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Engaging Learners through Digital Game-Based English Instruction: A Practical Insight from a Language Course Owner-Educator Aesthetic Bimbel

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Abstract: In the current digital era, English educators are challenged to design lessons that engage young learners and sustain their interest. While digital game-based learning (DGBL) has been widely studied in formal classroom contexts, there remains a gap in exploring its implementation within non-formal learning settings such as tutoring programs or private learning centers. This paper reflects on the author's dual role as both an English tutor and the owner of a learning center, highlighting practical insights into the use of DGBL for vocabulary enrichment and speaking practice. The study is significant not only for bridging the research gap but also for providing practical benefits to tutors and learning centers in understanding learners' interests, determining appropriate learning frequencies, and balancing direct and indirect explanations beyond the use of applications. Using a reflective narrative approach, the findings reveal that DGBL is effective in enhancing student engagement, fostering active participation, and expanding vocabulary. Furthermore, the approach supports up-to-date learning practices aligned with technological development. The implication of this study is the provision of practical guidance for English tutors in non-formal contexts to integrate DGBL into their teaching strategies, thereby enriching learning experiences and outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of rapid digital transformation, education is no longer limited to traditional classroom practices. English language learning, in particular, demands innovative approaches that not only teach linguistic knowledge but also sustain learner engagement in increasingly diverse learning environments. The challenge is more pronounced among young learners, who often perceive language lessons as repetitive or intimidating when delivered through conventional drills and textbook-centered methods. For English educators, both in formal and non-formal contexts, the pressing question is how to design learning activities that motivate students and make language practice meaningful.

Digital game-based learning (DGBL) has emerged as a promising solution to this challenge. By integrating interactive digital games into language

instruction, teachers can transform routine lessons into playful yet purposeful activities. Games are inherently engaging because they combine competition, rewards, and collaboration. When carefully designed, they provide learners with opportunities to practice vocabulary, enhance speaking fluency, and engage in authentic communication in a low-pressure environment. According to Hung (2022), game-based tasks not only capture learners' attention but also facilitate deeper learning through contextualized practice and problem-solving.

While the benefits of DGBL have been widely studied in school settings, much less is known about its application in non-formal education such as tutoring programs or private learning centers. These contexts differ significantly from formal classrooms in terms of flexibility, class size, student diversity, and instructional goals. As Korkmaz and Toraman (2021) emphasize, non-formal education provides a unique space for innovation, yet remains underexplored in language learning research. In Indonesia, tutoring centers play an essential role in complementing formal education, particularly for English, which is seen as a gateway to academic and professional success. Therefore, examining how DGBL can be applied in such contexts is both timely and significant.

This study addresses the gap by reflecting on the practical experiences of an English tutor who also serves as the owner of Aesthetic Bimbel in some branches. Drawing on classroom observations, interviews, and reflective narratives, it explores how digital games can be systematically integrated into English tutoring programs. The study focuses on their impact on learner motivation, vocabulary enrichment, and speaking practice. Beyond empirical insights, the paper highlights the role of the tutor as a facilitator who ensures that the technological affordances of games are aligned with pedagogical objectives.

The objective of this paper is twofold. First, it seeks to provide empirical evidence on the effectiveness of DGBL in a non-formal learning environment, particularly in the Indonesian context. Second, it aims to offer practical guidance for English tutors and course organizers in adopting game-based strategies that balance entertainment with educational value. By doing so, this research

contributes to bridging the gap between theory and practice, supporting the broader goal of enriching English learning through digital innovation

LITERATURE REVIEW

The increasing integration of technology in education has transformed how languages are taught and learned. In Indonesia, the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemdikbud, 2013) mandated the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to support effective instructional design. This policy reflects the growing recognition that learners today are digital natives who engage more actively with technology-mediated learning experiences. For English education, where motivation and communication practice are critical, technology provides a pathway to enrich learning and sustain learner engagement.

