GAME-BASED LEARNING AND ITS IMPACT ON MOTIVATION IN YOUNG EFL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of game-based learning (GBL) on motivation among young learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Recognizing motivation as a critical factor in successful language acquisition, the research explores whether integrating educational games enhances student engagement and enthusiasm. A quasi-experimental design was implemented with two groups of 7–10-year-old learners over an eight-week period. The experimental group participated in regular game-based activities, while the control group received traditional instruction. Data were collected through motivation questionnaires and classroom observations. Results indicated a significant increase in motivation levels among students exposed to GBL, with higher participation and enjoyment observed during lessons. These findings highlight the potential of GBL as an effective strategy to foster intrinsic motivation and create more dynamic EFL learning environments. The study suggests incorporating varied and age-appropriate games into young learners' curricula to support language development.

Keywords: game-based learning, motivation, young learners, EFL, classroom engagement, learning environment, questionnaires, classroom observations

Introduction.

The significance of motivation in the process of learning a foreign language, especially among young learners, has long been recognized by educators and researchers alike. Motivation serves as a driving force that directly influences a learner’s willingness to engage with and sustain language learning activities (Dörnyei, 2001). Within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, maintaining high levels of motivation among young learners is particularly important, as their cognitive, emotional, and social development stages demand instructional methods that are engaging, interactive, and playful. In this regard, game-based learning (GBL) has emerged as a promising pedagogical strategy that leverages the natural tendencies of young learners towards play, thus enhancing both their enjoyment and language acquisition (Reinders & Wattana, 2015).

Game-Based Learning refers to the use of games and playful elements for educational purposes, where learning objectives are integrated into game mechanics and environments (Gee, 2003). In language education, GBL offers numerous benefits, including creating low-anxiety environments, encouraging risk-taking, and providing immediate feedback, all of which are crucial for young EFL learners (Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 2006). Games offer opportunities for repetition, practice, and meaningful use of language in ways that traditional methods may not always achieve. Furthermore, incorporating games caters to different learning styles by combining visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities, thereby making the learning experience more inclusive and effective (Hadfield, 1999).

Despite the apparent advantages, empirical investigations into the specific effects of GBL on young EFL learners' motivation remain relatively scarce. Many studies have focused either on adult learners or on overall language proficiency outcomes rather than isolating the motivational aspects for younger age groups. As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) argue, young learners' motivation is often dynamic and sensitive to immediate classroom conditions, suggesting that playful, interactive methods like GBL could have a uniquely strong impact. Yet, there is a need for more focused research to understand how structured game-based approaches influence motivational factors such as engagement, persistence, and intrinsic interest among young EFL learners.

The purpose of the present study is to explore the impact of game-based learning activities on the motivation levels of young EFL learners aged 7 to 10 years. Specifically, it seeks to determine whether integrating structured educational games into regular classroom instruction leads to higher levels of engagement, enjoyment, and willingness to participate compared to traditional non-game-based teaching methods. Two main research questions guide the study: (1) How does game-based learning influence young learners’ motivation in EFL classrooms? (2) Which types of games are perceived as most motivating by learners?

By focusing on the motivational outcomes of GBL, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of literature advocating for learner-centered and engaging pedagogical approaches in EFL education. It is hoped that the findings will provide practical implications for teachers, curriculum designers, and educational policymakers seeking to enhance young learners' motivation and overall language learning success through innovative instructional strategies.

Methodology.

This study adopted a **quasi-experimental design** incorporating pre-test and post-test measures to explore the impact of game-based learning (GBL) on young EFL learners' motivation. Quasi-experimental designs are appropriate when random assignment is impractical but a comparative analysis between an experimental and a

control group is desired (Creswell, 2012). Two intact classes were selected: one participated in GBL activities, while the other received traditional instruction. The intervention lasted for eight weeks, providing a sufficient timeframe to observe motivational changes.

The participants were **48 young EFL learners** aged between **7 and 10 years**, drawn from two second-grade classes in a private language school. Each class contained 24 students. All participants shared a similar linguistic background and had at least one year of prior English learning experience. Participation was voluntary, and written consent was obtained from parents or guardians. The study strictly adhered to ethical research standards for work involving minors, following the guidelines outlined by Punch (2002).

The research was conducted in a private language school located in an urban environment, where classes met three times per week for 60 minutes per session. Both classrooms were similarly resourced, containing interactive whiteboards and projectors. However, the experimental group primarily engaged with low-tech materials such as flashcards, board games, and role-play props to maintain accessibility and practicality. These conditions helped ensure that differences in motivation levels could be attributed to the learning method rather than extraneous factors.

