

HARNESSING THE POWER OF EDUCATIONAL GAMES TO ENHANCE ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION AMONG YOUNG LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Aim. This study aims to investigate how games, as an enjoyable teaching method, can enhance motivation and engagement among young learners. It explores how different aspects of motivation and engagement manifest within a game-based instructional setting.

Methods. Using a qualitative approach, the study conducted a case analysis with a randomly selected class of 15 children from a language institute. Data was gathered over two months through video recordings, teacher journals, and classroom observations.

Results. The results indicate that learning through games creates an enjoyable environment that significantly boosts learners' motivation and engagement. Teacher journals, and observation notes revealed that children participated enthusiastically in every lesson and showed high motivation throughout the sessions. These findings align with previous research demonstrating that educational games foster intrinsic motivation and active participation among language learners. Furthermore, games help reduce anxiety and promote positive attitudes towards language learning.

Conclusions. Therefore, the findings suggest that game-based instruction serves as an effective motivator and engager, particularly in the early stages of the learning process, contributing positively to learner autonomy and sustained interest in language acquisition. Future studies could explore longitudinal impacts and game design features that maximize motivational benefits.

Keywords: educational games, engagement, motivation, young language learners, English language teaching

INTRODUCTION

Using games is widely recognized as an effective method for teaching young learners in language classrooms (Cornillie et al., 2012; Dewi et al., 2017; Huang et al., 2018). Play occupies a significant portion of children's lives, and as they mature, their play evolves into more structured games characterized by specific rules and defined objectives (Rixon, 1981). Playing games naturally requires communication among participants, fostering a learner-centered environment where learners feel comfortable speaking and practicing the target language with greater fluency. This communicative nature of games reduces learners' anxiety and encourages spontaneous language use in informal settings. Moreover, games organically promote the development of all four core language skills – reading, writing, listening, and speaking – by providing meaningful and contextually relevant language exposure. They also engage multiple intelligences, aligning with Howard Gardner's (1999) theory of multiple intelligences, which highlights how games stimulate various cognitive and social abilities (Jacobs et al., 2002). As natural tools for learning, games help children make sense of the world around them and therefore should be integrated into language learning curricula.

Recent empirical research further supports the effectiveness of educational games. Studies by Juho Hamari et al. (2016) and Jonathon Reinhardt & Julie M. Sykes (2014) demonstrated that games increase learner motivation, engagement, and retention. More recent investigations affirm these findings; for example, Qian Wu et al. (2020) found that digital game-based learning notably improved young learners' vocabulary acquisition and communication confidence. Similarly, Joan Lee and Jessica Hammer (2011) highlighted that gamified environments in ESL contexts significantly boost learner engagement and self-efficacy. Furthermore, research by Megala Rajendran et al. (2024) indicates that integrating games within language curricula fosters collaboration and critical thinking, crucial skills for language mastery. Games effectively support language development across instructional stages – presentation, practice, recombination, and freer use – and address diverse communicative functions such as encouraging, agreeing, criticizing, and explaining (Gee, 2017; Whitton, 2014). These cumulative insights reinforce the indispensable role of games in fostering meaningful, functional, and enjoyable language learning experiences.

Games provide rich opportunities for social engagement and create interactive contexts that promote peer communication, which enhances language learning progress. Language games, especially when played in small groups, encourage cooperative learning where children freely converse and participate in social interaction, fostering authentic communication skills (Alibakhshi et al., 2025). Additionally, games reduce learner anxiety, facilitating second language acquisition by creating low-pressure, motivating environments. This supports shy or reluctant children in expressing their opinions and feelings more confidently. Teachers benefit from games as tools that gen-

erate meaningful, context-rich, and enjoyable learning experiences, which increase motivation and reduce stress (Castronovo et al., 2022; Garton & Tekin, 2022).

Recent empirical research underscores that games effectively stimulate learner interest and motivation by integrating competitive and collaborative elements within engaging tasks (Wu et al., 2020; Yavuz et al., 2020). Games diminish language learning anxiety and improve learners' self-confidence and positive emotions toward language use (Alibakhshi et al., 2025). Pedagogical studies show games enhance multiple language skills, including grammar, vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading, and writing, and support various communicative functions (Reinhardt & Sykes, 2014; Taraj et al., 2025; Zheng et al., 2023). Research further highlights teachers' vital role in selecting, adapting, and integrating suitable games into language curricula to maximize educational benefits (Wu et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2023).

