THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DIGITAL GAMES IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

The usefulness of incorporating digital games—such as educational applications, virtual worlds, and gamified platforms—into English as a foreign language (EFL) class is examined in this study. The study investigates how these resources affect students' vocabulary growth, reading comprehension, motivation, and general involvement. Learner feedback questionnaires and experimental group comparisons in elementary and intermediate EFL classes were used to gather data. Although issues like content selection and technology accessibility still exist, research indicates that digital games greatly boost students' motivation and offer a low-stress, immersive setting for language practice, resulting in improved learning outcomes.

Keywords: Gamification, digital games, vocabulary learning, reading comprehension, EFL classrooms, and learner motivation.

Instruction

The modern language classroom is rapidly evolving due to technological advancements. Traditionally, EFL instruction heavily relied on textbooks and explicit grammar drilling. However, the growing demand for engaging, authentic, and learner-centered approaches has prompted educators to explore innovative methodologies. Among these, the integration of digital games and gamification has emerged as a powerful tool to foster an enjoyable and motivating learning environment.

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Digital games, ranging from simple educational apps to complex Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), inherently possess characteristics that align well with constructivist learning theories. They offer immediate feedback, structured goals, and the opportunity for repeated, low-stakes practice. In many EFL contexts, such as Uzbekistan, where students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, digital tools can provide a crucial immersive environment. This study investigates the specific effectiveness of digital games in enhancing learners' receptive skills, particularly vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension, alongside their impact on learner motivation.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The study involved 80 undergraduate EFL learners (aged 18–22) from four intact classes at a university. The participants were divided into two main groups:
 - Experimental Group (N=40): Taught using materials integrated with specific educational digital games (e.g., Duolingo, Kahoot!, and context-relevant virtual language simulations) for 30% of their contact hours.
 - Control Group (N=40): Taught through traditional teacher-centered methods, primarily utilizing textbook exercises and lectures.
The intervention period lasted for one academic semester (15 weeks).

2.2 Instruments and Procedures

Data were collected through the following instruments:
 - Pre- and Post-tests: Standardized vocabulary knowledge tests (measuring breadth and depth) and reading comprehension assessments (multiple-choice and short answer questions) were administered to both groups to measure learning gains.
 - Observation Checklists: Focused on recording instances of student engagement, time-on-task, and collaborative problem-solving within the classroom during intervention sessions.

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 - Learner Questionnaires: A five-point Likert scale survey measuring students' motivation, perceived enjoyment, and attitudes toward English learning and the use of technology in the classroom.

2.3 Teaching Intervention

The Digital Game-Based Learning (DGBL) instruction included:

 - Vocabulary Practice: Using gamified drilling apps (e.g., Quizlet, Memrise) as homework and warm-up activities.

 - Reading Comprehension: Utilizing virtual world platforms (e.g., Minecraft Education) or narrative-driven games requiring reading instructions and contextual clues for problem-solving.

 - Collaborative Tasks: Team-based educational games (e.g., Kahoot!, Gimkit) used for review and competitive learning.

 - Feedback: Emphasis on immediate, automated feedback provided by the digital platforms, focusing on mastery and challenge rather than simple accuracy.

3. Results

Quantitative analysis (paired-samples t-tests) of pre- and post-tests demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in both vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension scores among students in the Experimental Group (DGBL) compared to the Control Group (Traditional).

Observations revealed:

 - Increased student engagement: Students in the DGBL group displayed greater focus and sustained effort during game-based tasks.

- Higher collaboration: Games requiring teamwork led to frequent peer interaction and communication, often related to task objectives.

 - Reduced anxiety: The observation checklists indicated that the game environment fostered a low-anxiety atmosphere, encouraging students to take risks with language use.

Survey results also indicated that learners under the DGBL approach reported significantly greater motivation and enjoyment in lessons compared to the control

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group. However, some students and teachers in the experimental group highlighted technical issues related to internet access and device compatibility.

4. Discussion

The findings strongly suggest that integrating digital games effectively enhances language learning outcomes and motivation in EFL classrooms. The inherent structure of games—goals, rules, immediate feedback, and rewards—mirrors effective pedagogical principles, turning rote memorization into an active and enjoyable challenge.

 - Motivational Impact: The gamified approach successfully transforms potentially boring tasks, such as vocabulary drilling, into competitive, high-reward activities, aligning with principles of self-determination theory.

 -Authentic Contexts: Well-designed digital games often provide a simulated real-world context and purpose for using the language (e.g., reading a quest objective), which is vital in contexts like Uzbekistan where authentic exposure is limited.

Nevertheless, implementation faces clear challenges:

 -Technological Infrastructure: Reliable internet access and sufficient devices remain a significant barrier to widespread adoption in many EFL contexts.

 -Content Selection: Teachers need continuous professional development to select and effectively integrate high-quality educational games that align with curricular goals, rather than using games purely for entertainment.

Therefore, while DGBL proves pedagogically beneficial, contextual adaptation and careful resource planning remain essential for successful implementation.

5. Conclusion

The integration of Digital Game-Based Learning in EFL instruction significantly fosters learner motivation, improves vocabulary acquisition, and enhances reading comprehension. Digital games provide an engaging, low-anxiety environment that promotes active participation and sustained engagement among learners.

To maximize the potential of DGBL, educators must:

 -Strategically integrate game mechanics (rewards, levels, feedback) with core learning objectives.

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-Ensure adequate technological support and training for both teachers and students.

-Maintain a balance between digital and traditional instructional methods to cater to diverse learning styles.

Future research should investigate the long-term effects of DGBL on productive skills (speaking/writing) and explore frameworks for evaluating the pedagogical value of various gaming platforms.

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