A Critical Look at Using Games in Learning English Grammar for the First Year English-Majored Students at University of Phan Thiet

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Abstract: *In the context of Vietnam, Vietnamese people must learn English language from primary schools to universities. English is taught as a compulsory subject. Therefore, students need to learn grammar in each English lesson. Moreover, grammar, as an integral part of a language, plays a crucial role in the language learning process. Without some knowledge of grammar, it would be impossible to have language comprehension as well as language production. The lack of grammar knowledge affects all the four language skills. That is why grammar learning is an important and indispensable part of any language learning. Actually, there are a considerable number of studies examining how to use games in teaching grammar in many contexts. However, a few articles address how effective games are in grammar instruction. Therefore, this paper aims to fill the gap by analyzing the application of using games in teaching grammar for the first year English majored students at University of Phan Thiet. A mixture of both quantitative and qualitative methods was applied in the research. The finding results indicates both advantages and disadvantages as learning grammar through games for students. Thus, game application is encouraged to be adopted by English teachers. It also exposes students attitude positively toward grammar lessons.*

Keywords: *Grammar; learning English grammar; games.*

I. Introduction

English has been considered as one of the most popular languages in the world. According to Johnson (2009), English language is now as the key factor of globalization, political views, international business as well as education. Thanks to the development of economic with the investment of foreign companies, as a result tourism industry develops dramatisscally. People spend energy, efforts, finance and time participating in English classes at private centers and schools. They expect that they can master communicative languagge in any circumstances. Especially, they take a chance for studying abroad as well as look for good jobs with high income. The Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam has realized the importance of English in education. They have many policies to develop both teachers and students English proficiency. For instance, the project of improving teacher English proficiency following The Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) standardisation by the end of the year 2020 has been implemented recently to cultivate further training and the mind for those who are not qualified enough or for those who want to upgrade better qualification in teaching. In addition, a number of students in Binh Thuan province has opportunities to study with foreign teachers when others at remoted areas do not have this chance.

As Jones (2007, p. 40) claimed that teaching English has been improved recently in the term of student-

centered approach in which "students are involved in the learning process and become committed to improving their English" and "in a student-centered classroom, students get more "talking time". However, teaching and learning English at University of Phan Thiet has not developed students' communicative abilities, motivation, and autonomy. Most Vietnamese students are not able to communicate in English fluently and confidently during each lesson at class time. According to Nguyen (2008, p. 265), "numerous learners in Vietnam have degrees of competence level or advanced level; however they cannot produce correct and meaningful utterance or sentences". In fact, it is sticked with the concept; teachers who are in charge of giving instructions are the center of the classroom while students are interested in taking notes rather than speaking up their ideas and taking part in the lessons. This reality is happening almost all the public and private schools in Vietnam. Pradeep (2013) also states that grammar is a very important part that cannot be neglected in teaching and studying English. Students are able to speak English more correctly if they are proficient in grammar. However, Denham (1992) highlights the fact that teachers instruct most of their lessons through Grammar Translation Method approach (GTM) which is known as teacher-centered instead of giving students chances to communicate in English. It suggests that teachers should teach grammar with multiform methods that will help students to accurately and clearly express their ideas in English. Thus, it is necessary to carry out this study to make practical benefits for students by applying games and offer as an evidence proving whether games are helpful to English majors for learing the English language learning in Vietnamese universities.

As aforementioned above, using games to teach English grammar for freshmen at University of Phan Thiet to motivate learning for students so that relevant games will be used in order to help all students practice English more naturally and accurately as well as to help them know the way to use correctly grammar rules. Besides, games also give a better understanding and students can acquire grammar knowledge as well as bring source of inspiration for them to study English effectively. Eventually, lecturers can design lessons planning, gain further experience and make more contribution to teach grammar better. Moreover, students' attitudes are addressed toward the application of games and activities in classroom. In fact, it is also an evaluation of the effectiveness of teacher's pedagogy. The study firstly introduces the rationale and theoretical perspectives. Secondly, it has a clear and detailed description of the classroom research. Thirdly, it clearly describes the use of different methods and different data sets in the study. Fourthly, it presents the findings and discussion of this study. Finally, it summarizes what the evaluation has found in the paper.

II.   Literature review

1.1. Rationale

Teaching English grammar is quite tedious and stiffed so games is considered as a helpful application using popularly in instructing grammar. Teachers often use games activities to motivate students's eagerness and make them relaxed and always be ready for the lessons. There are many advantages when using game in teaching English grammar. It has been mentioned in previous studies. First and foremost, games provide good opportunities for students to use target language in real life contexts. According to Yolageldili & Arikan (2011, p. 220), students are engaged to the learning environment of target language when participating in games. The students tend to use various language sources to complete the given tasks, for instance, solving a problem, making a decision and dealing a task. Moreover, games are often designed within certain real life situations. It is true that when teachers hold whatever games with clear objectives, students are able to get many advantages. However, almost all first-year students are not confident enough to communicate or express ideas in English. They are accustomed to do exercises and take note when teachers are giving instructions. Therefore, using games is a good solution to provide students a realistic context in which they have to interact with others in English grammar lessons and bring amusement and enjoyment to them.

