

The Effectiveness of Board Games in Strengthening Oral Communication and Malaysian Cultural Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

Communication skills play a vital role in modern society, especially in a multicultural and multi-ethnic country like Malaysia. In the Malaysian context, which is rich in various languages, cultures, and histories, many individuals face challenges in communicating effectively and have limited knowledge of local cultures and geography. To address this issue, an interactive board game themed around Malaysian cultures was developed to enhance communication skills, improve cultural knowledge, and stimulate social interaction in a relaxed and enjoyable setting. This game focuses on three main objectives, namely to enhance participants' knowledge of Malaysian cultures through trivia questions, to encourage the use of language in oral communication, and to stimulate critical and creative thinking in social interactions. This study employs a descriptive approach, utilising both quantitative and qualitative methods. It was conducted at a public higher education institution in Melaka, with the participants consisting of diploma students. Data were collected through observations and questionnaires to assess the effectiveness of the board game on oral communication skills, knowledge of Malaysian cultures, and social interaction. The findings of the study indicate that the game successfully enhanced the participants' communication skills, enriched their knowledge of Malaysian cultures, and encouraged their positive social interaction. Furthermore, the informal learning approach applied proved to be effective and suitable for all levels of society, making it an effective alternative learning tool in the context of families, communities, corporations, and cultural tourism. Overall, this game method has proven effective in increasing individuals' interest and motivation towards the language and cultures of Malaysia, making it an innovative concept that can be adapted throughout the archipelago.

Keywords: board game, oral communication, Malaysian cultures, innovation, archipelago

INTRODUCTION

Oral communication skills are an essential element in the development of the self, society, and the nation. In this increasingly challenging era of globalisation, the ability to communicate clearly and effectively orally is not only needed in personal contexts but also critical in social and professional settings. In Malaysia, a country consisting of various races, languages, and cultures, oral communication skills become even more significant as they serve as a bridge to unite communities of different backgrounds. The diversity of ethnic groups, such as the Malays, Chinese, Indians, and other ethnic minorities, presents its own challenges in terms of communication, but at the same time, it also opens vast opportunities to foster more effective and harmonious communication.

However, among individuals, especially the students in higher education institutions, there are still some who do not master oral communication skills effectively. This weakness is also accompanied by a lack of knowledge about the cultural diversity that exists in the country. This situation is a problem that needs to be addressed because having effective oral communication requires not only the ability to convey information clearly but also a deep understanding of the surrounding cultural and social contexts.

Effective communication encompasses the ability to convey information clearly, listen actively, and adjust language according to social and cultural contexts (Canale & Swain, 1980). In today's increasingly advanced and digital world, the use of technology such as social media, text messaging, and online communication applications is widespread. This has led to a tendency among the students to reduce direct or face-to-face interaction. Such circumstances have the potential to affect their oral communication skills since digital communication does not involve body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions, which are essential elements of oral communication. Therefore, the main challenge in today's formal education is how to provide a learning environment that encourages the students to develop and use oral communication skills actively and meaningfully.

Moreover, deep cultural knowledge plays a critical role in strengthening communication. Understanding local customs, norms, and cultural values not only improves communication skills but also fosters respect and empathy towards others (Hall, 1976). In Malaysia's pluralistic society, strengthening knowledge of cultural diversity plays an important role in reducing prejudice and fostering social harmony.

Nevertheless, the existing education system in Malaysia is still heavily oriented towards traditional exam-based and rote-learning approaches, which give little room for the students to actively practise oral communication in an enjoyable setting (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). So, there is an urgent need to find alternative approaches that can integrate the aspects of interactive learning, cultural education, and communication stimulation more effectively and engagingly.

In this context, the use of locally cultured board games is seen as an innovative and promising tool to enhance the students' oral communication skills and cultural knowledge. Board games not only stimulate the students' interest and motivation but also provide opportunities to interact, think critically, and communicate in a relaxed and enjoyable environment (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). This game-based learning approach aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) social learning theory, which emphasises that learning occurs socially through interaction with others and their environment.