Digital game-based learning (DGBL) has been widely examined as a pedagogical tool to enhance language learning outcomes. According to Chen (2021), digital games can positively influence students' vocabulary retention, motivation, and self-efficacy by embedding language learning into interactive and enjoyable tasks. Likewise, Hung (2022) argues that games offer opportunities for contextualized practice, where learners encounter vocabulary in meaningful situations, thus improving long-term retention. Rahimi and Zhang (2023), in their meta-analysis, further confirm that DGBL consistently yields significant gains in vocabulary acquisition compared to traditional instruction, especially when repetition and feedback are embedded in gameplay.

In addition to vocabulary, DGBL also fosters learner motivation. Gamification elements such as points, levels, leaderboards, and rewards are shown to transform passive learners into active participants (Sun & Hsieh, 2020). Students perceive learning as fun rather than as a burden, and the sense of competition and achievement increases their willingness to participate. These motivational benefits are especially important in non-formal contexts such as tutoring programs, where learners often attend after school hours and may otherwise lack enthusiasm. As Korkmaz and Toraman (2021) highlight, non-

formal learning environments provide tutors with more flexibility to implement such motivational strategies, tailoring them to learners' preferences and readiness.

Beyond motivation and vocabulary, research also highlights the potential of DGBL in improving speaking confidence. Fithriani (2020) found that students in Indonesian private English courses demonstrated greater willingness to communicate and reduced speaking anxiety when digital games were integrated into lessons. Similarly, Khasanah and Ningsih (2022) reported that learners in community-based English programs became more engaged and expressive when interactive game applications were used. These findings indicate that games create a safe, low-pressure environment for learners to experiment with language, reducing fear of making mistakes.

Nevertheless, the role of the teacher remains central in ensuring the effectiveness of DGBL. OECD (2020) emphasizes that while technology can support learning, it is the teacher's facilitation that shapes meaningful educational experiences. Teachers scaffold learning by explaining rules, modeling language use, and guiding students to focus on pedagogical objectives rather than only on competition. Martin (2023) further stresses that even in an era where artificial intelligence is increasingly integrated into education, educators remain irreplaceable as facilitators of human-centered learning. In tutoring centers, where class sizes are often smaller and teacher–student relationships closer, the role of the tutor is particularly crucial in personalizing game-based strategies.

Despite these promising findings, most existing studies on DGBL have been conducted in formal school settings. Research on its application in non-formal education, such as tutoring programs or private learning centers, remains limited (Hung, 2022; Korkmaz & Toraman, 2021). This gap presents an opportunity to explore how DGBL can be effectively adapted in less structured environments, where instructional design is often more flexible but also less guided by standardized curricula. By investigating its implementation in a tutoring center, this study contributes to extending the body of knowledge on DGBL beyond formal classrooms, offering practical insights for educators and stakeholders in non-formal education.

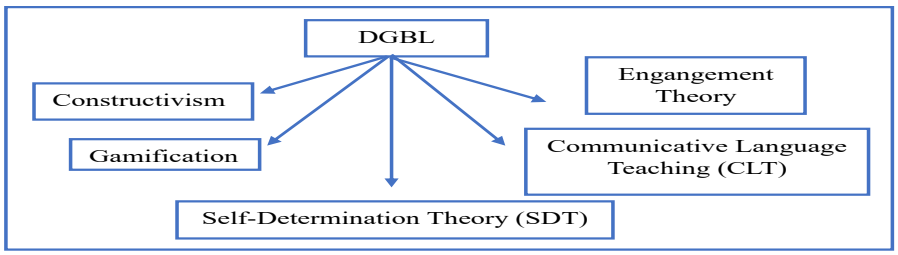

Figure 1. Some theories Digital Game-Based Learning (DGBL) in Usage

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore the implementation of digital game-based learning (DGBL) in a non-formal English tutoring center. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the objective of the study was not merely to evaluate learning outcomes, but also to capture learners' experiences, perceptions, and interactions during game-based activities. Qualitative thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was therefore adopted to provide an in-depth understanding of how students engaged with the instructional innovation.

The participants of this study were 46 students enrolled in both regular and private English classes at Aesthetic Bimbel Sentul and Karangsari in Blitar, East Java, Indonesia. They ranged in age from 12 to 17 years, representing junior high and senior high school levels. Their English proficiency varied from beginner to intermediate levels, which enabled the researcher to observe how DGBL supported learners across a broad spectrum of abilities. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and consented to take part. To maintain confidentiality, students' names were anonymized in all documentation and reporting.