In addition, using games helps students practice English and review on language use. Wang (2010, p.130) specifies that communicative activities used as games construct context in which learners are involved in practicing the target language for sharing information, negotiating meaning as well as contacting with others in meaningful context. By this way, teachers can use games to engage students in implementing the target language within all skills as speaking, reading, listening and writing. Games can be easily applied whenever

necessary and appropriate, for example games can be used for warming up part, instructing new structures or revising previous language points, and even using as follow-up activities to end a lesson. This implement supports students a lot in learning like memorizing new words, or practicing new grammar structures effectively in class. Besides, games create a supportive learning environment with fun, enjoyment and excitement. According to Wang (2010, p.131), teachers encourage learners to contact in target language rather than fix up errors in game situations. This could help students learn language more naturally and practically since games also reduce the fear of making mistakes. In contrast, many students feel bored and uncomfortable with tradition teaching approach. Inside non-stressful learning environment, students are optimistic and confident to work with others to learn new language as comfortable as possible. As a result, students will be more active to involve in the lessons.

In conclution, games build up interpersonal relations among students and teachers. According to Lee (1995, p. 1), games promote more interaction and group work not only among students but also between the teacher and students. As a matter of fact, most classes are often divided into small groups or pairs when teachers conduct whatever games. In this way, students have many chances to communicate with others naturally during the game activities. Thus, students' social and emotional development may be encouraged in the light of such positive collaboration and companionship.

1.2. Theoretical perspectives

1.2.1. Grammar position in instructing and learning English

Harmer (1987, p.12) points out "Without some understanding of Grammar rules, students would not be able to do anything more than utter separate items of language for separate functions. The expression of functional language is only possible through the use of the Grammar of the language"

Grammar instruction helps learners know how the language works. Besides, students are required to learn grammar to understand how words are combined together in a sentence so that they can understand the correct meaning of each sentence. In fact, lacking grammar knowledge comprehension, it is easy for students to get stuck with complicated sentences. Therefore, if grammar is taught within communicative and meaningful contexts, it will promote students' communicative goals and sufficient accuracy and fluency for language usage.

Larsen and Freeman (1986, p.13) also reinforce how important grammar is in English teaching and learning. They affirm that grammar can be considered as a skill rather than a language area. Obviously, learners only store knowledge language and its usage. Thus, it is necessary to create different opportunities to practice their grammar knowledge in the real life situations. Since grammar is also considered like the fifth skill apart from four basic skills speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Therefore, students need to learn grammar in writing, listening, and speaking skills to acquire target language. In order to master these skills, grammar is considered as a concrete foundation to long life learning.

In general, having a good knowledge of grammar is very important because it is hard to develop language skills without some knowledge of grammar. Teacher should help students to acquire grammar knowledge through meaningful contexts.

1.2.2. Benefits of games in teaching and learning grammar

Traditionally, Vietnamese students learn English grammar in most grammar lessons. Teachers give them grammar structures, usages and some exercises. It seems so tedious for learning. Although many teachers still conduct their teaching grammar by this way there is an effort in instructing grammar through games. There are many researches that prove excellent value of games when teaching grammar. Saricoban and Metin (2000) stated that games and problem-solving activities have a purpose beyond the production of correct speech, and are examples of the most preferable communicative activities. Clearly, students are more eager and motivated to join games than they are with doing with a dozen of exercises. The authors also state that students not only enhance grammar knowledge but also apply in their learning when studying with relevant grammar games.

In the same vein, Ersoz (2000) illustrates that challenging and amusing games are highly motivating.

When teachers announced that it was time for games, students were very excited. In fact, teachers can use games to create motivation and enjoyment through competition or to make bonding among students in class. According to Saricoban and Metin (2000), "the use of such activities both increases the cooperation and competition in the classroom." Games also allow meaningful use of the target language in a real life context.

In conclusion, using games is needed for promoting students motivation and improving their comprehension of the lesson. A number of authors have indicated that language learning performed in a playful atmosphere resulted into stimulating students motivation, making students feel confident and creating their positive attitudes to foreign language learning" (e.g. Griva, Semoglou and Geladari, 2010, p. 3704). Teachers, however, have to be careful in using games when teaching. Also, 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. On top of that, it must be engaging and inspiring for learners.