Although many previous works have regarded games mostly as fun time fillers, contemporary research advances their positioning as central instructional tools that can significantly influence motivation and engagement in young learners (Alibakhshi et al., 2025; Rajendran et al., 2024). This study seeks to contribute to this emerging perspective by investigating how games foster motivational and engagement behaviour among young learners. Thus, the following questions were investigated in this study:

1. How do educational games improve the motivation levels of young EFL learners during language instruction?
2. In what ways do educational games facilitate interaction and engagement among young EFL learners?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evolving Teaching Methods and Games in Language Learning

Teaching has seen a dramatic transformation from traditional passive learning, where learners acted as listeners, to active engagement models centered around learner participation. One of the most effective methods to maintain learner activity and motivation is through educational games that foster a constructivist learning environment (Hoshang et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2020). These games encourage learners to take ownership of their learning process by promoting patience, persistence, and focus through task progression and instant feedback (Castronovo et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2023). Furthermore, educational games support the development of transferable cognitive and social skills, perfectly suited for digital learning contexts that mirror real-world problem-solving and collaboration (Alibakhshi et al., 2025). This approach aligns well with contemporary pedagogical theories emphasising active construction of knowledge rather than passive reception.

Active Learning and Cognitive Benefits of Games

Active participation is essential for effective language learning, whereby learners engage in exploration, analysis, and problem-solving within meaningful and enjoyable frameworks (Hoshang et al., 2021). Games create immersive and low-stress contexts that reduce speaking anxiety and encourage creative use of language in authentic settings, which boosts learner motivation and raises self-confidence (Li, 2021; Yavuz et al., 2020). They also provide ample opportunities for repetition and reinforcement across multiple intelligences, such as logical thinking, communication, and kinesthetic engagement, enhancing retention and deeper understanding (Reinhardt & Sykes, 2014; Zheng et al., 2023). This multi-dimensional learning supports sustained skill development in reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Motivation in language learning is significantly enhanced through game mechanics that introduce excitement, challenge, and rewarding feedback (Cole et al., 2024; Li, 2021; Ponomariovienè et al., 2025). Games have been shown to increase learner satisfaction and attendance by creating engaging activities that encourage persistence and cooperation (Alibakhshi et al., 2025). They are particularly effective for shy learners, providing a safe space to express ideas without fear of judgement and improving both emotional wellbeing and classroom participation (Wang & Zheng, 2021; Zheng et al., 2023). Such motivational benefits are supported by game attributes like competition, collaboration, and immediate feedback, which cater to diverse learner styles and preferences and sustain active involvement.

Enhancing Learner Engagement with Games

Learner engagement is multi-faceted, involving cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions that educational games address effectively (Alibakhshi et al., 2025; Li, 2021). Well-designed games immerse learners through sensory-rich, interactive experiences that encourage problem-solving, critical thinking, and meaningful feedback loops (Ryan et al., 2006). Social aspects of game play foster communities of practice allowing learners to relate with peers, reinforcing motivation and satisfaction (Forbes, 2021; Ho et al., 2020). The collaborative nature of games cultivates learner agency and co-construction of knowledge, which are essential for authentic language use and long-term academic success.

In summary, research confirms that educational games constitute powerful tools for transforming traditional language instruction. By reinforcing motivation, engagement, skill reinforcement, and social interaction in an enjoyable and low-anxiety context, they fulfill critical pedagogical goals that modern language teaching aspires to accomplish. Integrating games centrally into curricula promotes active, learner-centered environments essential for effective and lasting language acquisition.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the role of educational games in enhancing motivation and engagement among young EFL learners. Case study methodology is ideal for investigating complex phenomena within their real-life classroom context, providing a holistic and in-depth understanding of learners' behaviour and experiences. It allows the researcher to examine "how" and "why" educational games impact motivation and engagement through multiple data sources such as field notes, video recordings, and teacher diaries over an extended period.

Given the focus on a specific group experiencing game-based instruction, a single-case design is appropriate. This approach facilitates detailed, micro-level analysis of learners' engagement and motivational patterns, capturing the nuances of their interactions and responses to educational games. The case study's descriptive and explanatory nature also supports linking observed behaviour to theoretical constructs of motivation and engagement in language learning.

By enabling longitudinal observation and rich data collection within an authentic learning environment, the case study method provides valuable insights that quantitative surveys alone may overlook. This design aligns with the study's goal to generate practical and theoretical knowledge about the effective use of games as motivational and engagement tools in young learners' language acquisition.

