner participation and negative attitudes toward grammar lessons.

Hashim, Rafiq, and Yunnus (2019) highlight the importance of making grammar instruction enjoyable to enhance learners' performance. Incorporating authentic language use and creative teaching techniques can foster an interactive environment that supports overall language learning, particularly grammar. Online language games, for instance, are a valuable tool for teaching foreign languages. They motivate learners, promote communicative competence, and enhance fluency, playing a significant role in second language acquisition. By integrating grammar games, teachers can create a more engaging and meaningful learning experience for both themselves and their students. There are a wide variety of technology-based grammar teaching resources available to teachers, some for free and some at an additional cost, and it is important for instructors to know if these programs help their students to learn and to retain grammar knowledge. This paper reviews the crucial role of grammar in teaching and learning language emphasizes the benefits of language games in teaching and learning of grammar, and suggests three essential tools including *Educaplay*, *Kahoot!* and *Quizizz* as beneficial applications of games in grammar lessons.

2. The importance of grammar in language teaching and learning

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According to Rama, J.L., and Agulló, G.L. (2012), as well as Halliday (1997), grammar serves as a foundational tool for effective communication. It enables the structuring of words, phrases, and clauses into coherent and meaningful sentences. These sentences form the basis of conversations by facilitating the exchange of ideas. The primary goal of grammar in communication is to express thoughts clearly and effectively. Without clarity and mutual understanding, the essence of a conversation is diminished.

Dalil, J. (2013) added that “grammar is not merely a set of static rules but rather a body of rules which gives structure to the instructor and the student. It is crucial for one to properly develop his/her second language”. In that way, teaching grammar helps learners to know how the language works; for example, students are required to learn grammar to understand how words are combined together in a sentence so that they can realize the correct meaning. In fact, with poor grammar knowledge, students easily get stuck with complicated sentences. Thus, if grammar is taught within communicative and meaningful contexts, it will promote students’ communicative competence and sufficient accuracy and fluency in language use.

Grammar also plays a crucial role in the writing and reading processes. Students cannot write efficiently and professionally without some understanding of grammar. It would be nearly impossible for learners to express their thoughts in an essay or an email and make them intelligible for their teacher. How would they be able to express the future perfect or doubt without knowing grammatically how? Moreover, without grammar, it becomes impossible to read accurately without misunderstanding the intended meaning. Teaching grammar to students helps them grasp what makes sentences and paragraphs clear and engaging. Without it, any language would become difficult to use and eventually incoherent. In short, grammar has a substantial part in governing the use and application of language so it is crucial to have a good knowledge of grammar. Teachers should support students to establish the structure to build complete and meaningful sentences.

3. Game-based language learning

In recent years, there have been a great number of studies officially published on game-based learning to improve grammar effectively. Grammar is quite complicated in acquiring English as a second language (ESL). However, when instructors incorporate technology in the classroom, such as online games with the support of personal devices, learners’ grammar skills seem to achieve substantial progress. Hashim, Rafiq, and Yunus, (2019) proved the effectiveness of using online language games in improving ESL learners’ grammar, in which “no participants obtained a grade D and E in the post-test as compared to the pre-test”. The reason lies in the motivation itself (Hassan and Hamari, 2019 and Flores, 2015), whereby it is inferred that students are more motivated and eager to learn while playing. Furthermore, Ersoz (2000) demonstrates that engaging and fun games are very motivating, with students expressing great excitement when teachers announce game time. Saricoban and Metin (2000) note that “the use of such activities both increases the cooperation and competition in the classroom”. Additionally, games provide an opportunity for students to use the target language meaningfully in real-life situations.

In another related study, Cam, L. and Tran, T.M.T. (2017) asserts game application should be adopted by English teachers because of supportive learning environment as well as students’ positive attitude toward grammar lessons. It seems true that challenging and amusing games are highly motivating. When teachers announced that it was time for games, students were incredibly excited. In fact, teachers can use games to create motivation and enjoyment through competition or to make connections among students in class. Likewise, Wang (2010) recognizes the importance of language games in language teaching and learning and hopefully, they will attract more attention and will be applied more widely in the grammar class with more positive attitudes as language teachers. Game-based learning involves the active participation of students in a learning process, which in turn supplies a solid platform for them to effectively and positively study grammar in ESL as well (Leaning, 2015; Hamari, Koivisto and Sarsa, 2014).

