LEARNING-TO-LEARN GRAMMAR MODULE: AN EVALUATION AMONG PRIMARY ESL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

One of the student aspirations in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 is bilingual proficiency where learners need to be operationally proficient in Bahasa Malaysia and English. Thus, the English Language syllabus is designed to equip learners with knowledge and language skills to face working environment encompassing these languages. However, not all learners are capable to be operationally proficient in English upon leaving school. This is due to the poor grammatical competence among the ESL learners. Therefore, the study reported in this article aims to evaluate the contents, suitability and user-friendliness of a learning-to-learn grammar module among primary ESL learners. The data of the study was collected by administering a set of questionnaire. 30 primary ESL learners with average English proficiency were chosen through purposive sampling. The findings of the study indicated that the learning-to-learn module has sufficient contents and is suitable and user-friendly for primary ESL learners. The module also enhanced grammar learning strategies among primary ESL learners. In addition, the study also illuminates a learner-centred learning which is parallel to the 21st century learning. The findings of the study also have important implications on ESL teachers and policy makers in implementing learning-to-learn module in ESL classrooms which will eventually enhance learners' language learning strategies.

Keywords: learning-to-learn, module, grammar, ESL learners

Introduction

English Language plays a pivotal role as an international language and also the medium of instruction and communication worldwide. In Malaysia, English is a compulsory language to be learned during primary and secondary schooling (Hiew, 2012). One of the student aspirations in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 is bilingual proficiency where learners need to be operationally proficient in Bahasa Malaysia and English. Thus, the English Language syllabus was designed to equip learners with knowledge and language skills to face working environment encompassing these languages.

In addition, grammar module has also been introduced to learners in the latest Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR) syllabus. The grammar module is included in the syllabus for primary school learners starting from Year 3 to Year 6. This provides clear evidence that grammar places a vital role in learning English. According to Hilmi and Dourado (2010), mastering listening and speaking as well as reading and writing is not sufficient for good English language proficiency among learners. They added that grammatical competence is equally essential in mastering English language. According to Lightbown and Spada (2009), grammar is an important element in language competency and learning. Thus, it is important for the learners to have a better understanding of grammar as lack of grammatical knowledge leads them towards failure in learning the language.

Despite numerous policies and programmes to enhance the understanding and learning of English, the results were not to the expected level. One of the evidences is through the results of the Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR). In 2015, UPSR results showed a decline for English Language (Better 2015 UPSR results, 38,344 candidates obtained 'A' for all subjects, 2015). This shows that primary school learners are still struggling to learn and acquire adequate proficiency in English.

The drawbacks in English Language proficiency is influenced by many factors. Some essential factors are grammatical competence as well language learning strategies (LLS). Language learning strategies (LLS) is the approach employed by learners to advance their language skills including grammar. According to Hakan et al. (2015), there is a shift in language learning and teaching. Great emphasis had been placed on the learners compared to teachers. This clearly shows that learning is accentuated over teaching. Thus, there is a need on developing and utilising learner centred approaches and tools such as the learning-to-learn modules among second language learners. However, limited studies have been carried out on learning-to-learn modules among primary ESL learners in Malaysia.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the use of a learning-to-learn module among primary ESL learners. Thus, this study is aimed to evaluate the contents, suitability and user-friendliness of a learning-to-learn grammar module among primary ESL learners. It is hoped that this study provides insights for the ESL learners on the learning-to-learn module as well as language learning strategies in order to enhance their language learning strategies as well as English Language proficiency.

Thus, this paper presents the problem statements underpinning this study as well as a brief literature review of the context of the study. In addition, the methodology of the study is also presented in this paper. This is followed by the findings, discussion, implications and recommendations. Finally, the conclusion of the study is presented towards the end of this paper.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In accordance with Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, the English Language syllabus was designed to mould learners to be operationally proficient in Bahasa Malaysia and English. However, not all learners are capable to be operationally proficient in English upon leaving the school.