Thus, this study focuses on the effectiveness of specially designed board games in strengthening oral communication and knowledge of Malaysian cultures among the diploma students at a public university in Melaka. It also aims to test the extent to which this informal learning approach can produce students who are not only proficient in oral communication but also possess a deep understanding and appreciation of the nation's cultural heritage.

The main issues identified in this study include the lack of knowledge of Malaysian cultures among the students, the weaknesses in oral communication, especially among non-native speakers, and the limitations of traditional pedagogical approaches in stimulating active student engagement. Therefore, this study aims to address these challenges through the development of an interactive and enjoyable board game model as a more engaging and effective learning support tool.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have shown that board games support interactive, social, and constructivist learning, and they are effective in enhancing language proficiency and cultural understanding.

Game-Based Learning

Game-based learning has gained wide attention in modern education as an effective pedagogical approach to increase the students' motivation and engagement (Gee, 2003; Prensky, 2007). Through this approach, the students learn actively by simulating real-life situations, building strategies, making decisions, and communicating effectively with their peers in an enjoyable and non-threatening environment. A study by Ahmad Afandi et al. (2024) emphasised that board games have the potential to be used as innovative teaching tools to foster cultural understanding and shape the students' identity.

Social Learning and Constructivist Theory

According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is a social process that occurs through interaction between individuals, their environment, and others. His theory highlights the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners can reach higher levels of learning with the assistance of their peers or more knowledgeable individuals. In this context, board games provide an appropriate medium for social interaction, teamwork, and collaborative learning.

Meanwhile, Piaget (1973), in his constructivist theory, stressed that learning occurs when individuals construct their own knowledge based on experiences and active interaction. Board games offer constructivist learning opportunities by allowing the students to experience learning situations directly and reflect on those experiences.

Board Games in Language and Cultural Learning

The use of board games in language and cultural learning not only enhances oral communication skills but also expands vocabulary and fosters an understanding of norms, customs, and cultural values of society. According to Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), effective learning occurs when cognition and social interaction are combined. In Malaysia, culture-based trivia board games play an important role in introducing the students to the richness of local cultures such as dialects, history, and traditions. Studies have also shown that such games stimulate interaction among the students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This not only helps foster unity but also nurtures respect and tolerance among the younger generation, aligning with the nation's aspirations to build a cohesive and harmonious society.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section provides a detailed description of the research design, the research questions that guided the study, the limitations encountered during the research process, the instruments used for data collection, the procedures implemented, and the theoretical framework that shaped the direction of this study. All these elements are interconnected and play a vital role in ensuring that the study is conducted systematically, comprehensively, and methodologically sound.

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive approach that combined both quantitative and qualitative methods within an integrated research framework. This mixed-methods approach was chosen because it offers flexibility in data analysis. Quantitative methods helped obtain measurable and analysable numerical and statistical data, while qualitative methods allowed researchers to gain a deeper understanding of participants' meanings, experiences, and perceptions. Through this approach, the researchers were able to obtain a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of board games on key aspects such as oral communication skills, cultural knowledge, and social interaction among the students.

Research Questions

This study was designed to answer three main research questions:

1. To what extent do board games improve oral communication skills among the students?
2. How do board games help increase the students' knowledge of Malaysian cultures?
3. What is the impact of board games on the students' social interaction?

Limitations of the Study

A total of 40 diploma students from a public university in Melaka were selected using purposive sampling, as recommended by Creswell (2014). The participants were chosen based on diverse ethnic backgrounds and different fields of study to ensure that the research would be inclusive and representative.

Research Instruments

Several instruments were used to collect data. Pre- and post-game questionnaires using a five-point Likert scale were administered to assess changes in oral communication skills and cultural knowledge. Direct observation during the board game sessions was conducted to record the students' interactions, language use, and level of engagement. In addition, semi-structured interviews with the selected participants allowed the researchers to collect more detailed qualitative data regarding the students' learning experiences.