III.   The study

1.3. Description of the context

This study takes place at University of Phan Thiet which is located at 225 Nguyen Thong Street, Phu Hai Ward, Phan Thiet City, Binh Thuan Province. There are forty students in each grammar class. The students attend grammar class one a week. The tests almost pay much attention to the acquisition of form or structure and the aim is to verify the apprehension of the learners in grammar.

Besides, there are a lot of students who do not have clear awareness of the importance of studying English; therefore they think it is not as exciting as others subjects. In addition, they have been studying English for eight years so far, but, their English proficiency is quite inadequate with the time.

The working environment supports continuously teachers' teaching process. Students are nice, easy to motivate and reflective. Moreover, great support from all colleagues in sharing teaching experiences is an invaluable thing. However, the budget is restricted so it influences materials and the freshness of materials.

All of these pros and cons above are just the observations during the time working here. Nevertheless, when this research is applied, it also has other possible benefits and drawbacks. With the hope to help student have better their grammar knowledge, games and games-like activities are applied in learning grammar for the first year English majored students. This paper plans to access the effect of games on students' grammar knowledge acquisition and students' attitude toward games by examining the answers of the two research questions below:

a. How can games support students acquire grammatical knowledge?
b. What are the students' attitudes toward the games?

1.4. Evaluation methods

1.4.1.   Participant and materials

In this study, 120 freshmen who have been studying English Language at class K13NNA1 and K13NNA2 were selected. The course book Grammar Practice for Pre-Intermediate Students (Walker & Elsworth, 2000) was used. Besides, those students learned with various activities or games related to a certain grammar lesson. Actually, games and other activities were chosen from the books Games for Grammar Practice (Zaorob & Chin, 2001) and Grammar-Focused Interactive ESL/EFL Activities and Games (Kealey & Inness, 2008).

1.4.2. Methodology and methods

In this study, quantitative and qualitative methods were employed. Definitely, these methods are different significantly. However, there is a tendency for researchers to practice more than one research method in a paper. According to Hinchey (2008), it is possible for researchers to apply three methods in each study which is named triangulation so that researchers can avoid ambiguity in their study. Moreover, Garbarino & Holland (2009) point out that the connection of both qualitative and quantitative research methods can help

researchers have accurate prediction as well as appropriate ideas classification. The following data collection methods were used in this paper and all data for analysis come from 120 freshmen of the Faculty of Foreign Languages at University of Phan Thiet.

Questionnaire (see Appendix 1)

In the study, questionnaire which consists of 6 closed questions was designed and delivered to all students. This questionnaire had the respondence to each items in a five point Likert Scale which have the meaning respectively from strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. This model is helpful to figure out students' attitude and opinion toward the grammar games applied during 8 weeks. All of the questions were explained very clearly so that students could understand all items clearly. In the last week, the questionnaires were completed by 120 students. After that, all data was synthesized and analyzed. Questionnaire was a very useful collection tool because the researcher could reach many participants in a short time and it didn't cost much time and energy. However, when using this method some students werenot willing to complete the questionnaire perfectly. So they left some questions with short answers and careless intention. Consequently, the result was not very consistent.

Semi-structured interview (see Appendix 2)

In additional to questionnaire, the interview was conducted at the following week. Twelve students were chosen randomly to answer several pre-set questions. All questions were in Vietnamese so that all students could express freely their ideas. Each interview lasted twenty minutes and all interviews were recorded with the aim to explore students' attitude to games. All the data showed how enjoyable students were with the games and how well students were involved in the lessons. The information was used to reinforce one of the aspects of research questions mentioned above. Like using questionnaire, applying interview also had certain problem. Some students followed the crowd.They didnot express their own feeling because they probably thought that their answers could affect their marks in class.

1.4.3. Ethical consideration

Ethical issues are considered as a very important part in any research. First of all, a formal meeting was held to inform clearly the purpose of this research to all participants. Meanwhile, all the participants completed consent form to make sure that they volunteered in this research. In this way, the collected data was valid and reliable. At the same time, it is necessary to ask for the permission of the Dean of Faculty of Foreign Languages so that this study could be handled freely. Additionally, all students were told about how the paper was implemented, and in what way the result could support their further learning. Next, most participants confidentiality were guaranteed so that the respondents felt comfortable and confident when joining the study. This means their private information was kept in secret, and the findings were just used for the aims of this paper. Besides, the environment was also important to make the participants relax. Garbarino & Holland, (2009, p. 20) stated that respect, principles, and justice were the core of each research. The researcher had to not only respect participants' feedbacks, opinion, and feelings, but also be interested in listening to respondents answer without any critiques. Moreover, the research data must be reported and analyzed truthfully due to the fact that it was considered unethical if the data were presented differently for research's purposes. Thus, the continuous section will clarify how the data were analyzed in this research.