According to Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2011), grammar had been considered as an important factor which discourages second language learners to learn English. This eventually creates a negative impact on learners communication skills both orally and also in written form. This clearly shows that grammar plays a pivotal role in English language learning as it contributes towards the enhancement of learners' proficiency level.

One of the problems faced by learners in grammar learning among second language learners is the use of teaching methods or approaches. According to Akram (2015), grammar rules are often taught in an isolated manner and adequate practices were not given to use grammar in various language skills. In addition to it, functional grammar is often neglected as more importance was placed on the teaching of textbooks.

Adding to this, second language learners are not having good grammatical knowledge because of the 'privileging examination' which is dominant across the education (Koo, 2008). High importance is placed on examinations but learners' autonomy and the application of the grammar knowledge in various contexts are being neglected. This eventually restricts learners' grammatical knowledge as the learners are only able to answer examination questions but incapable of applying grammar knowledge in specific context outside the classroom (Musa et al., 2012).

On the other hand, language learning strategies (LLS) have immense influence towards language learning. Hakan et al. (2015) had stated that learners apply various language learning strategies to process language tasks and input. Therefore, language learning strategies indicates how learners deal with a task during language learning process. Apart from that, the learners themselves also might be unaware about the learning strategies employed by them. Lack of exposure to diverse language learning strategies (LLS) restricts learners' capability of identifying and using suitable language learning strategies. According to Oxford (1990), previous researches indicated that learners employ LLS but most of them are not aware of the strategies they had used. Therefore, they would find difficulties in identifying and employing the most suitable and beneficial learning strategies to learn the language.

Although the Ministry of Education places a great importance on English language learning and introduced grammar module for the primary school learners in the latest KSSR English language syllabus, learning-to-learn module has never been developed for the primary school learners. The lack of learner-centred activities and approaches such as the learning-to-learn module is a huge drawback for second language learners especially in learning English grammar.

LITERATURE REVIEW
LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES (LLS)
Language learning strategies play important roles in learning a language. Since 1970's, the researches on language learning strategies have gained attention of many researchers. According to Chien (2010), many researchers tend to research on how learners process new information and the types of language learning strategies that they use to understand, learn, or remember the information while learning a second language.

Language learning strategies have been defined in various ways by various advocates of language learning strategies. According to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies are defined as specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations. On the other hand, Embi (2000) had stated that language learning strategies are the actions taken by the learners themselves to improve the process of language learning. He also added that language learning strategies are used by the learners to facilitate different language skills.

According to Lessard-Clouston (1997), language learning strategies can be characterised by several criteria. Firstly, language learning strategies are learner generated which means that the learners themselves take the steps or actions to learn the language. Secondly, language learning strategies improve language learning of the learners. Through this criterion, learners develop language competence and increase their understanding of the language. Next, language learning strategies can be visible as well as invisible. This includes learners' behaviours, steps, techniques, thoughts, and mental processes involved in learning the language. Finally, language learning strategies involve information and memory. The targets of language learning strategies are to gain knowledge and remember the information.

According to O'Malley and Chammot (1990), language learning strategies were divided into three categories which are meta-cognitive, cognitive and social affective. These three categories represent planning of the learning, thinking about the learning process, monitoring their own comprehension or production and finally evaluating the outcome of their own learning. Meanwhile, Oxford (1990) had categorised language learning strategies into two major aspects which are direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies are further divided into memory, cognitive and compensation strategies while indirect strategies are divided into meta-cognitive, affective and social strategies. According to Oxford (1990), direct strategies involve the target language and require the mental processing of the language. On the other hand, indirect strategies are strategies that support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language.

LEARNER STRATEGY INSTRUCTION

According to Cakici (2015), the major aim of learner strategy instruction (LSI) is to assist learners to have autonomy on their own language learning process. This is further supported by Cohen (1998) who had stated that strategy instruction or learner training is intended to encourage learners to self-direct their learning process especially in learning a language. Language Learning Strategies (LLS) can be taught through three different types of programme which are awareness training, one-time strategy training and long-term strategy training (Oxford, 1990). Awareness training is aimed to create awareness or familiarize learners with language learning strategies. Through this training, learners would be exposed with general ideas on LLS, the importance of LLS and how these strategies help them to complete or accomplish the language tasks. However, learners will not be exposed to application of the strategies as awareness training only aims to create awareness and interest among the learners to use LLS. Therefore, awareness training needs to be fun and motivating. This eventually encourages learners to learn more about LLS.

