

The Application of “Write It Right!” Board Game in an ESL Writing Classroom: A Study on Students’ Perspectives

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Abstract: Board games have become an indispensable tool in teaching and learning nowadays. Many learning instructors have chosen to use board games as an instrument to enhance their students’ language learning process. By incorporating games into the learning process, students are exposed to experiential learning. In this study, the focus is on incorporating board games in a language classroom with a specific focus on writing skills. The objectives of this study are twofold. They are to investigate students’ perceptions of using the “Write It Right!” (WIR) board game as a medium to assist them in the ESL writing classroom and to determine if the students’ perceptions differ between genders. The WIR board game was used during a writing class session for diploma students at a local university. Upon completion of using the board game, students were required to complete a survey to gauge their perceptions of using the board game as a tool in language learning. The findings discovered a positive outcome on the application of board games in the language classroom. It is recommended that language instructors embed board games into their writing classrooms to encourage and enhance students’ writing skills.

Keywords: Board games, Writing skills, English as a second language (ESL), Writing classroom, Language learning

Introduction

Language learning encompasses four different skills and they are reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Mastering these skills is essential and indispensable when one learns a language. The use of games in language learning is a well-established and effective approach. A study conducted by Liu et al. (2021) found that games can be a fun way to engage students and sustain their interest in learning, ultimately contributing to the development of their communicative competence. The students were also found to be motivated to learn using games. Enhancing students’ motivation in learning is one of the benefits of learning using games (Ni Luh Ayu Budi Hari Ningsih, 2023). Some examples of language learning games include traditional board games like Scrabble, Vocab, and digital games like those available on language-learning applications. It shows that the use of games in language learning, whether in the form of board games, applications, or online games, offers a dynamic and engaging approach to building language proficiency for learners of all levels and ages (Cuervo, 2022). Hence, language instructors need to be more creative to engage the students in learning a language through games.

Using board games in language learning is a valuable and engaging approach that offers various benefits. Board games provide interactive language practice in a student-centred, low-stress

environment, making them an effective tool for language instructors, especially in giving feedback to students (Iuliana & Juhász, 2020). They added that learning using board games can also create a positive and enjoyable classroom environment, attract students' interest and engagement, and facilitate learning for in-class activity. Additionally, board games can be a universal and motivational tool for language learning, equally powerful for both younger and adult learners, that they spend fun and enjoyable time together (O'neil & Holmes, 2022). It is shown that the use of board games in language learning is a versatile and effective approach that can significantly contribute to the development of language skills in a fun and interactive way. They also stressed that incorporating board games in classrooms requires students to work cooperatively with one another. Nur Shakila and Fika Megawati (2021) concurred with the points highlighted by O'Neill and Holmes (2022) as they too believe that using board games will encourage learners to share opinions and provide comments to their friends. This is especially true in a writing classroom as mentioned by the said researchers. In addition, students will not find their lessons dull and will be more motivated to work collaboratively (Nur Shakila and Fika Megawati, 2021). Hence, implementing the use of games, specifically board games in language learning is essential as it promotes many benefits to language learners.

However, despite the numerous advantages that board games bring to assist students in writing, challenges still arise among English as a second language (ESL) learners. The development of writing skills in a second language poses several challenges for learners. Advanced learners of English also found to be having difficulties in learning writing. As the world has grown increasingly text-oriented, writing has become one of the most important skills to be learned (Cole & Feng, 2015). Additionally, according to Jiang and Kalyuga (2022), the use of effective instructional strategies, such as the process-genre approach and collaborative writing is a common teaching strategy used by language instructors to help students to improve their writing skills. However, they also stated that this method may exceed a learner's working memory capacity which could impede the development of their writing skills. Thus, when addressing issues in language learning, particularly in the context of writing skills, it is important to consider the complexity of the writing process and the need for effective instructional strategies to support learners in developing their writing skills.

Based on the needs analysis conducted prior to this study with a few lecturers, it was identified that 43.9% of English lecturers opted for drilling on writing practices and 97.6% of English lecturers are willing to change the style of teaching writing. The students were also having difficulty in writing the most in learning English as a second language compared to the other skills. The students were having problems in identifying the elements of writing and took longer time to produce them; thesis statements, topic sentences, supporting details, discourse markers, and also concluding sentences. It was also found that there were not many board games focussing on writing, to help them master their writing skills. Thus, the four language instructors came up with the idea of teaching writing using a board game. They invented the "Write It Right!" (WIR) board game for the language instructors and learners to use as a classroom activity. WIR has unique features that can attract students to learn writing enjoyably as the developers bring back the board game idea in this digital era. It is hoped that the learners can benefit from WIR as much as they can as WIR reinforces a better understanding of learning writing, masters the foundation of writing, promotes collaborative learning and progress in learning, and invites communication between learners. WIR also comes with writing templates for several types of essay writing to work on the extra practices be it individually or collaboratively.