Several instruments were employed in the data collection process. Pre-tests and post-tests were administered to evaluate vocabulary retention and speaking improvement before and after the introduction of DGBL activities. In addition, digital game platforms such as *Kahoot!*, *Wordwall*, and *Word Chain Board Race* were integrated into the lessons because of their accessibility, adaptability, and effectiveness in vocabulary practice. Semi-structured interviews

were conducted with students after the game sessions in order to capture their reflections on the learning process, motivation, and the challenges they encountered. Furthermore, field notes were compiled by the tutor, who also acted as the researcher, to document classroom dynamics, student engagement, and non-verbal responses observed during game-based sessions.

The procedures followed in the implementation of DGBL were systematically structured. Each session began with an orientation in which the tutor introduced the objectives of the game, explained its rules, and modeled relevant vocabulary or expressions. Students then participated in the game activities for approximately 15 to 20 minutes, either individually or in groups, depending on the instructional design. After each gaming session, students engaged in a debriefing and reflection stage, where they discussed their experiences, shared strategies, and practiced target vocabulary in extended speaking activities. Selected students were also interviewed to provide more detailed reflections on their learning process and emotional responses to the games.

Data analysis was carried out using the six phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researcher began by familiarizing herself with the data, reading and re-reading interview transcripts and observation notes. Next, initial codes were generated to identify key ideas related to learner engagement, motivation, and challenges. These codes were then grouped into broader categories to form potential themes. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and consistency with the research questions. Each theme was defined and named, capturing distinct aspects of learners' experiences such as motivation, vocabulary retention, enthusiasm, and speaking confidence. Finally, the themes were reported with illustrative quotes from students, accompanied by interpretive analysis.

Through the triangulation of data from tests, interviews, observations, and reflective field notes, the study sought to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of its findings. This methodological rigor ensured that the conclusions drawn were not only grounded in the data but also representative of the varied experiences of the participants.