One-time strategy training involves learning and utilization of one or more LLS in real language tasks. Through this training, learners will be exposed with the importance or significance of the LLS learned as well as suitable ways and times to use it. Apart from that, learners are also exposed with ways or methods to assess the success of the LLS used by them. This type of strategy training is appropriate for learners who require special needs or intended to learn a specific strategy. Long-term strategy training involves learning and utilizing LLS through real language tasks. Learners are taught on the importance of LLS, appropriate ways and time to utilize the strategy and finally methods to monitor and assess their language achievement. This training or programme consumes more time and exposes more strategies compared to one-time strategy training. Thus, this programme is much more controlled, effective and updated.

ISSUES CONCERNING LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES TRAINING

Based on various researches carried out on LLS training, a few issues on the methods of LLS training have been argued. Those issues are on 'integrated or separate training' as well as 'explicit or implicit training'. Researchers raised the question whether LLS training should be carried out separately or integrated with other subjects that are being taught in the classroom. Researchers who view that LLS training should be carried out separately believe that LLS can be used and utilized in various contexts (Derry & Murphy, 1986). They also believe that the learners would learn LLS better if there is no interference or integration with the content of different subjects (Jones et al., 1987).

On the other hand, researchers who proposed the integration of LLS training with different subjects believe that the integration would increase the effectiveness of language learning. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), utilizing strategies in real language tasks ease the process of transferring the strategies to other subjects. However, there are also researchers who believe that the combination of both integrated and separate training is essential. Learners will be given input on LLS separately for a short term. Later, the LLS training are continued by utilizing it in various subjects (Derry & Murphy, 1986). Explicit training would expose learners to the importance and aim of the strategy being taught to them. On the other hand, implicit training depends on the effort of the learners to identify the strategies which have been utilized in the activities carried out and interact with the materials prepared. In implicit training, learners are not informed the reasons why the strategies have been chosen and utilised in the activities (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Early researches on LLS which used implicit training showed that only a few strategies have been transferred to different tasks (Brown, 1994). On the contrary, the strategies are able to be used continuously and transferable to different tasks when metacognitive strategies are added with the importance, aim and ways to apply the LLS which was explained explicitly (Brown, 1994). Indirect or implicit training is also being criticised for its inability to provide learner autonomy. Learners are incapable of being independent when they do not realise the strategy that they are using (Oxford, 1990). Adding to this, Embi (2000) stated that strategy training need to be explained to the learners in order to ensure that they realise and understand the types and ways to use the strategies learned.

MODELS OF LEARNER STRATEGY INSTRUCTION

Oxford (1990) proposed a model of LSI which is carried out step by step through five procedures. Firstly, in Oxford's model, the learners are required to be involved in an authentic language activity or task without any instructional cues given. Secondly, Oxford has suggested and demonstrated various helpful strategies which make sure that the learners are aware of the underlying principles or rationales of the strategy used. Besides that, the need for better self-direction and expected benefits are also mentioned in this model.

Besides that, Oxford's model also provides learners with ample time to work and practice the recent strategies on the language tasks apart from learning how those learning strategies are transferable to various other tasks. The fourth step is providing practice using the methods or techniques with latest tasks. This eventually allows learners to make selection of the strategy or strategies that they will employ in attempting and completing the learning task or tasks. The final step is to assist learners' understanding of the evaluation of their achievement of the strategy utilised and measure their progression as a self-directed and responsible language learners. According to Liu (2010), this model is very flexible as the steps can be altered or rearranged to suit diverse needs and intentions. However, Liu also added that this model is quite hard to be included in a normal classroom program.