1.4.4. Data analysis

All the data was described and analyzed so that the reader knew what, where, when and in which way something occurred. The collected data from questionnaire were used to insert and analyze the data. Firstly, all the data were inputted so that this software calculated the answers of the respondents. Then, the result was shown by percentages, pie charts, bar graphs, tables and so far. After analysis stage, most participant attitude toward grammar lessons was figured out.

Besides, the collected data from interview were useful in finding out how strongly participants agree with using
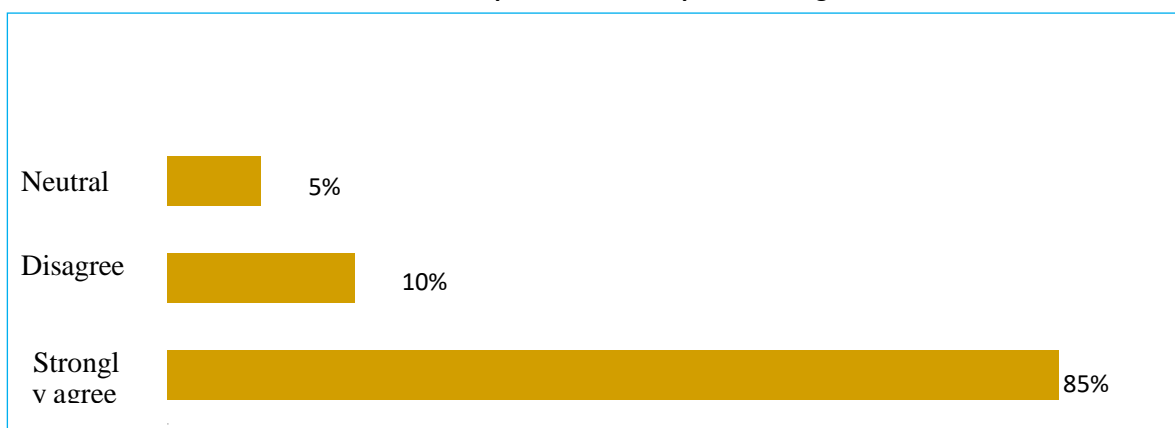
games in learning grammar. The answers were took notes and taped. Transcribing and arranging these responses into the same groups of theme for analyzing was the most important stage.

IV.   Finding results

4.1. Questionnaire

From the answers of students through questionnaire, most of the students (85%) strongly agree that grammar plays an important role when learning English while 10% of the students disagree with this idea. They might think that they can speak fluently without mastering the grammar structures. 5% of the students think it is neutral. To sum up, students realize how essential grammar is in English learning process. However, the problem is that students cannot use it in their utterance spontaneously and fluently.

Chart 1: Students' opinions of the importance of grammar

In addition, students can use English in real contexts by studying through games, but it does not at the same rate. In fact, 15% of participants strongly agree that there are more chances for them to use the grammar point in real life situations while 38% of the students agree that they are able to apply the grammar structure directly when they take part in the games. 26% cannot use the learnt grammar structures in their speaking and the number of students answer neutral is 21%. This means that most of students recognize the purpose of using games is not only for creating excitement but also for providing students opportunity to speak out in class. The data are shown as following:
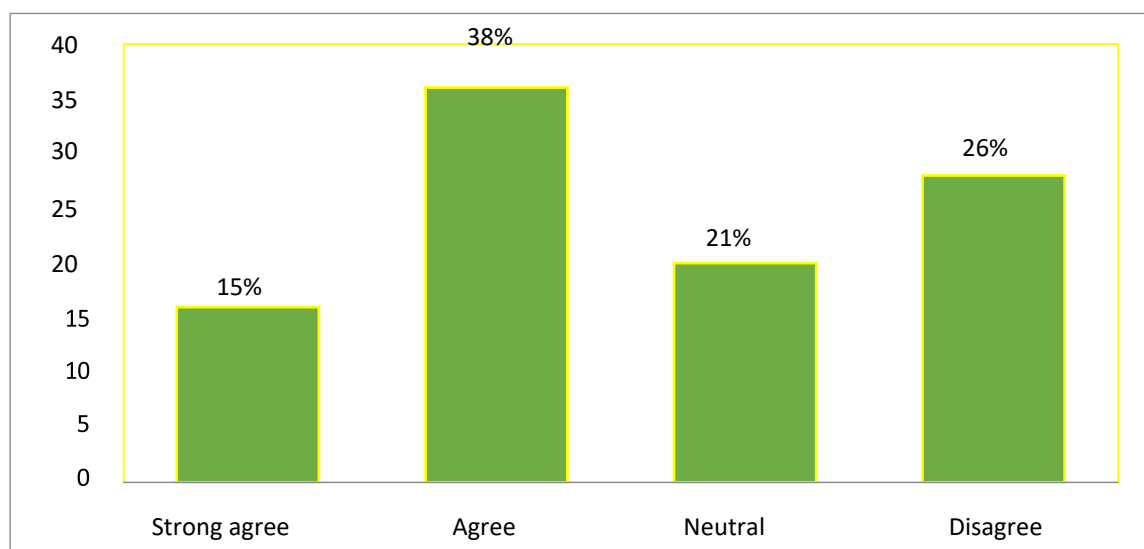

