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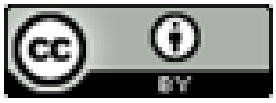

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EDITORIAL TEAM

Foreword

What's in a name?

We are pleased to open this third year of the *ELT Classroom Research Journal* (Volume 3, issue 1) with a brief review of what we are attempting to accomplish here.

We've been asked on several occasions about the journal's scope, how narrowly the title of the journal is interpreted. In grammatical terms, one might ask whether it is a "compound noun" or a "noun phrase" or simply a list of ideas that outline a concept.

We view the title expansively. For example, one of the papers in this issue is not based on an English language learning classroom, but instead a Japanese as a World Language classroom. The principles for language teaching remain common, and the researchers have each taught English in the pas: the challenges and finds apply equally to an English language teaching setting. In the same way, a "classroom" might be virtual (online), could possibly include 1:1 tutoring rather than multiple students learning alongside each other. Our particular interest is teachers researching their own classroom, rather than outside "scholars" "studying" classrooms (see Dickey, 2024). With a focus on the teaching-learning processes, teacher research, including various forms of Action Research and Reflective Practice, are very much key priorities; on the other hand, investigations extending into the broader community of learners, or intensive examinations of language or learner behavior, are less favored.

Our aim is not "scholarly studies" using the academic norms of the early 21st century – heavy citations, intensive methodologies with high replicability & validity which analyze a "gap in the literature" – but rather teacher-driven investigations (explorations?) of their own approaches to facilitating learning. Chaudron (2001) found more than 100 "empirical" studies from classrooms in *The Modern Language Journal* across the years 1916 through 2000, even after excluding studies of learner strategies, CALL, testing, and psycholinguistic experiments, so clearly there is a history here. Yet we seek more than just studies *from* the classroom, instead, as Allwright (1983) argued, classroom-*centered* research. Teachers clearly fall in the "subjectivists" column, as Allwright (1983) described the issue, rather than a "scientific" objectivist approach to generalizable findings. Anderson and Smith (2026) propose a research continuum that recognizes "self-directed inquiry by a teacher for their own professional purposes" (2). Such an arrangement affects readers: Impact Factor and CiteScore are less important to classroom teachers than relevance (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014) and readability. This is perhaps one of the reasons teachers don't make reading the academic literature a significant part of their professional development (Borg, 2009; Medgyes, 2017; see also Broemmel et al, 2019; Kwakman, 2003; Mour, 1977). Similarly, we recognize issues of "library poverty" for many teachers, and aim to make teacher-research widely accessible – through our own open-access papers, citing other open-access papers.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue of *ELT Classroom Research Journal*, share the publication with others, and we warmly invite you to consider sharing your own classroom investigations with our readers.

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Enhancing EFL Learners' Motivation and Engagement Through Digital Gamified Learning in EMI Classrooms

Haiyan Cai
Wenzhou – Kean University
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5151-6596

Andrew Jocuns
Wenzhou – Kean University
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6787-4613

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Abstract

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) classrooms often face challenges such as linguistic anxiety, unfamiliar instructional practices, and high participation demands. This classroom-based study applied Elliott's (1991) reflective action research model to investigate how technology-integrated gamified learning supports learners' motivation and multidimensional engagement in an intensive EMI bridging course at a Sino-foreign university in China. Drawing on Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System and Fredricks et al.'s (2004) multidimensional engagement framework, a mixed-methods design was employed, including pre- and post-questionnaires, classroom observations, reflective teaching journals, and semi-structured student interviews. Gamified activities, such as Kahoot and Quizizz, were embedded in instruction to promote interaction, participation, and learner autonomy. Descriptive comparisons of questionnaire data showed that students maintained high motivation and engagement, with slight changes reflecting experience-informed judgments. Qualitative findings provided deeper insights into learners' engagement and experiences, highlighting the practical value of gamified learning compared with non-gamified learning environments. Overall, the study offers implications for designing context-sensitive, motivating, and engaging EMI EFL courses in higher education, and provides recommendations for optimizing future English bridging programs.

Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in China has traditionally emphasized reading, writing, and linguistic accuracy often at the expense of oral communication and interactive language use. While such approaches support examination performance, they may limit

learners' communicative competence and reduce sustained motivation and classroom engagement (Lamb, 2017). These limitations are especially pronounced in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) programs, where students are expected to listen, speak, and collaborate in English across academic and social contexts. For learners transitioning from Chinese public high schools to an EMI university, this shift can produce a pronounced language learning "shock", highlighting the need for transitional supports, such as English bridging programs, which scaffold both academic and linguistic adjustment.

Contemporary Chinese EFL learners, mostly Gen Z, are accustomed to interactive digital environments. Gamified learning, which integrates game design elements into non-game educational contexts, has emerged as a promising pedagogical strategy (Panmei & Waluyo, 2023). Systematic reviews have confirmed that gamification can significantly enhance motivation (Ashfiah et al., 2025), engagement (Zhang & Crawford, 2024), and learning outcomes (Tsai, 2024) in EFL and ESL contexts. Empirical studies also showed that technology-integrated game-based tools, such as Kahoot, could improve classroom interaction and learner engagement from teacher perspectives in English language teaching settings (Tampubolon et al., 2025). In EMI bridging contexts, gamification could help learners overcome initial learning "shock" (Panmei & Waluyo, 2023), reduce language anxiety (Tsai, 2024), and encourage participation at the start of a course while sustaining motivation and engagement over time. Gamified interventions, including Duolingo and Quizizz, have been found to foster self-efficacy (Yang & Ying, 2026), learner autonomy, and reading performance (Zhang & Crawford, 2024), particularly in short-term, technology-integrated EFL courses.

Despite growing interest in gamified learning, relatively few studies have explored its application in authentic EMI classroom practice, particularly in short-term bridging programs. There is also limited research adopting an action research perspective that integrates teacher reflection, iterative adjustments, and learner feedback. These considerations point to practical challenges and concerns for investigating how gamified learning can support motivation and engagement in context-specific EMI classrooms in higher education.

The present study addresses these opportunities by investigating a technology-integrated gamified learning intervention in an EMI bridging course at a Sino-foreign university. The study draws on Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System and Fredricks et al.'s (2004) multidimensional engagement framework and employs Elliott's (1991) reflective action research model to integrate quantitative and qualitative data. Gamification is treated not as a fixed technique but as a dynamic, learner-centered process shaped through classroom interaction and reflective practice.

The study is guided by two research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does gamified learning influence EFL learners' motivation and multidimensional engagement in an EMI context?

RQ2: What pedagogical affordances and constraints emerge from the implementation of gamified learning in EMI classrooms, and how can its design be optimized?

Methods

Study Context

The study was conducted at a Sino-foreign cooperative university located in eastern China, which offers English-Medium Instruction (EMI) courses from undergraduate to doctoral levels, providing an immersive academic environment. The bridging program is a free, two-week pre-semester preparatory course from the university designed to help Chinese freshmen adapt to EMI and the Western-style curriculum, strengthen their English proficiency, and increase their confidence in participating in academic courses. The program also familiarizes students with academic expectations, classroom routines, and learning strategies commonly used in EMI courses. Students receive four hours of English instruction each day, excluding additional self-study and homework time. The instructors are faculty selected from the university's international academic staff, representing diverse national backgrounds. The Bridging Program curriculum focuses on overall academic skills and collaborative tasks, serving as a mini rehearsal for the demands of their upcoming semester.

Participants

The study involved 28 freshmen (16 female, 12 male) enrolled in an intensive English bridging program as they transitioned from a public English learning environment to an EMI program. All participants were EFL learners preparing for various STEM-related undergraduate majors and had previously studied English under the Chinese national curriculum, meeting the program's English requirement of at least 105/150 on the China National University Entrance Exam, roughly equivalent to IELTS 6.0 or TOEFL iBT 79. Their English proficiency ranged from intermediate to upper-intermediate (B1 and above, CEFR), with 6 to 15 years of English learning experience (average 11.5 years). Students came from over 20 cities across China, providing broad regional representation. The program offered instruction in English language and academic skills, and prior to data collection, participants were fully informed of the study's purpose and procedures. Ethical guidelines were strictly followed to ensure voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity.

Instruments and Data Sets

Pre- and post-intervention questionnaires

Students' motivation and engagement were measured using pre- and post-intervention questionnaires (see Appendices A & B) specifically designed for this study. The questionnaires included items assessing multidimensional engagement (behavioural, cognitive, and emotional) based on Fredricks et al.'s (2004) framework, as well as L2 motivational components informed by Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Twenty-eight participants completed the pre-intervention questionnaire, which provided baseline measures for instructional planning and reflected students' initial attitudes toward English learning. Twenty-one participants completed the post-intervention questionnaire, as some were absent due to illness, and participation was voluntary. These post-intervention responses captured changes in motivation and engagement after participating in the gamified learning activities.

Classroom observations

During the Bridging Program, structured classroom observations (see Appendix C) were conducted to capture participants' behavioural engagement, interaction patterns, and responses to gamified learning activities. Observations were guided by a standardized protocol, recording participation frequency, collaborative interactions, and evidence of cognitive engagement such as problem-solving or strategy use. These observational data complemented questionnaire results and provided contextual insight into classroom dynamics.

Reflective teaching logs

The researcher-instructor (the first author) maintained daily reflective logs (see Appendix D) throughout the intervention. Logs documented instructional decisions, student responses, challenges encountered, and emerging patterns in engagement and motivation. These qualitative notes supported interpretation of both questionnaire and observational data and facilitated continuous refinement of instructional strategies in line with action research principles (Elliott, 1991).

Semi-structured group interviews

Following the intervention, semi-structured group interviews (see Appendix E) were conducted with twenty-three participants (four groups) to explore their perceptions of the gamified learning experience. Interview questions focused on motivational transformations, engagement experiences, pedagogical affordances and constraints, and suggestions for optimizing future gamified learning activities. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed to identify recurring themes and insights into participants' experiences.

Procedure

The intervention and data collection were carried out both during and outside of class throughout the Bridging Program, following five stages (Figure 1). Stage 1 (Day 1) involved orientation and completion of a pre-questionnaire. Stages 2 and 3 (Day 1–Day 10) consisted of initial instruction and skill practice through gamified activities, with classroom observations and teaching reflection logs maintained to provide ongoing insight into learners' engagement and experiences. Stage 4 (Day 3–Day 9) included group interviews to capture learners' reflections, and Stage 5 (Day 10) involved the post-questionnaire. Triangulation of data minimized potential researcher bias and ensured that learners' perspectives remained central to the analysis.

During instructional time, gamified learning tools were systematically integrated into classroom activities to support specific learning objectives, as summarized in Table 1. These digital tools were employed in a progressive sequence throughout the program to enhance motivation, collaborative engagement, and academic skill development. For instance, Kahoot! was used to review content and stimulate competition, Quizizz reinforced core skills, such as plagiarism awareness, note-taking, and punctuation, through team-based exercises, and H5P interactive modules facilitated decision-making and scenario-based tasks, Canvas supported digital literacy and academic organization.

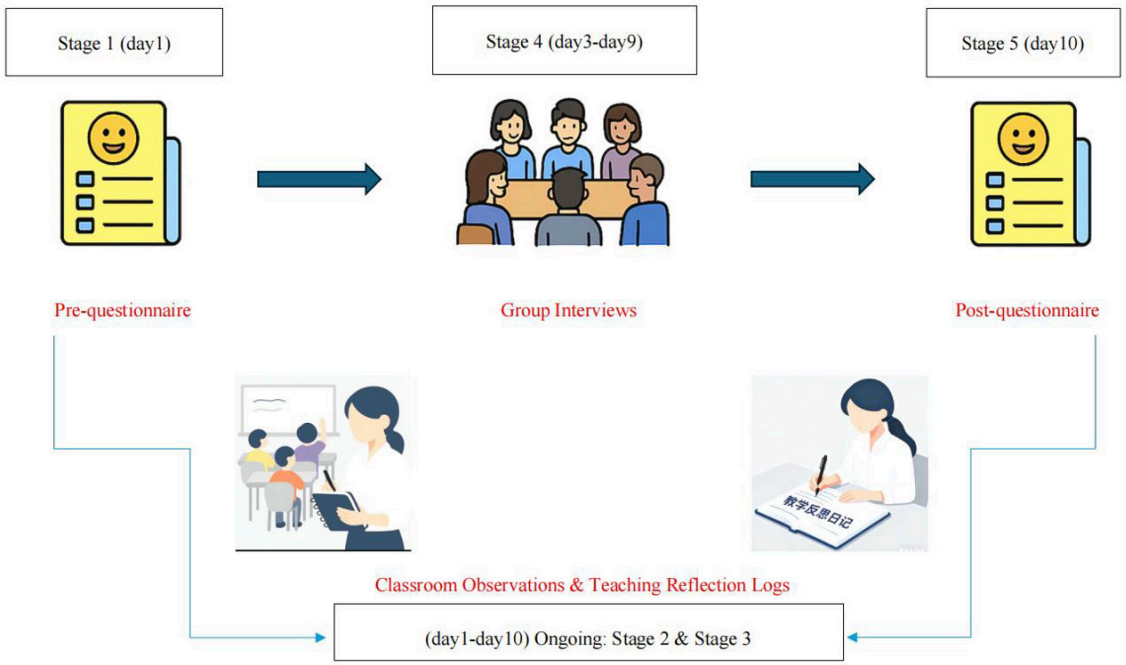

Figure 1.
Data Collection Sequence Across the Action Research

Table 1.
Digital Gamified Tools Used in the Intervention

Day	Digital Tool	Purpose	Duration / Frequency
2	Kahoot!	Team-based quiz to review Day 1 content (crossing-culture, university expectations)	15–20 min
4	Quizizz	Formative review of plagiarism, note-taking, and presentation skills	10–15 min
5	H5P Virtual + Real Scavenger Hunt	Interactive campus exploration with quizzes; submission via WeChat, Padlet, or Goose Chase	100–110 min
6	NYT Image Prompts	Online visual prompts to practice inference-making and collaborative discussion	45–50 min
7	Canvas Platform	Submission of annotated readings, organization of course folders, and practice of digital literacy skills	55–60 min
8	H5P Branching Scenario: Office Hours	Decision-based interactive scenario; students recorded choices in a graphic organizer and shared findings in teams	45–50 min

Data Analyses

Quantitative questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, to examine changes in motivation and engagement over the intensive English bridging program. Given the small sample size and the exploratory nature of classroom-based action research, inferential statistics were not employed. Qualitative data,

comprising interview transcripts, observation notes, and reflective teaching logs, were analyzed thematically through iterative coding. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative findings guided reflective instructional decisions and informed ongoing optimizations.

Results and Discussion

This classroom-based action research study was conducted in response to the adjustment challenges that EFL learners often experience in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) classrooms. In Sino-foreign higher education programs in China, students frequently encounter linguistic anxiety, unfamiliar instructional practices, and higher expectations for active classroom participation (Ou, Hult, & Gu, 2022). These challenges are partly shaped by differences between Chinese and Western teaching approaches and classroom interaction norms, which may create difficulties for learners transitioning into EMI learning environments.

To address these classroom realities, the present study implemented a technology-integrated gamified learning intervention within an intensive EMI bridging course. The intervention aimed to explore practical ways of supporting learners' motivation and engagement while facilitating their adaptation to interactive EMI classroom practices. Drawing on both quantitative questionnaire data and qualitative evidence from interviews, classroom observations, and reflective teaching journals, the study examined how digital gamified tools functioned within this instructional context.

Overall, the findings suggest that the integration of digital gamified tools supported sustained levels of learner motivation while encouraging behavioural, cognitive, emotional, and social engagement during classroom activities. At the same time, the results also revealed several pedagogical affordances and constraints that may influence how gamified learning is implemented in EMI classrooms. Although the study was situated in a specific Sino-foreign bridging program, the insights generated may offer useful pedagogical references for similar EMI courses in higher education, particularly in joint-degree or transnational education programs.

(RQ1) Effects of Gamified Learning on Motivation and Multidimensional Engagement

To address the first research question (RQ1) and examine the effects of gamified learning on learners' motivation and engagement, quantitative results were analyzed. As shown in Table 2, the pre- and post-intervention mean scores and standard deviations for both constructs are presented. Participants entered the program with relatively high levels of motivation and engagement. Following the gamified intervention, mean scores showed slight decreases, and standard deviations increased, reflecting greater variability in participants' responses over time.

Table 2.
Pre–Post Comparison of Motivation and Engagement

Construct	Pre-Mean	Post-Mean	Pre-SD	Post-SD
Motivation	4.72	4.48	0.44	0.66
Engagement	4.56	4.24	0.49	0.75

To provide a clearer visual comparison of trends and changes, Figures 2 and 3 entail the pre–post mean scores and standard deviations in line and bar graph formats, respectively.

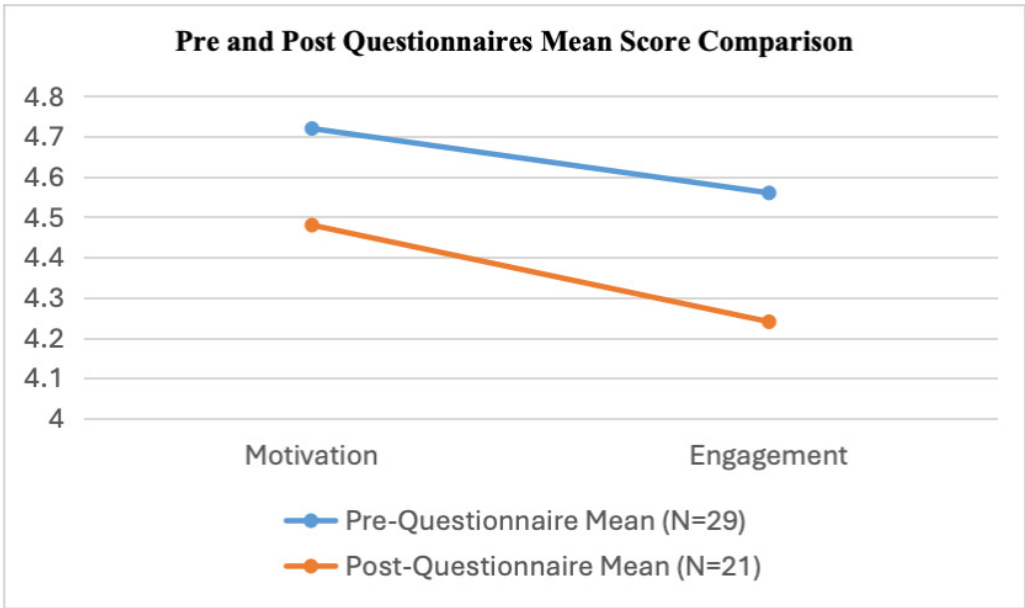

Figure 2.
Pre- and Post- Questionnaires Mean Score

Rather than indicating a substantial decline, the overall mean scores remained high (above 4.2 out of 5), demonstrating that learners maintained high levels of motivation and engagement following the gamified intervention. The observed increase in standard deviations likely reflected individual differences and the novelty of the gamified activities, rather than a reduction in overall engagement. In particular, variability in learners' responses to gamified learning, as evidenced by interview data, reflected differences in individual engagement, with some participants responding more positively than others. This variability contributed to the increased post-intervention score dispersion and suggests a normalization process, in which initial novelty-driven enthusiasm gradually stabilized into more contextually grounded and sustainable forms of motivation and engagement.