Therefore, this study was carried out to investigate the use of the "Write It Right!" (WIR) board game in an ESL classroom among the students and lecturers as an in-class activity. One group of diploma students in one of the local universities was chosen as the participants of this study on the WIR board game. The objectives of this study are to investigate students' perceptions of using the "Write It Right!" (WIR) board game as a medium of language learning among students and to see if the students' perceptions differ between genders.

Literature Review

English is considered essential for global communication, making it a crucial language to learn, especially in Malaysia where there is a strong emphasis on English education due to its worldwide importance. According to Parupalli (2019), “English, being the first world language, is said to be the first global lingua franca and it is the most widely used language in the world in international trade, diplomacy, mass entertainment, international telecommunications, and scientific publications as well as publishing newspapers and other books”. This prestigious language attracts attention as a pathway to success, offering ample opportunities for personal advancement and prosperity in life. According to Chitra and Shaifali (2021), acquiring proficiency in a second language necessitates both psychological and emotional engagement to communicate effectively and convey linguistic meaning. This study aims to understand the significance of employing all skills in the process of learning English. The four fundamental language skills; Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing are pivotal in enabling individuals to comprehend, generate, and utilise language in meaningful social interactions. A considerable amount of time and money has been invested in English language education around the world as it is a necessary skill. However, despite this emphasis, there has been a noticeable lack of efficiency in writing among students in ESL classrooms. Studies conducted by Limantoro (2018) and Castillo-Cuesta (2022) have explored numerous communicative activities aimed at improving writing skills, with board games standing out as one of the most effective tools for enhancing writing efficiency among students.

Board Games

Donovan (2017) stated that the resurgence of board games can be explained by Internet fatigue. Board games have survived in the digital era because they can reveal and expose the inner workings of our minds and interpret the change in society, as Donovan (2017) put it “Most of all, they have entertained us”. According to Bayeck (2020), “Board games are economically feasible, making their design and reproduction possible for independent game designers or researchers.” The increasing interest in board games across various disciplines and settings (Pierce et al., 2018; Wu & Lee, 2015) not only underscored the importance of reviewing empirical evidence regarding board gameplay and learning but also emphasised the significance of situating these findings within the field of game studies. According to Vera et. al (2023), there are benefits to introducing gameplay into lessons. When students study in the form of a game, such as being active in class, they can readily comprehend teachings or content.

Furthermore, literature suggests that playing entails learning as players interact with games and develop their engagement within the gameplay (Steinkuehler et al., 2012; Syahida et al., 2019). Additionally, learning is not solely evident in the outcomes but is intricately woven into the act of playing (Gee, 2005; Pelletier, 2009). It is integrated into participation, engagement, and interaction with the game environment (Gee & Hayes, 2012; Steinkuehler, 2007). Thus, learning extends beyond mere knowledge acquisition or behavioural changes; it encompasses the diverse practices and interactions players experience within the board game setting. A meticulously designed board game, tailored to specific learning objectives, holds significant educational value and is highly applicable in a classroom setting.

Writing

In the context of one's native language, writing presents itself as a complex and challenging endeavour, necessitating individuals to orchestrate a multitude of cognitive skills and knowledge domains. These encompass elements such as goal setting, discourse awareness, memory management strategies, and socio-cultural understanding (Flower & Hayes, 1980; Hayes, 1996; Torrance & Galbraith, 2006). Geiser and Studley (2001), Light (2001), and Powell (2009) stated that the ability to effectively produce written text plays a major role in the success of individuals in school and the workplace. In many ways, the writing process for an L2 student is comparable to that of a native speaker. Both L1 and L2 students must establish goals for their writing, set a clear purpose, interpret their ideas into words, and participate in a variety of other cognitive activities. This is supported by Graham (2006), Hayes (1996), Prior

(2006), and Flower and Hayes (1980) that “L1 and L2 students must maintain motivation and an overall awareness of the social and cultural purpose for the writing task for instance, claimed that writers must maintain knowledge of their task environment (e.g., topic, audience, etc.) and knowledge of their own goals (e.g., knowledge of a topic, writing plans, etc.), while simultaneously engaging in a complex writing process that involves stages of planning, translating, and reviewing.”