O'Malley and Chamot have proposed the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) as early as 1986. Since then, the model had undergone various enlarging and redefining works. According to Liu (2010), this model was developed to enhance language skills of learners with restricted English language proficiency. The CALLA Model involves six steps which are preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation, expansion activities as well as assessment.

In the preparation stage, teachers indentify learner current strategies for common and well-known tasks such as recalling previous knowledge and many more. In the presentation stage, teachers will name, model and explain new learning strategies such as elaboration, note-taking, imagery, inference and selective attention strategies. Next, teachers will question the learner if they have employed those strategies and if yes how they did it.

In the third step, the learners will practice using the new strategies. In order to enhance learners' independent language strategy use, teacher reduces reminders or teacher's participation. This is done by encouraging learners to check their own language production, classifying concepts or develop spoken or written report on their own. Evaluation is the fourth step in CALLA Model. In this step, learners are required to evaluate their individual strategy use right after they have practiced it. Learners are also capable to determine the success of their learning. This is done by having a self-talk or summarization of the language learning either individually or with cooperation with others.

Expansion activities are the fifth step in the CALLA Model proposed by Chamot (2005). In this stage, learners shift the strategies to newer tasks, cluster the strategies by combining them, develop a collection of most preferred learning strategies and incorporate it into the current frameworks. The final phase in the CALLA Model is the assessment stage. Through this stage, teachers assess learners' strategy use and its impact on their performance. As a whole, Chamot's model incorporates strategy learning into academic and content-based activities (Liu, 2010). According to Chamot (2005), learners and teachers are able to revisit the prior instructional phases in the CALLA Model.

IMPORTANCE OF STRATEGY TRAINING PROGRAMME
Language learning is seen as a part of daily routine. Thus, LLS as well as strategy training programme is very essential in enhancing learners' second or foreign language learning.

Through the strategy training programme, learners would be able to identify their methods or techniques of language learning and share their experiences with the other learners. Besides, learner would also have the chance to encounter learning strategies which are rarely used but proven effective to certain learners. In addition, learners also can improve their learning strategies based on the comments provided by the teachers as well as the other learners. Thus, strategy training improves learners' language proficiency and enables them to become good language learners (O'Malley & Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990).

According to Oxford (1990), strategy training programme enables language learning to be more meaningful and helps learners to be more independent to use the learning strategies. On the other hand, strategy training programme do not only focuses on the techniques of teaching LLS but also includes learners' emotions and motivates them to be more responsible for their language learning (Oxford, 1990). As a whole, strategy training programme is essential while learning a language especially a second or foreign language.

METHODOLOGY
This study was aimed to evaluate the contents, suitability and user-friendliness of a learning-to-learn grammar module among primary ESL learners. The research question underpinning the findings and discussion presented in this study is: What are the learners' opinion concerning the contents, suitability and user-friendliness of the module?

Quantitative approach was adopted in this study to obtain the results for the research question. A questionnaire was used to obtain the results from the learners after they have utilised the learning-to-learn grammar module. Questionnaire was selected as the data collection tool as it is suitable with young learners to provide their opinion. The questionnaire is divided into three parts evaluating on the contents, usability as well as user-friendliness of the learning-to-learn module among primary ESL learners. The questionnaire is based on 4 point Likert scales where the learners need to choose between strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree on the items listed.

The respondents of this study are 30 primary school learners. The respondents consist of 13 males and 17 females from Sekolah Kebangsaan Taman Tun Dr. Ismail (2), Kuala Lumpur. All the respondents are 11 years old and they learn English as their second language. The respondents of this study were selected through a purposive sampling based on their English Language proficiency. All the respondents have an average English Language proficiency based on their examination results. The data collected from this study was interpreted into charts using frequency and percentage. The findings were analysed and discussed based on related theories and past studies.

FINDINGS
In terms of the contents of the module, 21 respondents strongly agreed that the content of the module are well developed *(item 1)* which represents 70.0 % of the total respondents. Another 9 respondents agreed that the contents are well developed which represents 30.0% of the respondents. None of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed to *item 1* regarding the organisation of the contents.

