Approaches for Learning Collective Nouns Proficiency: A Case of a South African Primary School

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Abstract

Proficiency in the use of collective nouns is indispensable in English because it enhances effective communication. However, using collective nouns appropriately poses challenges to many. The present study investigated approaches for learning collective noun proficiency at a South African primary school. A quantitative research method was espoused as it establishes cause-and-effect relationships and determines a large population's opinions. Data was collected using a questionnaire because it gathers information from large data sets within a short period. A probability sampling technique was employed to randomly select twenty-five Grade 7 English First Additional Language learners because it gives every learner an equal chance of participation in the study. A Statistical Package for Social Sciences Version 28 was employed to enhance power analysis procedures that create a graphical representation of results. Preliminary investigation indicated that the participants were incompetent in understanding the use of collective nouns. Nonetheless, after using the *memory* and *Scavenger hunt game approaches*, learners performed outstandingly. The current study has significant implications for future collective noun proficiency for both learners and teachers. Future researchers can conduct further research on approaches for enhancing collective noun usage. The paper endorses the frequent use of the identified approaches to enhance English proficiency.

Keywords: *Collective nouns; Memory game; proficiency; Scavenger hunt game*

Introduction

Competence in the use of English is a fundamental obligation in most parts of the world as it is a *lingua franca*. Without appropriate knowledge of English grammar rules in such aspects as nouns and their components, effective communication is distorted (Nkereuwem et al., 2023). In South Africa, Mohohlwane et al. (2023) claim that English is used as a language of teaching and learning (LoLT). It is designed as English First Additional Language (FAL) in a situation where it is not used as a Home Language (Shandu-Omukunyi, 2023). South African children start using English FAL comprehensively in the Grade 4 (Intermediate Phase). According to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), by the time learners progress to Grade 7 (Senior Phase), they must be reasonably proficient in both interpersonal and cognitive academic skills (Zano, 2023). However, most learners still cannot communicate well in their English FAL at this stage.

Although several types of nouns including common nouns, proper nouns, concrete and abstract nouns, and countable and uncountable nouns exist in English, the focus of the present study was on the use of collective nouns (Kleineberg, 2023). Collective nouns are not like other nouns in that they take as pronouns co-referents either singular *it* and relative *which* or plural *they* and relative *who* without change of number in the noun (Albrespit, 2023). Collective nouns refer to the intrinsic meaning of a collection, a group of animate or inanimate entities including *assembly, band, bunch, and bundle. However, s*ometimes, they bear no relation to an explicit 'group' meaning as in *a pod* (*of whales, dolphins*), *a pride, a leash, a watch* (*of nightingales*), *a bed* (*of oysters*), *a flare* (*of symptoms*) as viewed by Albrespit (2023). Collective nouns are commonly used for concise, brief, and meaningful writing or everyday speech. Conversely, most second language (L2) learners cannot use collective nouns (Kamal & Li, 2023) appropriately because they are not used very often in English. Wege et al. (2023) claim that learners make peculiar mistakes when counting units regarding sets of multiple items. In addition, they often count disconnected items rather than the number of sets due to a lack of understanding of unit constituents (Tran & Bui, 2021) when constructing English sentences. Thus, learning of collective nouns is a daunting task, especially, for learners whose native language is different from English.

Collective nouns demand the user's competence to understand what is being deduced since not all of them can be used in every context, recognised cognitively as semantically different by different users, and depend on the dialect the speaker prefers (Kamal & Li, 2023). Collective nouns are used with singular verbs or sometimes with plural verbs (Karam et al., 2020) in present tenses. In this sense, when collective nouns are used as the subject of sentences and in a single form, representing a single group action, singular verbs are incorporated, for example, 'The troop is advancing towards the river'.

However, if all or some members of a collective group perform actions as individuals, plural verbs are utilised because they are doing something

independently of the other members; the group is not acting together as a single entity. The word 'together' qualifies collective subject nouns into a single entity. Karam et al. (2020) claim collective nouns take plural verbs if they perform the actions, as in 'The team play well' and 'The swarm of bees attack the hunter'. The singularity and plurality of the nouns are matched in the verb overriding the noun's actual forms as singular or plural. In this sense, the matching of collective nouns and verbs poses challenges to English FAL learners (Hoang, 2021) in teaching and learning.