Chart 2: Students' opinion of using English in real contexts

After grammar lessons, 45% students agree they can understand and practice lessons in class better through games, while 41% of the students answer neutral. Only 14% cannot understand right away and they need time to revise or need again teachers' explaination. These figures confirm that the understanding of students is rather low and they do not involve much in learning new grammar structures.
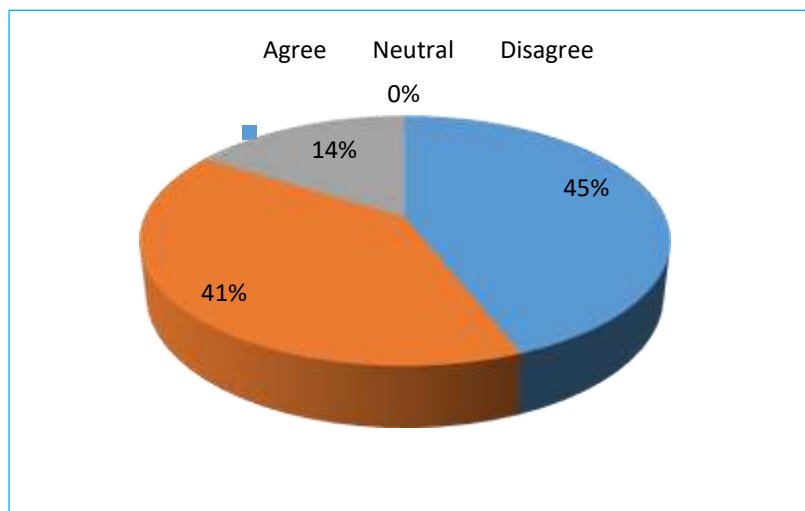