To measure motivation, several data collection instruments were employed. The primary tool was a **Motivation Questionnaire for Young Learners**, adapted from Gardner's (1985) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), and modified into a child-friendly format using smiley-face Likert scales. Additionally, **Classroom Observation Checklists** were utilized to record behavioural indicators such as active participation, enthusiasm, and attentiveness during lessons, based on a framework suggested by Richards (2001). To supplement quantitative data, **Teacher Diaries** were maintained throughout the intervention period to document reflective notes and anecdotal evidence concerning student engagement and behavioural changes.

The procedure began with the administration of a motivation pre-test to both groups. During the intervention phase, the experimental group was regularly exposed to various game-based activities, including vocabulary bingo, sentence-making races, role-play performances, and online quiz games like Kahoot. In contrast, the control group continued with traditional EFL instruction cantered on drills, textbook exercises, and worksheets. Both groups covered identical language content to ensure instructional consistency. After eight weeks, a post-test was conducted, and observational data were collected for analysis.

The analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. Pre-test and post-test questionnaire scores were compared within each group using **paired sample t-tests** to detect internal changes. Additionally, **independent sample t-tests** were conducted to determine statistical differences between the experimental and control

groups. The significance level was set at **p < .05**. Effect sizes were calculated using **Cohen's d** to assess the strength of any observed differences (Field, 2013). Qualitative data from observation checklists and teacher diaries were thematically analysed to identify recurring patterns related to motivation and engagement behaviours.

Results

The quantitative findings from the motivation questionnaires indicated a significant improvement in the experimental group's motivation levels following the integration of game-based learning (GBL) activities. A **paired sample t-test** revealed that the experimental group's mean motivation score increased from **3.2 (pre-test)** to **4.1 (post-test)** on a five-point scale. This difference was statistically significant at **p < .001**, suggesting a strong positive effect of GBL on learners' motivation. In contrast, the control group showed a negligible change, with a mean pre-test score of **3.3** and a post-test score of **3.4**, and the difference was not statistically significant (**p = .24**). These results are consistent with previous studies, such as those by Hung (2015), which demonstrate that integrating playful elements into instruction can significantly enhance motivation among language learners.

An **independent sample t-test** comparing the post-test motivation scores between the experimental and control groups further confirmed the positive impact of GBL. The experimental group's post-test scores were significantly higher than those of the control group (**t(46) = 4.52, p < .001**). The calculated effect size, using **Cohen's d = 1.28**, indicated a large effect, demonstrating that GBL produced substantial gains in learner motivation. These findings align with research by Reinders and Wattana (2015), who also found large motivational gains in EFL classrooms using game-based learning frameworks.

Observational data collected through classroom checklists provided additional qualitative support for the quantitative findings. Students in the experimental group exhibited higher levels of active participation, such as volunteering for activities, enthusiastically responding to prompts, and collaborating eagerly with peers during tasks. The average participation frequency during game-based lessons was recorded as **85%**, compared to **60%** in traditional lessons observed in the control group. These behavioural indicators are in line with Ushioda's (2011) assertion that learner engagement is a key visible manifestation of underlying motivational states.

Teacher diaries offered further insight into classroom dynamics throughout the intervention. Teachers reported that students in the experimental group consistently demonstrated excitement before game-based sessions, frequently requested to repeat games, and often showed increased willingness to use English spontaneously. Several diary entries emphasized that even typically shy students became more active during game sessions. Such anecdotal evidence supports the findings of Sylvén and Sundqvist

(2012), who noted that playful learning environments can significantly reduce affective barriers, thereby promoting language use and motivation.

In summary, both quantitative and qualitative data converged to illustrate that GBL had a significant and positive impact on the motivation levels of young EFL learners. The increase in motivation was not only statistically measurable but also observable in classroom behaviours and teacher reflections, reinforcing the argument that GBL is an effective strategy for enhancing engagement and fostering a more dynamic learning environment for young learners.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide strong evidence that game-based learning (GBL) significantly enhances motivation among young EFL learners. The substantial increase in motivation scores within the experimental group, alongside the observational and diary data, underscores the powerful role that games can play in fostering more engaging and dynamic language learning environments. These results support the theoretical view that intrinsic motivation, fuelled by enjoyment and meaningful interaction, is a central factor in successful language acquisition (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

One key interpretation of the findings is that games create an emotionally supportive environment, which lowers anxiety and encourages active participation. According to Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, language learning is more effective when learners experience low anxiety and high motivation. In the present study, students exposed to GBL activities consistently displayed behaviours indicating lowered affective filters, such as volunteering answers, initiating communication, and eagerly participating in English tasks. These observations align with previous research by Sylvén and Sundqvist (2012), who found that playful environments outside formal learning also significantly boosted learners' willingness to use a second language.