Numerous studies have consistently been conducted on the use of collective nouns. However, little convincing information has been obtained regarding approaches for learning collective noun proficiency. Karam et al. (2020) analysed the challenges faced in the use of collective nouns by 136 undergraduate students studying in the 5th, 6th, and 7th semesters of the Department of English at Hazara University, Mansehra, and found that they experienced difficulties. Albrespit (2023) studied the use of "collective" nouns in English to account for the creation of new expressions in three sections: the distinction between "classifiers" and "quantifiers", the difference between a "strict" quantifier (*a pound of*) and an "approximative" one (*a drove of pigs*), and nouns that refer to groups of animals (Albrespit, 2023:1). The study revealed that the pattern is well used in English although not fully sufficient.

Kamal, et al 2023 conducted a study on the use of a 'scavenger hunt' by pupils aged 12 to improve the learning of collective nouns for people, animals, and objects. To learn in English foreign language primary classrooms in Malaysia using Kemmis and McTaggart's model of action research. The study found that scavenger hunt enhances collective nouns although some participants were incompetent. Patson et al. (2023) investigated the use of collective nouns among Germanic learners focusing on singular collective nouns (e.g., *committee, team*) to introduce a single group into the discourse to test whether they are conceptually plural. The results of these experiments suggest that collective noun phrases are instantiated as conceptually plural in comprehenders' minds. Similarly, Wege et al. (2023) conducted an experiment with four- and five-year-old children (*N* = 43) regarding the use of collective nouns. The study established that most learners could not count sets as units even though they could give names to the sets, collect items for the sets, and form one-to-one communications with those sets, the majority of them cannot count sets as units.

Theoretical Framework
The paper was underpinned by Piantadosi's (2023) modern language models which undermine the theories propounded by general linguistics. They have

subverted and circumvented the frequently relied-upon theories using gradient computation and memorised constructions. Chomsky's linguistics approach is experiencing a remarkable downfall as it is problematic and undermined by computational advances (Piantadosi, 2023). Modern language models have huge datasets of internet-based text to predict linguistic materials, produce 90% output in Winograd-style questions (Vid et al., 2020), use language in a manner that is remarkably human (Mahowald et al., 2023), and have good desiderata of scientific theories, precise and formal, integrated into other fields' ideas, and empirically tested in the theory of grammar.

Although modern language models are still developing (Warstadt et al., 2023), they have opened new avenues for exploring the nature of the language and its relationship with machine learning and artificial intelligence, the interplay of structure and statistics, generating coherent language topics, and the plausibility of linguistic beliefs. Also, the modern language models are unable to separate word class categories from semantic representations, or even predict any findings at the level of analysis other than the literal word, cannot offer higher performance than other approaches in linguistics, they are indispensable in the current teaching and learning.

Literature Review

Collective nouns are used both syntactically and semantically (Albrespit, 2023). Indefinite articles such as 'a', 'an', or 'the' are followed by a noun and an 'of' preposition to form plural prepositional phrases or noun phrases serving as head nouns grammatically. They can be pre-modified with adjectives as a noun, for example, a 'rhumba of rattlesnake' and a 'crash of rhinoceros'. Collective nouns cannot always be utilised in plural forms as the other common nouns although their semantical plurality is displayed. They can be conjugated with either a single or plural verb or used separately when serving as an anaphoric reference to the antecedent to which they refer.

The benefit of using the 'scavenger hunt' game approach in lessons is indispensable and aligned with the theory of constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978 quoted in Umar, 2023) where pupils have more enjoyment of the lesson. Delacruz and Maddox (2022) assert that a scavenger hunt allows pupils to be less pressured to learn. This game motivates the pupils to continue learning since their interest is captured and retained. It supports the theory of constructivist learning where social and grouping activities enhance learning. In this situation, learners become motivated to work with a group of individual members.

A game is indispensable in learning as it enables learners to recognise the collective nouns for groups of people, animals, and objects Kamal et al. (2023). It is interesting and can be implemented in lessons. In addition, a game creates a fun and meaningful learning environment (Febriyanti, 2023). Also, playing a game enables learners to understand a particular grammatical element (Stewart &

Smiths, 2023) in teaching and learning. Based on this insight, games as forms of "cooperative learning are student-centered learning with the hope that students can find it easier to intuitively learn and understand concepts from material or a problem by discussing it with their group mates" (Muhammad et al., 2023: 81). Hence, the next game approaches are useful to enhance the learning of collective nouns to Grade 7 learners:

Memory Game and Scavenger Hunt Game Approaches

Memory game and Scavenger hunt game approaches are reliable for studying the use of collective nouns using games grounded by Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism theory (cited in Umar, 2023) based on promoting learners' social interactions and performance in the classroom environment. This theory was applicable in this study because "its application in cooperative learning in primary schools has significant importance in the educational context' (Muhammad et al., 2023: 81) that can benefit English FAL learners.