Chart 3: Students' understanding of the lesson

Furthermore, 66% of the students strongly agree that teacher's teaching method is effective and useful, 23% of the students agree with the idea and only 11% of the students disagree. This indicates that most students like their new way of applying games in learning grammar. As a result, they can improve better their learning.
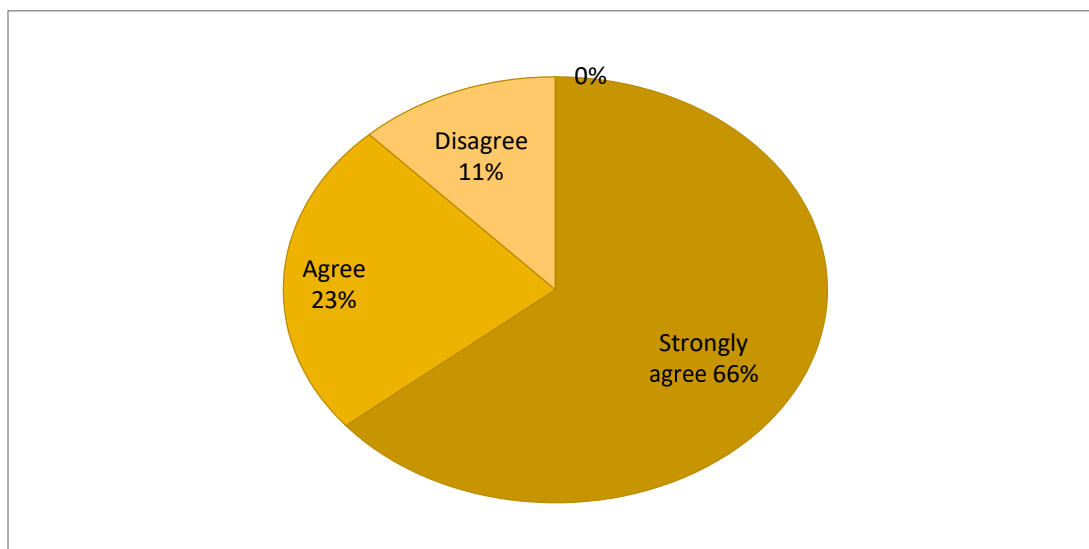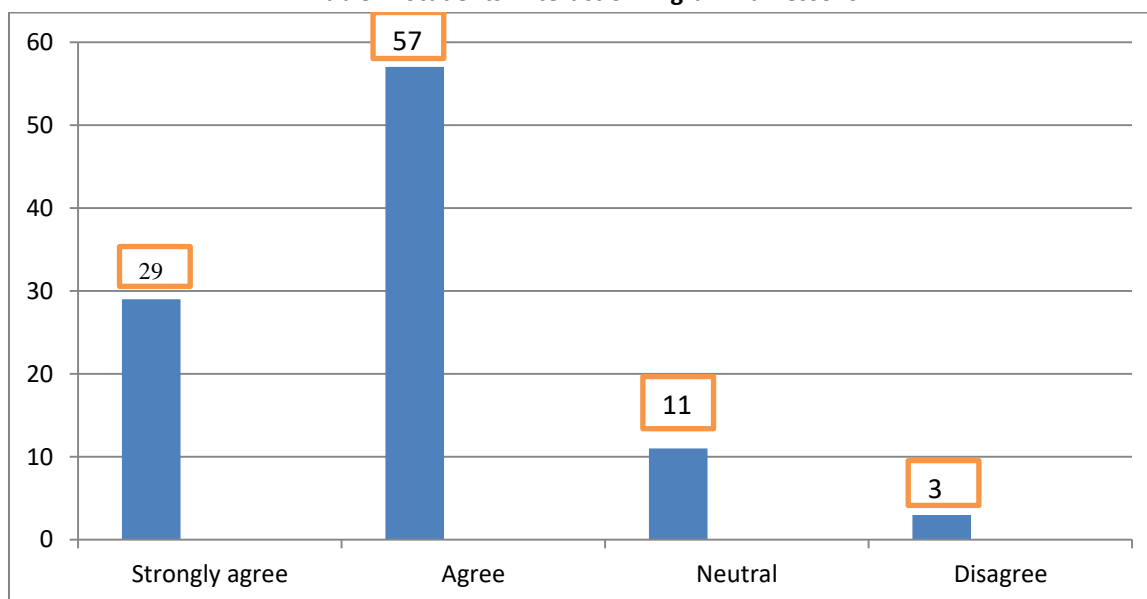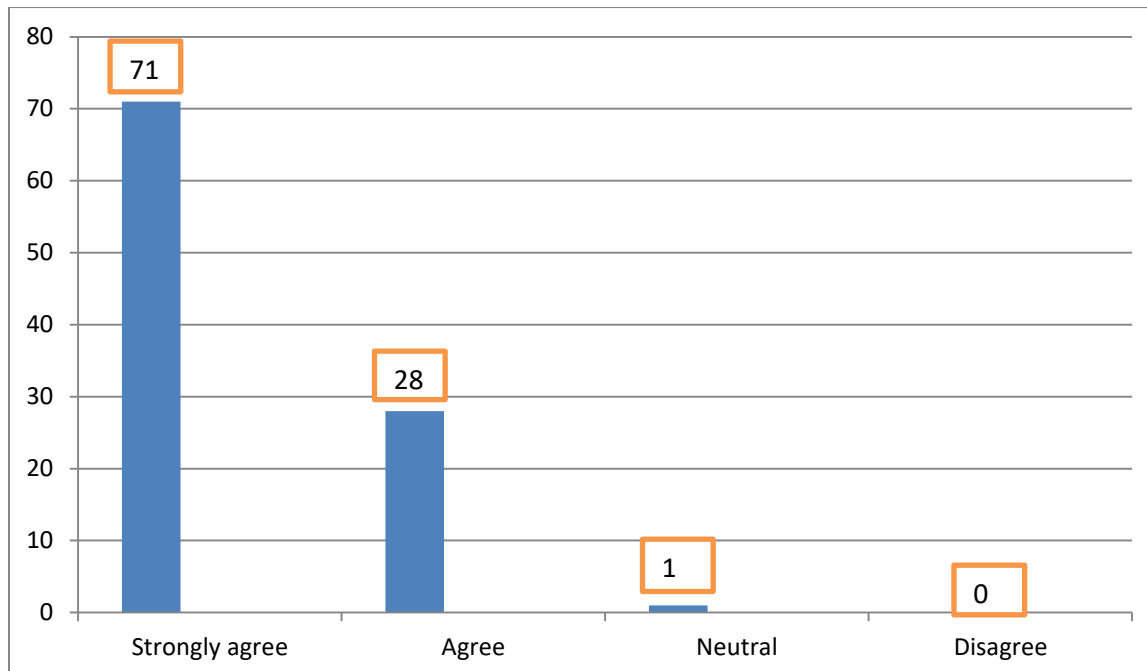

Chart 4: Students' attitude to teaching methods

Besides, the frequency of interaction among students through games is highlighted. 29% of the students strongly agree that they use more English in their communication with their classmates than learning grammar without games. 57% of the students agree they are able to interact with other students. 11% of students say it is neutral and 3% of students disagree with this idea. The data are interpreted as following:

Table 1: Students' interaction in grammar lessons

In short, the above findings show that using games in teaching grammar can create strong motivation for students to practice English as well as provide real life situations so that students are able to apply what they studied to interact between students-teacher and

students-students in class. This creates many opportunites for the students to work together as well as to boost their level.