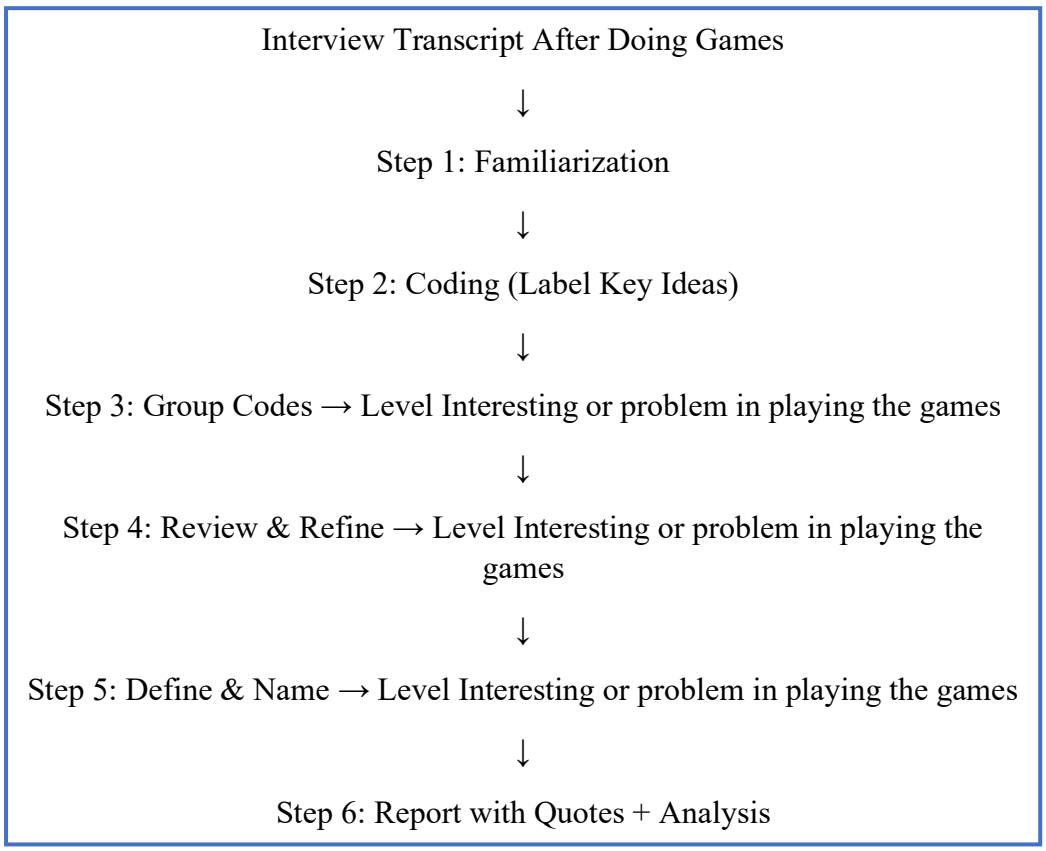

Figure 2. Thematic Analysis after playing the games

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of classroom observations, interviews, and student reflections revealed four major themes that highlight the effectiveness of digital game-based learning (DGBL) in non-formal English tutoring contexts. These themes are related to students' motivation, vocabulary retention, enthusiasm, and speaking confidence. Each theme is elaborated below and discussed in relation to previous research and theoretical perspectives.

4.1 Motivation

The findings show that students' motivation increased significantly when digital games were integrated into the lessons. Learners who were initially passive became more engaged, especially when games involved scoring systems or leaderboards. One student expressed, *"At first I didn't want to participate, but when I saw the scoreboard, I became more active just to compete with my friends."* This reflects the motivational impact of gamification elements such as points and competition, which transform learning into an enjoyable challenge.

This result resonates with Chen (2021), who found that DGBL enhances learners' self-efficacy and reduces anxiety by reframing learning as a playful activity. Similarly, Sun and Hsieh (2020) demonstrated that gamified response systems increase students' attention and performance by providing immediate feedback. In the present study, the motivational boost was particularly valuable because the sessions were conducted in a tutoring center where students often attended after formal school hours and were prone to fatigue. By sustaining motivation, games helped learners to remain attentive and invested in the learning process.

4.2 Vocabulary Retention

Another key finding was the improvement in vocabulary retention. Students were able to recall and apply new words more effectively after repeated exposure during gameplay. For instance, when practicing with the verb *get*, learners not only memorized its meaning but also experimented with different sentence structures such as *"I get some books"* or *"He gets his phone back."* This demonstrates how playful repetition in games supported both form recognition and contextual usage of vocabulary.

These observations align with Rahimi and Zhang's (2023) meta-analysis, which confirmed that DGBL enhances vocabulary learning because it embeds repetition and feedback within engaging contexts. The results also support Hung's (2022) claim that contextualized practice in games deepens learners' understanding of word meanings. In this study, learners showed signs of transferability by using newly acquired vocabulary in subsequent speaking

activities outside the game session, suggesting that DGBL fostered durable learning.

4.3 Enthusiasm

The study also highlighted the emotional dimension of learning, particularly students' enthusiasm during and after gameplay. Learners expressed excitement when games were announced, with one noting, *"When the teacher said we would play a game, our eyes immediately lit up. We even reminded her, 'Don't forget the game, Miss!'"* Such responses indicate that games created anticipation and joy, which contributed to a positive learning atmosphere.

This finding echoes Khasanah and Ningsih (2022), who observed that learners in community-based programs demonstrated heightened enthusiasm when interactive applications were incorporated into lessons. From the perspective of engagement theory (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998), enthusiasm is a critical component of emotional engagement that sustains active participation and reduces negative attitudes toward learning. In this study, enthusiasm was not merely a byproduct of entertainment but also a catalyst for deeper engagement with the learning content.

4.4 Speaking Confidence

Perhaps one of the most significant outcomes was the enhancement of speaking confidence. Learners who were previously hesitant to speak began to participate more actively when games provided a low-pressure environment. Because the focus was on winning or completing tasks rather than avoiding mistakes, students felt safer to try speaking without fear of failure. A learner remarked simply, *"It was fun!"*, suggesting that enjoyment replaced anxiety as the dominant emotion during speaking practice.