On the other hand, 27 out 30 respondents strongly agreed that the contents of the module cover strategies that are related to grammar *(item 2)*. This represents 90.0% of the total respondents. Another 10.0% of the respondents agreed to *item 2* and none of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the contents cover strategies that are related to grammar.

The last item in terms of the contents is the contents are easily understood *(item 3)*. As for this item, 22 out of 30 respondents strongly agreed meanwhile another 6 respondents agreed to it. This shows that 76.7% of the respondents strongly agreed and another 20.0% of the respondents agreed that the contents are easily understood. However, there was 1 respondent (3.3 %) who

disagreed that the contents were easily understood and none of the respondents strongly disagreed that the contents of the module are easily understood. Learners' evaluation on the contents of the module is shown below.

**Chart 1: Learners' Evaluation on the Contents of the Module**
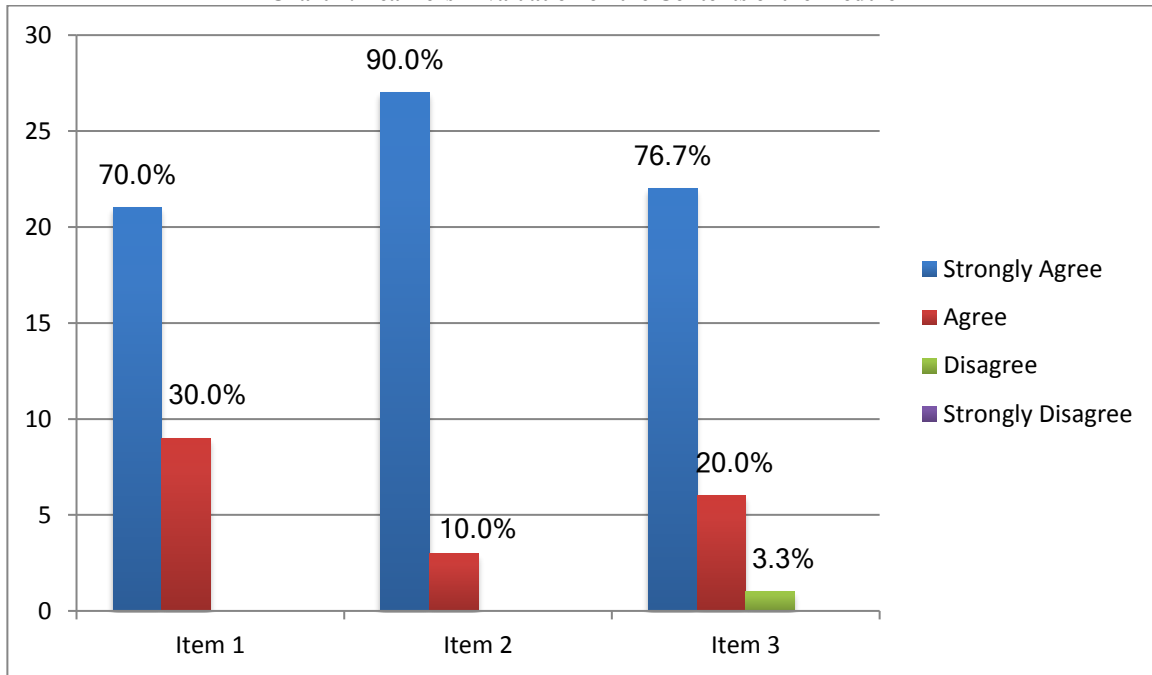
The second aspect in the learners' evaluation questionnaire was the usability of the module. 19 out of 30 respondents strongly agreed that the module help learners to master the strategies *(item 4)*. This accumulates 63.3% of the total respondents of this study. Adding to this, another 9 respondents (30.0%) agreed that the module help learners to master the strategies. Meanwhile, 2 respondents which represent 6.7% of the total respondents disagreed and none of the respondents strongly disagreed that the module helps learners to master the strategies.