Participants

The study participants consist of 15 young learners enrolled in a general English course at a language institute. Their ages range from 10 to 12 years old, placing them at the elementary level according to the results of Oxford Placement Test (OPT). These learners are at an early stage of English language learning, providing an ideal sample to explore the effects of educational games on motivation and engagement in this age group. The participants represent typical elementary learners attending a formal language programme designed to build foundational English skills.

Instruments

To comprehensively explore learners' motivation and engagement during game-based language instruction, this study employs three qualitative data collection instruments: field notes (observation), video recordings, and teacher journals.

Field Notes (Observation)

Systematic classroom observations are conducted to capture real-time learner behaviours, interactions, and engagement patterns during game activities. The researcher takes detailed field notes focusing on learners' participation, verbal and non-verbal reactions, peer collaboration, and moments of increased motivation or distraction. These notes allow for capturing of authentic, contextual insights into how educational games influence learner dynamics and classroom atmosphere.

Video Recording

Video recordings of selected game-based sessions provide rich, visual evidence of learner engagement and social interactions. Reviewing video footage enables the researchers to observe subtle behaviours such as facial expressions, gestures, and interactions that might be missed during live observation. It also allows repeated viewing for accurate data coding and supports triangulation of findings with field notes and teacher reflections.

Teacher Journals

The teacher maintains structured journal entries throughout the study period, reflecting on each session's flow, learner responses, challenges faced, and observed shifts in motivation and engagement. These reflective journals provide valuable insider perspectives on instructional strategies, learners' progress, and the overall effectiveness of the games incorporated. Additionally, teacher insights help contextualise observed behaviours and enrich data interpretation.

Together, these instruments facilitate a multi-faceted, in-depth understanding of how educational games impact young learners' motivation and engagement in an authentic classroom setting.

Data Collection Procedure

The study was conducted over a two-month period in a natural classroom setting with 15 young learners enrolled in an elementary-level general English course. To comprehensively explore the effects of educational games on motivation and engagement, multiple qualitative data sources were utilised.

Firstly, systematic classroom observations were carried out during game-based instruction sessions. The researcher used detailed field notes to record learners' participation, verbal and non-verbal behaviours, peer interactions, and motivational signs. These observations allowed capturing authentic, real-time learner responses in their natural learning environment.

Secondly, video recordings of selected sessions complemented the observations by providing visual and auditory data. Videos enabled the researcher to revisit complex interactions and subtle engagement cues, such as facial expressions and group dynamics, ensuring the accuracy of data interpretation and supporting triangulation.

Thirdly, the classroom teacher maintained reflective journals throughout the study duration. These journals documented session-specific insights on learners' motivation, challenges faced, behavioural changes, and the overall efficacy of the game activities. Teacher reflections added depth to the data by offering insider perspectives on teaching strategies and learner progress.

Data collection followed a systematic schedule aligned with the curriculum, ensuring consistency and allowing for longitudinal analysis of changes over time. Ethical considerations including informed consent from parents and assent from learners were strictly observed.

Together, these instruments provided a rich, multi-dimensional dataset that supports a detailed understanding of how educational games influence young learners' motivation and engagement in language learning.

RESULTS

The first research question explored the extent to which educational games improved the motivation levels of young EFL learners during language instruction. Educational games serve as powerful motivators for young Iranian language learners by activating key components of motivation outlined in John M. Keller's (1987) ARCS Model: Attention, Relevance, Confidence, and Satisfaction. Drawing from multiple data sources – observations, video recordings, and teacher diaries – this study found that games create an immersive and dynamic learning environment that engages learners cognitively, emotionally, and socially.

Attention was successfully captured and sustained through strategies such as inquiry arousal, active participation, and variability in game types and rules. Games that prompt learners to solve problems or critically think about their answers spark curiosity and focus. The teacher remarked, "I noticed that during the game activities, even the quieter learners became more willing to participate and express their ideas. The games gave them confidence to speak up without fear of making mistakes." This aligns with observation and video data showing enthusiastic active participation and prolonged learner focus during gameplay.

Relevance was achieved by aligning activities with learners' needs for achievement and social affiliation. Cooperative games created opportunities for collaboration and trust-building in a low-risk environment while providing moderate challenges that matched learner competencies. As a teacher's journal entry noted, "When I used cooperative games, the learners seemed more interested and focused. They worked

together naturally, encouraging each other, which made the classroom atmosphere more positive and motivating". These insights reflect game-based instruction's ability to make learning meaningful and tailor it to learners' motivational drives.