1. Memory Game

A memory game activity can be played by a partner or groups of learners (Mulrooney, 2023). The players use cards and score sheets to record the number of cards obtained by each learner or group. The cards are placed face-down in the middle of the playing area. The first player flips over two cards. If they match, the player keeps the cards. However, if they do not match, the player turns them both face down in their original location. The game continues until there are no more cards in the playing area. After learners have played to the satisfaction of their teachers, the scribes compare the quantity (Anggra, et al., 2023) of the cards obtained by individual players. The player who obtains more cards than the others, wins the game.

2. Scavenger hunt game

The scavenger hunt game is "an engaging activity that can be implemented in class while teaching grammar" (Delacruz & Maddox, 2022:10) to enhance learner's competence in the English language. Learners work in small teams to complete specific tasks (Kamal et al., 2023).   A scribe is put in place to record the scores obtained in the process of playing. This game starts with a place or series of locations in which players search for hidden objects (Rosyidi, 2023). The players hunt and find, ask for, or photograph. Before the selected players start playing, teachers prepare a list that defines specific items, that the participants seek to gather or complete all items on the list, usually without purchasing them.

The steps to follow in the Scavenger hunt game are: 1) Hide objects (optional) or direct participants to find items that are already in place. 2) Make and distribute

a list of items for participants to find. 3) Determine whether the participants need to bring the items back or just photograph them or check them from their list. 3) Define the search perimeter. 4) Tell the players how much time they must find the objects, 5) The scribe compares the scores and 6) Proclaim the player who has the most cards a winner.

The objective of this study was to identify suitable approaches for learning collective nouns proficiency by Grade 7 English FAL learners at a South African primary school, to describe and evaluate the identified approaches. The study attempted to answer the following research questions 1) What are the approaches for learning collective nouns proficiency by Grade 7 English FAL learners at a South African primary school? and 2) How can the approaches for learning collective noun proficiency by Grade 7 English FAL learners at a South African primary school be described and evaluated?

After having reflected on the introduction of the present study comprising theoretical framework, literature reviews, objectives, and research questions, the research dealt with the following methodology section to indicate how the study was going to be executed.

Method

The present study adopted a quantitive research approach to measure the learning outcomes that address the difficulties faced by both the teacher and learners (Fischer, et al. 2023). Additionally, the researcher aimed to establish cause-and-effect relationships, test hypotheses, and determine the opinions, attitudes, and practices of a large population by using numbers and percentages (Jamieson et al. 2023) in a study.

Research Design

A descriptive research design was employed to obtain a comprehensive and meaningful understanding of the collective nouns (Hwang, 2023). Furthermore, the researcher wanted to identify **major and minor tasks of the study and make the study effective by providing details at every step undertaken in the research.**

Participants

A probability sampling technique was employed to randomly select twenty-five Grade 7 English FAL learners because it is the most reliable and appropriate technique for making extrapolations that can be comprehensive to a predetermined population (Sharma, 2023). Moreover, it gives every learner an equal chance of participation in the study. Inclusion and exclusion techniques were based on doing Grade 7 for the first time because the researcher hoped to achieve valid and credible results from those participants.

Data Collection

A closed-ended questionnaire was utilised to collect data because it is a convenient way of collecting information from many people within a short time to ensure interpretable and generalisable results. In addition, researchers apply closed-ended questionnaires to force "participants to express even complex impressions or attitudes through a set of predetermined answers" (Hansen et al., 2023: 1). In this study, the questionnaire was placed on a graph and a table from which the participants selected their answers. In a graph, a single question was used as the collective noun 'choir' believed to be representative of all the collective noun subjects. Contrastively, five questions were provided in the table since they represented collective noun phrases that could confuse learners due to the presence of the 'A' article.

Data Analysis

In this study, quantitative data were grouped, quantified, and organised into comprehensive and meaningful findings according to the participant's responses using statistics and percentages (Han et al., 2023). A graph and a table were used to place and compare the study variables. Data were interpreted using a Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28 due to its enhancement to the power analysis procedures that create a graphical representation of results. Furthermore, SPSS is suitable for planning, designing, and conducting quantitative research.