Apart from that, 24 respondents (80.0%) strongly agreed and another 6 respondents (20.0%) agreed that the module introduces the strategies in a meaningful way *(item 5)*. None of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the module introduces strategies in a meaningful way.

Lastly, 22 respondents strongly agreed and another 8 respondents agreed that the module would help second language learners to master English *(item 6)*. This represents 73.3% and 26.7% of the total respondents respectively. However, none of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the module would help second language learners to master English. Learners' evaluation on the usability of the module is shown below.

**Chart 2: Learners' Evaluation on the Usability of the Module**
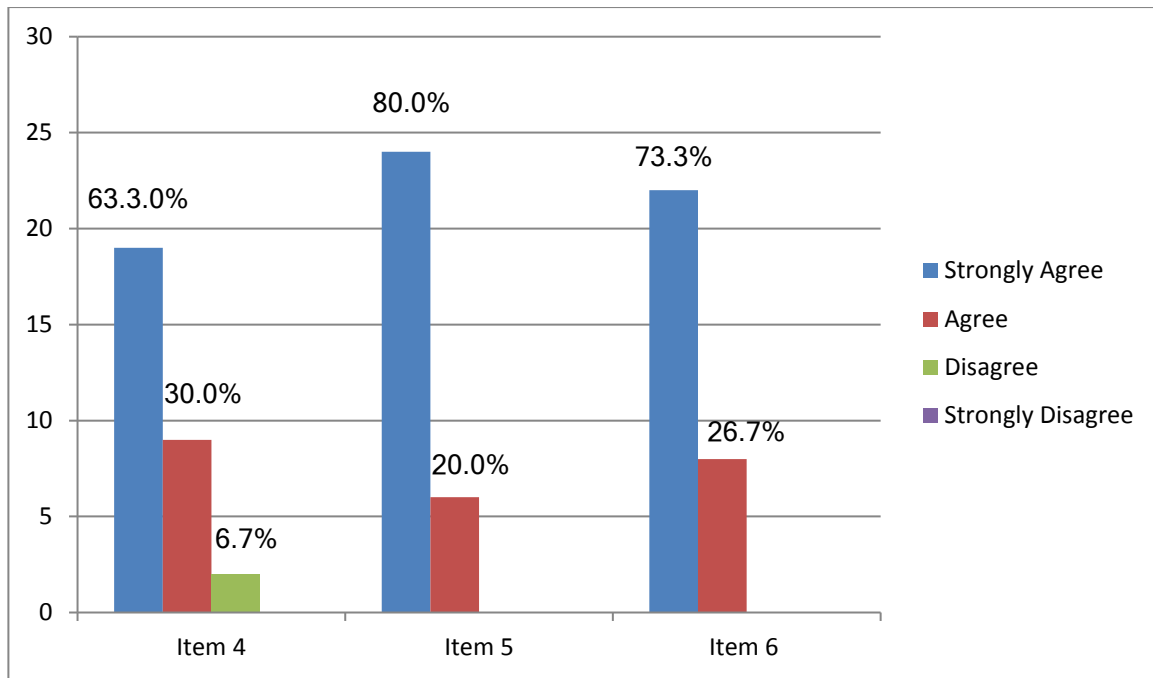
The third and last aspect in the evaluation was the user-friendliness of the module. 21 respondents strongly agreed and another 8 respondents agreed that the module was user-friendly *(item 7)*. This accumulates 70.0% and 26.7% of the total number of the respondents in this study respectively. Only 1 respondent (3.3%) disagreed that the module was user-friendly and none of the respondents strongly disagreed that the module was user-friendly.

Furthermore, 18 respondents strongly agreed that the layout of the module was well-designed *(item 8)*. Adding to this, another 10 respondents agreed that the layout was well-designed. Thus, 60.0% of the respondents strongly agreed and 33.3% of the respondents agreed that the layout of the module was well-developed. Nevertheless, 2 of the respondents, representing 6.7% of the total respondents disagreed that the layout of the module was well-developed. Similar to previous items, none of the respondents strongly disagreed that the layout of the module was well-developed.