Qualitative evidence provided insight into the motivational transformation observed during the gamified intervention. The analysis was guided by Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System, which comprises three interrelated constructs: Ought-to L2 Self (external obligations and responsibilities), Ideal L2 Self (learners' aspirational vision of themselves as future competent language users), and L2 Learning Experience. As shown in Table 3, participants initially engaged in activities primarily out of group responsibility and external expectations (Ought-to L2 Self) but gradually shifted toward aspiration-oriented engagement aligned with their Ideal L2 Self. For example, learners first coordinated to ensure all group members' involvement (Quote 2) and strived to avoid letting their teams down and secure higher scores (Quote 4), both rooted in obligation-based external motivation. As the intervention progressed, they moved to aspiring to become competent English users for flexible real-world communication (Quotes 12 & 13), reflecting a clear transition from obligation-driven participation to motivation anchored in personal language identity and their future-oriented Ideal L2 Self.

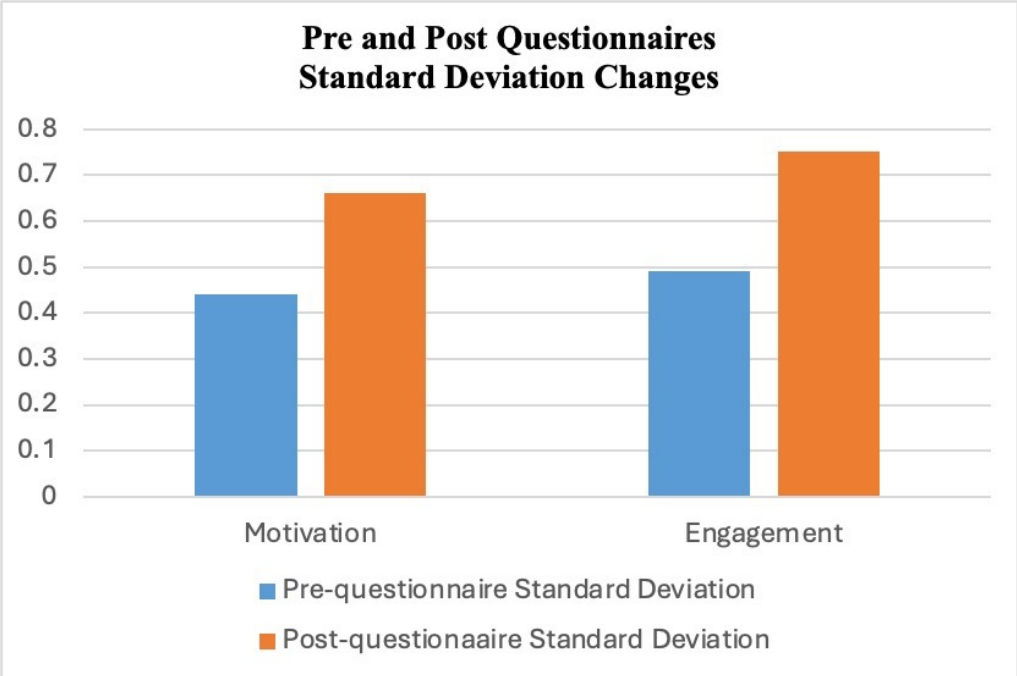

Figure 3.
Pre- and Post-Questionnaires Standard Deviation

Learners' direct experiences with gamified activities (L2 Learning Experience) further facilitated this shift. Interactive tasks encouraged participation and reduced anxiety, fostering confidence in using English (see Quotes 7 & 8 in Table 3). Enjoyable and achievement-oriented elements of the program promoted autonomous learning and intrinsic motivation (see Quotes 10 & 11). Additionally, competitive mechanisms, team-based challenges, and authentic tasks reinforced learners' commitment to continuous improvement, connecting classroom practice with future-oriented language identities (see Quotes 12, 13 & 16).

Taken together, these findings suggest that digital gamified learning supported the internalization of motivation by linking classroom activities to learners' Ideal L2 Self and meaningful learning experiences. The structured progression from external obligation to personally meaningful engagement illustrates how digital gamified tools can strengthen learners' initial motivation and facilitate a shift from externally driven expectations toward more aspirational and self-directed forms of language learning. Such motivational developments provided an important foundation for learners' subsequent classroom participation.

Building on this motivational transformation, gamified learning also positively influenced learners' overall engagement in the EMI classroom. Students demonstrated active participation, enthusiasm, and collaboration, suggesting that gamified activities fostered a dynamic and interactive learning environment. These patterns of participation were reflected across multiple dimensions of engagement, including behavioural, emotional, cognitive, and social aspects, which are examined in the following paragraphs.

Table 3.
Enhancing Motivation Through Gamified L2 Learning Experience

Quote No.	Source (G=Group, S=Speaker)	Quote Content	Theoretical Affiliation	Corresponding Argument
1	G4:S3	"Share mistakes collectively and catch up with scores together." "In Shandong Province, we mostly learn silent English; gamified activities let us practice listening and speaking."	Ought-to L2 Self	Obligation-driven participation; group responsibility Aligned with academic requirements, external expectations
2	G1:S2	"Coordinating to ensure every member's involvement."	Ought-to L2 Self	Obligation-driven participation; group responsibility
3	G2:S4	"I didn't want to let my group down, so I focused on every task."	Ought-to L2 Self	Social accountability drives participation
4	G3:S1	"Making sure my team scored well motivated me to keep trying."	Ought-to L2 Self	Responsibility toward peers motivates effort
5	G1:S3	"Competitive mechanism made us pay more attention in class, hoping to perform better next time."	L2 Learning Experience	Interactive and competitive engagement facilitates aspiration
6	G4:S2	"As a team, we wanted to win and get a higher score."	L2 Learning Experience	Team-based motivation enhances engagement and social accountability
7	G2:S2	"It's easier to speak up; there's more interaction than in traditional classes."	L2 Learning Experience	Reduced anxiety; encourages active communication
8	G3:S6	"Everyone actively shares ideas, encouraging even shy girls to participate."	L2 Learning Experience	Inclusive participation strengthens active contributor identity
9	G2:S6	"The light-hearted atmosphere makes people want to participate more."	L2 Learning Experience	Intrinsic motivation through enjoyment; encourages engagement
10	G4:S5	"Gamified learning feels more relaxed; I'm willing to learn independently without teacher prompting."	L2 Learning Experience	Autonomous learning motivation; proactive learning stance
11	G1:S2	"We won first place and felt happy, wanting to keep doing well."	L2 Learning Experience	Achievement feedback strengthens drive for excellence
12	G3:S5	"Organizing English ideas quickly feels like real-world communication, aspiring to be such a competent user."	Ideal L2 Self	Competence aspiration; planning and strategy in language use
13	G4:S6	"Speak up without fear of mistakes and become someone who dares to use English." "Realize English is not just for exams but a life communication tool, and we wanted to become someone who can use it flexibly."	Ideal L2 Self	Identity vision; personal language confidence; Functional aspiration; linking classroom practice to real-life use
14	G3:S2	"Ranking visibility makes everyone want to be first, motivating us to improve English to compete."	Ideal L2 Self	Sustained motivation; deepening aspiration for linguistic excellence
16	G2:S2	"Willing to try different gamified programs to keep practicing English."	Ideal L2 Self	Desire for continuous engagement; commitment to lifelong language development

Behavioural engagement was particularly evident in learners' observable classroom participation. During gamified activities, students frequently displayed visible positive affect, such as smiling and laughing. When pairing or grouping was required, learners quickly located their randomly assigned peers and initiated collaboration in order to complete the game-based tasks efficiently (see Figure 4). These behaviours indicated a high level of task-oriented involvement and willingness to participate and were consistently documented in classroom observations.

Figure 4.
Observable Classroom Engagement during Gamified Activities

Emotional engagement was fostered by a classroom atmosphere that participants frequently described as "light-hearted," which appeared to encourage participation, particularly among learners from previously "silent classroom" environments (see Quotes 1, 9, and 13, in Table 3). Interview data suggested that the enjoyable and relaxed nature of the gamified activities encouraged students to take risks, speak up without fear of making mistakes, and remain actively involved in classroom interaction. As one participant reflected, "even shy girls could speak" (Quote 8), highlighting how peer interaction and a supportive emotional climate promoted more inclusive participation.

Cognitive engagement was reflected in learners' strategic thinking, including monitoring their performance, evaluating answers, and reflecting on mistakes, as documented in the reflective teaching logs. Several participants also described organizing their English ideas in advance to improve oral expression and participate more confidently in classroom tasks (see Quotes 12 and 16). These responses suggest that gamified learning supported autonomous and goal-directed cognitive effort, encouraging learners to plan, self-monitor, and actively engage in problem-solving during interactive activities.

Social engagement emerged as another key dimension, as peer scaffolding and collaborative problem-solving enabled participation from students who had previously been reluctant to speak. Learners reported sharing mistakes collectively, coordinating efforts to involve all members, and celebrating group achievements, which strengthened their sense of collective responsibility and collaboration (see Quotes 1, 2, and 14). These interactions illustrate how gamified learning fostered a supportive and inclusive classroom environment.

In contrast, students' interview responses regarding traditional classrooms consistently reflected lower levels of engagement and interaction across multiple dimensions. In this study, traditional classrooms refer to non-gamified, lecture-oriented, and teacher-centered environments with limited interactive tasks. As summarized in Table 4, participants distinguished gamified learning from traditional classroom experiences in terms of interaction patterns, classroom atmosphere, oral participation, task design, learning-related stress, and skill development.

Across groups, gamified learning was associated with multidirectional interaction, more equitable opportunities for participation, and collaborative goal pursuit. By contrast, traditional classrooms were commonly described as one-way, passive, and strongly exam-oriented. These

contrasts highlight clear experiential differences between gamified and traditional instructional modes in EMI classrooms. This pattern was further supported by classroom observations and reflective teaching logs, which documented heightened student activity during gamified tasks and comparatively limited participation during lecture-based instruction.

Table 4.
Comparison of Gamified and Non-Gamified Learning Experiences

No.	Dimension	Interview Quotes (G = Group, S = Speaker)	Key Differences / Comparison
1	Interaction & Collaborative Dynamics	G1:S3: "Gamified classroom is more interactive; in traditional classes, teaching is one-way." G4:S6: "Group activities go from icebreaking to deep engagement; traditional groups' goals unclear."	Gamified learning promotes multidirectional interaction, emphasizes student collaboration and group icebreaking, lowers participation barriers, and strengthens team cohesion. Non-gamified classrooms rely on one-way instruction, have unclear group activity goals, low interactivity, and higher participation thresholds.
2	Classroom Atmosphere & Format	G2:S6: "Class is light-hearted and cheerful; traditional classroom is dull." G4:S7: "Gamified classroom atmosphere is lively; traditional high school English classes were lifeless."	Gamified classrooms are relaxed, engaging, and visually/structurally stimulating, with novelty that attracts attention. Non-gamified classrooms are monotonous, rigid in format, and lack novelty or stimulating elements.
3	Oral Expression & Participation	G4:S6: "Gamified classroom gives everyone equal chance to speak; traditional classroom is one-way." G3:S3: "To do well in games, we read rules and communicate with the professor in English."	Gamified learning provides equal opportunities to speak, enhances oral confidence, and motivates active English use. Non-gamified classrooms provide few opportunities to speak, leaving students passive and with low willingness to participate verbally.
4	Task Design & Motivational Mechanisms	G4:S1: "Teams work to win or get high scores; traditional classroom lacks team goals." G3:S4: "Ranking drives proactive learning; traditional classroom lacks such mechanism."	Gamified learning incorporates competition, points/rankings, and countdowns, with team-oriented goals driving active engagement. Non-gamified classrooms are knowledge-centered, lack competitive or team-based mechanisms, and rely on passive information input.
5	Learning Experience & Stress	G3:S5: "Competition brings pressure but it is positive; traditional stress comes from exams." G4:S4: "Stress in gamified classroom is different from exams; more relaxed to complete tasks."	Gamified learning generates moderate, positive pressure that combines tension and excitement, supporting active and relaxed engagement. Non-gamified classrooms produce exam-oriented stress, leading to passive and anxiety-driven learning experiences.
6	Skill & Interest Development	G4:S5: "Gamified classroom makes learning English enjoyable; traditional classroom focuses on exams." G2:S5: "English content is simpler and easier to understand in gamified classroom."	Gamified learning enhances English skills, increases interest, and facilitates comprehension and enjoyment. Non-gamified classrooms focus on exam preparation, offer limited skill development, and present content that may be harder to understand.

Taken together, the findings for RQ1 suggest that digital gamified learning supported sustained motivation and multidimensional engagement in EMI classrooms, providing a foundation for examining pedagogical affordances, constraints, and design implications in subsequent analyses.

(RQ2) Pedagogical Affordances, Constraints, and Design Implications in EMI Contexts

Beyond motivational and engagement outcomes, the findings revealed a complex pattern of pedagogical affordances, constraints, and design implications associated with digital

gamified learning in EMI classrooms. For the affordances mentioned in this study (see Table 3 and Table 4), a key benefit was the enhancement of interaction and participation. Gamified tasks reduced classroom silence, especially among introverted learners, by lowering affective barriers and providing structured opportunities for contribution through peer support. Competitive elements, such as rankings and points, stimulated motivation, while collaborative mechanics fostered a sense of collective belonging. Learners also reported increased English use and perceived improvement in integrated language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Cognitively, gamified learning promoted sustained attention and goal-directed behavior, with students engaging in strategic decision-making during tasks. Socially, peer scaffolding and collaborative problem-solving further strengthened engagement, shifting classroom dynamics from passive reception to participatory learning (see Tables 3–4). Together, these mechanisms demonstrate how digital gamified tools reinforce motivation and support meaningful, overall engagement, laying the foundation for discussing pedagogical constraints and design implications.

Table 5.
Representative Interview Quotes on the Disadvantages of Gamified Learning

Quote No.	Disadvantage dimension	Interview Quotes (G = Group, S = Speaker)	Core meaning interpretation
1	Time, Rhythm, and Role-Related Pressure	G4:S3: “My mind goes blank when I'm nervous”; G1:S2: “Gamification takes too long overall, and transmits less knowledge than traditional classes in the same time”; G2:S2: “As the person submitting answers via phone, I felt very nervous when urged by group members”; G3:S2: “Options were clicked arbitrarily before I could finish reading the questions”	Countdown design caused stress and insufficient thinking for some students; time-intensive activities reduced knowledge transmission efficiency; specific roles faced pressure from group members.
2	Insufficient Knowledge Content and Systematicity	G1:S2: “Contains a relatively small amount of information”; G1:S4: “Unfamiliar words are not explained, lacking follow-up feedback”; G1:S5: “Hope for more content related to vocabulary, grammar, or culture”	Activities lacked systematic design, with fragmented knowledge points that failed to meet in-depth learning needs.
3	Interference from Technical and Environmental Issues	G3:S2: “Hope the school maintains the network”; G3:S6: “The campus treasure hunt activity was held in summer with hot weather; we were very tired from walking, which tested physical strength rather than English proficiency”	Network lag, equipment failures, complex platform operations, or uncomfortable outdoor conditions negatively impacted student experience.
4	Monotonous Game Forms and Content	G2:S2: “It gets a bit boring if it's the same question format every time”; G3:S5: “Mostly multiple-choice questions, which are equivalent to doing it alone with insufficient interactivity”; G3:S5: “The form is a bit outdated and needs innovation”	Over-reliance on multiple-choice questions and speed answering led to aesthetic fatigue and reduced long-term motivation and participation due to lack of diversity and innovation.

At the same time, several pedagogical constraints shaped learners’ experiences with digital gamified learning (see Table 5). Key issues included time pressure and task pacing, particularly in countdown-based activities, which for some learners caused anxiety, mental blocks, and reduced cognitive processing (G4:S3). Insufficient depth and systematicity of knowledge also emerged as a concern, with language input sometimes limited or fragmented, and a lack of explicit explanations or follow-up feedback for unfamiliar vocabulary and grammar (G1:S4), potentially encouraging surface-level processing rather than deeper

learning. Limited variation in game formats and content further constrained long-term engagement, as repeated multiple-choice or speed-based tasks reduced interactivity, novelty, and opportunities for authentic communication (G3:S5). Technical issues, including network lag and platform instability, occasionally disrupted task flow and increased cognitive load (G3:S2).

Overall, these findings highlight that while digital gamified learning offers significant pedagogical benefits, careful attention to task design, content depth, variation, feedback, and technical reliability is essential to maximize learning outcomes. Thoughtful, learner-centered implementation can balance engagement with cognitive and linguistic development, ensuring that gamified interventions support sustained motivation and multidimensional engagement in EMI classrooms.

Table 6.
Representative Interview Quotes for Future Pedagogical Design Implications

Quote No.	Solution dimension	Interview Quotes (G = Group, S = Speaker)	Core meaning interpretation
1	Enriched Game Forms and Content	G1:S5: "Hope to integrate more content such as culture, vocabulary, and grammar"; G3:S3: "More diversified game content and mechanisms"; G3:S5: "Increase interactive forms beyond multiple-choice questions"; G4:S4: "More opportunities to express in English to develop usage habits"	Added non-multiple-choice questions, situational simulations, role-plays, integrated with professional or cultural knowledge, and improved innovation.
2	Strengthened Knowledge Systematicity and Feedback	G1:S3: "Hope the teacher explains the answers and teaches related words after answering questions"; G1:S6: "Need systematic design of knowledge-based courses"	Added answer explanations, error review, and supplementary knowledge summaries to enhance learning depth.
3	Optimized Time, Rhythm, and Collaboration Design	G1:S2: "Hope the game contains more knowledge and the overall time allocation is more reasonable"; G4:S6: "Teamwork can reduce tension; discussion sessions can be added"; G4:S6: "Appropriately add discussion processes"	Balanced activity duration and knowledge density adjusted countdowns based on question types, and increased discussion sessions to reduce role pressure.
4	Improved Technical and Environmental Support	G3:S2: "The school should maintain the network"; G1:S6: "Simplify the answer platform interface and issue operation guides in advance"; G3:S6: "Avoid physical activities in high-temperature outdoor environments"	Tested networks/equipment in advance, simplified platform operations, optimized outdoor activity environments, or adjusted activity forms.
5	Added Rewards and Incentive Mechanisms	G3:S4: "Can add some small rewards"; G4:S6: "Appropriately add some reward and punishment mechanisms"	Increased small rewards, collective honor awards, etc., to strengthen participation motivation.

Reflections for Future Pedagogical Optimization

Based on insights from the action research intervention, daily teaching logs, and student interview feedback, several strategies were identified to optimize future gamified learning experiences, as summarized in Table 6. Learners consistently expressed a desire for more varied and interactive activities, systematic knowledge presentation with timely feedback,

optimized task pacing and collaborative structures, improved technical support, and mechanisms to sustain long-term motivation. Accordingly, future iterations of the program could incorporate diverse game formats such as role-play and situational simulations, integrate culturally and professionally relevant content, provide knowledge-mapping tasks and metacognitive debriefs, calibrate activity duration and collaborative processes, ensure platform stability, and include small rewards or collective honors.