A similar research on the use of games in teaching grammar conducted by Willis and Willis, (2013) has resulted in revelation that language games allow ESL learners to work in pairs and in groups, giving them more opportunities to use the language themselves and progressively improving fluency. A clear example of a game is role-playing which needs learners to be creative and spontaneous. In addition, ESL learners experiment, explore and cooperate through playing games (Mubaslat, 2011/2012). They develop their language skills by interacting with others and learning from mistakes. Godwin-Jones (2014) further explains that “learners are using language in real and meaningful ways to accomplish a task through games” and it is great that “they are exposed to cultural and linguistic knowledge that they are unlikely to have encountered in a textbook or in the classroom” (p.10). Instead of just listening to teachers explaining grammar rules in classrooms, students interact with others and complete the task actively, which increases dramatically their talking time. Based on these studies, it implies that language games in some certain ways contribute to developing ESL learners’ fluency in the target language through communication with others in order to progress in a game.

Generally speaking, utilizing online language games is needed for promoting students’ motivation and improving their comprehension of the lesson. Griva, Semoglou, and Geladari (2010, p. 3704) stated that learning a language in a ‘playful’ environment helps to a) boost students’ motivation, b) build their confidence, and c) foster positive attitudes toward learning a foreign language. However, teachers must consider carefully when incorporating games into their lessons. According to Khan (1996), “Teachers need to consider which games to use, when to use them, how to link them up with the syllabus, textbook or program and how, more specifically, different games will benefit students in different ways”. Therefore, successful games must be well- designed, well-organized, clear, and funny.

4. Employing games in teaching grammar at UEF

4.1. Description of the context

4.1.1. First-year English major students and the Grammar textbook

The study aims to support the first-year English major students at University of Economics and Finance (UEF) in bettering their grammar skills. Normally, the Faculty of English welcomes around 150 freshmen annually, who are grouped into four classes with more than thirty students in each class. Two courses *Grammar* and *Advanced Grammar* are included in the curriculum program during the first school year. The students attend grammar class twice a week, three periods a day. The tests almost pay much attention to the acquisition of form and structure and the objective is to verify a basic understanding of the learners in grammar. All the questions in their midterm and final tests are in multiple choice forms with four parts in the task types, *Sentence completion*, *Cloze test*, *Sentence transformation* and *Sentence building*.

The course books *Grammar* (2023) and *Advanced Grammar* (2024), both written by the faculty of English, UEF, internal use, corresponding to the level B1-B2 of The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), are used for the courses *Grammar* and *Advanced Grammar*. These courses provide students with fundamental knowledge of English grammar, including *parts of speech*, *word order and word combination*, *sentence structure*, *articles*, *demonstratives*, *quantifiers*, *modal verbs*, *tenses*, *relative clauses*, *noun clauses*, *prepositions and phrasal verbs*, *conditional sentences*, *wishes*, *reported speech*, *passive voice*, *subject-verb agreement*, *parallel structures*, *connectors and focus structures*.

As far as we are concerned, freshmen have been learning English for more than seven years and they have spent such a long time learning the same grammar points year by year. As a grammar teacher at UEF, I notice that most first year English major students experience boredom just before the lesson. They wonder ‘why do I have to learn such a dull and repetitive subject?’, ‘What else will we learn with it?’ or ‘Can I skip this?’ and so on... Furthermore, I feel that my students think of grammar just as a list of rules in a textbook but they do not really identify ‘those rules’ of language as

a significant element that allows us to produce sentences to convey their messages, which they have always wished to achieve. After all, many students even attend the class regularly in a vain attempt to understand such familiar grammar rules because they may get the same traditional teaching method as high school or they may employ an ineffective way of learning habits.

4.1.2. School facilities

Presently the term Information Communications and Technology (ICT) has been used widely in communities, serving as an indispensable educational tool and UEF believes in empowering students with the tool for learning. The choice of student-center pedagogies to bring about engaged learning provides instructors with the impetus to use Information Technology in their teaching. Appropriate technology that could be incorporated in the well-decorated small-size classrooms includes wireless Internet connection, projectors, classroom audio system, air conditioning system, surveillance cameras, computers, white boards and markers. To support self-directed learning and research, information has to be on-demand. The school has installed a wireless infrastructure so that the instructors and the students could be connected to the Internet as and when required. Both teachers and students are able to search for information or document any time during the lesson.