The final item in terms of the user-friendliness of the module was the suitability of the module for second language learners *(item 9)*. 23 respondents strongly agreed and another 7 respondents agreed that the module was suitable for second language learners representing 76.7% and 23.3% from the total respondents respectively. Last but not least, none of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the module was suitable for second language learners. Learners' evaluation on the user-friendliness of the module is shown below.

Chart 3: Learners' Evaluation on the User-friendliness of the Module
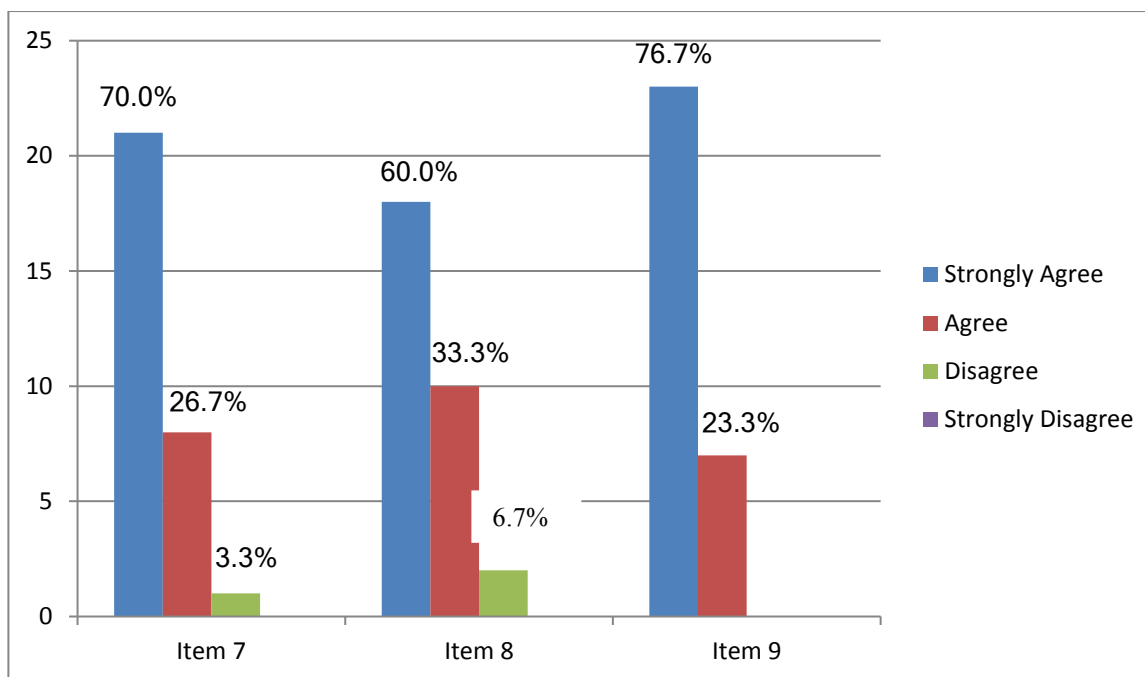
DISCUSSION

The evaluation of the learning-to-learn grammar module was done based on three aspects which are contents, usability as well as user-friendliness. As for the contents of the module, most of the learners strongly agree or agree that the contents of the module was well organised and cover strategies related to grammar. On the other hand, majority of the learners responded that the contents of the module were easy to be understood. This clearly shows that the learning-to-learn grammar module is convenient for ESL learners to learn grammar as there is no interference with other subjects. This is further supported by Jones et al., (1987) where they have identified that learners would learn language learning strategies better if there is no interference or integration with the content of different subjects.

In terms of the usability of the module, more than half of the learners responded that they strongly agree or agree that the module helps them to master the strategies. Apart from that, majority of the learners had responded that the module had introduced strategies to learn grammar in a meaningful way. This clearly shows that the learners are interested in the learning-to-learn module compared to traditional teaching. On the other hand, they also identified the strategies to be more meaningful as they have the autonomy to explore and learn the strategies on their own. This is parallel to Oxford (1990), who has stated that strategy training programme enable language learning to be more meaningful and enable learners to be more independent to use the learning strategies. In addition, for the last item in terms of the usability of the module, once again most of the learners strongly agree or agree that the module helps second language learners to learn English. This is another important response from the learners which indicated that learner training such as learning-to-learn module is effective among second language learners as it promotes learner autonomy. This is supported by Cakici (2015), who had identified that learner training assists learners to have autonomy on their own language process.