Research Procedure

The study was conducted over two main sessions across two consecutive weeks. In the first session, a pre-game questionnaire was distributed to identify the students' initial levels. Next, the students played the board game in small groups, and the researchers observed the activity. In the second session, a post-game questionnaire was distributed, followed by interviews to gather deeper insights into the participants' views.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Vygotsky's (1978) social learning theory, which emphasises the importance of social interaction in cognitive development, and Piaget's (1973) constructivist theory, which posits that learning occurs actively when learners build knowledge through experience. Board games were used as an interactive pedagogical medium, providing opportunities for the students to construct meaning collaboratively, interact with their peers, and express their ideas orally in an enjoyable environment.

DATA ANALYSIS

In this study, data were analysed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain a comprehensive picture of the effects of board games on the students' communication skills and cultural knowledge. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation, as well as paired t-tests to identify differences between pre- and post-game scores. Meanwhile, qualitative data were analysed in depth using thematic analysis techniques based on semi-structured interview transcripts and observation notes collected during the game sessions.

Quantitative Analysis

The questionnaire results revealed a significant increase in both oral communication skills and cultural knowledge among the participants after engaging in the board game activity. The paired t-test showed a p-value < 0.05 , indicating that the differences between pre- and post-scores were statistically significant. The average score for oral communication skills increased from 3.2 to 4.1, while the average score for cultural knowledge rose from 2.9 to 4.0. This proves that using board games as a learning medium positively impacted the students' communication skills and broadened their understanding of Malaysian cultures.

Observation

Throughout the observation, it was found that the students participated actively and demonstrated high engagement during the activity. They frequently switched between Malay and English, reflecting the game's effectiveness in fostering bilingual communication in daily interactions. The students exchanged ideas, voiced their opinions confidently, and gave constructive feedback to teammates. The game indirectly nurtured collaboration, which created a spirit of healthy competition and encouraged practical language use in an enjoyable setting. When answering trivia questions related to Malaysian cultures, the students showed their enthusiasm, eagerness to understand, and strong curiosity about each element presented.

Interviews

Based on the interview answers, most participants expressed that the game was not only enjoyable but also

provided meaningful learning values. Several students admitted that they had just learned about certain aspects of Malaysian cultures that they previously did not know. The game opened their minds to the nation's cultural diversity. Furthermore, they felt that their communication skills had improved, as the activity required active interaction, teamwork, and the ability to ask questions, explain information, and respond spontaneously in a mutually understood language. This approach clearly proved effective in enhancing cultural awareness among the students.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study align with Vygotsky's (1978) social learning theory, which emphasises that the most effective learning occurs through active social interaction. In this process, individuals are given opportunities to communicate, collaborate, and receive guidance from their peers or more knowledgeable individuals. In addition, the results also correspond with Piaget's (1973) constructivist theory, which asserts that learners build knowledge through personal experience, exploration, and interaction with their environment. In this context, the use of board games as a learning aid functions as an interactive and conducive medium to support both constructivist and social learning approaches. Board games not only stimulate the students' thinking but also encourage group learning, allowing them to exchange perspectives, solve problems collectively, and reflect on their experiences. Thus, this approach strengthens meaningful learning rooted in real-life experiences, which is in line with the views of Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1973).

The use of board games in cultural learning plays an important role in fostering the students' interest and enthusiasm in gaining deeper knowledge of Malaysia's cultural diversity. It also contributes to shaping national identity and self-awareness among the younger generation. Through board games specifically designed for cultural education, the students can learn more engagingly and interactively, which in turn improves memory retention and understanding of local values and heritage. Moreover, given Malaysia's multi-ethnic background, this approach has the potential to cultivate respect and appreciation for one another's cultures, contributing to greater unity and tolerance in a plural society.

Nevertheless, several challenges must be addressed to ensure the effective use of board games in learning sessions. Among them are time constraints, which may not be sufficient to fully achieve the learning objectives. Furthermore, the role of experienced facilitators is essential to ensure that the activity is conducted in a structured way and has a positive impact on the students. Careful planning and adequate resources are therefore necessary to guarantee the success of this learning method in the context of cultural education.

Improvement in Oral Communication Skills

Observation results showed that the students became more confident in speaking, interacting, and expressing opinions in a fun environment. The post-game questionnaire revealed an average increase of 28% in communication confidence.