Findings and discussions

The present study attempted to answer the following questions 'What are the approaches for learning collective nouns proficiency by Grade 7 English FAL learners at a South African primary school?' and 'How can the approaches for learning collective nouns proficiency by Grade 7 English FAL learners at a South African primary school be described and evaluated?' In this study, the obtained results were placed in the form of numbers and percentages in a graph and a table. The following graph presents the findings from questionnaires answered by Grade 7 learners about the appropriate approach, namely, the 'memory game' for learning collective nouns proficiency at a South African primary school.
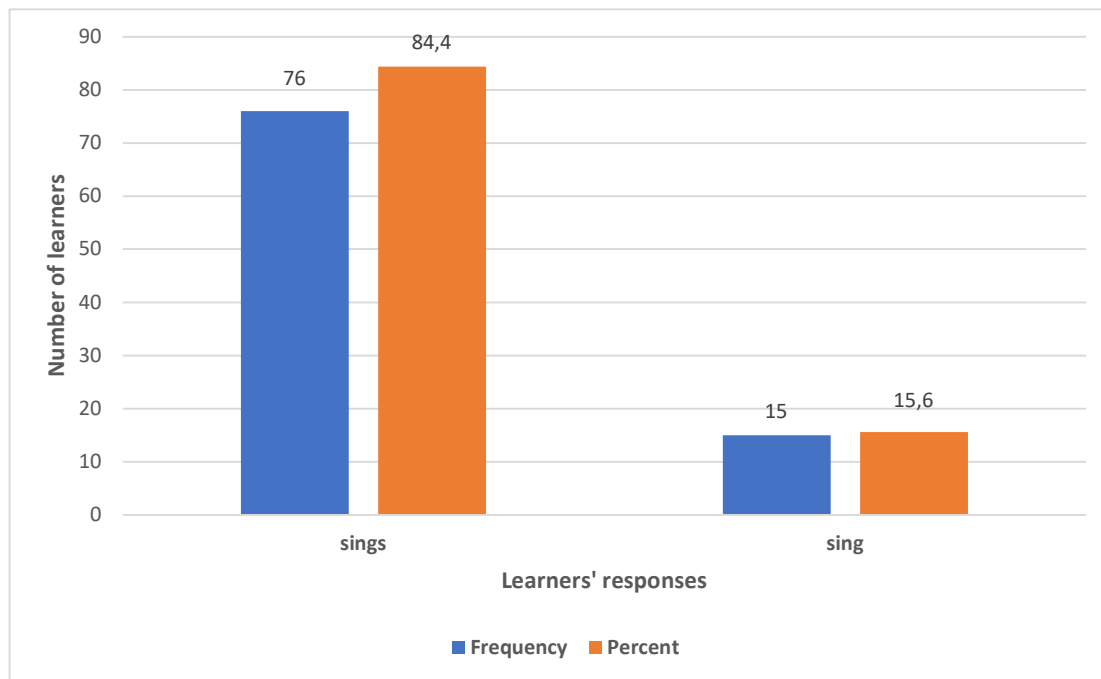
Figure 1. Use of Collective Noun

Figure 1 shows that 76 participants amounting to 84,4% were competent in understanding collective noun usage. The participants knew that although the noun 'choir' can take a plural verb when acting individually, it requires a singular verb in this instance because it entails a group comprising several individual members. The participants selected a singular verb 'sings' rather than 'sing'. The finding is in line with Kamal et al. (2023) that the scavenger hunt game motivates and improves the learning of collective nouns. However, this is in contrast with Karam et al. (2020) who suggest that L2 learners experience extreme difficulties in the use of collective nouns.

Nevertheless, the participants knew that the noun 'choir' belonged to a grammatical subclass with distinguishing characteristics occurring in the singular subjects. The participants were familiar with the rules regarding the agreement between collective nouns and verbs. This rule states that the plural verbs must be matched with the plural nouns while singular verbs are paired with the singular ones. Also, the inflection of the suffix '-s' to the verb 'sings' guarantees singularity than the plurality of the verb. The finding supports Patson et al. (2023) who suggest that collective noun phrases are instantiated as conceptually plural and difficult in comprehenders' minds.