This result aligns with Fithriani (2020), who found that DGBL increased willingness to communicate among Indonesian learners by reducing speaking anxiety. It also supports Swain's (2005) *output hypothesis*, which argues that producing language in meaningful contexts helps learners identify gaps in their knowledge and refine their language skills. By embedding speaking practice into

gameplay, learners were encouraged to experiment with language, leading to gradual improvements in fluency and confidence.

4.5 Discussion and Implications

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that DGBL is effective in promoting motivation, vocabulary retention, enthusiasm, and speaking confidence in non-formal English tutoring contexts. They reinforce the theoretical framework of this study, which draws on constructivism, gamification, engagement theory, communicative language teaching, and self-determination theory. For example, the motivational effects observed align with self-determination theory, as games fulfilled learners' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Similarly, the collaborative and competitive aspects of games supported engagement theory by creating meaningful, interactive learning experiences.

The findings also highlight the irreplaceable role of the tutor. Although technology provided the medium, it was the tutor's scaffolding that ensured learning objectives were achieved. The tutor explained rules, modeled language use, and provided step-by-step support for hesitant learners, in line with OECD's (2020) assertion that teacher interaction shapes meaningful learning experiences. Thus, DGBL should not be viewed as a replacement for teaching but as a tool that enhances the pedagogical effectiveness of tutors in non-formal education.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the implementation of digital game-based learning (DGBL) in a non-formal English tutoring center in Blitar, Indonesia. By analyzing the experiences of 46 students through pre-tests, post-tests, interviews, and classroom observations, four major themes were identified: increased motivation, improved vocabulary retention, heightened enthusiasm, and greater speaking confidence. The findings demonstrate that DGBL is not only an engaging instructional method but also an effective pedagogical strategy that aligns entertainment with learning objectives.

The results affirm that DGBL supports young learners in overcoming common barriers such as boredom, anxiety, and limited vocabulary exposure. Importantly, the games created a safe environment for communication, where learners were more willing to take risks and use English actively. Beyond the use of technology, the study underscores the indispensable role of the tutor as a facilitator who guides learners, scaffolds understanding, and ensures that pedagogical goals remain central to gameplay.

5.2 Implications

The findings have several practical and theoretical implications. For English tutors in non-formal contexts, this study provides evidence that digital games can be seamlessly integrated into tutoring sessions without requiring sophisticated resources. Applications such as *Kahoot!* and *Wordwall* are accessible, adaptable, and highly effective in motivating learners. Tutors are encouraged to incorporate game-based tasks not as isolated activities but as part of a structured instructional cycle that includes orientation, gameplay, and reflection.

At the theoretical level, the results support constructivist and engagement-oriented perspectives by showing that learners construct knowledge more effectively when actively involved in meaningful, interactive tasks. The motivational impact observed also lends credence to self-determination theory, as learners experienced autonomy, competence, and relatedness during gameplay. For policymakers and educators, the findings highlight the potential of non-formal education as a laboratory for innovation, complementing formal schooling with flexible, learner-centered approaches.

5.3 Limitations

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small and limited to one learning center in Blitar, which constrains the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied on qualitative data and short-term observations; therefore, it cannot fully capture the long-term impact of DGBL on learners' proficiency. Third, the dual role of the researcher as both tutor and data collector may have introduced bias, as students' responses could have been influenced by their familiarity with the tutor.

5.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies could address these limitations in several ways. Larger-scale research involving multiple tutoring centers across different regions would provide broader insights into the effectiveness of DGBL in diverse non-formal contexts. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine the sustained impact of digital games on vocabulary development, fluency, and learner autonomy. Furthermore, comparative studies between different types of digital games, such as role-playing games versus quiz-based applications, could reveal which genres are most effective for particular language skills. Finally, incorporating perspectives from parents and fellow tutors would enrich the understanding of how DGBL is perceived and supported within the wider ecosystem of non-formal education.

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