Confidence was developed through supportive teaching strategies including clear session roadmaps, positive facial expressions, timely and accepting feedback, and encouraging learner independence. The teacher's active listening and positive reinforcement fostered a safe space for risk-taking, as expressed by the teacher: "The immediate feedback within games really helped learners feel a sense of accomplishment. I saw them light up when praised or when they passed a level, which encouraged them to try harder in the next task". This nurturing environment promoted sustained motivation through enhanced self-efficacy.

Satisfaction stemmed from immediate praise, rewarding experiences, and personal attention during gameplay, which created intrinsic motivation for learners to continue engaging enthusiastically. The teacher noted, "The roadmap I provided before activities helped learners understand what to expect, which seemed to boost their confidence and reduce hesitation during new tasks". Additionally, peer and teacher feedback combined to reinforce learners' satisfaction and sense of success.

Importantly, the social context provided by games fostered positive peer interaction and reduced anxiety, critical for sustaining motivation in young learners. The teacher observed, "I felt that learners were more relaxed and less anxious during game sessions. The fun environment decreased the usual pressure of speaking English, leading to more spontaneous language use". Field notes and video recordings substantiated these points, showing increased cooperative communication and learner engagement.

The second research question explored how educational games facilitate learner engagement among young language learners.

Learner engagement in this study is conceptualised as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, behavioural, emotional (affective), and social dimensions, consistent with Jenefer Philp and Susan Duchesne's (2016) model which emphasises that engagement involves active participation not just cognitively but also socially, behaviourally, and emotionally.

Analysis of classroom discourse, video recordings, and teacher journals indicates that game-based instruction effectively cultivates engagement across all these dimensions, substantiated by clear indicators identified in learners' discourse and observed interactions.

Cognitive Engagement: Learners showed active cognitive involvement through behaviours such as asking questions, completing peer utterances, evaluating and judging arguments, providing explanations and directions, and exhibiting exploratory talk and private speech. For instance, cooperative games encouraged learners to ask teammates and the teacher directive questions to solve problems, facilitating deep cognitive processing. The teacher commented, "In cooperative games, younger learners asked

questions from their teammates for solving problems and the teacher's prompts helped them tackle complex tasks", demonstrating the active mental engagement games evoke.

Behavioural Engagement: Observations reveal learners' sustained behavioural involvement through active participation in game tasks like identifying picture cards starting with particular sounds, competitive cooperative ball games, and role-taking as referees. Behavioural engagement was further demonstrated by learners' persistence and efforts to achieve game goals. The teacher noted, "Employing cooperative and competitive games led to active learners' participation", highlighting that games promote physical involvement and adherence to task demands.

Emotional (Affective) Engagement: Learners displayed emotional investment by expressing enthusiasm, satisfaction, and excitement during game activities. Raised voices to celebrate successes or cheer peers, facial expressions showing joy or victory, and positive reactions to praise provided strong affective engagement cues. As the teacher observed, "When I presented their favorite game, learners exclaimed 'hurray!' and showed satisfaction upon task completion", confirming that games evoke positive emotional responses which are essential for sustained engagement.

Social Engagement: Data revealed active social interactions including negotiating meaning, listening to peers, providing evaluative feedback, cooperating, and even helping rival teams, thereby fostering a sense of affiliation and friendship. Teacher reflections supported this finding: "Learners negotiated solutions and supported others with a sense of trust and cooperation during game play", illustrating how games create rich social environments promoting reciprocal engagement.

Together, these findings affirm that educational games effectively engage learners in multifaceted ways that go beyond mere participation to include emotional involvement and social connectivity. This comprehensive engagement is crucial for meaningful and sustained language learning, as highly engaged learners invest more cognitive effort, demonstrate persistence, and derive emotional satisfaction from the learning process.

The multidimensional nature of engagement observed in this study aligns with Philp and Duchesne's (2016) model and broader educational research which highlights behavioural, cognitive, emotional, and social engagement as interrelated facets crucial to effective learning (Fredricks et al., 2004; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

In conclusion, educational games serve as potent facilitators of learner engagement by offering cognitively challenging activities, fostering social interaction, eliciting emotional enthusiasm, and promoting active behavioural involvement, thus supporting holistic learner engagement in Iranian young language learners.