Moreover, the use of varied games such as vocabulary bingo, sentence-making races, and interactive quizzes provided opportunities for meaningful repetition, immediate feedback, and authentic use of language structures. As emphasized by Wright, Betteridge, and Buckby (2006), games offer natural contexts for language practice, making learning more meaningful and memorable. In this study, the combination of physical movement, competition, collaboration, and humour embedded within games seemed particularly effective in sustaining attention and fostering positive emotional experiences with English language learning.

Importantly, the large effect size found in this study (**Cohen's d = 1.28**) suggests that the motivational benefits of GBL were not marginal but substantial. This finding mirrors results from Reinders and Wattana (2015), who demonstrated that digital game-based environments could significantly enhance motivation and willingness to communicate among EFL learners. However, while digital games were used in their

study, this research focused mainly on traditional, low-tech classroom games, suggesting that even without sophisticated technology, game-based methodologies can have significant motivational impacts when appropriately designed.

Despite these promising results, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, the relatively short duration of the intervention (eight weeks) may not fully capture long-term motivational trends. Motivation, particularly among young learners, can fluctuate based on numerous classrooms, individual, and contextual factors (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Longer longitudinal studies would be beneficial to examine whether the motivational effects of GBL are sustained over time and whether they translate into measurable language proficiency gains. Secondly, this study was conducted in a private school setting with motivated students; future research should investigate how GBL operates in more diverse educational contexts, including public schools with larger class sizes or mixed-ability groups.

Practical implications for teaching are clear. Teachers of young EFL learners are encouraged to integrate a variety of structured games into their lesson planning. Selecting games that are age-appropriate, linguistically relevant, and balanced between competition and cooperation can maximize motivational benefits. As Hadfield (1999) suggests, games should not only be fun but should also reinforce specific language skills or concepts in a systematic way.

In conclusion, the study reinforces the value of game-based learning as a potent tool for enhancing motivation in young EFL classrooms. When thoughtfully implemented, GBL strategies can help create classrooms where learners feel engaged, enthusiastic, and willing to take the risks necessary for effective language acquisition. These findings contribute to a growing body of evidence supporting learner-cantered, playful approaches to foreign language instruction, offering practical pathways for teachers seeking to motivate and inspire young learners.

Conclusion.

The present study set out to investigate the impact of game-based learning (GBL) on the motivation of young learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Through a quasi-experimental design involving motivation questionnaires, classroom observations, and teacher diaries, it was found that the integration of game-based activities significantly increased learners' motivation compared to traditional instructional methods. Students exposed to GBL demonstrated higher engagement levels, greater enthusiasm for classroom participation, and a more positive attitude toward learning English. These findings align with previous research that highlights the importance of affective factors and learner-centred approaches in successful language education (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reinders & Wattana, 2015).

The motivational benefits observed in this study suggest that GBL is not merely an entertaining addition to language lessons but a powerful pedagogical strategy that

addresses the emotional, cognitive, and social needs of young learners. By providing opportunities for meaningful communication, lowering anxiety, and enhancing intrinsic motivation, games create a classroom environment where young students are more willing to take linguistic risks and persist in challenging tasks. In line with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, reducing learners' anxiety and increasing their motivation through playful activities proved essential in maximizing their potential for language acquisition.

However, the study also acknowledged certain limitations that warrant consideration. The relatively short eight-week intervention period may not fully capture the long-term effects of GBL on sustained motivation and language proficiency development. Additionally, the study was limited to a private school context, which may not fully represent more diverse educational settings. Future research should therefore aim to conduct longitudinal studies and expand participant demographics to ensure greater generalizability of results.

Despite these limitations, the practical implications of the study are clear. EFL teachers working with young learners are encouraged to thoughtfully integrate game-based activities into their instruction, ensuring that games are not only engaging but also aligned with curricular objectives. Careful selection of games that balance competition, cooperation, and linguistic relevance can maximize both motivational and educational benefits. Furthermore, teacher training programs should highlight GBL strategies as part of effective methodologies for teaching English to young learners.

In conclusion, the findings of this study reinforce the idea that motivation is a key determinant of successful language learning, and that game-based learning offers a viable and effective approach to fostering motivation in young EFL classrooms. By embracing playful, learner-centred strategies, educators can create more dynamic, inclusive, and motivating language learning environments, ultimately contributing to better language outcomes for young students.

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