

COLLEGE STUDENTS' VIEWS ON USING ONLINE GAMES TO IMPROVE ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS

Sonia Wulandayanti¹, Suciana Wijirahayu², Siswana³

Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Prof. DR HAMKA,
Indonesia¹²³

soniawulandayanti69@gmail.com¹, sucianawijirahayu@uhamka.ac.id²,
siswana@uhamka.ac.id³

Abstract

Online games have recently transformed from simple entertainment platforms into interactive environments that provide immersive experiences and significant language exposure for English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners. This qualitative study explores how English-language online games impact the speaking skills of Indonesian EFL scholars. Recognizing online games as immersive language environments, we interviewed five purposively selected English majors who regularly use English in these platforms. Semi-structured interviews (10-15 minutes each) utilized seven open-ended questions covering speaking habits, confidence, vocabulary development, communication challenges, and overall evaluation of gaming as a speaking tool. Despite encountering some obstacles, all participants unanimously affirmed that online gaming significantly contributed to their speaking improvement. This study highlights the potential of online games as powerful, informal instruments for boosting English communicative competence. Findings advocate for integrating online games into language learning settings that prioritize learner autonomy, motivation, and practical language application.

Keywords: Online games; EFL; Learner perceptions; English speaking ability

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, online games have evolved from purely recreational tools into a pervasive part of daily life, particularly among teenagers and young adults. For English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners, these games provide a rich, immersive, and informal environment where language skills—especially speaking—can develop through authentic interactions. As Zheng et al. (2020) note, online multiplayer games foster linguistic immersion by exposing players to natural language use during gameplay, particularly through voice chats and cooperative missions that demand verbal communication. This shift toward game-mediated learning has increasingly captivated TEFL researchers seeking innovative approaches to speaking instruction. The current era emphasizes self-directed learning and the integration of digital tools, aligning with broader trends in education, as seen in studies exploring digital resource consumption (Wijirahayu, Nurmaulida, & Fathin, 2025).

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most challenging skills to acquire in EFL contexts due to its spontaneous nature, real-time processing demands, and a high affective filter, particularly within formal classroom settings (Bailey & Savage, 1994; Nation & Newton, 2009). However, online games offer a more relaxed and authentic setting for language use, effectively reducing the pressure learners often experience in traditional classrooms. In many online multiplayer games—such as role-playing games (RPGs), battle royales, or simulation games—players must interact with others using English, whether via text or voice. These interactions compel players to formulate utterances quickly, negotiate meaning, respond to teammates, and articulate strategies, thereby providing meaningful opportunities for spontaneous English use (Peterson, 2016; Wijirahayu et al. 2024).

The affordances of online games as informal language-learning environments have been substantiated by various studies. For instance, Reinders and Wattana (2014) discovered that Thai EFL learners engaging in MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) reported increased confidence and fluency in spoken English. Their study emphasized how the

gaming environment created conditions for real-time interaction, lowered speaking anxiety, and supported learner autonomy. Similarly, Li and Chu (2021) reported significant improvements in fluency and oral accuracy over a semester among students who used English in voice-based games. These findings collectively suggest that online games can serve as a powerful platform for informal speaking practice, offering spontaneous and contextualized input and output.

Moreover, online games have been found to foster intrinsic motivation, which is crucial for successful language learning. According to Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory, learners are more likely to engage with tasks when they are enjoyable, meaningful, and self-directed. In this regard, games fulfil all three criteria. Su and Cheng (2015) observed that students playing role-based digital games demonstrated increased willingness to communicate (WTC) and greater linguistic creativity. The game environment provided immediate feedback, challenge, and social interaction—all contributing to higher speaking engagement.

Another benefit of using online games in speaking development is their potential to provide task-based learning opportunities. Many games include missions or goals that require collaboration, negotiation, or problem-solving, thereby generating rich discourse and prompting learners to use language functionally. Ahn and Lee (2020) emphasized that such game-based tasks mirror Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles, particularly those related to real-world communication and meaningful output. In multiplayer scenarios, learners must engage in back-and-forth conversation, request clarification, give instructions, and manage turn-taking, all of which are essential components of spoken fluency.