Through this reflective process, pedagogical adjustments can be aligned with both student needs and broader theoretical frameworks, demonstrating how iterative, data-informed design can enhance motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes in gamified EMI contexts. These findings highlight the value of iterative, context-sensitive design for gamified EMI courses.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was conducted within a relatively short, intensive English bridging program, and participation in the pre- and post-intervention surveys varied, which may have affected the reliability and validity of quantitative measures. Additionally, the survey instruments used in this study were not formally validated, reflecting practical constraints in real classroom settings. To mitigate this limitation, triangulation with classroom observations, teaching logs, and interview data was employed, providing additional support for the interpretation of findings. Nevertheless, the results should be considered exploratory and trend-indicative rather than definitive causal evidence, as the study did not include a control or comparison group, limiting direct causal inference. While these limitations reflect the realities of action research in voluntary, time-constrained, and ethically sensitive classroom contexts, the findings still offer meaningful insights for similarly intensive, practice-oriented EMI programs in higher education in China.

Future research could extend the duration of gamified learning interventions to examine the sustainability of their effects. Studies may also adopt validated instruments and experimental or quasi-experimental designs to strengthen causal inferences, incorporate larger or more diverse samples, and refine survey instruments and assessment procedures to enhance reliability and validity. Such efforts would further support evidence-informed, iterative design of gamified learning experiences in EFL and EMI classrooms. Taken together, these considerations highlight both the value and the contextual boundaries of the current findings, providing guidance for subsequent research.

Implications for Learning and Teaching

The findings of this study highlight that digital gamified learning can meaningfully enhance motivation and multidimensional engagement in EMI classrooms in higher education. Beyond demonstrating practical benefits, the results suggest that instructors can leverage these insights to iteratively refine pedagogical design. By linking established theoretical frameworks, such as Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, with actual classroom contexts, educators can compare expected outcomes with observed learner responses, identify areas for improvement, and implement theory-informed adjustments in successive cycles of action research.

This reflective, action-oriented approach allows for continuous optimization of digital gamified interventions, ensuring that instructional strategies not only address context-specific

challenges, such as linguistic anxiety, unfamiliar classroom practices, and high participation demands, but also promote student autonomy, collaboration, and sustained engagement. Thoughtful design and iterative refinement can therefore support meaningful learning experiences, reinforce learners' future-oriented language identities, and inform evidence-based pedagogical decisions in EMI EFL higher education settings.

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About the Authors

Haiyan Cai is a graduate of the MA TESOL program in Instruction and Curriculum at Wenzhou–Kean University. Her research focuses on technology-enhanced learning, digital literacy, innovative and reflective pedagogy, and data-informed curriculum and instruction in higher education. She aims to bridge theory and practice to inform context-sensitive and sustainable approaches to technology-mediated education. Email: caiha@kean.edu

Andrew Jocuns is an Assistant Professor in the MA TESOL program at Wenzhou–Kean University. His research focuses on sociolinguistics, multilingualism, and language and identity in global contexts. He has conducted research on STEM education, linguistic anthropology, and multilingual communication in Asia and the USA, and serves as a reviewer for several journals and the American Association of Applied Linguistics conference. Email: ajocuns@kean.edu

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Appendix A

Pre-Intervention Questionnaire

Notification: This questionnaire aims to understand your learning experience in English classes. Your responses will help improve future teaching and learning. All answers are anonymous. Thank you for your participation!

***Notice:** 1 – Strongly Disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Neutral 4 – Agree 5 – Strongly Agree

Background Information

What's your gender? ☐Male ☐Female

How long have you been learning English? _____ years, since ___ years old.

Part 1: Motivation in English Learning

1. Learning English was enjoyable for me.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

2. I felt motivated to learn English in my regular English classes.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

3. I found traditional English learning activities interesting.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

4. I was willing to spend time learning English outside class.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

5. I saw value in learning English through game-based methods.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

Part 2: Engagement in EFL Learning

6. I participate actively in English class activities.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

7. I enjoy learning English.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

8. I feel excited when using English in fun or creative ways.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

9. I try to understand English deeply, not just memorize.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

10. I think about how I can improve my English outside of class.
    ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

Appendix B

Post-Intervention Questionnaire

Notification: This questionnaire aims to understand your learning experience after participating in gamified English classes. All answers are anonymous.

***Notice:** 1 – Strongly Disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Neutral 4 – Agree 5 – Strongly Agree

Part 1: Motivation in Gamified English Learning

1. I found gamified English learning more enjoyable than regular English classes.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
2. I like to attend English classes because of the gamified activities.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
3. I am more willing to spend extra time learning English because of the gamified experience. ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
4. I see value in learning English through gamified methods.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

Part 2: Engagement in Gamified English Learning

5. I participated more actively in class during gamified activities compared to traditional activities. ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
6. I felt more focused and involved when completing game-based English tasks.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
7. The gamified activities helped me understand and use English in creative ways.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
8. I tried harder to understand English deeply during gamified tasks, not just memorize.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
9. I thought about how to apply strategies learned in gamified tasks to improve my English outside class. ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

Part 3: Overall Perception of Gamified Learning

10. The game elements (e.g., levels, badges, leaderboards) enhanced my learning experience. ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
11. I would recommend gamified English learning to other students.
    ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
12. Compared to traditional methods, gamified learning helped me remember English better. ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
13. I felt a sense of achievement when completing gamified tasks.
    ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
14. I would like to have more gamified activities in future English classes.
    ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

Optional Open-ended Questions

15. What did you like most about the gamified English learning experience?

16. What suggestions do you have to improve gamified English classes?

Appendix C

Classroom Observation Checklist

Observer Name: _____ Date: _____

Session Topic: _____

Dimension	Indicators	Rating (1–5)
Behavioral engagement	✓ Attentiveness during learning tasks ✓ On-task behavior and actions ✓ Visible engagement in learning activities or processes ✓ Active use of digital learning tools	☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
Emotional response	✓ Positive facial expressions ✓ Demonstrated enthusiasm, interest, or enjoyment ✓ Laughter, emotional expression during tasks ✓ Changes in emotional energy level	☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
Cognitive engagement	✓ Deep processing of learning content ✓ Independent thinking and reflection ✓ Self-regulated strategy uses ✓ Monitoring complex understanding	☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
Social engagement	✓ Peer interaction and communication ✓ Help-seeking and help-giving ✓ Turn-taking and cooperative participation ✓ Joint engagement in group activities	☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

Classroom Observation Notes

1. What worked well today?

2. What challenges did students face?

3. Any noticeable change compared to previous sessions?

4. Suggestions for next session's adjustment.

Appendix D

Daily Teaching Reflection Log

Instructions: Write no more than 300 words for each day's reflection.
Use single space, Times New Roman, size 12.

Day 1: Classroom observation

1. What was the overall classroom atmosphere like?

2. How did students interact with the teacher and with each other?

3. What did you notice about students' English proficiency levels?

4. Were some students particularly quiet or active?

5. What teaching strategies did you observe?

6. What did you learn from this observation?

Day 2–Day 10: Teaching reflection

1. What went well with your teaching today?

2. What didn't go as planned?

3. How did students respond to your teaching?

4. Were you happy with the level of teacher talk, student talk, and interaction?

5. Did you improve one thing you wanted to improve from the previous day? How?

6. What is one thing you would like to improve for your next lesson, and how?

7. Any other comments?

Appendix E

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Opening & Rapport Building

1. How did you feel about the previous gamified learning activities you participated in?

2. Were you mostly active, passively cooperative, or occasionally engaged?

A. Core Dimensions of Motivation

1. What usually motivates you to learn English? Can you provide examples or scenarios?

2. Compared with traditional English classes, did the gamified activities affect your motivation? If so, how?

3. Which specific elements of the gamified activities influenced your motivation? Could you provide an example?

B. Core Dimensions of Engagement

1. What differences do you notice in your participation between gamified and traditional classes (non-gamified)?

2. During gamified activities, did you take initiative to communicate, share ideas, etc.?

3. Did gamified learning affect your interaction with group members? If so, how?

C. Opinions & Suggestions on Gamified Learning

1. Based on your experience, what do you consider the main advantages and disadvantages of gamified learning?

2. Regarding the challenges mentioned, what changes or improvements would you suggest for future gamified learning designs?

3. Do you have any additional comments, suggestions, or ideas that have not been covered?

The Impact of Game-Based Learning on Student Engagement in a Japanese World Language Class

Donovan Tse
University of Hawaii at Manoa
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9941-1212

Vail Matsumoto
University of Hawaii at Manoa
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8260-9455

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Abstract

This exploratory study investigated the impact of game-based learning on engagement in a second-year high school Japanese world language class that primarily used a Communicative Language Teaching approach in the target language. By investigating the question, "What impact does game-based learning have on student engagement in a communicative language teaching classroom?" this study aimed to examine student engagement in a high school Japanese world language class. Games were implemented across multiple classes and students completed exit passes that included self-assessment statements regarding engagement and answered two questions based on their enjoyment of the games. Analysis of the data showed that game-based learning had an overall positive effect on student engagement in a Communicative Language Teaching setting. Analysis of the qualitative data identified four aspects of the games that contributed to student enjoyment: interpersonal communication, physical movement, opportunities to use the content, and competition.

Introduction

World language education pedagogy has progressed in the last two decades with some schools shifting away from using textbooks to opting for a more student-centered approach. Even with modern approaches to teaching language, student engagement remains a challenge across languages and cultures. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris's (2004) model conceptualizes engagement as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive participation in learning. Utilizing games for learning is one possible strategy for addressing lack of engagement. Games have the potential to entertain and engage, which make them attractive for use in education. While some games are simpler than others, many of them serve to make rote tasks more enjoyable and can be modified to suit a wide range of school subjects.

My (Donovan's) interest in educational games for language education stemmed from my work as an assistant language teacher in Japan where games were used more often than I had experienced as a student in a Western educational setting. I saw the impact of games almost immediately after I began work in Japan. Students were receptive to the game format and I found the games to be effective in engaging even the students who did not enjoy learning English. During this time, I had the opportunity to team-teach with some of the younger Japanese teachers of English and I observed them employing simple games that engaged students. Some of the them used games and others did not. Classes that utilized games showed an increase in student participation.

Back in an American educational setting, I learned more about Comprehensible Input (CI) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in my teacher preparation courses and got to see it all in action at my placement school. I wondered if games could help increase engagement in classes that used CI and CLT as they do with other approaches and if game utilization could be a way to hook students into lessons and get them more engaged. This exploratory study investigates how short, in-class games influence behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in a second-year Japanese course that uses a CLT/CI approach.

Context

This exploratory study took place at a Hawaii high school with an ethnically diverse population of 2,538 students including Filipino, Native Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Samoan, Black, Micronesian, Tongan, White, Hispanic, and Portuguese. The majority of the school was Filipino with 15% identified as multilingual learners.

The study was conducted in a second-year Japanese language course with one of the authors (Donovan) serving as the primary instructor. Ten students of varying degrees of fluency in the Japanese language participated in the study, with none being heritage speakers. The students had differing degrees of interest in Japan and the Japanese language. The participants in the study were in a Japanese language class using a CLT approach that focused on using CI rather than explicit grammar instruction. The target language, Japanese, was used in context and for communication purposes rather than solely for study. For example, presentations were done for the purpose of conveying information rather than practicing language skills.

With the shift to CLT, the focus was getting the meaning across rather than grammatical accuracy. This shift from grammar drills to meaningful communication is central to CLT as described by Savignon (2002). The goal of CLT is communication, so if a student answers with only their name rather than a full sentence, it would still be acceptable. The focus of this CLT self-introduction exercise would be to learn names rather than practice a sentence. Under the old method, grammatical accuracy would have been prioritized and learning the name would have been a secondary objective.

Students in this exploratory study were exposed to periodic game playing in their first and second year Japanese classes as part of class. Typically, the games they played during class were designed to review material before a quiz or exam. None of the games presented in this study had been played in class before.

Literature Review

Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching is an approach to teaching language that was developed in the 1970s that focuses on the communication skills of the target language (Dos Santos, 2020). Sandra Savignon's work in this area helped shape CLT by emphasizing the ability to negotiate meaning and use the language appropriately in context, rather than simply mastering grammatical forms (Savignon, 2002). Luis Miguel Dos Santos (2020) cited the strengths and weaknesses of the approach: its student focused approach is a strength because it can make use of authentic resources from the wider world such as from the students' communities as well as real-world situations and applications of the language which can help learners connect the language to outside the classroom (Dos Santos, 2020). Another strength of CLT is that it has the possibility of increasing student interest in the target language more than grammar focused instruction (Dos Santos, 2020).

The emphasis on using real world situations and cultures can also be a weakness because lessons may go into topics that instructors do not have the language proficiency or knowledge to approach effectively (Dos Santos, 2020). Language lessons taught with a CLT approach often use real world materials and topics which can lead to a wide range of questions, from cultural to linguistic, making it difficult to be prepared for every possible situation or question that a student may have (Dos Santos, 2020). As CLT highlights meaningful interaction and the negotiation of meaning as significant parts of language learning (Savignon, 2002), activities like games are particularly compatible with this approach.

Comprehensible Input

Comprehensible input (CI) is a key part of CLT and has its roots in Stephen Krashen's 1982 Input Hypothesis which states that learners should be exposed to language that is at one level higher than their current language level to advance in that language (Krashen, 1982). The Input Hypothesis is focused on language acquisition and is related to the idea that we acquire language and the structures that go with it by using language for meaning first (Krashen, 1982). To understand language that is at a level higher than the students' current understanding, learners use context, the environment, and other knowledge to aid in comprehension (Krashen, 1982). Over time, as students are continuously exposed to CI, some of that input should be internalized and the student should be able to output some of the target language (Krashen, 1982).

Recent communicative game-based projects in World Language Education have shown that integrating games into communicative lessons can enhance learners' speaking confidence and willingness to communicate (Malgazghdarova et al., 2024). Games that simulate real life scenarios report improved listening and speaking skills in learners (Espiritu & Buaraphan, 2024).

Game-based Learning

Tekinbaş & Zimmerman (2003) describe a game as a system that engages players in artificial conflict with defined rules and a quantifiable outcome. Game-based learning (GBL) usage has been studied for use in a wide variety of subjects (Boctor, 2013) and can be defined as a setting that allows game content and gameplay to support the development of knowledge

and skills, while the challenges built into the game give learners a sense of accomplishment (Qian & Clark, 2016). Games allow students to fail without heavy consequences (Boctor, 2013). Recent studies focusing on undergraduates also show that GBL enhances behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Thi, 2025). Additionally, foreign language research on game platforms such as *Kahoot!* reports significant gains in engagement (Anane, 2024).

In a review by Shu and Liu (2019), the researchers sought to answer the questions of what influences engagement in GBL and how GBL engagement affects learning. It was found that when comparing students who had a game-based education and those who did not, the students who had the game-based education were found to be more engaged with their class work (Shu & Liu, 2019).

Studies examining GBL's effect on student engagement have shown a positive effect and an increase motivation in language classes (Wati et al., 2023). In a study that looked at the effectiveness of playing educational games, creating educational games, and traditional instruction in an English as a foreign language class, it was found that the group playing the games showed the highest motivation to learn (Chen & Liu, 2023).

It is also important to distinguish GBL from gamification. Al-Azawi et al. (2016) argue that the two are related, but markedly different. In GBL, the game itself is the learning activity, and the students engage with the content through game playing, problem solving, and interaction with each other. Gamification is not an activity; it adds elements like points and badges to a lesson or task, but the lesson is not a game (Anane, 2024). Gamification is turning the learning process as a whole into a game, while GBL is using a game as part of the learning process (Al-Azawi et al., 2016). In this study, the classroom activities were examples of GBL because the games were the instructional vehicles that allowed students to practice the language, interact with peers, and engage with the target language rather than simply receiving game-like rewards or incentives. This distinction matters because the present study examines how structured gameplay can support engagement in a CLT classroom, not how game mechanics can be layered onto traditional instruction.

Student Engagement

In line with widely cited ideas about school engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004), this study considers behavioral, emotional, and cognitive facets of students' involvement in class. Behavioral engagement is based on participation, such as how involved a student is with an activity or if they are doing their work (Fredricks et al., 2004). According to Fredricks et al. (2004), there are three ways to define behavioral engagement: learners behave positively, following school rules and norms; learners are persistent, use questioning, and pay attention and learners are involved in school-related extracurricular activities, such as sports (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Students' emotional and physiological reactions to classes, school, and the educational environment define emotional engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Consistent with Fredricks et al. (2004), emotional engagement refers to students' affective reactions to school, such as interest, boredom, happiness, or anxiety, and their sense of belonging in the school context. Additionally, emotional engagement encompasses how much a student feels belonging and identifies with their school (Fredricks et al., 2004). Emotional engagement has also been known to have an indirect effect on academic achievement (Pietarinen et al., 2014). Teacher-student and student-student relationships are a part of emotional engagement and can lead to an

increase in engaged behavior (Pietarinen et al., 2014). Students who are both emotionally and cognitively engaged in school have been shown to spend more time studying and deal with the rigors of school better (Pietarinen et al., 2014; Wang & Eccles, 2012).

Finally, cognitive engagement is based on mental investment and is tied to how much effort the student is willing to put into understanding what is being taught or their motivation level in learning something (Fredricks et al., 2004). Cognitive engagement involves students' psychological investment and effort in learning—how much they are willing to exert themselves to understand complex ideas or master difficult skills (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Student engagement in class has been found to affect student learning; behavioral, cognitive, and, to an extent, emotional engagement has been correlated with academic achievement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Students pay more attention and are more likely to learn material if they are engaged in a class (Allen et al., 2014). Student enjoyment of the classroom environment is another factor that has been tied to student engagement (Allen et al., 2014). Because it is changeable and able to be influenced by the teacher, environment, or instruction, there are different methods that can be used to increase engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004) including GBL.

Most GBL research looks at engagement by emphasizing either behavioral participation or motivation. Building on (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang & Eccles, 2012), this study attempts to address that gap by exploring different types of engagement in a CLT classroom, including on-task behavior, active participation, interest, and motivation.

Implementation

This exploratory study was conducted over seven classes spanning three weeks. Prior to the baseline class, I (Donovan) had served as a co-teacher for three months and the primary instructor for two months. Aside from the initial class illustrating the baseline condition, a different game was implemented in each of the six class sessions. Each class began with greetings and a warm-up activity, then proceeded to the introduction of a game, followed by playing the game, and finally completing the exit pass. Six games (described in the next section) were used in six classes of the study: Red Light Green Light, Card Relay Race, *Shiritori*, Sensei Says, Telephone (*Dengon* Game), and Row Game.

