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Using Language Games in the Elementary and Storytelling in the Senior High School as ESL Online Teaching Strategies in Taiwan

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Abstract: The study narrates teachers' experiences in using language games in the elementary school and storytelling in the senior high school as ESL (English as a Second Language) online teaching strategies in Taiwan. Many studies support English language learning through the use of language games in the elementary school (Yunus, 2019; Ariani, 2020 and Morty & Aziz, 2020), and storytelling in the high school (Dujmovic, 2006; Satriani, 2019 and Schaumann, 2021) in the face to face instruction. However, the pandemic is forcing some schools to shift from in-person to online classes, making teachers think of a variety of ways on how to sustain students' motivation and interest in learning English. Learning online is not as easy as it seems for both the elementary and high school students in Taiwan. This study presents English language teaching and learning experiences on utilizing teaching strategies that are proven effective on face to face instruction, but also reveal positive results when used online. Through the use of these ESL teaching strategies, students' engagement became evident as they were exposed to fun and interactive online games and storytelling. The strategies didn't only arouse students' interest to learn vocabulary and grammar, but also enhanced students' macro-skills.

Introduction

Taiwan is a story of independence, strategic approach and technological advancement in dealing with the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Taiwan approach is described to be transparent, responsive and efficient. It is supported by a high degree of public trust that underlies its democratic governance-based approach. Salter (2021) mentions that, "despite its proximity to the source of the pandemic's outbreak, by autumn 2020, Taiwan had recorded fewer than 500 infection cases, only 7 deaths and no instances of large-scale community transmission – a remarkable achievement that gained the country wide-reaching international attention and recognition."

Salter (2021) also presents that in 2020, Taiwan was one of the most successful countries in curbing the impact of the pandemic on the economy and public health. Taiwan acted swiftly on several aspects, from protecting the national stockpile of certain goods such as digital thermometers and face masks, to imposing strict measures which controlled the spread of the disease locally. The Ministry of Health, led by an epidemiologist, had based its actions on research and on what the country had experienced during the SARS outbreak. In May 2021, the authorities continued to impose both international and domestic travel restrictions to curb the spread of the virus. Moreover, in May 2021, Taiwan faced its worst outbreak since the beginning of the pandemic, with level 3 restrictions coming into force. Consequently, several establishments had been closed, including schools.

The country has adapted a “New Taiwan Model” (Chen, 2022). Through the precise use of technology, information transparency, strict border controls, and accurate screening and case investigation, Taiwan was able to contain the pandemic while having people lead normal lives and achieving positive economic growth.

Consequently, last August 2022, the Ministry of Education (MOE) announced the COVID-19 prevention and response measures for schools for the new semester, including the requirements for the suspension of classes, mandatory testing and disease-prevention leave. According to the MOE, “local governments and the universities can adjust teaching methods according to the COVID-19 situation, but should discuss changes with the ministry’s response task force and protect students’ right to education” (“Ministry releases virus rules for schools”, 2022). Taiwan classrooms adapted ‘hybrid’ teaching in which a combination of face to face and online classes is done for those students who don’t and do need home quarantine.

Language Games in the Elementary School

Elementary school students in Taiwan need avenues to use and practice English as a target language. As an approach, the Ministry of Education (MOE) encourages English teachers from different countries to teach and expose the students to the English language. Similarly, a language teacher needs to introduce a teaching strategy where students get exposed to the language in an engaging and fun way, more particularly in the age when face to face classroom experiences are limited.

In using language games in the teaching process, a teacher creates an interactive and entertaining classroom environment for elementary school students. The learning process for students becomes more meaningful and unforgettable. These insights have been revealed by the classroom teaching I conducted in the elementary schools in central Taiwan where language games were incorporated in the main lesson. For the established goals at the end of the meeting, the students were expected to: a) recognize the flag of each country, b) construct sentences orally by asking and answering a question; and c) compose sentences by supplying the missing words. As a form of assessment, students should be able to independently use their learning to communicate with other people from different countries.

A language game is defined as an activity that is used to facilitate the learning of a language (Yacob & Yunus, 2019). According to Bryne (1987), educational language games play a vital role in learning basic language skills. In this context, games are assured to be beneficial as said by Taheri (2014), for it creates an exciting and fun learning atmosphere. In connection to this, digital language games are very suitable for shifting from face to face to online classes.

This study of using language games in English language teaching is anchored in the Theory of John Dewey’s *Learning by Doing* (Williams, 2017). The teaching approach is student-centered where language teachers act as facilitators in the classroom. At the same time, students learn through hands-on activities by experiencing various language games in an English online classroom. In my teaching experience, I noticed that my elementary school students are digitally smart. Thus, students’ active classroom participation and engagement were evident

as the teaching and learning process was assisted with technology through language games. The students were not using pen and notebooks rather laptops, I-pads or computers.

As an example, a board game influences students' mastery of the content of the lesson (Ariani, 2019). It is the reason that textbooks of public schools in Taiwan contain board game activities that allow students to practice and check their level of mastery in a fun way. It significantly impacts students' learning in mastering the target vocabulary words, grammar rules, and phonics sounds. In my teaching, an E-book copy of our reference book includes a board game that has images of different flags. Students were asked to identify the countries which the flags represent. Afterwards, they were asked to raise their hand and tell their answers.