Table 2: Students learn grammar faster and remember longer

Fron the above result, most of the participant strongly agreed (71%) that using game activities in learning grammar lessons can help them learn faster and keep in their mind longer. 28% also agreed about this opinion, 1% students say it is neutral and 0% of students disagree with this idea.

4.2. Semi-structured interview

Students' motivation is clarified through their feedback as well as suggestion in grammar lessons and emotion to those games used in class from collected information. After the interviews with twelve students, the results are illustrated very clearly and precisely.

Nearly 85% of students said that" I feel really exciting when studying with games". Many students (65%) eagerly take part in more games and attempt to win these games. Through the mentioned percentages, students enjoy the non-stressful atmosphere, high motivation, as well as positive competition inside the classroom which is created by games. In fact, the students try to win because the teacher give them the bonus scores or they receive the small gifts once they are winners. Sometimes, it is a lovely pencil, a small notebook or even lollipop or candy but these presents stimulate students to win the games. Indeed, 85% of the student answer "I can understand the games instructed by the teacher" 14 % of the students sometimes cannot catch on the rules of the games so they do not know how to play. "I do not know how to play at first, so it is better to observe my classmate" say one student. Most of the students (32%) say that they are able to use new structures into the games immediately, 15% of the students sometimes have difficulties to do so, and 14% cannot apply. Despite the fact that games bring many benefits, students have unavoidable problems when they join the games. For more details, students' difficulties with grammar games are clarified in the below chart:
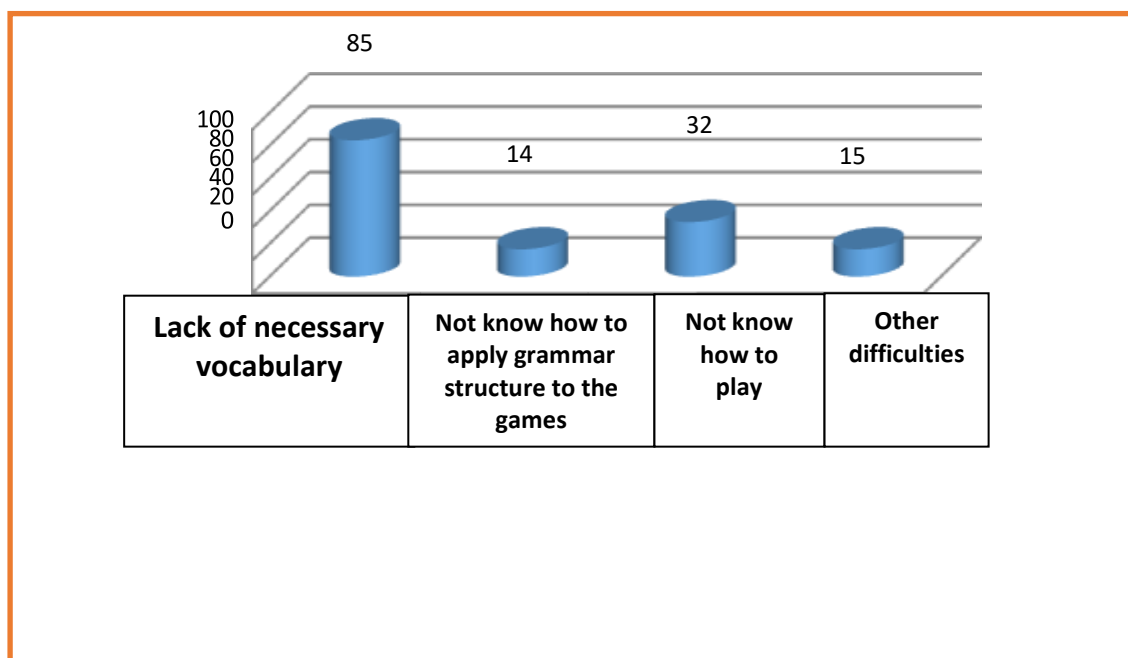

Chart 5: Students' difficulties in playing grammar games

A crucial element which determine to what extend students can master teachers' lectures and apply learnt grammar knowledge in speaking is their studying methods. From the collected data, there are about two third of the students who often take part in the games positively and half of the students (51%) answer that they have more opportunities to speak out what teacher instruct when they play the games while 16% students share their ideas. As a matter of fact, 84% of students are used to taking note and write down teacher's explanations. We can see that students are still influenced by Grammar Translation Method (GTM), and they become passive in learning process. Students activities are shown in the following table.