At the end of each class, students completed a double-sided exit pass (Figure 1), where one side was used for the warm-up activity (completed upon arrival) and the other side was used by students to self-assess their engagement and respond to questions regarding the game at the close of class. The side used to assess engagement contained four self-assessment statements that were each paired with a Likert scale that students used to mark their level of agreement or disagreement. The four self-assessment statements were: *I was on task, I actively participated, I was interested in class,* and *I was motivated to do well in class*. The statements were selected because they represent behaviors linked to student engagement, namely, on-task behavior, active participation, interest in class/subject, and motivation to do well (Fredricks et al., 2004). These statements also connect to commonly cited issues of engagement in the literature, with on-task behavior and active participation reflecting behavioral aspects, interest reflecting emotional aspects, and motivation reflecting cognitive aspects of engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). The Likert scale included the following options: *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *neutral*, *agree*, and *strongly agree*.

With no game played and using the double-sided exit pass exhibited in Figure 1, the baseline class yielded an overall on-task score of 4.56, an active participation score of 4.56, a class interest score of 4.56, a motivation score of 4.33, and an overall engagement score of 4.50. In each successive class, students played a different game.

Following review of the data from the second class, a need for more qualitative data regarding student perception of the games became apparent. While data from the second class provided information on how students perceived their engagement in class, it lacked insight into students' perceptions of the game. For that reason, starting from the third class onwards, students also responded to two questions in regards to the game: *Did you enjoy the game?* and *What aspect/part of the game did you like?* The first question was to gauge students' feelings about the game and the second question aimed to provide insight into factors influencing the perceived effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the games. These questions did not have any prewritten options; students provided their responses in the blank area for writing below the four self-assessment statements and Likert scales. In the final class of the study, students were asked the question, *Do you think games are useful for learning?* to gauge their opinion of games as a learning tool after having experienced them over the course of the study.

名前（なまえ）_____ _____ 月_____日 Pd._____

Bellwork

Please mark how you think you did today。					
	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
I was on task.					
I actively participated.					
I was interested in class.					
I was motivated to do well in class.					

Extra

Figure 1
Double-Sided Exit Pass Used in the Study

Game Descriptions

Red Light Green Light

This game was introduced in the second class of the study to help students practice Japanese listening and speaking skills. Students worked in assigned pairs, which allowed for mutual support. Examples of game questions were first reviewed in the classroom before students moved outside to begin the game.

The game began with all students standing in pairs in a horizontal line a distance away from the teacher. A question was asked by the teacher and if both members of a pair answered correctly, they advanced a step. Once a pair correctly answered enough questions to make it past the teacher, they assisted the teacher in creating and asking simple questions to the remaining pairs. Students often asked questions similar to those being asked by the teacher. The questions were asked in Japanese with gestures and hints in the target language being used to make them comprehensible. For short and simple questions, the fastest pair to raise their hands could answer; for longer, more complex questions, all pairs had an opportunity to provide a response. The game continued until all students reached the goal. When the game concluded, students returned to the classroom and completed an exit pass.

The game itself did not fit the ideal form of CLT, but provided practice for skills needed for communication. The game provided speaking and listening practice so that students would become more accustomed to speaking and listening in conversations. The questions asked were more conversational in nature and represented topics that might come up in everyday conversation.

Card Relay Race

In Card Relay Race, students worked together in teams to answer questions written in Japanese on 27 numbered cards. The questions used grammar and vocabulary that the students had previously encountered. The game helped students practice reading skills while reinforcing the vocabulary and grammar they had learned.

The game consisted of a total of 27 questions, six questions required writing words in Japanese characters and 21were riddle-like questions that made use of the students' knowledge of subjects such as Japanese culture, culture in Hawaii, food, and events. Students were required to use the target language for the purpose of deciphering riddles. These were not all questions related to grammar or language practice itself which brings the activity more in line with modern language teaching methodology of using the language for a purpose other than just practice. If hints were given during the game, they were done so in a CI manner, meaning context clues and gestures were used to make hints in the target language comprehensible.

Specific roles were assigned to encourage participation by all students within each group. The roles included card taker, writer, and two supports. The writer was responsible for writing the answer to the question on a small whiteboard provided to all groups. The card taker returned the answered question cards, tracked points, and retrieved new cards. The two supporters had flexible roles and were tasked with seeking additional information or hints from the teacher. After each correctly answered question, students rotated roles within their group.

To begin the game, question cards were spread out on a table in the front of the classroom. The designated card takers from each group moved to the front of the classroom, picked up a card, and then returned to their group. The members worked collaboratively to answer the

question and then the writer wrote the answer on a whiteboard. They then called the teacher over for an answer check. If it was correct, roles were rotated, and the new card taker returned the answered card, took a new one, and wrote the answered question number on the board in the front of the classroom.

Each group could only answer each question once and every correct answer earned them one point. There was a time limit of 25 minutes, and students were encouraged to answer as many questions as possible. After the game concluded, students completed an exit pass to assess their engagement during the class.

Shiritori

The class was divided into two teams for *Shiritori*, with two to four minutes allotted for each round. The objective of the game was to write as many Japanese characters as possible on the whiteboard at the front of the classroom. Like the English alphabet's ABCs, Japanese characters have a sequential order and the students followed this order when writing during the game. Each team was given a starting character, and students sequentially wrote the character that followed the previous one. For example, if the starting character was "A," student 1 wrote "B," returned to their team, and switched out with student 2, who then went to the board and wrote "C." Only one student from each team could be writing on the board at any given time. After each round ended, each team's points were tallied, and the winner was announced. Students then completed their exit passes.

Similar to Red Light Green Light, students practiced skills needed for CLT including character reading. The teacher also provided CI for the time checks during the game for students to keep track of the time remaining in rounds. The results were counted up in the target language to give students input to learn and practice numbers. The target language used was supported with gestures to ensure students understood the numbers involved.

Sensei Says

Sensei Says is similar to Simon Says where players only act if the game leader precedes the command with "Simon says." The game was used to help students practice directional words in Japanese. The practice phase began with the teacher demonstrating an action while saying the corresponding Japanese term. Students stood up and mimicked the action while repeating the term. For example, when the teacher said "left" and stepped to the left, the students also stepped left and repeated the word "left."

After the practice phase, students played the game, moving according to directions given by the teacher. The speed and sequence length of the directions increased until only one student remained, who was declared the winner. After the game concluded, the students completed an exit pass.

Sensei Says made use of the target language to communicate directions to students with the focus on the meaning rather than grammar. The practice phase was done using CI methods of using gestures to make the vocabulary comprehensible. The game created a low-stakes environment to learn and practice vocabulary.

Telephone (Dengon Game)

Telephone (*Dengon* Game) was a cooperative team-based game so that students could review sentences that would appear on their final test for the quarter. It provided a competitive environment for students to review and practice their listening and speaking skills. This game

encouraged students to practice skills important for communication. Sentences in the game were taught using CI methods so that students could comprehend the material rather than just repeat it. Even if unfamiliar vocabulary was sometimes used, the teacher used gestures and objects around the classroom to convey the meaning of the sentences used.

Students were divided into three teams and arranged into lines going from the front of the classroom to the back. They were only allowed to speak to the teammate directly behind them. The objective was to verbally pass a message from the first student to the last student in line. Once the message was received, the last student in line then ran to the teacher to relay the message. The team that was the fastest and most accurate would earn three points, with the second-place team receiving two points and the last team getting one point. After all teams delivered the message, the sentence was repeated aloud for all to hear and practice saying. After the winning team was declared, the students then filled out an exit pass.

Row Game

The Row Game was used in the final class of the study. This flexible game required no prior preparation and was suitable for reviewing a variety of language points. To play the Row Game, students were first seated in rows and then instructed to stand up. Students needed to answer questions asked by the teacher. Students who answered correctly then chose either "row" or "column." If they chose "row," the students who were standing in the same row, as the student who answered, sat down. However, if any students were already sitting down, they had to stand back up. The "column" option followed the same rules but applied to students standing in front or in back of the student who answered correctly. The game continued until only a few students remained standing, at which point they were asked questions individually and then sat down.

The Row Game was used to review sentences and questions in preparation for the final test of the quarter. Pictures were also used to support the questions and students were asked questions based on images displayed on the television. They had to create answers using the items in the pictures or items related to them. Some pictures also included text to help students identify the items and practice reading skills. Additionally, students could also choose the option, "only me" which allowed only the student who answered to sit down. Once the game concluded, the students were given their final test for the quarter and completed an exit pass.

Comprehensible input methods were used to support asking questions during the game. The questions were supported by visuals as well as gestures when being asked to make it comprehensible. Rather than focusing on grammatical accuracy of answers, the teacher focused on whether or not the meaning was successfully conveyed.

Findings & Discussion

The results derived from the analysis of student exit passes covered student self-assessments of on-task behavior, active participation, interest in class, and student motivation. Prior research has not clarified whether GBL maintains its engagement benefits in CLT world language settings, nor which game elements matter most. Students' responses to the two questions regarding the games used in each class throughout the study provided data on what aspects of the games may have influenced engagement effectiveness. Analysis of the responses to the second question revealed four themes that may have influenced the games' effects on student engagement; interpersonal communication, physical movement, opportunities to use

the content, and competition. These data offer initial evidence that engagement is affected by games and begin to specify which features of the games (team-based interpersonal interaction, movement, content use, competition) are associated with higher engagement scores. Data was tracked day to day to monitor the change over time and the change between different games.

The data from the study indicated that the level of student engagement in the majority of classes that utilized games was greater than the baseline class. The pattern of higher on-task behavior, participation, interest, and motivation in most game-based classes suggests broad gains across multiple dimensions of engagement, which have been linked to improved academic outcomes (Fredricks et al., 2004). The overall engagement score derived from the analysis of the four self-assessment statements was higher than the baseline class in all but the last class. The scores for the on-task self-assessment statement were higher than the score from the baseline class in four out of six classes and equal to the baseline in one out of six classes. The scores for the active participation statement were equal to the baseline in two out of six classes and higher than the baseline in three out of six classes. The scores for the class interest statement were higher than the baseline in three out of six classes and equal to the baseline in two out of six classes. Finally, the motivation scores were higher than the baseline in all six of six classes.

On-Task Behavior

At the end of each class, students indicated their level of agreement with the statement "I was on task" by marking one of five options on a Likert scale. The number of strongly agree responses consistently equaled or exceeded that of the baseline class throughout the study. To quantify this data, each response was given a value ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, and the mean for each class was calculated to provide an on-task score.

The mean on-task score exceeded that of the baseline class in the majority of classes where a game was played, however, a slight decrease was observed during the fifth class. The baseline class's mean on-task score was 4.56, compared to the lowest score of 4.44 for the fifth class. Sensei Says was played during that class to practice directional words. The shorter duration of this class allowed for only one round of the game. This coupled with the individual nature of the game may have contributed to the decreased on-task behavior among some students. Overall, however, the number of student responses marked as strongly agree or agree with the on-task statement remained consistently at or above the baseline class.

Active Participation

The second self-assessment statement was, "I actively participated." The mean score for this statement in the baseline class was 4.56. The mean active participation score for three of six classes was higher than baseline and two of six classes were equal to the baseline. The final class, however, recorded a mean score of 4.33. As shown in figure 3, two of the six game-based classes had fewer strongly agree responses than the baseline. Despite this, however, the overall mean scores for active engagement across all classes except the final one remained at least at the level of the baseline.

The game for the final class was the Row Game which was an individual-based game. Students were scheduled to take their quarter final test on this day, so the game was designed to be short and flexible, allowing time for review before the test. The individual nature of the game may have made it less engaging when compared to the team-based games. Furthermore,

while most students answered questions, some did not have the opportunity to respond due to time constraints or because they were already seated. These factors could explain the lower participation score on this day. In contrast, the scores from the other days were equal to or higher than the baseline.

Interest in Class

The third self-assessment statement was, "I was interested in class," and it yielded similar results to the previous two statements. Three out of six game-based classes recorded mean scores higher than the baseline class mean of 4.56. Two out of six game-based classes recorded mean scores equal to the baseline. However, the third class, which utilized the Card Relay Race game had a slightly lower interest mean score of 4.5. The presence of visiting students from Japan participating in this class may have influenced the score for that class. Despite this singular instance of a lower overall interest mean score, the classes that utilized games consistently had a higher number of strongly agree responses compared to the baseline class.

Motivation to Do Well

The final self-assessment statement that students responded to was, "I was motivated to do well in class." Among all of the self-assessment statements, this item had the lowest baseline mean score at 4.33. The six classes that utilized a game all recorded higher mean scores than the baseline class for this statement. However, when examining the frequency of strongly agree responses, there were two classes equal to the baseline. These sessions did record a higher frequency of agree responses than the baseline class, suggesting a positive effect on motivation overall, which the mean scores support.

Student Engagement

An overall engagement score was derived from the four self-assessment statements. The mean scores for each statement were summed and divided by four to derive the overall engagement score. A comparison of these scores demonstrates that, overall, games were beneficial for student engagement in class. Five out of six classes that utilized games recorded higher overall engagement scores when compared to the baseline. The consistently higher engagement score across multiple classes that utilized different games suggests that, overall, GBL had a positive effect on student engagement. This aligns with recent empirical studies demonstrating that GBL significantly boosts multiple engagement dimensions across disciplines and age groups (Espiritu & Buaraphan, 2024).

Certain games had greater influence and were more positively received by students than others within the study. The final class in the study, however, yielded a score of 4.47 which was .03 lower than the baseline class score of 4.5. A potential explanation for this lower score is that this session coincided with the quarter final test. Because of this, the game was individual-based, short, and focused heavily on review. Students' worries about the final or the impending end of the quarter may have also influenced their views of the self-assessment statements. Overall, the data suggests that games helped improve or maintain student engagement in class.

The literature supports the notion that GBL can positively affect engagement in educational settings (Wati et al., 2023). The findings of the present study appear to support this, as the overall engagement scores were higher for five out of six classes that utilized a game

when compared to the baseline class. Only the final class had a lower score, which was unexpected and may be attributed to factors discussed above. Consequently, the findings also suggest that game choice is important as demonstrated by the decrease in the overall engagement score during that final class.

Elements that Contributed to Game-Based Learning's Effect on Student Engagement

Starting with the third class, students were also asked two questions regarding the games utilized in class: "Did you enjoy the game?" and "What aspect/part of the game did you enjoy?" Analysis of student responses to those questions identified factors that may have influenced the games' effectiveness. Responses to the first question revealed that most students reported enjoyment of the games. Analysis of the second question brought to light four themes that may explain the games' effects: interpersonal communication, physical movement, opportunities to use the content, and competition.

Enjoyable Experience

According to student responses, the games used in the classes during the study were generally enjoyable. In five out of the six classes that utilized games, students responded to a question regarding their enjoyment of the game. Out of a total of 48 responses, 45 (93.75%) were positive, indicating that the games were enjoyable.

This finding supports the conclusion that GBL helped create an enjoyable experience for students, potentially influencing the games' effect on engagement which is in line with the literature. For students taking a language course, engagement has been linked to the enjoyability of their practice environment (Allen et al., 2014; Shu & Liu, 2019). Responses to the question regarding game enjoyment were overwhelmingly positive, which corresponds to the increased student engagement scores for five out of the six classes.

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication was the factor most frequently cited by students as an enjoyable aspect of the games. Students frequently mentioned teamwork and interactions with their classmates as aspects they enjoyed. Team-based games were used in the second, third, fourth, and sixth classes; these classes demonstrated higher overall engagement scores when compared to the fifth and seventh classes where individual-based games were played. The interpersonal communication inherent in the team-based games may have contributed to making those games more engaging to students. Overall, the data suggests that the interpersonal aspects of GBL were favored by students and may have contributed to the games' effect on student engagement in class.

Games have been noted as having the potential to be tools that can increase communication between students (Adipat et al., 2021; Boctor 2013). The findings of this study support this literature, as many students submitted responses that fell under the interpersonal communication theme. The prevalence of this theme throughout the qualitative data suggests that the games were successful in providing a space and setting for students to interact with one another.

Physical Movement

The second most frequent theme cited by students in their responses was physical movement. All of the games integrated some form of physical movement, which likely contributed to keeping students engaged. The high frequency of responses citing physical

movement as a source of enjoyment suggests that this factor contributed to games' appeal, thereby influencing student engagement. In the literature review, it was noted that games require an entertaining gameplay loop to be engaging (Adipat et al., 2021). This present study suggests that physical movement is one component that helps create an entertaining activity.

Opportunities to use the Content

Students also noted that they enjoyed being able to apply the content they were learning. Since students were not graded on their performance, the games provided motivation and opportunity to use the language in a low-stakes environment. The relevance of the games as a medium to use content likely contributed to the effect they had on student engagement.

Competition

Lastly, students cited competition as a source of enjoyment. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that competition can positively influence student engagement as found in the literature review. Students' evident enjoyment of winning and competing suggests that this element contributed to keeping students engaged.

Game-Based Learning Complementing Communicative Language Teaching

The findings of this exploratory study suggest that GBL can complement CLT by creating conditions that support the kinds of interaction and practice emphasized in CLT. In this study, games provided structured opportunities for students to use the target language to achieve goals, solve problems, and collaborate with peers, versus simply completing drills that focused on content as opposed to context. The increases in students' reported on-task behavior, participation, interest, and motivation across these GBL lessons indicate that these activities can be more engaging for learners who might otherwise remain passive during CLT tasks.

Specific game features highlighted by students including interpersonal communication, physical movement, opportunities to use content, and competition, align with CLT principles. For example, interpersonal communication and teamwork are similar to CLT's emphasis on interaction and negotiation of meaning. Another example is physical movement and competition, which appeared to lower barriers and draw in students who were less inclined to participate in more traditional activities. The games used in the study did not replace CLT, but were connected to its implementation, offering low-stakes, enjoyable formats through which students could practice Japanese in line with learning goals.

Recommendations

This exploratory study begins to address the lack of classroom-based teacher research on GBL in CLT Japanese courses by identifying game characteristics linked with engagement. Because the data came from a single, small class over a short period, broader and more generalizable studies are key. Preliminary findings in this study showed that games can have a positive impact on student engagement in a Japanese world language class utilizing the CLT approach. The study identified aspects of the games that students found particularly enjoyable that may have increased engagement. Building upon these results, potential avenues for future research could include the use of lengthier games, leveraging the interpersonal aspect of games, using games for CI, compiling best practices for game selection, and the consideration of online games.

Lengthier Games

Future research into GBL in a CLT classroom would benefit from examining the impact of using lengthier educational games. Increasing the length of the games would allow the researcher more data to gauge the impact on student engagement or learning. This study used shorter games that could be used alongside other activities. It could be beneficial for future studies to examine longer games as the main focus of a class rather than a supporting part of a lesson and to investigate how they might affect student engagement in CLT based classes. Given that GBL utilizing short games was shown to positively affect student engagement, future research could investigate the influence of longer games on engagement.

Leveraging Interpersonal Aspects of Games

Interpersonal communication emerged as the most prominent theme in students' qualitative responses regarding enjoyable aspects of the games. Therefore, it could be valuable to explore how the use of games can be used to promote interpersonal interaction and build an environment conducive to risk-taking within a CLT based classroom. Incorporating games could help create a less risk-averse environment, encouraging students to engage more freely in the target language. The interpersonal interaction within the games was cited by students as an enjoyable component, therefore it could be leveraged to help create a welcoming environment.