Examples of observations:

1. Student A, who initially appeared passive, became more active in answering and challenging other participants after the second round.
2. Student B, who used to avoid speaking in front of the class, began volunteering to share her opinions during the game's discussion activities.
3. Student C showed improvement in interaction by encouraging teammates and suggesting strategies during the game.

Improvement in Cultural Knowledge

The trivia questions in the game covered topics such as traditional foods, customs, and Malaysian geography. 85% of the participants reported that they gained a better understanding of Malaysia's cultural diversity after playing.

Specific findings include:

1. 90% of the participants learned about the wedding custom of *bersanding* after the session.
2. 75% of the participants recognised the differences in traditional clothing across ethnic groups.

Promotion of Social Interaction

The game required the participants to collaborate on strategies, negotiations, and moral support. This significantly strengthened social relationships among the students from different courses and ethnic backgrounds.

Interview excerpts:

1. “I had never talked to friends from the other class, but today we worked together and had fun laughing.”
2. “At first, I felt awkward since I didn’t know them, but once we had to discuss strategies together, it felt like we’d known each other for a long time.”
3. “Usually, I only hang out with my classmates, but through this game, I met many new friends from other courses. It was fun to play in a different group.”

Implications of Observations

Board games are increasingly recognised as a highly interactive medium with great potential to support learning processes, especially through approaches that combine informal learning elements with game characteristics. This approach provides a more relaxed and enjoyable learning environment, reducing reliance on conventional teacher-centred methods. Through the hands-on experience offered by board games, the students can explore learning content more naturally, which enhances motivation and interest in a subject. Moreover, the less formal atmosphere helps to reduce the pressure which often present in classroom settings. The social interaction that occurs during play also helps to strengthen the students’ soft skills such as effective communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving abilities. Therefore, this approach not only contributes to cognitive development but also supports character building and holistic social competence.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this study demonstrates that Malaysia’s culture-based board games have a positive impact on the higher education students. The findings show that using games as a learning method can enhance various essential skills among the students, particularly oral communication skills. Through active participation in the game, the students trained themselves to communicate more confidently, clearly, and effectively, especially when interacting in groups. This activity also created a more relaxed and enjoyable learning environment, thereby reducing the stress and anxiety that are often associated with formal communication situations.

Beyond being a mere communication tool, the game also effectively enhanced the students’ knowledge and awareness of various aspects of local cultures. The cultural elements embedded in the game’s design provided indirect yet meaningful exposure to Malaysia’s history, customs, language, traditional food, performing arts, and the values of a multi-ethnic society. This approach made cultural learning easier to understand, more engaging, and closely related to the students’ experiences. In addition, the game bridged gaps between the students of different backgrounds—whether in terms of ethnicity, different religions, or fields of study—thus creating more harmonious and inclusive social interactions in higher education institutions.

From a theoretical perspective, this study supports the view that learning is a social and constructive process, consistent with social learning theory and constructivism. This means the students build new knowledge through interactive experiences with their peers and meaningful learning materials. The culture-based board game provided a platform for such active and reflective knowledge-building. From a practical perspective, the findings confirm that effective learning is not necessarily confined to classrooms or lecture-based approaches. Instead, interactive methods like games can stimulate the students’ interest, encourage critical thinking, and nurture holistic soft skills.

However, to gain a clearer picture of the long-term impact of this game, further studies are needed. Longitudinal research will allow scholars to examine changes in attitudes, understanding, and cultural identity formation among the students over time. Moreover, the effectiveness of the game in cultivating appreciation for Malaysia's cultural heritage can be assessed more systematically. This research can also be expanded to different contexts, including primary and secondary education, local communities, families, corporate sectors, and the tourism industry. Such an innovative approach has the potential to be adapted and applied not only nationally but also across the broader archipelago, in efforts to promote and preserve cultural heritage interactively and effectively.

If this approach is expanded and integrated with digital technology, such as mobile applications or online learning platforms, the cultural board game can attract more users and increase accessibility. Indirectly, this will elevate the prominence of Malaysian cultural heritage within a technology-savvy modern society. It is hoped that this innovative approach will catalyse strengthening national identity and will instill a deeper appreciation for local culture among today's and future generations.

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