Noureddine (2017) states that positive language learning can be achieved with the integration of technology. Hence, many instructors have started using ICT to monitor and accompany their teaching and learning session. "Due to the fact that students are familiar with technology and they will learn better within the technology-based environment, the issue of ICT integration in schools, specifically in the classroom is vital" (Ghavifekr and Rosdy, 2015, p. 175). This demonstrates that ICT positively impacts education by enabling learners to take control of their own learning. Yunus (2018) highlights that technological advancements have transformed teachers' roles, promoting more learner-centered activities. With proper support from UEF, I personally hope that incorporating language games into grammar lessons will significantly enhance freshmen's engagement in classroom activities, motivating them to learn more enthusiastically.

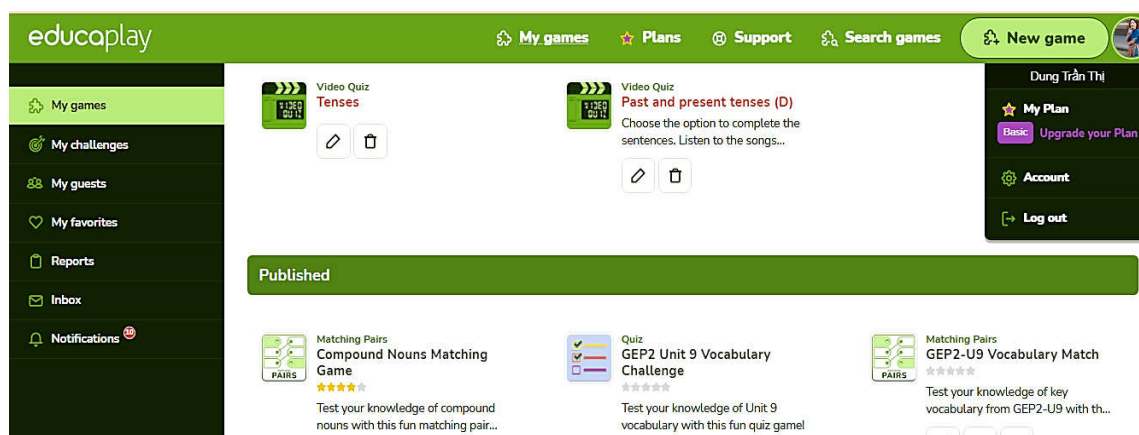
4.2. Online language games

Online games or digital games vary in terms of the number of players and categories, ranged from individual to large groups and from educational to entertaining (Kim, Song, & Burton, 2018). Additionally, "language game is a game with rules that have linguistic aims and they are agreed with the participants" (Ibrahim, 2016, p.54). Therefore, online language game brings the meaning of a competitive platform that includes linguistic elements in a game. UEF has equipped teachers and students with available wireless internet connection and students themselves use their own mobile devices to support their study. In that way, teachers get a chance to apply online games providing a competitive platform for students to fully engage in grammar lessons.

Modern technology tools serve a variety of games accessed via website or app, with separate apps for teachers and students and especially the tool is quite easy to use. In this paper, *Educaplay*, *Quizizz* and *Kahoot!* are suggested thanks to their compatibility as well as benefits as described as follows.

4.2.1. Educaplay

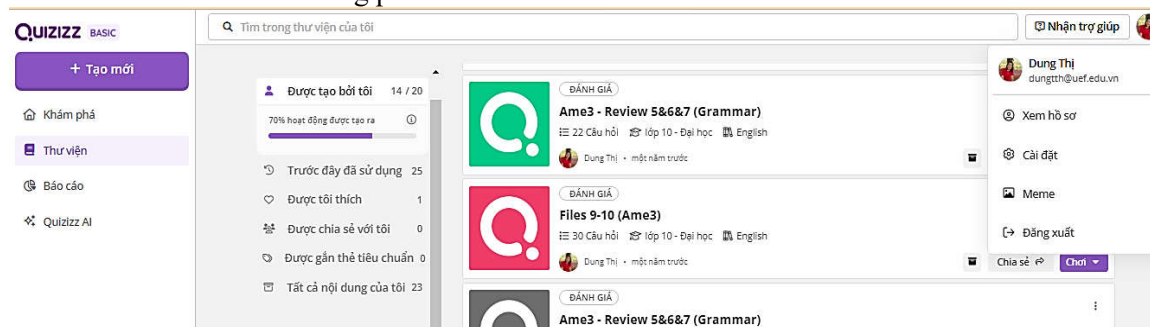
Educaplay.com is an online platform that enables teachers to design free educational games. After signing up, teachers can create various types of interactive exercises, such as quizzes, matching activities, video quiz, fill in the blanks, yes or no, crosswords, and so on, and then share them with their students, and receive their results. The platform also offers a library of ready-to-use games and activities across various grammar points, so teachers can search for and use these resources in their classrooms or learning environments. This is the layout of my Educaplay's account.