Games for Comprehensible Input

This study focused on the impact of GBL on student engagement, finding it to be overall beneficial with high levels of student enjoyment. As CI is an important component of the CLT approach, it is worthwhile to further explore the use of games as a vehicle for CI. Providing CI to students in an enjoyable manner may positively affect its efficacy. Therefore, future research examining how games could be effectively utilized in the classroom to provide CI and drive communication between students could prove beneficial to learning. A deeper investigation into games in relation to the CLT approach could offer valuable insights into both educational strategies.

Best Practices for Game Selection

The analysis of student qualitative responses revealed four themes regarding the enjoyment of games. These themes were identified as desirable aspects of the games. It was also found that team-based games were more effective than individual-based games at generating engagement. This was possibly due to the increased interpersonal interaction inherent in team-based games, suggesting that not all games are equally valuable. Therefore, future research into the best practices for selecting games for use in a CLT context is warranted. Games have a variety of structural and design elements, such as interesting graphics, sound effects, rules encouraging teamwork or competition, or a focus on verbal or non-verbal communication. Investigating which elements of a game provide the greatest benefit for engagement could provide information that would help educators choose games suited for their needs.

Online Games

This study used short, in-person games within a CLT context and found GBL to be beneficial to student engagement. Therefore, a logical next step is to explore the use of online games or platforms to assist in learning with the CLT approach. In the current age, where remote learning is increasingly common, online games potentially offer a way to sustain student engagement and provide CI. Online games could also be utilized as supplementary learning resources for courses that are predominantly in-person. Further research investigating online games as a medium for CI and a tool for the CLT approach could yield valuable insight into modern technology-based language learning options for classrooms.

Conclusion

Despite interest in GBL in a variety of classrooms across disciplines, there has been limited empirical work on its role in CLT-based world language classes, especially Japanese. This study showed that GBL can have a positive impact on student engagement in a CLT-based Japanese world language class and further identified four game features. The study revealed important factors to consider when implementing games to ensure effectiveness. Students valued the interpersonal aspects of games the most and team-based games were found to be more engaging than individual-based games. Based on this, teachers seeking to improve engagement should choose games that are team-based and require that students work collaboratively rather than individual-based games. The other themes that were found to contribute to the games' effectiveness were physical movement, opportunities to use the content, and competition. When selecting games, it may be beneficial to look for games that include these components or modify existing ones to include them. Doing so could increase the effect on student engagement.

The final class in the study saw a drop in engagement, possibly due to game choice and the close proximity of the final test of the quarter. This emphasizes the importance of game implementation; timing or situational factors can affect a game's effectiveness on student engagement. Similarly, the only class with a lower interest score than the baseline was a class where visiting Japanese students were present. The findings in this study can inform game selection to ensure games positively impact student engagement within classes that use a CLT approach.

The exit passes provided valuable data regarding students' self-assessed engagement and their reception of the games utilized. These quick self-assessments helped provide feedback that could be used to plan further lessons and also to guide activity or game selection. Even outside a formal study, the practice of using exit passes can be useful in guiding teaching practice.

While this study remained exploratory and descriptive in its analysis, the findings yielded evidence supporting the use of GBL to improve student engagement in a world language class. The aspects of the games cited by students as enjoyable can serve as things to consider when selecting games to ensure effectiveness. When the goal is to enhance student engagement through GBL, teachers should employ team-based games that foster interpersonal communication over individual-based games.

This study represented an effort to integrate a strategy from older instructional methods for language with more current instructional pedagogy to enhance instruction and ultimately improve student engagement. While language instruction has shifted away from purely explicit grammar and vocabulary instruction toward teaching for communication in context, deficiencies in student engagement still exist. The findings in this study provide evidence that GBL can positively influence student engagement in a CLT based world language classroom.

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About the Authors

Donovan Tse is a 2025 graduate from the University of Hawaii at Manoa, College of Education, School of Teacher Education, Master of Education in Teaching Program. He spent six years teaching in Japan after getting his bachelor's degree in History and Japanese from the University of Hawaii at Manoa. He has taught Japanese at a number of Hawaii Department of Education high schools. Donovan served as the primary instructor in the Japanese language class that participated in this study.

Vail Matsumoto is an Associate Professor at the University of Hawaii at Manoa in the College of Education's School of Teacher Education in the Master of Education in Teaching Program. She spent one year teaching in Japan after getting her bachelor's degree in English Education from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. She serves as a university liaison to several Hawaii Department of Education public schools, including the school that participated in this study.

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The Power of Extensive Reading in Improving Students' Vocabulary and Reading Skills

Ugilkhon Kakilova
Andijan State Institute of Foreign Languages
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5709-1832

Elyanora Menglieva
University of Warwick
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9050-2722

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Abstract

This study reports on an Exploratory Action Research (EAR) project that investigated the use of extensive reading (ER) as a pedagogical approach to support English language learning among teenagers in a state school in Andijan City, Uzbekistan. Departing from Day and Bamford's classical model, this study implemented a 'Modified' ER with 'Class Reading' elements. This approach emphasised the provision of level-appropriate reading materials and opportunities for students to freely choose texts to increase their engagement through collaborative discussions and reflective blogging. This pedagogical initiative, introduced gradually with the help of EAR, proved the value of ER for students' vocabulary expansion and reading comprehension, as well as for their confidence and motivation to read for pleasure. Overall, ER is most effective when supported by access to a wide range of reading materials, combined with structured opportunities for reflection, collaborative sharing, and independent reading beyond the classroom.

Introduction

Extensive reading (ER) is a widely recognised and powerful learning tool in first, second and foreign language learning. ER has been variably defined, but it is often associated with Day and Bamford's (2002) "Ten principles" for successful ER programmes. These principles emphasise that ER should be engaging, easy, fast, silent and self-selected with a primary purpose of information or pleasure (Day & Bamford, 2002; Robb & Ewert, 2024).

Many studies highlighted the benefits of ER on students' language development. Hardy and Rodrigo (2025) highlight that ER can greatly contribute to language proficiency, namely vocabulary and grammar acquisition, spelling, as well as reading fluency and reading

comprehension. Suk (2017) found that students who had consistent exposure to ER, particularly graded reading, over time demonstrated clear improvements in reading comprehension, reading speed, and, most importantly, vocabulary acquisition.

In addition, according to Hardy and Rodrigo (2025), there are affective and cognitive benefits of ER for language learners. Affective gains include developing positive attitudes toward reading, fostering love for books, and cultivating long-term reading habits. Cognitive benefits, on the other hand, include delaying cognitive decline and preserving cognitive functions.

Although ER has been much investigated and its benefits for language proficiency are well documented, it is still not commonly practiced in EFL (English as a foreign language) settings (Jeon & Day, 2016), particularly school settings. There could be many reasons for this: teachers' reluctancy, prioritising intensive reading-only instruction in the school programmes, limited exposure to a variety of texts, students' low proficiency levels (Hardy & Rodrigo, 2025; Macalister, 2010). Suk (2017) also outlined other challenges of introducing ER in the classroom. One of the most significant challenges is the mismatch between the vocabulary explicitly taught in regular lessons and the words that students encounter in graded readers. This gap can cause frustration, as learners may feel unprepared to deal with unfamiliar words, which can reduce their motivation to read. To address this, teachers are encouraged to carefully select reading materials that match students' proficiency levels and to provide sufficient pre-reading or vocabulary-building support to help learners approach the texts with confidence.

Therefore, Suk (2017) recommends selecting materials that align with learners' proficiency and interests while also ensuring that assessments reflect the words students encounter through reading. Reading materials that include graded readers, simplified short adventure and detective stories, and illustrated books with controlled vocabulary can enhance students' reading fluency and foster more positive attitudes toward reading in the EFL and secondary school context.

To explore how to engage secondary school students in extensive reading, I, Ugilkhon Kakilova, together with my mentor Elyanora Menglieva, implemented an EAR project. The main goal of this project was to help students who struggled with vocabulary development and had limited access to reading materials. We wanted to develop school students' reading fluency through ER. As part of this project, several interventions were successfully implemented, including ER sessions integrated into regular lessons and extracurricular activities.

Methods

Research Context

I conducted my research project in my own classroom at the specialised secondary school No. 14, located in the Andijan region of Uzbekistan. This type of school is for the gifted children who pass entry school exams. In this school, students' exposure to reading materials was generally limited to short passages from the textbook, and opportunities to engage with longer, more diverse texts were very rare. Reading for pleasure was not a common practice, and many students associated reading in English only with exam preparation or completing homework tasks.

Research Aims and Questions

The primary aim of this research project was to understand how ER can support students' reading comprehension and vocabulary development, and to reflect on the challenges and successes of integrating this intervention into an EFL classroom. The project also aims to initially explore my own perceptions and actions on the ways of engaging students in ER in the classroom. The following research questions guided this study:

Table 1.
Set of exploratory research questions with aims

Research questions	Aim of research question
1. *Why do I believe ER improves students' reading comprehension and vocabulary?*	Explore my own perceptions on the use of ER
2. *What are the challenges of implementing ER in my classroom?*	Explore my own perceptions on considering challenges in implementing ER
3. *What do my students enjoy about ER sessions?*	Explore others' perceptions to understand students' needs and interests
4. *What strategies do I use to motivate student participation in ER?*	Explore my teacher behaviour to understand how I teach ER
5. *How does ER contribute to student progress based on their assignments and test results?*	Explore students' performance
6. *What do my students say about ER-integrated classes and how do they perceive their impact on vocabulary growth and reading comprehension?*	Evaluate the impact of ER on aspects of language proficiency (action step)
7. *Did students demonstrate measurable improvement in these areas as a result of participation in ER activities?*	Evaluate the impact of ER on aspects of language proficiency (action step)

Participants

The participants of this study were my 9th-grade students. The students are teenagers (aged 14-15), whose first language is Uzbek and who are studying English as a foreign language. Most of them struggle with reading comprehension, especially when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary and longer texts. Their prior experience with reading English has been limited to short texts, and they have had little exposure to graded readers or authentic reading materials. This made them suitable participants for exploring how ER could support their vocabulary development and overall reading comprehension.

Research approach

The main research approach in this study is EAR. According to Smith (2015), EAR, as a gradualist and grounded approach that was developed as a form of teacher-research in difficult circumstances, encourages teachers

> *to engage in research-based exploration of issues arising in their classrooms via means which do not interfere with their everyday teaching, rather than immediately plunging into action and attempting measurement of change* (p. 39).

Being involved in the EAR mentoring initiative by the Network of English Teacher-Researchers in Uzbekistan, I employed this approach to explore the teaching problem and embed ER as a pedagogical practice in the school context. The following sections describe each of the EAR steps that were completed during this project.

Exploration phase

The problem in the classroom was initially identified through multiple sources of evidence. At the beginning of the school year, observations during daily lessons indicated that many 9th-grade students struggled with reading. When longer texts were introduced, students often paused due to difficulty understanding unfamiliar vocabulary. Motivation to continue reading tended to decrease when challenges were encountered.

To explore this issue more systematically, teacher reflection notes were kept after each reading lesson. These notes documented which parts of the texts were difficult for students, their reactions to new vocabulary, and the level of engagement during tasks. This provided insight into the effectiveness of my instructional strategies. Based on my reflections, I noticed a consistent pattern: students were confident with short textbook passages but faced difficulties when reading longer stories or graded readers.

In addition, a colleague acting as a critical friend observed several of my lessons and wrote notes about how students engaged with the reading tasks. This provided an objective perspective and helped me see things I could have missed. Her observation notes confirmed that students avoided reading aloud, lost focus during silent reading, and often asked for word translations instead of trying to guess meaning from context. This helped me realise that the challenge was not limited to vocabulary but also included a lack of reading strategies.

A short survey was administered to students to explore their reading habits, preferences, and attitudes toward reading in English. The results indicated that most students rarely engaged in reading English texts outside of class. Approximately one third reported enjoying reading in their mother tongue but described English texts as “too difficult” or “boring.” These responses provided further evidence that limited vocabulary and minimal exposure to engaging reading materials were significant obstacles to developing reading proficiency.

Taken together, these observations, reflections, critical friend notes, and survey results helped me clearly identify the core problem: my students had limited vocabulary knowledge and very little experience with ER, which restricted the development of their reading comprehension and overall language proficiency.

Action phase

After analysing all data collected during the exploratory phase, the research progressed to the Action phase. After comparing my exploratory findings with the literature, I decided to adopt Day & Bamford’s (2002) five principles for the successful implementation of the ER programme:

- the availability of materials suited to students’ proficiency levels and interests,
- opportunities for students to freely choose and read as many materials as they wish,
- access to a wide variety of reading materials across different topics,
- understanding that reading should be an individual and silent activity,
- teacher is orienting and guiding their students.

Besides, other important dimensions of ER were considered, including the location where pleasure reading took place, the agent responsible for selecting the text, and the availability of supplementary activities related to reading (Waring & McLean, 2015). The main reasons for not being able to implement all the principles was the curriculum limitations and time management.

Interventions: Considering the principles of ER and exploratory findings, I decided to implement three main interventions over the period of two months:

(1) I provided a wide variety of accessible reading materials, primarily graded readers, according to students' proficiency levels, linguistic competence, interests, as well as curriculum requirements for acquiring textbook-specific lexical units. This curated approach allowed students to read independently with minimal frustration while remaining engaged and motivated, ensuring necessary vocabulary attainment.

(2) Regular silent reading sessions were organised as part of extra-curriculum activities to support the development of sustained reading habits among students. To make this experience more interactive and meaningful, students were encouraged to share their reading experiences during the Readers' Club meetings and through supplementary classroom activities. These activities included role-plays based on the characters, group discussions about the plot, debates on key themes, and writing short summaries or reflections on each chapter. Such activities were designed not only to deepen comprehension but also to create a collaborative and supportive reading culture where learners could express their ideas, ask questions, and motivate each other to continue reading.

(3) Continuous reflection on teaching practice was conducted, and interventions were adjusted as necessary. Data from a reflective journal, a student-readers' blog, post-lesson surveys, and test results were used to identify effective strategies and areas for improvement. Observations indicated that students participated more actively and engaged more deeply in both regular reading classes and Readers' Club sessions. Activities were modified to allow greater opportunities for peer discussion, enabling students to share short summaries, discuss new vocabulary, and reflect on their reading experiences collaboratively.

These combined interventions highlighted the critical need to create a richer reading environment where students could access engaging, level-appropriate texts and develop positive reading habits.

Data analysis

All the qualitative data collected from my own reflections and my critical friend's observation notes were analysed thematically at the exploratory and action cycles of this project. The themes have been outlined in the further sections. The data analysis for the surveys was performed via Excel, and descriptive statistical information was generated.

Results and Discussion

Exploratory phase findings

The exploratory phase of this research revealed challenges and opportunities in implementing ER with 9th-grade EFL learners in Uzbekistan. I explored this teaching challenge from three perspectives: my own teacher perceptions, students' perceptions, and my behaviour in the classroom.

From my perspective as a teacher, I identified three main challenges in integrating ER into the classroom. First, students had a very limited access to reading materials that were appropriate for their proficiency level; many of the available texts contained vocabulary beyond their current knowledge, making sustained reading difficult both at home and at school. This aligns with Suk's (2017) finding that mismatches between classroom vocabulary and words in graded readers can reduce the effectiveness of ER. Second, the school curriculum allocated very little time for reading activities, resulting in limited opportunities for extended practice during lessons. Finally, variations in student motivation and reading ability were observed. While some students engaged enthusiastically with reading tasks, others struggled or displayed lower interest, creating challenges for ensuring balanced participation.

I conducted a survey to explore students' perceptions. Findings showed a complex but, overall, more positive attitudes towards reading. The data (see Table 2) showed that half of the students recognised reading as a useful activity for vocabulary development and outlined their preferences for certain genres that could be included to the ER programme. However, that fact that 35% of students still did not enjoy reading outside the classroom suggested a challenge to overcome: developing students' autonomous habits for pleasure reading. These findings highlight the importance of offering students the freedom to choose texts that match their interests, a point that has been repeatedly emphasised in previous studies on ER (Day & Bamford, 2002; Suk, 2017).

Table 2.
Students' perceptions of ER (survey results)

Survey item	% of students	Interpretation
Reading helps to improve vocabulary	50%	Students saw clear benefits for vocabulary growth
Do not enjoy reading outside the classroom	35%	Reading is still not a pleasurable habit for some students
Enjoy specific genres (adventure, detective, fantasy)	65%	Choice of genre motivates students and increases engagement

The recommendations of my colleague, who observed my lessons, also pointed to several practical improvements. For instance, my colleague noted during a personal conversation that "students seemed more engaged when they were asked open-ended questions about the story". She suggested allocating more time for group discussions to allow quieter students to express their opinions. Also, there was another point worth considering from the observation: having discussions primarily in English with occasional use of Uzbek for clarification could engage students who encounter comprehension difficulties. Another valuable observation was the idea

of using short reflection prompts at the end of each chapter, which could encourage learners to connect the text with their own personal experiences. Encouraging students to share their thoughts on chapters, as my colleague recommended, could create a more collaborative and interactive learning environment. This aligns with the observation that reading becomes more meaningful when combined with peer interaction. Since all students read the same book, Jamie Summer's "*Roll with It"*, vocabulary assessments could be directly linked to the text. These assessments, administered every two weeks, focused on key words and phrases introduced in the chapters, allowing students to consolidate new vocabulary and providing a measurable indication of their progress. This suggestion reflects Suk's (2017) emphasis on aligning assessments with the vocabulary students encounter during reading.

Overall, these exploratory findings suggest that while ER has the potential to improve vocabulary and reading comprehension, its success depends on access to suitable materials, time allocation within the curriculum, and strategies for sustaining students' motivation. The survey results showed that students were more engaged when they could choose texts that matched their interests. Similarly, the recommendation to integrate peer discussion and vocabulary assessments highlights the importance of combining ER with supportive teaching practices. These insights provided a foundation for the action stage of the research – to plan and implement specific strategies to make ER more effective for my learners.

Action phase findings

The action stage began with the preparation of a diverse collection of accessible graded readers and short stories, spanning various genres and levels of difficulty. Students were encouraged to form a reading community and self-select texts based on their interests. At the beginning, all students chose to read an adventure story, Jamie Summer's *Roll with It,* as their first reading text, reflecting their preferences and high initial engagement. This approach can be considered as a Modified or Class Reading with follow-up activities, which is a "distinct and equally valid" form of ER in comparison to classical model (Waring & McLean, 2015, p. 161). After students chose the story, I designed reading comprehension tasks that incorporated the target vocabulary to support the acquisition of new lexical items and the active use of target vocabulary in both written and spoken forms, providing structured support while maintaining student choice and motivation.

By structuring the reading process in this way, the intervention aimed to balance independent reading with targeted classroom support. This stage provided a foundation for students to develop stronger reading habits and enhance linguistic skills. The subsequent interactive reading activities included group discussions about plot and characters, role-plays based on story events, debates on key themes, and writing short summaries or reflections. The discussions focused on the main ideas of the stories, predictions about the plot, students' personal responses, and the new vocabulary encountered. Through this process, students were supposed to not only strengthen their comprehension skills but also to develop greater confidence in expressing ideas and opinions in English. Overall, all these follow-up activities were designed to deepen comprehension, encourage active use of new vocabulary, and foster collaborative engagement in reading among students.