Based on the understanding that learning is both inherent to gameplay within a sociocultural context (Nasir, 2008) and involves the acquisition of skills/knowledge and observable behaviour (Pepler et al., 2013; Yilmaz, 2011), utilising board games has proven to be highly effective in facilitating active learning, especially when children are engaged in activities that encourage them to contemplate ideas and their practical application (Collins & O’Brien, 2003). In a comprehensive meta-review and effects analysis, Noda, Shiotsuki, and Nakao (2019) examined twenty-seven studies conducted in educational settings. These studies directly compared children's knowledge levels before and after they received instruction using active board game-based methods versus passive forms of instruction such as lectures.

Significance of the Study

There is a potential for the board game to assist students of second language learners(L2) in terms of the skills needed to learn the language, specifically writing. As Joseph et al. (2020) mentioned, board games hold significant potential within the ESL context, aligning well with socio-constructivist learning principles and meeting the criteria for task-based learning. The board games can also relate to real-life situations which provide opportunities for L2 learners to share their thoughts and ideas in the target language freely by writing. This assists them to be more flexible in the real world and develop their social skills.

Methodology

This study is an action research design as it was conducted for the language instructor attempting to resolve issues in the classroom for the betterment of his/her teaching practice (Burns, 2010; Kuhne & Quigley, 1997) and that analysis, observation, and data collection in a natural classroom environment (Kuhne & Quigley, 1997). In this same study, quantitative data collection methodology was employed to elicit students’ perceptions of using the “Write It Right!” (WIR) board game as a medium of language learning. According to Bhandari (2023), a questionnaire is useful in eliciting participants of a study on their behaviours, experiences, and viewpoint by answering a set of questions or responding to a set of items.

This study purposely selected a class of 22 diploma students from the Faculty of Theatre of a local university. The selection was based on a purposive sampling technique where the respondents fulfilled these criteria; 1) enrolled for the English writing language course, 2) diploma level students, 3) completed two prior English courses, and 4) had been taught on the basic essay writing skills. The students were divided into two groups and partnered to play the board game.

“Write It Right!” Board Game as an Intervention Tool

The board game is a self-developed teaching and learning tool by the researchers, used for the intervention and named “Write It Right!” (WIR). It is a board game developed with the intention to be used as a reinforcement activity in an ESL writing classroom. It focuses on the fundamentals of writing specially designed for tertiary-level students. The concept and framework of WIR are based on the concept of gamification together with 8 design considerations, which are meaning, user-centered design, challenges, personalisation and feedback choices and autonomy, perils and advantages of extrinsic rewards, social interaction, and relatedness, competition vs cooperation and failure as an opportunity to learn. This board game can be played by 2 - 8 players. The objectives of WIR are; 1) to enhance students’ writing skills, 2) to encourage collaborative learning, and 3) to make learning writing a fun experience. WIR also includes color-coded writing templates for Argumentative, Descriptive/Expository, Cause and

Effect, and Problem-Solution Essays. These writing templates can be used as references when students work on their essays. The ‘Task’ cards and ‘Detective Desk’ cards are cards that contain questions that test students’ understanding of the important sections of an essay such as thesis statements, topic sentences, supporting details, linkers, as well as sentence construction.

The questionnaire utilised in this study is readily adopted and adapted from Anisha Sasidharan and Tan Kok Eng (2013). According to the questionnaire developers, the questionnaire’s scale has good internal consistency, with a Cronbach alpha coefficient reported of more than 0.80. The questionnaire consists of a 5-point Likert scale with 14 items to measure the students’ perception of using board games as a medium for learning language writing skills. The questionnaire ended with an open-ended section for the respondents to leave their general comments. The questionnaire was digitised and the respondents were required to respond immediately after the session had ended. The questionnaire returned a 100% response rate and a Cronbach Alpha Reliability value of 0.94 for this particular study.

The data was gathered from a quantitative technique whereby a set of questionnaires was distributed among the participants. Before the data collection, the participants were required to join the activity of using the board game. The total number of students was divided into 2 groups to play the board games simultaneously. For each board game set, 4 pairs of participants were assigned to use the board game and were given one round to complete the game being monitored by the language instructor in class. The questionnaire was then distributed as a post-activity to collect the quantitative data for the study. The data collected was analysed through SPSS for descriptive statistics for the first objective of the study and inferential statistics for the second objective of the study.

Findings and Discussion

To gain feedback on the students’ perception of the self-developed board game, a set of questionnaires was utilised to elicit their responses immediately after they had completed the task assigned to them. The following are the findings and discussion of the study.

Demographic Information

Table 1. Participants’ Gender

	Male (N=22)	Female (N=22)
Gender	6 (27.3 %)	16 (72.7%)

In this current study, a total of 27.3% of male students and 72.7% of female students participated in the activity and responded to the questionnaire. This number is made up of one class in the ESL writing classroom. They were diploma students who enrolled for an ESL writing course from a particular semester.