DISCUSSION

The overarching aim of this study was to examine how educational games motivate and engage young Iranian learners in language classrooms and assess their impact

on acquiring grapho-phonemic knowledge. The findings reveal that educational games create an enjoyable learning experience that actively stimulates learners' engagement, leading to improved language acquisition outcomes. This aligns with Najwa Ghamrawi (2014), who emphasised that games capture young learners' attention through competitive and interactive elements, particularly benefiting those with short attention spans. Similarly, Min Wang and Xuan Zheng (2021) noted that active learner involvement positively correlates with progressive language achievement.

Consistent with Keller's (1987) ARCS model, this study found educational games to enhance learners' motivation across the dimensions of attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction. Games generated enthusiasm and excitement, fostering sustained participation – a finding supported by contemporary studies showing gamification's positive effects on motivation and language proficiency (Forbes, 2021; Roseni & Muho, 2024). For example, Rui Li (2021) found that well-structured game elements like immediate feedback and rewards increased learner motivation by meeting psychological needs for competence and relatedness.

This motivation translates into robust learner engagement, encompassing cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and social facets (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Specifically, educational games promote cognitive engagement by encouraging learners to ask questions, explain, evaluate, and problem-solve collaboratively. Learners actively participate physically and mentally in game tasks, reflecting strong behavioural engagement, as corroborated by teacher diaries noting increased focus and task persistence during game sessions (Fredricks et al., 2004). Emotional engagement is expressed through learners' joyful reactions, vocal excitement, and satisfaction after successful task completion. Social engagement emerges prominently as learners negotiate meanings, support peers, and provide feedback, fulfilling powerful affiliation needs fundamental to young learners' motivation (Moranski & Toth, 2016; Wang & Zheng, 2021).

Teacher reflections vividly illustrate these dynamics: the teacher observed, "During game activities, even quieter learners gained confidence and eagerly participate". Furthermore, she noted, "Cooperative games fostered a positive, motivating atmosphere as learners encouraged each other". Positive feedback loops through immediate praise and clear activity roadmaps further bolstered learners' confidence and satisfaction, reducing language anxiety and promoting autonomy. These qualitative insights enrich the quantitative and observational data, painting a holistic picture of games as effective motivators and engagement facilitators.

Neomy Storch (2002), along with numerous other researchers (Moranski & Toth, 2016; Sato & Ballinger, 2012; Storch, 2002; Wang & Zheng, 2021), have found consistent evidence that learners demonstrate greater effectiveness in language acquisition when actively socially engaged. Supporting this perspective, Jan L. Plass et al. (2015) posited that games function as social environments when their design fosters a sense of community and encourages player participation in collaborative decision-making. It is clear that multiplayer games inherently require social inter-

action and collective problem solving, whether through competitive or cooperative frameworks. Educational games can effectively meet young learners' strong needs for affiliation and friendship by providing spaces that promote negotiation, as well as offering informative, supportive, and evaluative feedback among peers.

In conclusion, this study reaffirms that educational games are a potent pedagogical tool in language learning. By integrating motivational strategies that foster attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction, while simultaneously engaging learners cognitively, behaviourally, emotionally, and socially, games facilitate not only enduring motivation and engagement but also tangible gains in language competence. These findings reinforce the imperative for language educators to incorporate game-based methodologies to create dynamic, learner-centered, and effective language learning environments.

CONCLUSIONS

This study conclusively demonstrates that educational games play a vital role in motivating and engaging young Iranian language learners, while also fostering meaningful language acquisition, particularly in grapho-phonemic knowledge. By providing an interactive and enjoyable learning environment, games successfully capture learners' attention, meet their psychological needs for relevance and confidence, and offer immediate satisfaction through constructive feedback and collaboration. These motivational factors merge to promote deeper cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and social engagement, which are essential components for effective language learning. Teacher reflections and observational data further underscore the efficacy of games in reducing anxiety, encouraging participation, and strengthening learners' autonomy and confidence. The superior performance of game-based learners in language-related tasks compared to their peers in alternative instructional settings highlights the pedagogical value of incorporating games into language curricula. Therefore, educational games should be embraced as integral tools in language instruction to create dynamic, learner-centered experiences that not only motivate but also yield tangible educational gains. Future investigations may explore customising game design to better align with specific learner profiles and extend these findings across varied linguistic and cultural contexts.

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