An online class blog was also introduced to serve as a reflective space where students could share their reading experiences, respond to guiding questions, and complete additional vocabulary activities. I monitored students' contributions, documented their reflections, and recorded evidence of vocabulary use in their posts and discussions. The blog thus functioned

both as a pedagogical tool and as a means of collecting qualitative data on learners' engagement and reading comprehension.

When I planned these interventions, namely allowing students to select their preferred reading texts and maintaining engagement in reading through discussions, vocabulary activities and a blog, I aimed to increase students' motivation and support their vocabulary development as well as reading comprehension. In addition, incorporating reflective writing and collaborative activities aimed to foster learner autonomy, critical thinking, and confidence in using English. Most students decided to read the same books as a class which enabled shared discussions while still allowing for personal reflection and engagement with the text.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the ER programme, I collected data from students' formative assessments (pre- and post-tests), observations of students' engagement in classroom interactions and their contributions to the class blog throughout the intervention. The data from formative assessments (tests after each chapter) that included reading comprehension and vocabulary questions demonstrated measurable gains (see Table 3). Notably, the post-test scores indicated significant improvements in students' ability to identify main ideas, retrieve details, make inferences more accurately, implement new words in practice compared to the pre-test performance. The overall performance in tests reflects a positive outcome, suggesting that the majority of students benefited from the ER programme.

Table 3.
Students' Vocabulary Test Results

Test	No of Students	A Grade	B Grade	Failed	Overall Outcome
Pre-Test (before Chapter 1)	14	4	6	4	Moderate performance, many struggled with new vocabulary
Test 1 (after Chapter 1)	14	12	2	0	Strong performance with majority achieving top results
Test 2 (after Chapter 2)	14	9	3	2	Slight variation in performance but overall positive outcome

Data collected from the class blog revealed that 14 students actively shared their reflections on the "Readers' blog". In their posts, students frequently used the vocabulary items they had encountered in the selected book, which indicates active learning and application. Besides, students' reflective blog entries demonstrated a deeper understanding of story plots and characters, as they were able to summarise chapters, express personal opinions, and discuss new vocabulary in context. Finally, observations during collaborative discussions revealed that students could articulate ideas more clearly, respond to peers' interpretations, and make predictions about story outcomes, indicating enhanced comprehension and engagement with the texts.

Overall, the findings at the action level indicate that ER not only supported vocabulary growth and comprehension but also increased students' confidence and motivation. The

combination of independent reading, collaborative activities, and reflective blogging contributed to both linguistic and attitudinal improvements among the learners.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that ER can play a significant role in improving 9th-grade EFL students' vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. This EAR project showed that when students were given opportunities to read graded readers of their own choice, combined with collaborative discussions and reflective blogging, they could develop greater confidence in their reading skills and began to use new vocabulary more actively. Both quantitative evidence from vocabulary tests and surveys and qualitative data from blog reflections confirmed the effectiveness of ER in supporting language development as well as learner motivation.

From a pedagogical perspective, this research highlights the importance of providing students with access to varied and level-appropriate reading materials. The positive results suggest that ER should not be viewed as an optional activity, but rather as an essential part of the EFL curriculum. Teachers can support this by integrating ER into their lessons, organising reading clubs, and encouraging reflective sharing through digital platforms or peer discussions.

At the policy level, it is recommended that schools and educational authorities allocate more time and resources to support ER initiatives. This includes investing in collections of graded readers, developing teacher training modules on ER practices, and creating supportive frameworks that encourage students to read for pleasure in English. Institutions should also consider integrating formative vocabulary assessments alongside reading activities to help track progress and consolidate learning.

For future research, further studies could explore how ER influences different groups of learners, such as students of varying proficiency levels or learners in rural and urban contexts. Comparative studies involving different genres of texts could also shed light on how reading preferences affect motivation and vocabulary acquisition. In addition, longitudinal studies would provide valuable insights into the long-term impact of ER on overall language proficiency.

In conclusion, this teacher research project demonstrates that ER is a powerful approach to enhancing both vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension among EFL learners. With the right support from teachers, institutions, and policymakers, it can become a sustainable and motivating practice that significantly contributes to language development in secondary school contexts.

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About the Authors

Ugilkhon Kakilova is a researcher, a teacher trainer and an EFL teacher at the General and Comparative Linguistics Program in Andijan State Institute of Foreign Languages, Uzbekistan. She is also an active member and mentor in the Network of English Teacher-Researchers in Uzbekistan. Email: kakilovaugilkhon@gmail.com

Elyanora Menglieva is a PhD candidate at the Department of Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, UK. She mentors teacher-researchers around the world and is currently leading the Network of English Teacher-Researchers in Uzbekistan. Email: elyanora.menglieva@warwick.ac.uk

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There is no financial interest to report as part of this research project. We hereby certify that the submission is our own original work and is not under review at any other publication.

Enhancing Academic Writing Proficiency Through Formative Feedback

Rajeswari Kangayanatha Aiyer
Post Graduate Institute of English, Open University of Sri Lanka
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6885-252X

Shalini Kaduwela
Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology, Sri Lanka
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5433-3897

Fathima Zahra Hameed
Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology, Sri Lanka
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4337-3810

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Abstract

This concurrent mixed-methods action research study investigated the effectiveness of targeted formative feedback while introducing Coxhead's Academic Word List to improve the academic writing proficiency of students at the foundation level of university education and its relationship with students' confidence. Informed by the theoretical underpinnings of control theory, self-regulation theory, and cognitive overload theory (Lipnevich & Panadero, 2021), three intervention cycles were designed to investigate the efficiency of targeted formative feedback provided by teacher, peers, and self. The participants were 135 university foundation students at a private higher education institute in Sri Lanka. The student questionnaires; classroom performance of 101 students and focus group discussions with 5 teachers showed marked improvement in student writing though at disproportionate levels The students also expressed a significant increase in confidence, and displayed heightened awareness of academic vocabulary. Teachers' feedback stimulated inquiry and reasoning behind the choice of academic words and remained the most preferred type of feedback among students. Peer feedback created the most interaction, the highest average grades, and the most sharing of knowledge, thereby decreasing the gap between current and expected level of achievement. However, self-feedback lacked the enthusiasm and performance shown in other cycles, although it promoted student autonomy. This study confirmed the necessity of consistent scaffolding for university foundation students to support their academic writing development and highlighted the importance of the teacher as the main channel of support. The study recommends implementation of varied feedback mechanisms and continuous attempts to increase students' confidence through teaching of academic vocabulary.

Introduction

Having a strong academic vocabulary is an important goal for learners of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Research consistently concurs that there is a significant positive relationship between strong vocabulary and overall language proficiency (Rafique et al., 2023). Nation (2000) categorizes vocabulary into four main types, namely high-frequency, academic, technical, and low-frequency words. Academic vocabulary occupies 10% of the words in academic texts, according to Coxhead (2000), thereby underlining its importance. In her extensive study, a corpus of 3.5 million words of written academic texts was analysed to create an Academic Word List (AWL) of 570 word families divided into 10 sub lists based on frequency of use. This list has been utilized as the key source for vocabulary building activities that form the core of this research.

Though possessing a strong vocabulary is not the only determining factor of academic success, in a higher education setting, students are expected to explain concepts, critically analyze literature, synthesize arguments, and communicate their ideas orally and in writing. Thus, knowledge of academic vocabulary is deemed important for the undergraduates. University foundation-level students, particularly those transitioning from secondary education to higher education in the Sri Lankan context, often find adapting to the rigorous academic writing requirements challenging. As a consequence, they produce writing that has a combination of academic and non-academic words. Paxton (2007) claims that this heteroglossic nature of writing, where features of primary discourse (used at home) and the secondary discourse (used in academic and official settings) is produced in writing tasks because of the students' inability to identify and incorporate academic writing conventions.

In navigating these challenges, the role of teachers in assessing the work of the students and giving them feedback is paramount. Extensive research underscores the necessity and benefits of formative assessment and feedback in student writing (Morris et al., 2021; Wingate, 2010; Esambe et al., 2016). However, the efficacy of formative feedback depends on the clarity, specificity, immediacy, level of personalization, degree of scaffolding, and the mode utilized (Shute, 2008). According to Winstone et al. (2017), the inability to use the feedback stems from non-comprehensibility, lack of opportunities to improve, and lack of motivation. By providing targeted formative feedback on specific language features and opening multiple channels (teacher, peer, and self-feedback) for providing feedback, students get better scaffolding in class, thereby aiding in becoming confident users of academic language.

This action research study specifically seeks to understand the effectiveness of giving targeted formative feedback while introducing the AWL and analyse the impact of formative feedback on the perceptions and performance of academic writing in foundation-level students. It further aims to investigate the possible correlation between improved academic writing and students' confidence in using academic vocabulary. The research questions are:

1. How does targeted formative feedback on AWL application improve the academic writing proficiency of the students?
2. What is the relationship between improvements in academic writing proficiency and students' confidence?
3. How do AWL applications and formative feedback influence students' orientation towards academic writing?

The findings of this study will offer practical insights for English language educators in Sri Lanka and similar EAP/ESL contexts, providing evidence-based strategies for integrating Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List with writing development. Furthermore, this research contributes to the existing literature by providing context-specific data on the correlation between students' confidence and academic writing.

Literature Review

Feedback is an integral part of the learning environment. It is a process where the effects of language production are communicated back to the learner, enabling learning, growth, and performance. Sadler's (1989) seminal work on formative feedback indicates that knowing the assessment criteria, being able to monitor one's own work, and having access to different strategies like peer assessment and examples make feedback more effective. However, any single theory might fail to address the multifaceted nature of feedback and its implications. Hence, integration of theoretical frameworks as suggested by Bruin et al. (2020) and Lipnevich and Panadero (2021) is warranted.

Building on this principle, for this action research that focuses on strengthening academic vocabulary proficiency of students by introducing AWL and providing targeted formative feedback, an integration of the following theories will form a solid theoretical grounding. Control theory, explained by Pekrun (2007 as cited in Lipnevich and Panadero, 2021), asserts that feedback helps the learners identify the discrepancies between set goals and their current performance. Understanding this discrepancy-reduction function is vital for designing feedback on AWL because the gap between students' current word choices and the expected academic discourse can be highlighted precisely. They further explain that according to Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's self-regulation theory (2006), feedback assists the learners in monitoring their progress, adjusting the strategies to achieve the goal, and maintaining motivation. This means that the formative feedback given to the students should be aimed at empowering them to self-monitor and adapt their writing strategies for accuracy. Cognitive overload theory, explained by Panadero et al. (2018 as cited in Lipnevich and Panadero, 2021), states that clear and well-structured feedback optimizes the capacity of the working memory by reducing unnecessary mental effort and aiding efficient processing, necessitating the need for highly targeted, comprehensible feedback.

Beyond these theoretical underpinnings, empirical studies also identify practical features of effective feedback, often revealing divergences in perspectives between teachers and students. Dawson et al. (2019) list the key features that constitute effective feedback according to the teachers and the students. They indicate that the teachers think effective feedback should lead to improvement in the work, self-regulation, and creation of a positive effect. They also believe that feedback has to be timely, include peer feedback, and provide examples. Students, however, express that it has to be personal, explicable, objective, detailed, specific, thorough, constructive, and encouraging. This multifaceted nature of feedback asserts the current understanding that the focus of feedback has shifted from being a mere transfer of information about someone's performance to an interactive process which gives importance to acceptance and use by the learner (Winstone et al., 2017; Wisniewski et al., 2019).

Discussions about the kinds of feedback, namely oral, written, and corrective, shed some light on the nature of feedback and how it influences the learner uptake. Lyster and Ranta (1997) list explicit correction, recast, clarification requests, elicitation, repetition, and

metalinguistic feedback as the oral corrective techniques used by teachers. Explicit correction and elicitation led to high learner uptake, while metalinguistic feedback encouraged self-repair among the students. Hyland and Hyland (2006) insist on the need for written corrective feedback from the teachers. They believe that the teacher's comments should be informative, satisfy pedagogical needs, and take students' likely reactions into account. In the event of giving peer feedback, those authors propose that some training on giving constructive feedback will ensure a positive impact.

The significance of training the students has been reiterated in other studies as well. Sadler's (1989) article that redefined formative feedback and its importance in developing confidence outlines three conditions that need to be satisfied in closing the gap between current and desired performance of the students. He posits that knowing what '*good*' work looks like, knowing how the current work compares to the goal, and possessing the skills to achieve it are mandatory in improving confidence. AWL positively serves as the tool for gap closure. Popovska Dimova et al. (2024), in their recent article about the link between formative assessment and student confidence assert the irreplaceable role played by teacher feedback and the importance of training students for self-feedback. They believe self-assessment and self-confidence are directly proportional. In line with the above study, Shaddad and Jember (2024) also discuss the importance of peer-work activities in improving self-esteem.

Further analyses of literature reveal a close connection between the academic positioning of the students in the university, their perceptions of their language competence, and the type of feedback they receive. Paxton (2007) claims that 'avoidance of new terminology' (p. 8) is one of the strategies followed by students in their interim literacy state. Insufficient use of academic vocabulary is directly connected to this behavior. In-depth investigations by Esambe et al. (2016), Alzamil (2021), Wingate (2010), and Morris et al. (2021) reveal the following notions. Formative feedback, both oral and written, plays a vital role in shaping academic success. Additionally, formative feedback with learning strategies and metacognitive information that helps students with future writing work was seen as the most successful form of feedback. Though all students benefited from targeted formative feedback, the weaker students needed more detailed, positive, and encouraging feedback. In terms of timeliness, students mostly preferred immediate and repeated feedback from different agents (peer, self).

Therova (2021) emphasizes the importance of academic vocabulary exposure, learning, and practice among foundation-level students, as proficiency in academic vocabulary is directly linked with academic achievement. According to her, the Academic Word List introduced by Coxhead (2000) proves to be one of the important sources for modelling vocabulary in the classroom. Brun-Mercer and Zimmerman (2015) add that receiving feedback on vocabulary usage leads to measurable improvement in students. The same is evidenced in a study conducted by Winkler et al. (2021).

Based on the analysis of literature about the acquisition, implementation, and production of academic vocabulary among foundation-level students in universities, the need to focus on teaching and giving feedback explicitly in the classrooms is pertinent. However, despite the recognized importance of academic vocabulary and formative feedback, there is a limited body of empirical research, particularly in the form of action research, that specifically investigates the direct impact of targeted formative feedback on the AWL application while simultaneously enhancing both academic writing proficiency and student confidence among Sri Lankan university foundation-level students. This study aims to fill this gap by implementing

interventions that measure the efficiency of targeted formative feedback given by the teacher, peers, and self in improving students' academic writing proficiency and confidence.

Methods

Research Design

A concurrent mixed-methods action research design has been adapted in this study. Burns (2009) explains that one of the main goals of action research is to identify problematic areas for the stakeholders involved in a learning environment, intervene in a deliberate manner to address the problems while collecting information systematically, so that decisions can be made to vary the approach until the desired changes are observed. She proposes the cyclical pattern of Plan-Act-Observe-Reflect as the broad phases of the research cycle. This study utilizes the self-reflective action research principle suggested by Burns. In terms of the research design, Creswell (2018) explains that a mixed methods study "combines or associates both qualitative and quantitative approaches, so that the overall strength of a study is greater…" (p.23). He continues to explain how concurrent data collection of both qualitative and quantitative nature provides a comprehensive analysis of the research problem. With these foundational principles, this study has been designed as concurrent mixed-methods action research, where three cycles of interventions are implemented to collect data.

Procedure

The interventions were administered during the second week of the semester, in the "Introducing Academic Vocabulary" lesson. The objective of the lesson was to introduce the AWL and instruct the students to use the academic vocabulary in context. The following steps were followed to implement the lessons:

1. The teachers were provided with the necessary lesson material (the lesson plan, worksheets, answer keys, and relevant presentation slides)
2. Instructions were given on the procedure, the purpose of interventions, and data collection mechanisms
3. Data was collected from the students and the teachers during and after the interventions

The lessons were executed in the following manner. Starting with a warmer activity that introduced the AWL and their definitions, the lesson was followed by the intervention cycles (see Appendix A for full details). In the first intervention, the students completed an activity of converting non-academic words to academic in a given paragraph with the help of teachers' oral and written feedback. In the second, the students completed a similar activity and provided feedback to each other with the help of error correction codes (see Table 1). They were also instructed to use affirmative feedback comments from the templates (see Table 2) provided to them. In the third, the students completed a task of rewriting a paragraph using academic vocabulary and self-corrected it, using the answer key. They were asked to write 'points to remember' as a takeaway message after the interventions. The activities were graded in all three interventions, and the marks were collected. At the end of the third intervention, the students were requested to complete a survey, and teachers participated in a focus group discussion to obtain their feedback on the whole process.

Table 1.
Error Correction Codes

Code	Area	Explanations	Examples
AW	Academic Word Needed	Replace with a more academic term from the AWL	"looked at"→ analyzed
C	Collocation	Word choice doesn't form a natural academic phrase	"strong improvement"→ significant improvement
WF	Word Form	Correct root word, but wrong form (noun/verb/adj)	"feedback was **benefitting** to students" → beneficial
R	Register	Too informal or conversational for academic tone	"kids" → students,
V	Vague Language	Replace vague word with more precise academic vocabulary	"a lot of" → a significant number of
WC	Word Choice	Word is incorrect or awkward in context	"Students were **forced** to use academic vocabulary"→ required

Table 2.
Affirmative Feedback Sentences Template

No	Sentence templates
1	You used strong academic words like [word], which made your writing sound formal and clear.
2	I noticed that you used academic terms such as [word/phrase]. That was really effective.
3	The word [word] was a great choice- it fits the academic tone very well.
4	This sentence is clear, but you might try using a more academic word instead of [word].
5	Consider changing [word] to something more precise to match academic writing.
6	To make your writing more academic, you could use a collocation like [collocation] here.

Participants

The study included 135 students in the University Foundation Programme at a private higher education institute in Sri Lanka, following EAP as a core module. The foundation programme in this context functions as a bridge between the Ordinary Level (O/L) and the university degree. This program is designed to fill the essential knowledge and skills gap required to transition to a degree programme without completing the Advanced Level (A/L) or failing to get pass grades in the board examination. Further details are given in Table 3 below.

Table 3.
Basis of University Foundation Programme

Ordinary Level (O/L)	University Foundation Programme	University Degree
Students aged 15/16 who complete Grade 11 board examinations	For Students aged 16 -18 (i) who do not proceed to advanced level grade 13 board examinations And/or (ii) Fail to get pass grades in A/L	3 or 4 years

Given the above context, the student cohort in this study comprised 15 to 20-year-old (15 years – 2%, 16-18 years - 57% and above 18 – 41%) students in the business, computing, and law subject streams, with varied English language proficiency levels (A1-C1). Each class consisted of 20 – 35 students based on the stream chosen.