In addition, learning the spelling of the vocabulary words is essential to constructing a sentence, so I also introduced this online game to create a fun and interactive learning environment. An *anagram* is the best tool in terms of practicing students' spelling of the word in an interactive way of learning it. Students were more willing to participate and engage themselves. I noticed that more students became participative in an online class than in face to face class. For the teaching of writing, I utilized various online games such as *Quizizz* and *Wordwall* as supplemental tools to serve as a motivation in introducing sentence construction to the students. This made them more interested and excited to learn and assess their mastery of English grammar as well. This approach is supported by McLean (2012) which states that a good sentence needs to make sense on its own.

Ultimately, learning the target language for the learners who have a first language other than English is not as easy as compared when they are learning their native language. The responsibility always lies with the language teachers for students to enhance and develop the skills needed. It is why *Computer Assisted Language Learning* (CALL) in English classrooms through various online games is necessary to introduce and use as a teaching strategy to arouse students' interest, activate their online classroom engagement and willingness to learn and participate, and have a fun and interactive learning environment. 21st-century students live in a digital era, so teachers should adapt to the fast-growing change in teaching styles nowadays.

Storytelling in the Senior High School

Several studies on language learning assert the role of storytelling as an effective teaching tool. Dujmovic (2006) presents three benefits of storytelling when incorporated in the whole school curriculum. First, stories can be used to reinforce conceptual development in children. Second, stories are means of developing learning. Lastly, carefully selected stories can also be used to develop other subjects in the curriculum. As the study also suggests, these positive effects of storytelling are consistent when incorporated in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum.

The findings revealed from the study mentioned above resonate with the findings of Satriani (2019) on the benefits and challenges of storytelling in teaching literacy. Firstly, in the process of implementing storytelling, it was found that students' literacy skills were developed. Secondly, the selection of story and quality of book

also gave an impact on arousing their imagination. Moreover, students' vocabulary, reading awareness, and interest also increased.

The project of Schaumann (2021) on teaching proficiency through reading and storytelling in the middle-school ESL class reveals that the teaching approach also meshes well with principles of culturally responsive teaching, and has been designed to maximize exposure to comprehensible English while still respecting the experiences and cultures of the learners. In other words, storytelling is a powerful tool to develop students' language proficiency with respect to their background.

This study is conducted in a private senior high school class located in central Taiwan in which the main learning material is in the form of an English magazine. The magazine is published quarterly which includes various articles in different genres which are not only about Taiwan but also about other countries. The reading texts that are included in the magazine have a list of vocabulary terms that may be unfamiliar to students and some reading comprehension response questions to check students' understanding of the text.

The learning objectives that students had to achieve are: a) recognize new vocabulary terms in the story, b) identify the elements of the story which are characters and their characterization, setting, conflict, and theme, and c) show literary appreciation. The teacher utilized a sectional approach of reading aloud the text, rather than making students do close reading by themselves. As a result, storytelling as a teaching strategy enhances not only students' learning of new vocabulary terms and familiarity of the subject content, but also their macro-skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing.

For enhancing students' listening skill, it is found that students recognized unfamiliar words as they were able to hear how the words were pronounced by the teacher. They were also exposed with the learning of suprasegmentals such as phrasing, blending and intonation patterns. Also through listening, the students were able to identify the elements of the story, as it was accompanied by comprehension response questions after reading a particular section of the text. Since the teacher asked questions in every section of the story, it was easier for the students to express their answers by oral sharing. Moreover, the teacher mentioned that the students should not be afraid of committing errors in grammar as long as they can share their ideas freely. This made the 'online environment' conducive to learning – lowering the level of students' anxiety promotes better learning. Consequently as observed by the teacher, more students became responsive and participative when asked to share their responses.

Students' writing is assessed in a form of a journal-writing in which students were asked to write their reflection about the theme and issues that they identified when reading the text. Two to three sentences are enough as a response, and the students were asked to write on a Google Document and submit to their Google Classroom. Also, the journal-writing is not rated based on vocabulary, rules of grammar or subject-verb agreement, but mainly on how the students expressed themselves meaningfully. The students were informed about it which made them write freely, with less inhibitions. Also, a few students asked if they could write in

Chinese first, and translate their responses afterwards. The teacher allowed them to do as they wished.

Conclusion

ESL teaching strategies should be adaptive to the learners' needs as "communicative practices, communicative genres are changing very dramatically all the time in the context of globalization, digital media" (Canagarajah, 2022). In the time of the pandemic, classes are shifting from in-person to online which involves learning challenges such as lack of students' motivation, difficulty of having students' engagement with the discussion, and students' lack of focus. As mentioned above, language games and storytelling address these issues and reveal positive outcomes in the ESL teaching and learning environments in the elementary and senior high schools in Taiwan. Consequently, these teaching strategies enhanced not only students' learning of vocabulary, sentence construction, and grammar, but also their macro-skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) which are vital in the communicative process in the target language.

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