Picture 1. Sample of Educaplay's layout

4.2.2. Quizizz

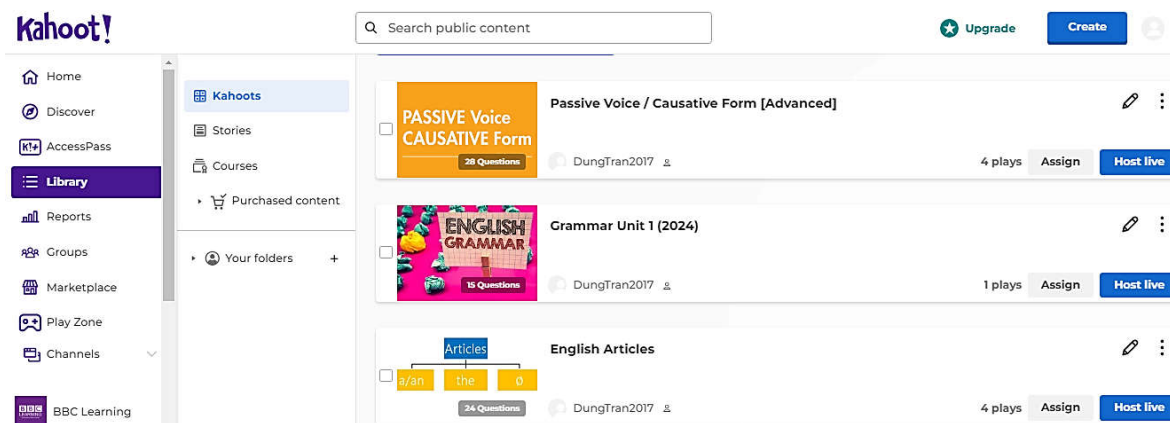
Quizizz is an online platform created to make free learning engaging and interactive through fun quiz games. It is commonly utilized by educators, students, and professionals for purposes such as education, training, and entertainment. By incorporating gamification, it ensures an enjoyable and effective learning experience for users of all age groups with big classes. Participants answer questions to earn points, with speed and accuracy affecting scores. Features like memes, avatars, and music add an element of fun. Teachers can also access a library of pre-made quizzes on various topics and grammar points. Quizzes can include multiple-choice, true/false, open-ended, and matching questions with multimedia support such as images, videos, and audio in quiz questions to enhance interactivity. Quizizz transforms learning into a game, making it interactive and enjoyable. Whether used in classrooms, training sessions, or casual trivia games, Quizizz helps foster engagement, collaboration, and knowledge retention in a playful and effective way. My Quizizz's account is shown in the following picture.



Picture 2. Sample of Quizizz's layout

4.2.3. Kahoot!

Likewise, Kahoot! is a free game-based learning platform that allows users to create, share, and participate in interactive quizzes with a variety of question types, including multiple-choice, true/false, and puzzles. It is widely used in language teaching, especially grammar to foster engagement, collaboration, and fun. Participants join games using a unique PIN or scanning QR code and compete in real-time, answering questions on their devices while tracking their performance on leaderboards. With features like multimedia integration, customizable content, and analytics, Kahoot! is a versatile tool for teaching, training, or simply entertaining individually, in pairs or in groups.



Picture 3. Sample of Kahoot!'s layout

In short, these online games are amazingly interesting and highly motivating as students can use their personal devices (cell phones, iPads, laptops) either in a group setting or individually to play the game and simultaneously show their level of the new language respectively. Therefore, these language games can cater to independent learning as well as enhancing the language of learners.

4.3. Application of games in grammar lessons

UEF is known as an international standard university of high quality of learning environment and UEF's students become more knowledgeable, confident, dynamic and creative in such an internationally standardized system. Therefore, teaching those students, especially grammar lessons - a really boring subject, requires a special effort and challenge from teachers and online language games seem one of the best ways for grammar instructors to achieve this. However, for a game to fulfill its aim, it is necessary that teachers should consider the factors as follows: students' learning styles, deciding on which game feature to use and the time to use the game in the classrooms.