Students' first language distribution – Sinhala (63%), Tamil (22%) and English (15%) – reflects the multilinguistic culture of Sri Lanka. Though the official languages (Sinhala and Tamil) are mutually intelligible, the educational policy promotes learning of both national languages along with the 'link' (English) language. Typically, in the Sri Lankan school system, students are introduced to the English language formally from Grade 3 (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2023; Indrarathne & McCulloch, 2022). However, those who study in bilingual schools (which offer a few subjects in English and the others in students' first language) and in international schools (that follow Cambridge or Edexcel syllabus) learn English from pre-school to A/L, leading to a big disparity in their language level (MoE, 2023). Despite the years of learning and varied language levels, all students lack the necessary academic language and vocabulary expected at university. For the findings and interventions to be comprehensible and credible, all students in the cohort and teachers were invited to participate in the study.

Instruments and Data Sets

Quantitative data was collected through the graded answers after the interventions and through the questionnaires from the students. Out of the 135 students who participated in classes, 101 submitted the completed questionnaires. The students' demographic information, years of exposure to English language, their opinions about getting feedback (teacher, peer, and self), and their level of engagement during the lessons were collected from the questionnaires. Qualitative data was collected through the focus group discussions with all the teachers after the completion of the interventions. The teachers were encouraged to discuss their teaching experiences at the foundation level, their opinions about giving feedback, how it was received by the students, and the challenges faced while implementing the interventions.

Data Analyses

Keeping in line with the basic principles of mixed methods research design explained by Creswell (2018), the quantitative and the qualitative data collected were compiled and analysed. Students' performances in the academic vocabulary tasks were measured by the grades obtained. This was compared against the level of engagement observed by the teachers and the opinions given by the students in the survey. Data was triangulated and presented in a thematic manner with the aim of answering the research questions.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Institutional approval was obtained to conduct the interventions, collect data, and share results with the academic community. Informed consent was obtained from the student participants and the teachers. Data was treated confidentially, and pseudonyms were used to refer to each participating teacher.

Given the time constraints in implementing the lessons and collecting data, the study has its own limitations. Firstly, only one cohort of students in one semester from a single private higher education institute was considered for the study. Hence, data cannot be generalised to a larger group. Moreover, qualitative data in the form of interviews or discussions were not collected from the students after the interventions. This could have given a much better picture of the students' perceptions. In addition, to assess the effectiveness of targeted formative feedback, a follow-up study could have been conducted after a time period with the same set of students to check their academic progression. In the future, a longitudinal study involving multiple batches over several semesters would give much better results.

Results and Discussion

RQ1: How does targeted formative feedback on AWL application improve the academic writing proficiency of the students?

Data from the students' survey and the discussions with the teachers collectively supported how students' academic writing proficiency improved with targeted formative feedback. In fact, they provide an affirmative position. In the foundation year, students are generally expected to develop clear and cohesive writing ability while using academic vocabulary appropriately. While targeted formative feedback from the teachers increased awareness and a positive mindset, peer feedback generated more marks. Self-feedback promoted reflective thinking.

Teacher's feedback

According to the survey, 67% of the students said that they found the teacher's feedback useful. In addition, 70% of the students have expressed the desire to get teacher's feedback in the future as well. This positive reception of teacher's feedback could be a result of the step-by-step introduction of the AWL and how this intervention was executed with continuous scaffolding. During the presentation phase, teachers introduced AWL and discussed the difference between academic and non-academic vocabulary. Learning to distinguish between what is wrong and what is expected, which is the key tenet of the control value theory as stated by Pekrun (2007, as cited in Lipnevich and Panadero, 2021), aided the students in understanding the lesson objective. Then, during the practice phase, the students were asked to identify non-academic phrases in a text with the teacher's oral feedback. Following that, a student's answer for the activity was displayed on screen, and constructive feedback was given using the error correction codes. This process of showing an example, according to Dawson et al. (2019) increases student comprehension. Finally, in the production phase, the students answered a similar activity (see Appendix B for a sample activity), which was corrected with written feedback from the teacher.

The success of the first intervention falls in line with Shute's (2008) notions about clarity of instructions, specificity of the task, and immediacy of formative feedback. In alignment with this finding, teachers shared that giving on-the-spot formative feedback helped the students

learn 'how to receive and give feedback.' In other words, teacher feedback served as a model for the successive peer and self-feedback interventions. However, the ineffectiveness of teachers' feedback in translating into increased marks, as seen in Figure 1 below, needs further exploration.

Peer's feedback

Marks obtained after the intervention where the peers gave feedback were on average higher than the other two interventions with teacher and self-feedback, according to Figure 1. While peer feedback sessions were evidently successful in terms of more correct answers, mixed opinions were expressed by the teachers in focus group discussions.

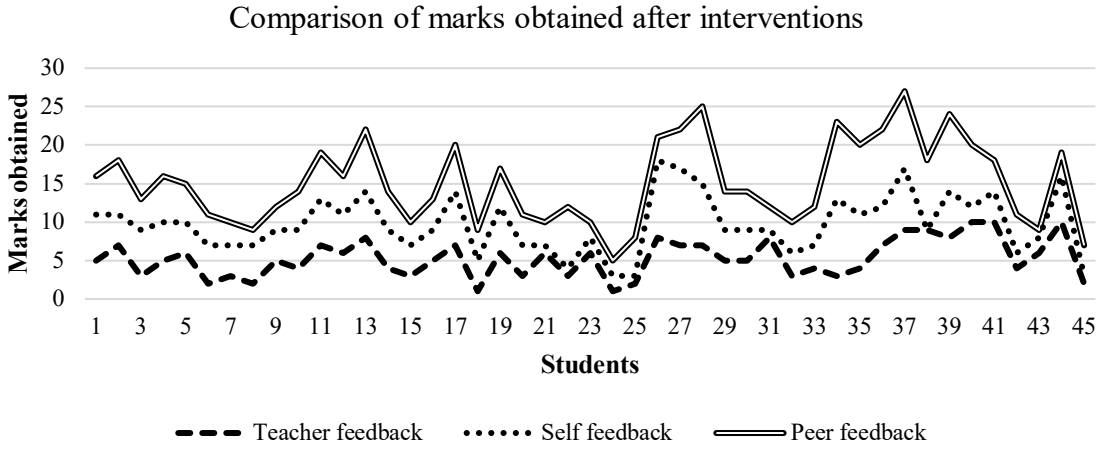

Figure 1.
Comparison of Marks Obtained after Interventions

The second intervention with peer feedback encouraged the students to use the error correction codes as a form of metalinguistic feedback after being introduced in the teacher feedback cycle as proposed by Lyster and Ranta (1997). The codes (see Table 1) were given with necessary information (the code, the area where the error has occurred, and the explanation for it) so that both students can benefit from sharing feedback. In addition, they were also encouraged to write affirmative feedback, as shown in Table 2. Thus, reducing the cognitive overload (Lipnevich & Panadero, 2021) during the task. Consequently, the students were seen to be interacting throughout the task.

Focus group discussions revealed the teacher's observations during the class. Prasadhini noticed more interaction among the students and opined that active participation meant that both students learned during the task. All of the teachers accepted that peer feedback generated the most interaction and visible interest in the tasks among the students. However, Shaheema felt that peer pressure was partly the reason for students' increased level of activity in class because 'they did not want their peers to see their faults'. She also pointed out the requirement for expert knowledge. According to her, the students did not take the peers' feedback seriously. If they had written two different answers, they came to the teacher to get the answer finalized. Nalini too observed that the students took the teacher's opinion as the final word. This leads to the understanding that generating more interaction does not necessarily mean more learning.

Self-feedback

During the self-feedback intervention, the students were given an informal paragraph with errors in academic vocabulary. After completing the activity, they were given the answer

key with additional explanation (e.g., replacing the non-academic expression *real skills* with the academic collocation *transferable skills*) to justify the answer. Finally, they were advised to write 'Points to remember' based on their experience with the interventions and their response to the tasks. This metacognitive reflection enabled the students to internalize the feedback so that they could accommodate the new information and perform better in the next activity, effectively closing the self-regulation loop (Sadler, 1989).

Students' survey shows that 42% of the students liked self-feedback, which is a moderately high preference. Fazra saw the swiftness in completion of the task during this intervention positively, while Shaheema viewed the same as a lack of enthusiasm. Other teachers too, felt that self-feedback lacked interaction. Though self-feedback encouraged self-reflection, according to the teachers, more training is needed in reflection. Sadler's (1989) article justifies this by saying that students need to be given more opportunities to self-correct. He also questions the act of evaluating peers' work as a training mechanism to self-correct. According to him, evaluation, which is at the top of cognitive skills in Bloom's taxonomy, might not come naturally to young children. He further doubts that the ability to evaluate can successfully translate to the ability to produce language. Hence, self-feedback worked as a novel attempt but not an immediate success.

Overall, the interventions highlighted key indicators of academic writing proficiency, namely awareness of academic vocabulary, critical thinking, collaborative work, interaction with peers, increased performance, and self-reflection. Hence, in combination, the interventions did improve academic writing proficiency.

RQ2: What is the relationship between improvements in academic writing proficiency and students' confidence?

There is a strong positive relationship between academic writing improvement and a rise in students' confidence, as 98% of the students reported that their confidence in academic word usage had increased. This show of confidence is consolidated with teachers' classroom observations and experiences during the interventions. They conveyed that the students' questions indicated confidence development in getting guidance from teachers ('Can I use this?') and promoting critical thinking ('Why can't I use this?'). This activation of engagement was also referred to in Shaddad and Jember (2024), when feedback-supported tasks and peer-work activities significantly increased learners' self-esteem and engagement compared to traditional instruction, indicating higher task confidence and willingness to participate.

In addition to this, Shaheema and Fazra shared that the students were convincingly exposed to academic vocabulary because they were introduced to AWL, explained about the importance of using it, provided with the list for reference, given a list of possible errors that might occur, and given an option to correct them. This is what Sadler (1989) refers to as "gap-closing" strategies (p. 22). The students were not merely given formative feedback; they were also given tools to improve their own work, thereby making them more confident. Malika expressed that, not only do they now know how others may use academic vocabulary differently, but also how they can go wrong. In other words, because of the feedback received, the students were clear about what is considered non-academic language. This demonstrates the activation of social and affective dimensions of students' writing identity, which is a crucial part of confident academic writing development. In this way, students' confidence levels rose with improved academic writing proficiency, developed through interventions.

Reduction of confidence

However, teachers shared their thoughts on what did not work well during the interventions. Self-feedback has been the least effective tool in improving students' performance in using AWL, according to the teachers. This is evident from the initial confusion observed in using the error correction codes on their own. This could have, in turn, negatively influenced the confidence of the students. 13% of the students mentioned that the error correction code was not useful. Though the use of error correction codes was unconventional, the benefits of learning to self-correct could have been enhanced with extended teacher scaffolding and additional modelling of correct answers. When agreeing to the low performance of the students in comparison to peer feedback, during the self-feedback cycle, teachers believed that weaker students were not forthcoming and might need more time to get adjusted to the idea of self-learning. Though the teachers believed that self-feedback intervention was informed by the first two interventions, only 9% of students had scored the highest marks during the self-feedback cycle among all three interventions, in contrast to 56% who scored the highest during peer feedback, as seen in Table 4.

Table 4.
Percentage of students with the highest score

Type of feedback	Highest Score
Peer	56%
Teacher	35%
Self	9%

The teachers also looked at the affective factors. Shaheema believed that 'the students were not willing to self-evaluate,' due to which 'enthusiasm died' in self-feedback. However, Fazra and Prasadhini noted the positive side by saying that the evaluation was quick, and it made them reflect on their own writing. Deriving from Nicol and Dick's self-regulation theory as cited in Lipnevich and Panadero (2021), which posits that feedback should assist students in monitoring their progress and adjusting strategies to achieve their goal, the art of self-monitoring and reflection needs to be developed through consistent practice. Overall, with careful formative feedback and sufficient availability of tools to improve their work, the students displayed improved confidence.

RQ3: How do AWL applications and formative feedback influence students' orientation towards academic writing?

As established in the introduction and literature review, students often find the use of academic vocabulary challenging. Accordingly, one of the objectives of this study was to examine whether the use of AWL applications, combined with formative feedback, could influence students' orientation towards academic writing. This challenge was also corroborated by teachers during the interviews, who described students in previous semesters as having 'insufficient vocabulary', 'struggling', or finding the AWL 'challenging'. The interventions were designed with these challenges in mind.

Following the completion of the interventions, students' responses to the questionnaire indicated a highly positive perception of formative feedback. When asked whether they liked receiving feedback from teachers, peers, and themselves, an overwhelming majority (98%) reported that they valued the feedback provided during the interventions. This finding suggests that formative feedback was perceived as supportive rather than evaluative and that it played a meaningful role in shaping students' engagement with the learning process. Furthermore, 99%

of students indicated their intention to apply the feedback received to future writing tasks. This suggests that sustained formative feedback not only supported immediate task completion but also fostered a forward-looking orientation towards academic writing, characterized by increased willingness to revise, improve, and transfer learning beyond the intervention.

Nevertheless, the presence of a small minority (2%) who reported that they did not like receiving feedback is noteworthy and necessitates further exploration. This resistance may stem from factors such as negative prior experiences with feedback, presumed high cognitive demand, particularly when dealing with complex academic vocabulary, or emotionally challenging learning experiences with different types of evaluations.

Insights from focus group discussions illuminate heightened awareness of the role of feedback among the teachers and the students combined. The teachers collectively expressed positive feelings with regard to interventions and their effect on the students. Nalini noted that feedback provided immediately during the lesson prompted greater student responsiveness compared to summative feedback delivered previously at the end of the semester. She emphasized that 'Students realized what words they should use and what words they should not use'. Prasadhini continued to say that 'They did a good job of replacing the non-academic word with an academic alternative.' The shift in realization that academic words are better learned through practice and consistent usage rather than rote learning created a sense of relief among the students; as Fazra mentioned, 'it was an eye opener' for them. Paxton's (2007) claim that the students use avoidance of new terminology as one of the coping mechanisms has been contested because the students in this context were given the realization that rote learning can be replaced with consistent practice, thereby reducing the resistance to academic word usage. This leads to the conclusion that the students have developed a positive attitude towards receiving formative feedback and are open to receiving it in the future as well.

Conclusion

This action research solidified the benefits of formative feedback in developing the confidence of the students in using academic words in higher education settings. Multiple advantages of formative feedback are not limited only to improving proficiency but extend into the affective factors. The first was the sharing of knowledge among the students, which was evident during peer feedback. In mixed-ability classrooms like the ones in this context, teachers find it challenging to disseminate knowledge for the benefit of the entire class. This was overcome through peer feedback, which resulted in bridging the gap between the current and expected level of knowledge.

The next was heightened awareness of language use. Students showed a positive perception of academic language by realizing that rote learning can be replaced with continuous practice. More importantly, what is wrong was learned before learning what is right. By the end of the third feedback, students were quite confident in identifying non-academic phrases, which logically led to replacing them with academic words. Nevertheless, an underlying sense of peer pressure and competitiveness was evident in peer feedback. In terms of academic performance, the responses from the students and the teachers revealed that increased interaction did not automatically translate to improved marks but definitely resulted in increased awareness.

Finally, immediate targeted formative oral and written feedback from the teachers reduced resistance, increased questions, promoted critical thinking, and boosted the confidence of the students. Having the teacher as the source of affirmation permeated all three interventions, thereby asserting the need for continuous scaffolding in class. To sum up, learning is facilitated by the teachers, which is then shared among peers, leading to self-growth in individual students.

Pedagogical Implications

The pedagogical implications of the results can be listed as follows:

1. Including feedback as an integral part of teaching for developing behavioral engagement increases active participation and bridges the learning gap.
2. Leveraging teacher expertise by remaining a constant source of scaffolding is paramount. They can expertly demonstrate the difference between right and wrong usage through continuous feedback.
3. Promoting self-correction for learner autonomy is recommended. As evidence suggests, it is a skill that needs to be fostered with the teacher's guidance.
4. Adopting a feedback-rich culture in the classroom is necessary. Students gain confidence when feedback is introduced as a tool for growth rather than a scale to measure deficit.
5. Integrating discipline-specific vocabulary will take the language precision of the students beyond general words. This will add strength to their repertoire and support professional communication in the future.
6. Designing the curriculum can be realigned to incorporate feedback as a standard component by allocating time for formative feedback.

This research clearly underlines that grades are not sufficient to measure students' academic writing potential. By creating a conducive environment for experimenting, sharing, and giving feedback, the students are empowered to transition from passive recipients to active self-regulated learners.

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About the Authors

Rajeswari Aiyer is an academic and resource person for the Postgraduate Institute of English at the Open University of Sri Lanka. She has 14 years of experience in the field of ELT. She holds a Master's degree in Teaching English as a Second Language. Her research focuses on mixed-methods and qualitative studies in higher education with specific interests in academic literacy and formative feedback. Email: rajeswarika@gmail.com

Shalini Kaduwela is a senior lecturer in English at the Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology (APIIT), Sri Lanka. She has 14 years of ELT experience in the field of higher education. She is reading for a PhD in Education. She has completed her Master's studies in Teaching English as a Second Language and a Bachelor's degree in Arts. Her research interests are academic writing, second language teaching and learning, and education management. Email: shalinikaduwela@gmail.com

Zahra Hameed is an English language lecturer at the Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology (APIIT), Sri Lanka. She holds a Master's Degree in Business Management and a Bachelor's degree in Arts. She is also a CELTA qualified teacher. She has been teaching English as both a first and second language to learners for almost 14 years. Email: zahra.hameed16@gmail.com

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The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.
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All contributors have seen the contents of the manuscript, and all authors agree with the contents and the order of presentation. The listing of authors correctly identifies their level of contribution to this work.
Rajeswari Aiyer: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Writing - Introduction, Literature review, Results and discussion, Conclusion, Review & editing
Shalini Kaduwela: Conceptualisation, Data collection, Writing - Methodology, Discussion, Abstract, Data analysis
Zahra Hameed: Conceptualisation, Data collection, Designing the interventions, Writing - Results and discussion
We hereby certify that the submission is our own original work and is not under review at any other publication.

Appendix A: Plan for the Interventions

Phase	Objective	Activity	Mode of interaction
Pre-intervention	Introducing the AWL Eliciting the importance of academic vocabulary Identifying AWL sub-lists, Word families, and academic collocations.	Warmer: Student pairs match 5 words from AWL sub-lists with their meanings Gap-filling exercise with the same words Distinguish academic and non-academic words	Teacher-led whole-class discussion.
Intervention 1 Teacher feedback	Identifying appropriate academic alternatives for non-academic words	Identify and replace non-academic words with academic words in a paragraph	The teacher gives immediate oral feedback Whole class discussion with a model answer Written feedback for the students' answers
Intervention 2 Peer feedback	Identifying appropriate alternatives for non-academic words and non-academic collocations	Use error correction codes to identify errors Replace errors with academic words.	Peers give affirmative written feedback along with marks
Intervention 3 Self-correction	Replacing the non-academic words in a paragraph and rewriting it.	Use the answer keys to correct errors Write 'points to remember	Students self-correct using the answer key provided by the teacher.

Appendix B: Sample Intervention Activity

Read the paragraph below. It contains 10 academic vocabulary errors, shown in bold.

Use the error correction code to identify the type of error, then suggest a better academic alternative from the Academic Word List (AWL).