Beyond fluency, online games can also enhance learners' communicative competence—the ability to use language appropriately across various contexts. Çiftçi and Oktay (2021) conducted interviews with Turkish EFL learners and found that regular engagement in English-language games helped students develop better discourse strategies, such as topic maintenance, conversational repair, and appropriate use of expressions. These learners reported that speaking during games felt "natural" and "non-judgmental," which enabled them to take more linguistic risks. Additionally, digital games have been shown to reduce speaking anxiety, a major barrier to spoken language development. Horwitz et al. (1986) explain that language anxiety often leads to silence, avoidance, and low performance in speaking tasks. In contrast, the immersive and low-stakes nature of gaming allows learners to speak without fear of evaluation. This was confirmed in a study by Chik (2014), which found that teenage learners who played English-language games felt more comfortable experimenting with spoken English than they did in the classroom.

Despite these well-documented advantages, the field still lacks in-depth qualitative research exploring how learners themselves perceive and experience the speaking opportunities offered by online games. Most prior research has focused on quantitative outcomes such as test scores or vocabulary acquisition (e.g., Li, 2021; Patra & Mahadewi, 2022), while the affective, cognitive, and social dimensions of game-mediated speaking have not been sufficiently addressed. Deckert et al. (2024) specifically highlighted that user-centred perspectives remain underrepresented in game-based language research, particularly concerning speaking skills.

Furthermore, few studies have examined how cultural and educational contexts influence learners' perceptions of game-based speaking practice. For example, Indonesian learners—who may be accustomed to more teacher-centered instruction—might view speaking in online games as either liberating or unfamiliar. Aprilia and Nasekhah (2023) note that while gamification can enhance student participation in grammar instruction, its effects on oral language production require more contextualized exploration. The relevance of understanding self-directed learning and digital tool usage in diverse educational settings, particularly for future educators, is further underscored by recent studies on mobile audio-podcast consumption (Wijirahayu, Nurmaulida, & Fathin, 2025) and the adoption of grammar-checking tools among pre-service teachers (Wijirahayu, Suheri, & Hartati, 2025).

This study directly responds to these gaps by exploring the perceptions of TEFL students regarding the use of online games to improve their English speaking skills. Through qualitative

methods such as interviews, the study aims to investigate how learners interpret their experiences, what speaking strategies they employ in games, and what emotional and motivational factors shape their engagement. By giving voice to learners' own narratives, this research seeks to contribute new insights to the field of digital game-based learning in EFL contexts, particularly from the standpoint of speaking development.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research design to delve into TEFL students' perceptions regarding the use of online games for enhancing their English speaking skills. A qualitative approach was selected to gain in-depth insights into participants' personal experiences, motivations, and reflections on engaging with English in informal settings, such as online gaming. This methodology allowed for the exploration of speaking-related behaviours and learner attitudes that are best understood through rich, descriptive accounts rather than purely numerical data.

Participants and Data Collection

Data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews with TEFL students. Each interview spanned approximately 10 to 15 minutes and was conducted in either Indonesian or English, based on the participant's comfort and preference. This flexible approach aimed to facilitate authentic responses.

The interviews utilized seven open-ended questions meticulously designed to probe various aspects of their speaking experiences. These questions explored their speaking habits during gameplay, vocabulary acquisition, self-reported confidence levels, specific challenges encountered, and their overall perception of how online gaming influences their English speaking proficiency. Representative questions included: "How do you feel when speaking English during gameplay?", "Do you think online games help improve your fluency?", and "What difficulties do you face when communicating in English while playing?"

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded with prior participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data underwent thematic analysis. This analytical approach was employed to systematically identify recurring patterns, key ideas, and emergent themes across the participants' responses. The goal was to construct a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how online gaming environments contribute to the informal development of English speaking skills among TEFL students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative data gathered from interviews with TEFL students revealed six key themes regarding their perceptions of using online games to enhance English speaking skills. These themes highlight the various ways online gaming environments contribute to informal language learning, as well as the challenges encountered by learners, offering valuable insights into the intersection of digital leisure and language acquisition.

Result

Specifically, respondents mentioned playing games such as Dragon Nest, Genshin Impact, and Mobile Legends, all of which necessitate real-time communication among players. Table 1 summarizes these six themes identified from the data.