Students’ Perception of the Use of “Write It Right!” Board Game in an ESL Writing Class

Table 2. Students’ Perception of Using Board Games as a Medium of Language Learning

	<i>M</i> (N=22)	<i>S.D</i>
Perception of Board Games as the medium of language learning	4.16	0.67

As reported in Table 2, the students perceived the use of board games as a medium of learning in an ESL classroom assisted in the betterment of their writing skills with $M=4.16$, $SD= 0.67$. Rukiyah (2020) in her study reported that board games help students with learning and preservation, particularly in writing.

Another study by Phuong and Nguyen (2017) found that the majority of participants had a positive outlook on board games in general and the advantages it provides. Additionally, a systematic literature review done by Jack and Hashim (2023) proved that non-Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) tools including the use of board games in writing were largely as good as ICT writing tools and traditional board games are preferred by the participants (Fang, Chen & Huang, 2016). Thus, the use of physical board games should not be dismissed in a classroom setting.

Additionally, here are some responses from the open-ended section that further clarify their perceptions towards the use of WIR in the classroom;

“it's more fun to improve English using this method because students can enjoy the game and try to learn English at the same time.”,

“THE GAME WAS FUN!!!”, and

“IT WAS FUNNNN”.

No suggestion was provided by the students on the improvement of the WIR board game. The responses from the open-ended section are in line with the findings on the perception of students in this particular study.

Students' Perception of the Use of “Write It Right!” Board Game in an ESL Writing Class Based on Gender

Concerning the second objective of this study which is to determine if there are any differences in the perceptions of students between genders, an independent T-test analysis was utilised.

Table 3. Students' Perception of Using WIR Based on Gender

	Gender (N)	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D</i>
Perception	Male	4.25	0.79
	Female	4.11	0.64

Based on Table 3, it was reported that based on gender, male students have a slightly higher agreement that the use of the board game enhances their writing skills with $M=4.25$, $SD= 0.79$. While female students, though reported a lower agreement with $M=4.11$, $SD= 0.64$, found that they agreed that the use of board games assisted them in learning writing skills.

Table 4. Independent Samples T-test Table on Students' Perception of Using WIR based on Gender

	<i>p</i>	<i>df</i>	Two-sided <i>p</i>	Mean difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	0.53	20	0.68	0.13	-0.54	0.81

An independent-sample t-test was conducted to compare the perception of WIR as an alternative to language learning between males and females. There was no significant difference in scores for males ($M=4.25$, $SD=0.79$) and females, $M=4.11$, $SD=0.64$; $t(20) = .41$, $p=0.68$ (two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = .13, 95% CI: -0.54 to 0.81) was very small (eta squared = 0.008). Although it was found by Belda-Medina and Calvo-Ferrer (2022) that there were gender-based differences in preferences for gameplay in class, these findings found that both male and

female students perceived mutual agreement on the idea of using board games in ESL writing classrooms. This finding is in line with the findings of a survey conducted by Statista (2020) where both genders enjoy playing board games.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the board game “Write It Right!” (WIR) has been shown to help students in their writing. Reflecting on the first objective of the study which is to look into students’ perceptions of the use of WIR, it can be concluded that the board game is a useful language learning tool for students in the writing classroom. Besides that, the board game WIR also ignited students’ interest in learning writing based on the responses received from the open-ended section of the questionnaire. On the other hand, although there was not much significant difference in the use of WIR between male and female genders, overall, both genders perceived that the tool helped them in their writing classroom. Therefore, the teaching of writing could be enhanced with board games and language classrooms could adopt this more in their lessons.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions for future research can be made. Firstly, including a better sample size would be useful to get a better reflection of students’ perceptions of the use of “Write It Right!” in the ESL writing classroom. This is one of the limitations of the current study that could be addressed in future studies. Secondly, incorporating interview sessions with students as part of data collection can yield an in-depth understanding of students’ perceptions of the board game. Although an open-ended section was included in the questionnaire of the current study, however, including interview sessions with the students would provide a more explicit information-sharing experience. Lastly, this current study was conducted based on a short-term duration, therefore, it is recommended that a longitudinal study be conducted to see the long-term effects of incorporating the “Write It Right!” board game in the ESL writing classroom.

Co-Author Contribution

The authors confirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author 1 worked on the abstract, conclusion, and suggestions for future research as well as prepared the questionnaire. Author 2 wrote the introduction and research methodology sections of this paper. The author also collected data for this study. Author 3 completed the findings and discussions section, statistical analysis, and interpretation of the results, and completed the statistical analysis. Author 4 wrote the literature review and assisted with the statistical analysis and interpretation of results.

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