As the inclusion of the adverb 'always' led to the two streams of competent responses, namely those regarding the noun 'choir' as singular and opted for the verb 'sings' and those who chose 'sing', only 15 participants amounting to 15.6% were incompetent in the matching of the collective nouns and verbs. They did not

know that when a subject is in the plural form, the verb must also be plural to guarantee the semantic and grammatical acceptability of the collective nouns and the verb match. The finding is congruent with Kamal's et al. (2023) that the scavenger hunt game motivates and improves the learning of collective nouns.

The following table was used to assess the suitability of the 'scavenger hunt approach' in learning the collective noun phrases:

Table 1. Use of Collective Noun Phrase

Questions	Participants' rejoinders	
	Correct responses	Incorrect responses
1) The bike of bees (*stay*/stays) motionless.	88.8%	11,2%
2) A nest of rumours (sound/*sounds*) loudly.	94.2%	5.8%
3) The shiver of sharks (*have*/ has) a leader.	79.8%	20.2%
4) The army of caterpillars (*loves*/love) grasses.	81.%	19%
5) A congregation of elephants (*are*/is) safe.	90.%	10%

Table 1 shows that most (88.8%) participants were competent in using collective noun phrases appropriately. Question 1 'The bike of bees' and the verb 'stay' makes it clear that the participants knew how best the collective noun phrase can be applied in the use of the English language. The participants knew that this phrase was plural since there was no action taking place. They selected the plural verb 'stay' instead of 'stays'. They might have been aware that the verb 'stays' was in singular form regardless of the presence of the suffix '-s'. This finding is congruent with Karam's et al. (2020) claim that if a collective noun does not have an action, a plural verb is a requirement.

Alternatively, it is not in line with Tran and Bui's (2021) suggestion that L2 learners face difficulties when matching the collective noun phrases with verbs in the simple present tense. On the other hand, the minority (11.2%) of the participants were incompetent because they were not aware of the wrong pairing between the collective noun phrase and verb. This finding differs from Albrespit's (2023) suggestion that collective noun pattern is appropriately used in English although not fully sufficient.

Concerning question 2, the majority (94.2%) of the participants had a remarkable performance than in any of the questions in this table regarding the

agreement between the collective noun phrase 'a nest of rumours' and the verb 'sounds'. They selected the singular verb 'sounds' rather than the plural verb 'sound' because the former entailed an action in this question and called for the singular verb. The finding is congruent with Kamal's et al. (2023) suggestion that a scavenger hunt game motivates and improves the learning of collective nouns. Conversely, it is incongruent with Pabro-Maquidato's (2021) suggestion that learners commit errors in the matching of the collective noun phrases and verbs.

On the contrary, only 5.8% of the participants were incompetent as they never realised that the plural verb 'sound' was not a requirement. The presence of the suffix '-s' to the plural noun 'rumours' might have confused the participants to select the plural verb 'sound' instead of the singular 'sounds. The participants confused the plural rule for a singular one. This rule states that the presence of an '-s' to the nouns guarantees plurality of both noun subjects and verbs. On the other hand, should they have considered the article 'A' fronting this collective noun phrase: the 'a nest of rumours', they would have selected the singular verb 'sounds'. The finding differs from Kamal's et al. (2023) suggestion that a scavenger hunt game motivates and improves the learning of collective nouns.

Question 3 shows that most (79.8%) participants were competent in the agreement between the collective noun phrase 'shiver of sharks' and the verb 'have'. They knew that the verb 'have' is plural while 'has' is singular. They knew the collective noun phrase 'shiver of sharks', for example, is in a plural form and requires the plural verb 'have'. The participants knew that there was no single nor group action involved and that they were not viewed nor described as a collective group. In this situation, they selected 'have' rather than 'has' for an answer. Also, they knew that the plural verb 'have shown possession and has nothing to do with the present perfect tense in this context. This finding supports Albrespit's (2023) suggestion that collective noun pattern is appropriately used in English although not fully sufficient.

However, the minority (20.2%) of the participants were incompetent regarding the agreement between the collective noun phrases and the verbs. They selected a singular verb 'has' instead of the plural 'have'. The participants might have been confused by the subject-verb agreement rule and thought that because there was only one 'shiver' in this sentence, the correct answer could have been 'has' instead of 'have'. This rule states that singular verbs must be matched with singular subjects while plural verbs are matched with plural subjects. Also, the proximity rule' could have brought another confusion to the participants who might have thought that because there was only one 'leader', the singular verb 'has' might have been the correct answer. The finding is congruent with Kamal's et al. (2023) that the scavenger hunt game motivates and improves the learning of collective nouns.