Activities	%
- Positively join the games teachers ask	65
- Take note and write down the lesson	84
- Speak out using new structures	51
- Contribute ideas eagerly	16

In summary, games or game like activities encourage most of the students positively to involve in grammar lessons which can be seen through their motivation when playing games. Students feel confident and they are able to communicate better at the end comparing to those who are in non-experimental class. Although GTM still affect the way students learn English, a good sign is that after the games students express their enjoyment as well as they think that grammar games are beneficial for applying grammar features in their communication. Games both bring lively atmosphere and effective lessons for students. They can remember knowledge longer.

V.   Discussion

This study aims to explore the answers from two research questions: How can games support students learn grammar?, and What are the learners' attitudes toward the games in classroom?. The following presentation will discuss more about how the results are combined together to address the mentioned research questions

The data from both questionnaire illustrates that using games help create enjoyment, motivation and reduce stress in learning grammar. Also, collected data from interviews indicate that 85% of the students have positive attitude to English grammar games, just three students (15%) have difficulties when playing the games for the first time. On the other hand, all students (100%) answered that those games was exciting and interesting. More importantly, the answers from the interviews reveal that the students knew how to use vocabulary in appropriate situations. The analysis of the data collected from questionnaire and interview can be combined to answer the research questions as games support better learners' grammar acquisition.

Besides, the study also expresses participants' attitudes. The questionnaire reveals that most students are pleased about games and activities that teacher applied in teaching grammar. However, if teachers abuse too much games in teaching, students might be bored and lose their interest. Therefore, it is believed that the combination of Grammar games with some popular approaches like grammar translation method (GTM), communicative language teaching (CLT), or task- based language teaching (TBLT) and so forth could create more benefits for learners than using each approach separately. Actually, those activities support learners to use English in real situations and to make them energetic in learning, while other approaches can help students to comprehend the contents. Thus, this combination is thought as a good solution. During the time of implementing the research, there are many difficulties when using games in teaching grammar. Firstly, 85% of the students are not confident enough to participate in the games as they lack necessary vocabulary. Secondly, some students cannot understand the rules of the games or even how to play it correctly. Thirdly, some find it is difficult to practice new structure in their communication with their classmates because they have not familiarized with the structure yet. Finally, good students often dominate those who are shy to win the games.

To overcome these problems above, the following suggestions recommend useful tips to successfully apply games in class:

- When teacherss organize the class, they should focus on learners'age, level, andinterest,
- Change activities if the class is getting disorderly and noisy,
- Choose activities appeal with all types of learning styles and vary the things you want your learners to do,
- Establish a routine and set up schedule for certain type of activities in class,
- Make sure all game rules and instrucrions are clear and understandable, and all learners have to respect and follow the rules.

Last but not least, applying games bring many benefits for both teachers and students. However, teachers should keep t h e i r students involved and be sure that those games truly focus on the skill and make students become engaged and interested in learning grammar lessons.

VI.   Conclusion

The study clarified the strong points of using games for first year students at the University of Phan Thiet. The results from this evaluation expressed the positive influences of games on student oral skill. The data from questionnaire and interview gave researcher evidence-based judgments to the innovation. They have promoted the trend of adopting games in teaching grammar for students at all ages from young learners to adults in any levels. Specially, pertinent games and activities should be examined to identify the most relevant ones for studying grammar. The upcoming study of using games in teaching grammar could be continuously investigated in different areas of further study at the University of Phan Thiet.

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Appendix 1: Students' Questionnaire

(Strongly agree =SA, agree= A, neutral= N, disagree= DA, and strongly disagree= SD)

No.	Questions	SA	A	N	DA	SD
1	Grammar is very important in learning English					
2	By studying grammar through games, you have more chances to use English in real context					
3	Via games you are able to understand and practice grammar lessons better.					
4	Teacher's teaching method is effective.					
5	You have more opportunities to interact with your classmates through games					
6	You can learn grammar faster and effective; and remember longer.					

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

1.   Do you enjoy the games instructed by teacher? Why/ Why not?
2.   Are you able to use new grammar point when joining the games?
3.   What are some obstacles as you participate in the games?
4.   Do you have more opportunities to communicate using new structures in class?
5.   What do you often do in grammar lessons?