Firstly, being a grammar teacher here for more than 12 years, I somehow learn of my students' taste of learning that they master a new language when being aroused in the technology-based teaching method employed by instructors. These days, students grow up with technology and for them, they are unable to do anything brilliantly without it. Moreover, introducing something new into the regular classroom routine can capture students' interest. Learning grammar through innovative methods is likely to be appreciated by students, boosting their enthusiasm and motivation to learn. Obviously, UEF students are more independent in fostering their own learning, especially when they are motivated and have interest in the learning process, which can be aroused using the so called Socrative and Kahoot! In this paper, the two mentioned online games are likely to be a highly motivating tool which makes English major freshmen obtain better results and further proves that online language games improve ESL grammar learning.

The choice of games or game activities is the second consideration. There exist some kinds of functions in Educaplay, Quizizz or Kahoot! and teachers need to connect the tasks or lessons to appropriate game in order to achieve the learning objectives of the lesson. In addition, teachers play vital roles in ensuring the success of games by preparing adequately, organizing the class effectively, and facilitating the activity to run as smoothly as possible. Among these, designing an effective game makes a valuable contribution to a successful lesson in terms of relevant content, appropriate level of learner and sufficient challenge. Students get bored if the game is easy and they get discouraged if the game is too challenging.

The last factor teachers need to consider lies in learning settings and the time duration. The games are advised to be played twice a day- once just before the lesson to review the previous language and

once after introducing the new one to judge students' understanding and knowledge of a particular lesson easily. Depending on the feeling of the learners, the classroom atmosphere as well as the objective of the lesson, teachers reach a decision on the game duration of fifteen or twenty minutes for three periods. One more thing a grammar instructor must keep in mind is that games should not only be used to prevent class from being monotonous or to attract students' attention or to fulfill the time at the end of the class. They ought to promote learners' engagement and motivation, enhance their understanding of the new language, foster their collaboration and more significantly learn how to apply grammar rules in real life conversations.

5. Conclusion

It goes without saying that online language games effectively lead to success in one's teaching. It is likely that each teacher has his/her own viewpoint about game-based learning as well as his/her own strategy to adopt them in the process of teaching. However, it is believed that teachers all aim at the same target of making their teaching more motivating and effective. In my opinion, teachers should take many factors into consideration in order to achieve success in implementing online language games.

The teacher should determine the purpose of the online game and select one game activity that coincides with that purpose. It is also required that the activity must be appropriate to their students' level and interest so that they can enjoy it to the full.

The teacher should also make every effort to integrate other techniques in order to provide stimulus and experience for students. If some kinds of games are repeatedly carried out, the learners will surely find no interest in them and refuse to participate. In that way, the teacher should be creative and flexible in designing and/or modifying an online language game.

In brief, game-based learning can make an invaluable contribution to increasing motivation and improving grammar skills in English language teaching if the teacher knows how to make the best use of online games methodologically. Therefore, it would be best if teachers start using online language games in teaching ESL grammar and integrate technology in aiding their lessons for an efficient learning outcome. Overall, with the rapid advancement of technology and gadgets, ESL learners will benefit massively through game-based learning.

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Tích hợp học tập dựa trên trò chơi vào lớp học ngữ pháp cho sinh viên năm nhất chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại Trường Đại học Kinh tế - Tài chính Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh

Tóm tắt: Hệ thống quy tắc ngữ pháp tiếng Anh phức tạp thường gây khó khăn cho người học ngôn ngữ. Là một thành phần cốt lõi của ngôn ngữ và có vị trí then chốt trong quá trình học tập, vì vậy việc giảng dạy ngữ pháp trở thành một nhiệm vụ đầy thách thức đối với giáo viên. Trò chơi chiếm một vai trò quan trọng trong việc dạy tiếng Anh như ngoại ngữ, hỗ trợ đáng kể cho giáo viên bằng cách tạo ra các ngữ cảnh nơi việc sử dụng ngôn ngữ trở nên thực tế và có ý nghĩa. Bài viết này xem xét những lợi ích của học tập dựa trên ba ứng dụng trò chơi: Educaplay, Quizizz và Kahoot!, đồng thời nhấn mạnh tầm quan trọng của ngữ pháp và đề xuất các ứng dụng thực tiễn giúp giáo viên ngữ pháp nâng cao hiệu quả học tập và tăng thêm sự hứng thú trong các lớp học ngữ pháp.

Từ khóa: học tập dựa trên trò chơi; trò chơi trực tuyến; ngữ pháp; lớp học/bài giảng.