As seen from question 4, the majority (81%) of the participants had enough proficiency in the use of the collective noun and the verbs in the question 'The army of caterpillars (loves/love) grasses. They knew that although there was only one

army who performed an act of loving grasses, the proper answer should be the plural verb 'love'. This discovery is in contrast with Karam et al. (2020) who suggest that L2 learners experience extreme difficulties in the use of collective nouns. Furthermore, the finding is incongruent with Pabro-Maquidato's (2021) suggestion that L2 learners are negatively affected by the agreement between the collective noun phrases and the verbs.

Nevertheless, a minority (19%) of the participants were incompetent in the use of collective noun phrases and verbs. They might have been confused by the rule regarding plural noun formation. This rule states that the suffix '-s', '-ies', or zero-marking must be used in transforming singular to plural nouns. The participants might have thought that the collective noun phrase 'an army of caterpillars' was singular and selected a singular verb 'loves' instead of the plural verb 'love'. The finding supports Karam's et al. (2020) suggestion that L2 learners experience extreme difficulties in the use of collective nouns. Nevertheless, the finding is in contrast with Kamal et al. (2023) who suggest that the scavenger hunt game motivates and improves the learning of collective nouns.

Relating to question 5, the majority (90%) of the participants performed extra-ordinarily in the matching of the collective noun phrase 'A congregation of elephants' and the singular verb 'are'. They knew that this phrase was plural and called for a plural verb since there was no action involved. Therefore, they selected the verb 'are' instead of 'is. The finding is incongruent with Patson et al. (2023) who suggest that collective noun phrases are instantiated as conceptually plural and difficult in comprehenders' minds.

Notwithstanding, only (19%) of the participants were incompetent since they were troubled by the subject-verb agreement between the collective noun phrase and the singular verb. They did not know that the collective noun phrase was in the plural form and called for the plural verb 'are'. They might have been confused by the rule regarding the use of the article 'A'. This rule states that the articles: 'A' and 'An' before the subject nouns indicate the singularity of the nouns. The participants selected the singular verb instead of the plural verb 'are'. The finding is congruent with Pabro-Maquidato's (2021) suggestion that learners commit errors in the matching of the collective noun phrases and verbs. Therefore, combining memory and scavenger hunt games, in the present study, promotes the learning of collective nouns (Alajaji & Alshwiah, 2021) by Grade 7 English FAL learners.

Conclusion

As the objective of this research paper was to identify suitable approaches for learning collective noun proficiency by Grade 7 learners at a South African primary school, learners' the researcher conducted a study on learning approaches for

collective noun proficiency at a primary school. The researcher tested the appropriateness of using 'memory game' and 'scavenger hunt game approaches. Even though a few participants were incompetent in understanding collective nouns, most of them performed extraordinarily. This advocates the suitability of employing 'memory game' and 'scavenger hunt game approaches to learn collective noun proficiency. The results from the learning approaches for collective noun proficiency proved the indispensability of the identified game approaches by Grade 7 learners at a South African primary school.

The present study indicated a dire need to apply memory game' and 'scavenger hunt game approaches in the learning of collective nouns. The findings from this study are indispensable for Grade 7 English FAL to enhance the learning of this grammatical aspect. These findings contribute to the scientific body of knowledge because the stakeholders including English FAL learners, teachers, and curriculum designers can develop strategies for learning, teaching, and designing suitable strategies for dealing with collective noun proficiency. The findings from the questionnaires involving the use of collective nouns and noun phrases are conspicuously consistent in the enhancement of proficiency in the use of collective nouns.

The present study has the following implication, namely, using 'memory game' and 'scavenger hunt game approaches benefits both teachers and learners in teaching and learning. Learners must be exposed to various situations that call for the full utilisation of collective nouns and collective noun phrases by identifying them from specific textbooks, for example. Nevertheless, this study has some limitations. 1) The distribution of the questionnaire took considerable minutes vis-à-vis, the specific time (25 minutes) allocated for the English FAL period. 2) The lack of actual probability sampling as the teacher who was teaching learners before the start of the period spent extra minutes to disengage with the Grade 7 learners. In this study, the findings cannot be generalised, and as such future researchers are encouraged con conduct further research on the suitability of applying 'memory game' and 'scavenger hunt game approaches to learn collective noun proficiency.

Declaration of conflicts of interest
No declaration of conflicts of interest.

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