Table 1

Summary of Themes on College Students' Perceptions of Online Games for English Speaking Skills

Theme	Sub-theme	Respondent Quotation	Frequency
Speaking Practice	Voice chat usage	"I use voice chat when I play with international players to coordinate the game."	4
	Text-based communication	"If I don't use the <u>mic</u> , I usually type in English using short commands."	5
Confidence in Speaking	Feeling nervous	"At first, I was shy to speak, but now I'm more confident."	3
Vocabulary Improvement	Comfortable and spontaneous speaking	"When I play often, I start speaking without thinking too much about grammar."	2
	Learning new words from games	"I often find new words and try to say them while playing with others."	4
	Game-related phrases are remembered easily	"Phrases like 'attack now' or 'cover me' stick in my head because I use them a lot."	5
Fluency Development	Speaking becomes faster	"I feel I can speak faster and <u>smoother</u> when gaming regularly."	3
	Real-time reaction practice	"Games help me think and respond quickly in English conversations."	2
Speaking Challenges	Lack of vocabulary	"Sometimes I don't know the right word, so I just use body language or <u>emojis</u> ."	3
	Fear of making mistakes	"I'm scared of being laughed at if I say the wrong thing."	2
Perception of Impact	Positive influence on speaking skill	"I feel my speaking improved a lot since I started playing English games."	5
	Games as motivation to speak English	"Gaming makes learning English fun. I want to speak well to be a	4

Discussion

The majority of participants reported actively engaging in English speaking practice during gameplay, primarily through voice chat or typed messages. This finding underscores that online games offer an authentic and immediate context for spoken interaction, far removed from traditional classroom settings.

Speaking Practice Through Games

As one participant articulated, "I use voice chat when I play with international players to coordinate the game," illustrating how the intrinsic demands of gameplay necessitate instant communication and provide a genuine, task-based motivation to speak English. This observation resonates powerfully with previous research by Lo (2024), who emphasized that gamified environments significantly increase learner engagement and make speaking feel more natural and purposeful. Participants frequently noted that speaking English within games felt "less formal" and more "spontaneous," thereby enabling them to practice without the typical anxieties and pressures associated with formal classroom speaking activities. This informal, low-stakes environment appears to be a crucial factor in encouraging consistent oral production.

Building Confidence in Speaking

Confidence building emerged as a significant and recurring theme among the participants. Several students shared that while they initially felt nervous speaking English with other players, they gradually became more comfortable and uninhibited over time. For example, one participant stated, "At first, I was shy to speak, but now I'm more confident." Another added, "When I play often, I start speaking without thinking too much about grammar," pointing towards a developing fluency and reduced self-monitoring. This aligns with the notion that frequent, low-stakes speaking opportunities inherent in online games contribute to reduced affective filters and increased self-confidence—a finding consistent with Li (2021), who observed that game-based learning environments effectively enhance motivation and willingness to communicate among EFL learners. The iterative nature of game interaction provides a safe space for experimentation, allowing confidence to grow organically.

Vocabulary Improvement in Context

Participants consistently reported encountering and acquiring new vocabulary within the rich, contextualized environments of gameplay. A common strategy involved the repetition of phrases frequently heard during their gaming sessions, indicating an implicit learning process. One learner shared, "Phrases like 'cover me' or 'watch out' stick in my head because I use them a lot," demonstrating how highly recurrent, functional language becomes internalized. Another noted, "I often find new words and try to say them while playing with others," suggesting an active attempt to incorporate new lexicon. This directly supports the arguments of Erya and Taloko (2023), who posited that narrative-based and action-driven games facilitate incidental vocabulary acquisition through repeated contextual exposure and meaningful use. The participants' demonstrated ability to not only recognize but also utilize and retain game-specific vocabulary indicates that gameplay provides robust linguistic input, enabling the meaningful and practical learning of spoken English. This contextual learning is often more effective than rote memorization.

Fluency Development

Three participants specifically highlighted improvements in their speaking fluency as a direct result of consistent practice during gameplay. One individual remarked, "I feel I can speak faster and smoother when gaming regularly," indicating an increase in processing speed and automaticity. Another explained, "Games help me think and respond quickly in English conversations," emphasizing the real-time demands of in-game communication. This suggests that the dynamic and spontaneous nature of interactions within games can aid learners in developing not only vocabulary but also their cognitive processing speed and automaticity in spoken English. The fast-paced environment fosters quick turn-taking and spontaneous language production, both of which are crucial components of oral fluency. This kind of rapid-response communication aligns with the practical communication needs that extend beyond gaming, such as those discussed in the context of academic speaking (Wijirahayu, Ananda, Ringo, Yunus, & Sari, 2024).