Lastly, is the user-friendliness of the module. In terms of user-friendliness, many learners identified that the module was user friendly to them. This clearly shows that learning-to-learn module can be developed and used by learners with various needs. As for the layout of the module, more than half of the respondents identified that the layout of the module was well developed. Adding to this, majority of the learners responded that the module is suitable for second language learners, especially primary ESL learners. This is because learners' needs and abilities have been taken into consideration before developing the module. This is parallel to Liu (2010), who stated that a module can be developed to suit diverse needs and intentions.

As a whole the learning-to-learn module shows a positive response from the learners. This indicates that learning-to-learn module can be developed and utilised to learn grammar strategies among primary ESL learners. These findings were validated by the data collected through the questionnaire. Hence, this answers the research question of this study on learners' opinion concerning the contents, usability and user-friendliness of the learning-to-learn grammar module.

IMPLICATIONS

From the findings of the study, a few implications have been identified. First and foremost, the use of a learning-to-learn module to learn grammar strategies encourages learner-centred learning. This eventually encourages learners to actively participate in their own learning without being restricted to traditional ways of learning. A learning-to-learn module gives autonomy to the learners to explore the module and strategies, utilise it as well as to do a self-assessment on their grammar learning. Self-assessment or reflecting on their own learning is one of the important aspects being highlighted in the 21st century learning process.

Besides that, a learning-to-learn module also increases learners' exposure to various language learning strategies. This is due to the various strategies which are utilised in the module itself. According to Yunus et al. (2013), learning strategies are vital in second language acquisition. Thus, learning-to-learn modules enhance grammatical competence as well English proficiency as the learners are able to utilise the learning strategies from the grammar module to various language skills.

On the other hand, the finding also identified that learning-to-learn grammar module has sufficient contents, suitable and user-friendly among primary ESL learners. Thus, ESL teachers should be aware of language learning strategies especially grammar learning strategies in order to enhance learners' grammatical competence. In addition, policy makers need to be aware that learning strategies play pivotal roles in enhancing second language learning and include language learning strategies in the syllabus.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the study, there are a few recommendations particularly for ESL teachers, policy makers and future researchers.

Firstly, it is recommended that teachers should equip themselves with the knowledge of learner training especially in developing and utilising learning-to-learn modules among primary ESL learners. According to Nazri, et al. (2016), language instructors should employ the contexts of learning strategies to help learners to utilize various strategies. In order to equip themselves with the knowledge of learner training, teachers should be involved in workshops or projects that involve module development as well as language learning strategies. Thus, Ministry of Education should play the role to plan and provide workshops at the state and district levels for the teachers who will then implement the knowledge of learner training and language learning strategies in their respective schools

On the other hand, policy makers also need to introduce language learning strategies as a part of the syllabus and include it in textbooks. Through this, learners will be exposed to various language learning strategies and utilise the strategies that suits them the most. This eventually enhances second language learning.

As for the future researchers, studies on learning-to-learn module can be conducted in various language skills. These include listening, speaking, reading, writing as well as vocabulary. Apart from that, researches on the effectiveness of a learning-to-learn module can also be carried out among secondary school learners.

CONCLUSION

The study identified positive responses from most of the respondents for all the three aspects evaluated which were the contents, usability, and user-friendliness of the learning-to-learn grammar module. Thus, it can be concluded that learning-to-learn module especially in learning grammar strategies can be developed to cater the needs of primary ESL learner as it is sufficient in contents and is suitable and user-friendly for young learners. This clearly shows that the learners are capable to be involved in learner centred learning with the use of learning-to-learn module especially in language learning strategies parallel to the 21st century learning.

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