Speaking Challenges

Despite the noted benefits, participants also identified several speaking challenges. These primarily included a limited vocabulary, the fear of making mistakes, and the concern of being misunderstood. A respondent shared, "Sometimes I don't know the right word, so I just use body language or emojis," illustrating pragmatic communication strategies in the face of lexical gaps. Another candidly expressed, "I'm scared of being laughed at if I say the wrong thing," highlighting the persistent affective barrier of language anxiety. These challenges reflect common difficulties that EFL learners encounter in real-time communication settings, whether in formal or informal contexts. However, it is noteworthy that even when faced with these obstacles, learners demonstrated resilience by employing adaptive strategies—such as code-switching, guessing, or relying on visual cues—to maintain participation in conversations. This highlights their proactive and flexible approach to language use within the gaming environment, showcasing a valuable skill set for self-directed learning.

Overall Perception of Impact on Speaking Skills

Universally, all participants agreed that playing online games had a tangibly positive impact on their English speaking ability. One participant explicitly stated, "I feel my speaking improved a lot since I started playing English games." Another added, "Gaming makes learning English fun. I want to speak well to be a better teammate," underscoring the powerful role of intrinsic motivation and peer interaction. These positive perceptions align well with the findings of Patra & Mahadewi (2022), who underscored how digital games can foster learner autonomy and motivation. The strong perceived connection between gaming and speaking development, as articulated by the learners themselves, strongly supports the view that online games can function as informal, yet highly effective, platforms for language learning, particularly concerning the development of oral proficiency. This further emphasizes the value of informal learning resources in the digital age, much like the role of podcasts in developing listening comprehension skills among pre-service teachers (Wijirahayu, Nurmaulida, & Fathin, 2025), and the general integration of popular culture into language learning contexts (Wijirahayu, Ananda, Ringo, Yunus, & Sari, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that online games offer EFL learners a dynamic and meaningful opportunity to enhance their English speaking skills beyond formal classroom instruction. Participants actively engaged in English communication while playing games, particularly through voice chat and teamwork-based interactions in titles like Dragon Nest, Genshin Impact, and Mobile Legends. These real-time exchanges allowed them to practice speaking in a natural, authentic context—one that unequivocally supports the development of fluency, responsiveness, and confidence.

The thematic findings strongly suggest that online games serve as an effective platform for repeated language exposure and spontaneous language use. Learners consistently reported acquiring new vocabulary, especially functional expressions frequently used in gaming contexts (e.g., commands, strategies, and social interactions). Moreover, several participants indicated that their fluency improved as they adapted to the fast-paced demands of in-game communication. This reflects how digital environments can effectively simulate real communicative situations where learners are required to think and speak English quickly.

In addition, the study clearly shows that students' self-confidence in speaking English increased through their gaming experiences. Initially hesitant, some participants reported gaining the courage to speak more freely over time. This aligns with the understanding that informal environments significantly reduce the pressure typically associated with language performance in academic settings. Although some learners still faced challenges such as limited vocabulary and fear of making mistakes, they notably developed personal coping strategies, such as code-switching or using gestures, demonstrating resilience in communication.

All participants expressed a generally positive perception of the impact of online games on their speaking ability. They viewed gaming not just as a recreational activity but also as an indirect yet potent learning space that genuinely improved their communication skills. These insights strongly support the inclusion of game-based learning as a complementary tool in TEFL contexts, especially for fostering speaking skills in a way that is engaging, learner-driven, and contextually meaningful.

In light of these compelling findings, future research is encouraged to involve larger and more diverse groups of participants, possibly utilizing a mixed-methods approach to compare speaking outcomes with and without gaming exposure. Educators should also actively consider the pedagogical potential of online games, particularly for learners who thrive in informal, interactive, and technology-enhanced learning environments. This study underscores the importance of embracing innovative digital avenues to support language acquisition in the modern era.

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