Paragraph (With Errors in Bold):

In recent years, **a lot of** attention has been given to the effects of social media on education. Researchers try to **find out** how online platforms **help** students learn better. While some say it **makes** communication easier, others argue it can be **bad** for focus. One **thing** that needs to be studied is how long students use social media during class. Some schools have created **rules** to limit phone use, but not all of them **work good**. Also, many **kids** do not understand how their digital behavior affects their learning. Teachers must **give help** to students so they can use technology in better ways.

Classroom-Based Explicit Instruction of Formulaic Sequences: Effects on Japanese EFL Learners' Speaking Performance

Ken'ichi Yamazaki
Akita Prefectural University
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3211-2765

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Abstract

This classroom-based study investigates whether explicit instruction in formulaic sequences (FSs) enhances Japanese EFL learners' speaking performance. Over a 15-week semester, first-year university students were divided into an experimental group (English B), which received structured FS instruction using model scripts, visual highlighting, guided rehearsal, and weekly short written tests, and a control group (English A), which followed the regular curriculum without script-based FS instruction. Pre- and post-speaking tests were administered using an individual monologue task. Quantitative analysis revealed that the experimental group demonstrated significant gains in both FS use and total word production (effect size $d = 0.95$), whereas the control group showed no significant improvement. Furthermore, a moderate positive correlation was found between written test performance and spontaneous use of learned FSs in speech ($r = .50$, $p < .01$), suggesting a transition from declarative to procedural knowledge. Comparison with a general learner corpus (ICNALE) further indicated that explicit instruction enabled learners to exceed baseline FS usage levels observed in naturalistic contexts. Qualitative observations showed that learners used FSs to organize discourse, add information, shift topics, and gain planning time, functioning as formulaic scaffolding that reduced cognitive load. These findings suggest that systematic FS instruction, combined with retrieval-based practice, can substantially enhance L2 speaking development in classroom settings. Pedagogical implications for integrating discourse-oriented FS training into regular EFL curricula are discussed.

Introduction

Achieving fluent, natural speech remains a significant challenge for many learning the English language. In particular, Japanese EFL learners often possess sufficient grammatical and lexical knowledge but struggle to produce appropriate speech in actual communication contexts. This "knowing-but-not-using" problem has long been recognized in second language acquisition research. In response, recent studies have increasingly highlighted the effectiveness of

formulaic sequences (FSs) in enhancing L2 learners' fluency and real-time speech production (Schmitt & Carter, 2004; Wood, 2015). While definitions of FSs vary, the present study adopts Wray's definition and treats FSs as multi-word expressions that are stored and used as single units in communication. Typical examples include discourse markers and other prefabricated expressions such as "by the way," "in addition," and "to be honest," which help speakers organize and connect ideas. Although the term overlaps with concepts such as lexical chunks and prefabricated expressions, the present study focuses specifically on sequences that function as ready-made units in real-time speech production rather than focusing primarily on isolated phrasal verbs or purely grammatical constructions. For Japanese learners, FSs with advanced discourse management functions are particularly difficult to acquire and use spontaneously. To address these challenges, this study investigated effects of explicit FS instruction on Japanese L2 learners' English-speaking performance using an experimental versus control group design. Furthermore, by comparison with a large-scale learner corpus, instructional effects were objectively evaluated against general usage patterns. The extent to which learning for written tests transfers into actual free speech was also investigated.

Literature Review

Formulaic sequences (FSs) are linguistic expressions that function as a single unit but comprise multiple words (Wray, 2002). For second language learners, mastering FSs is crucial. A substantial body of research has highlighted the importance of FSs in fluent L2 performance (Pawley & Syder, 1983; Schmitt & Carter, 2004; Wood, 2015). Research has also shown that acquiring FSs, particularly collocations, poses a significant learning burden for L2 learners (Peters, 2016).

Various types of FSs can be classified according to their functions within sentences. Discourse markers, as described by Schiffrin (1987), operate in relation to preceding and following utterances, organizing and guiding the flow of discourse. Although not grammatically obligatory, these expressions support smooth interaction and facilitate both speaker intention and listener comprehension. For instance, "in addition" functions as an elaborative discourse marker that signals the addition of information (Fraser, 1999).

For L2 learners, acquiring FSs—particularly discourse markers—is challenging. Nonnative speakers tend to use them less frequently than native speakers, and especially underuse advanced discourse-organizing markers (Müller, 2005). A contrastive interlanguage analysis of discourse markers used by nonnative and native English speakers showed that Japanese learners relied heavily on a limited range of basic markers and underused more advanced expressions (Shimada, 2014). These findings suggest that targeted instruction on discourse-related FSs may be particularly beneficial for Japanese learners.

However, several studies have highlighted the challenges learners face in acquiring and using formulaic expressions (Boers et al., 2006; Li & Schmitt, 2009; Wang & Christiansen, 2024). The effectiveness of FS instruction has also been supported by empirical research. For example, Wood (2009) reported improvements in learners' fluency following focused instruction in narrative discourse among Japanese learners. Recent empirical evidence suggests that the acquisition and active use of FSs directly contribute to various dimensions of oral fluency (François & Albakry, 2021; Nergis, 2021; Yu, 2022; Yucedal & Kara, 2023). For instance, Nergis (2021) showed that explicit instruction in academic FSs significantly enhanced pruned speech rate, while François and Albakry (2021) found that the frequency of FS use

predicted mean length of fluent run in standardized speaking tasks. Yucedal and Kara (2023) similarly reported that collocation- and idiom-enriched instruction led to higher speaking scores than a regular curriculum.

Nevertheless, two important gaps remain in the current body of pedagogical research. First, few studies have documented which specific FSs learners actually acquire and how far their use of these expressions can develop over the course of regular classes. Second, there is still limited classroom-based evidence from semester-long courses that systematically track pre- and post-instruction changes in speaking fluency. Further research is therefore needed to determine the extent to which intensive FS instruction yields robust and generalizable effects on learners' spoken performance. These gaps are particularly relevant in light of two theoretical frameworks that underpin the present study. Skill Acquisition Theory (DeKeyser, 2007) predicts that declarative knowledge of FSs can be transformed into procedural knowledge through deliberate practice, while Usage-Based Theory (Tomasello, 2003) emphasizes that repeated use drives language acquisition. Together, these frameworks suggest that explicit, practice-oriented FS instruction in classroom settings should yield measurable gains in spontaneous speech.

To address these gaps with greater objectivity, corpus-based methods were employed. A learner corpus is a systematically collected database of L2 learner language use (Granger et al., 2015). In recent decades, corpus research has clarified patterns of actual language use through frequency-based and register-sensitive analyses (Biber et al., 1998). Research on Japanese learner speech has also expanded, demonstrating how corpus data can inform language pedagogy beyond intuition-based approaches (Tono et al., 2014). For the purpose of ensuring objectivity, this study employed the ICNALE Spoken Monologue corpus (Ishikawa, 2014) to provide a statistical baseline for comparing the learners' FS usage with that of a general learner population.

Research Question

To address the issues mentioned above, the following research question was formulated:

> **RQ:** Does explicit classroom instruction influence Japanese learners' spontaneous use of FSs in speaking tasks?

Participants

Participants were 60 first-year university science students from a Japanese public university located in a regional city, with an enrollment of approximately 2,000 students, specializing in engineering and agriculture. They were drawn from two intact general English classes (English A and English B, $n = 30$ each). Their English proficiency was approximately equivalent to a TOEIC Listening and Reading (L&R) score of 350 (CEFR A2), reflecting approximately six years of English study in junior high school and high school. Speech samples were recorded from all initial enrollees. Following the exclusion of recordings containing unclear audio, 30 participants were randomly selected from each class, yielding a final sample of 60. The study received ethical approval from the university ethics committee, and all participants provided written informed consent before data collection.

The control group (n = 30) attended a general English class, English A, weekly for 15 weeks, using the same textbook as the experimental group. Each 90-minute class consisted of approximately 30 minutes of pair-work conversation practice based on textbook passages, followed by grammar and vocabulary exercises, along with reading and listening activities unrelated to conversation practice. The control group received no explicit instruction directed at FSs and took no written tests on FSs.

The experimental group (n = 30) attended another general English class, English B, with the same textbook and schedule, including the same 30 minutes of pair-work conversation practice as the control group, but received explicit instruction on FSs and took 14 short written tests weekly from Week 2 to 15. Each test required students to write 10 English FSs corresponding to Japanese prompts.

Instructional Procedures

Both classes were taught by the same instructor (the author) on the same weekday afternoon. The instructional procedures differed substantially between the control group (English A) and the experimental group (English B), although both classes used the same textbook and followed the same weekly schedule.

Control Group: English A

Students in English A followed the standard curriculum without explicit instruction on FSs. Each 90-minute lesson consisted of approximately 30 minutes of pair-work conversation practice based on textbook passages, followed by grammar and vocabulary exercises, as well as reading and listening activities.

Students were encouraged to express their ideas freely during speaking activities, but no model speech scripts were provided, and FSs were neither highlighted nor systematically practiced. No written tests targeting FSs were administered.

Experimental Group: English B

In contrast, English B incorporated systematic and explicit instruction of discourse-oriented FSs over 15 weeks. A total of 99 FSs were taught throughout the course, and a complete list of the FSs is provided in Appendix A. Each week, the instructor prepared a short model speech script related to the lesson topic and uploaded it to the Manaba online platform (Example 1). Students accessed the script on their smartphones during class.

Instruction followed a consistent four-step cycle:

1. Noticing Stage

Target FSs were embedded in the model script and visually underlined to draw attention. The instructor briefly explained their communicative functions (e.g., addition: “in addition”; contrast: “on the other hand”; stance: “to be honest”; conclusion: “all in all”).

2. Guided Reading and Rehearsal

Students read the model speech script (shown in Example 1) silently and practiced orally, completing parentheses and selecting options provided in brackets to personalize the speech.

3. Structured Production

The 30-minute conversation practice session followed the same procedure in each class:

(1) All students were paired for the activity (the instructor paired with any student without a partner).
(2) One student spoke for two minutes referring to the model script on their smartphone, then the partner did the same.
(3) The pair then had a conversation about the same topic using the script.
(4) Students randomly changed partners and repeated the process.

Students were encouraged to prioritize inclusion of target FSs (highlighted in the script) rather than fluency during practice.

Example 1. ***An extract from a model script used in English B.***

I think part-time jobs have some advantages.

First of all, we can ( ) by doing part-time job.

It's hard / rare for students to ( ) at college,

so part-time jobs lead to a great experience.

In addition, at the workplace, we have to

[take care of / pay attention to / listen to] ( ).

It is really [tough / interesting / challenging] for me.

This will be of great value.

On the other hand, part-time job has some disadvantages.

Above all, the worst point is that we ( ) by doing part-time job.

It is bad because we cannot ( ).

If college students cannot ( ), their college life will be ( ).

Note. Students used this model speech script following the four-step instructional cycle described in this section.

4. Recycling and Retrieval Practice

From Week 2 to Week 15, students completed weekly short written tests requiring them to produce 10 previously taught FSs in response to Japanese prompts within five minutes. These tests aimed to reinforce form-function connections and promote retrieval-based learning. An example of the weekly written test is provided in Appendix B.

Through repeated exposure, guided production, and weekly testing, the experimental group students were systematically encouraged to incorporate the target FSs into their spontaneous speech.

Data Collection Procedures and Corpus Comparison Data

In a quiet computer room, each participant recorded a one-minute monologue speech sample on the topic "My College Life" at the semester's beginning (Week 1) and end (Week 15). Before recording, participants had one minute to prepare. All recordings were transcribed verbatim by the author. FSs were identified and coded based on criteria proposed by Wray (2002). FSs were operationally defined as multi-word units explicitly taught as fixed expressions and treated as single lexical items in instruction, regardless of their degree of compositionality, reflecting their holistic processing and storage as proposed in the same framework. For example, expressions such as "in addition" and "to be honest" were coded as FSs, whereas compositional phrases not taught as fixed expressions were excluded. This definition is consistent with widely accepted approaches in previous research on formulaic language and ensures construct validity in identifying FSs in learner speech. The coded items were reviewed and discussed with a native English-speaking instructor who was familiar with formulaic language research, and any disputed items were excluded or revised until consensus was reached. This procedure was adopted to enhance the reliability of FS identification and coding. As measures of fluency and formulaic competence, the use of FS frequency and word count is supported by previous research (Ellis, 2012; Wood, 2015). The facilitative role of FSs in fluent speech production has also been widely discussed (Wray, 2002).

To provide an objective baseline for comparison, speech data from 100 Japanese EFL learners were sampled from the ICNALE Spoken Monologue corpus (Ishikawa, 2014), which contains 600 monologues by Japanese people at various proficiency levels. The ICNALE corpus task elicited opinion-based responses, resulting in frequent use of "agree with" and "disagree with." To ensure task equivalence, these expressions were excluded from the corpus baseline, yielding an adjusted mean of 1.17 FSs per speaker (50 of 100 speakers had used these expressions at least once). Comparing baseline corpus data with experimental data enabled objective evaluation of the instruction's effect.

Table 1. ***Formulaic Sequence Usage Count by Group*** **(*N* = 60)**

Group/Time	Total Words *M* (*SD*)	Total FS Count *M* (*SD*)	*t*(29)	*p*	*d*
Experimental (*n* = 30)					
1st Speech	38.53 (9.68)	0.87 (0.78)			
2nd Speech	52.30 (10.53)	1.70 (0.70)			
Change	13.77	0.83	5.22	< .01	0.95
Control (*n* = 30)					
1st Speech	40.40 (10.27)	0.70 (0.65)			
2nd Speech	47.67 (9.77)	0.87 (0.78)			
Change	7.27	0.17	0.93	.36	0.17

Note. FS=formulaic sequence. No significant between-group differences were observed at pretest for either total words ($t(58) = -0.72$, $p = .47$) or total FS count ($t(58) = 0.90$, $p = .37$).

Results

Table 1 shows a comparison of FS usage between the two groups. The experimental group demonstrated significant increase in FSs from the first to the second speech (+.83, $t(29) = 5.22$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.95$), but the control group's increase (+.17) was not statistically significant ($t(29) = 0.93$, $p = .36$, $d = 0.17$). In the second speech, the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group, with a large between-group effect size ($d = 1.13$).

As Table 2 shows, the experimental group increased both total word count and FS use from the first to the second speech. The group's total word count rose significantly ($p < .01$). Use of FSs practiced in class (planned FSs) rose from 0.27 to 1.37.

Table 2. ***Descriptive Statistics of the Experimental Group (n = 30)***

Variable	*M*	*SD*	Min	Max
1st Speech				
Total Words	38.53	9.68	19	54
Total FSs	0.87	0.78	0	2
Planned FSs	0.27	0.45	0	1
2nd Speech				
Total Words	52.30	10.53	29	71
Total FSs	1.70	0.70	0	3
Planned FSs	1.37	0.81	0	3
Written Test Average	7.97	1.34	4.57	9.71

Note. FSs=formulaic sequences, Planned FSs=FSs explicitly taught in class.

Table 3 compares sentence counts and sentences beginning with FSs between groups. The proportion of sentences starting with FSs was significantly higher in the experimental group (12.96%, $SD = 8.27$) than in the control group (2.67%, $SD = 5.50$) during the second speech ($t(58) = 5.68$, $p < .01$, $d = 1.47$). The experimental group showed a significant within-group increase (+8.50 percentage points, $p < .01$), but the control group did not.

Table 3. ***FS Sentence Counts and Percentage by Group*** **(*N* = 60)**

Group/Time	FS Sentences *M* (*SD*)	Percentage *M*
Experimental ($n = 30$)		
1st Speech	0.30 (0.47)	4.46
2nd Speech	1.17 (0.79)	12.96
Change	0.87	8.50
Control ($n = 30$)		
1st Speech	0.17 (0.38)	2.90
2nd Speech	0.20 (0.41)	2.67
Change	0.03	−0.23

Note. FS=formulaic sequence. FS sentences=sentences beginning with FSs.

Table 4 illustrates a notable increase in FS use, especially "in addition" and "to be honest," in the experimental group compared to the control group and the general learner corpus. For instance, the use of "in addition" rose from 1 to 10 in the experimental group, whereas the general corpus recorded no instance. Use of "to be honest" increased from 1 to 7, but was also never used in the control group or general corpus.

Table 4. ***Usage Frequency of Specific Formulaic Sequences***

Formulaic Sequence	Exp. Pre (n = 30)	Exp. Post (n = 30)	Cont. Pre (n = 30)	Cont. Post (n = 30)	General Corpus (N = 100)
in addition	1	10	0	2	0
to be honest	1	7	0	1	0
care about	0	5	0	1	0
all in all	0	6	1	1	0
thanks to	0	3	0	1	0
for example	4	6	4	4	20

Note. Pre=Pretest (1st speech); Post=Posttest (2nd speech).

Table 5 compares the mean number of FSs used per participant across groups. The experimental group's FS use (1.70) exceeded the general learner corpus baseline (ratio = 1.45), and the control group (0.87) remained below the baseline (ratio = 0.74).

Table 5. ***Comparison with the General Corpus Baseline***

Group	Total FS Count *M*	Ratio to the General Corpus
General Corpus (N = 100)	1.17	1.00 (baseline)
Exp. Post (n = 30)	1.70	1.45
Cont. Post (n = 30)	0.87	0.74

Note. Post=Posttest (2nd speech). Task-dependent FSs ("agree with" and "disagree with") were excluded from the corpus count to ensure task equivalence (50 of 100 corpus speakers used these expressions).

Discussion

One significant finding of this study concerns the dramatic increase in FS usage among the experimental group. Over 15 weeks, the experimental group showed significant gains in FS use in their speaking (effect size d = 0.95, which Cohen classifies as "large"). As shown in Table 4, FSs such as "in addition" (from 1 to 10 instances) and "to be honest" (from 1 to 7 instances) showed remarkable growth, but these expressions were virtually absent from both the control group and the 100-speaker general corpus. This pattern suggests that, without explicit instruction, Japanese EFL learners may need a long time to acquire and use certain FSs in spontaneous speech. Additionally, students in the experimental group produced many more words in the second test. In the experimental class, explicit instruction of FSs—repeatedly highlighted in model scripts, explained in terms of their communicative function, practiced through structured pair-work activities and weekly written tests, and actively used in their speeches—significantly impacted Japanese learners' English-speaking performance.

As is often pointed out, in Japan, a large amount of secondary school English lessons is still spent on grammar explanation and translation with limited opportunities for speaking

activities (Butler & Iino, 2005). This study has revealed that even Japanese EFL learners can enhance their speaking skills and use FSs in spoken production with enough instruction and practice in FSs.

These results support the findings of Wood (2009) and Yucedal and Kara (2023) regarding fluency improvements. Moreover, the findings of the present study converge with, yet also extend, a growing body of instructional research. McGuire and Larson-Hall (2018) found that the FS instruction group demonstrated gains in speed fluency and used a larger number of FSs at posttest. The present study corroborates these results in a larger sample (n = 30) within a semester-long regular classroom, suggesting that such effects are replicable under more ecologically valid conditions. Nergis (2021) showed that explicit instruction enhanced pruned speech rate in academic EFL contexts, while François and Albakry (2021) found that FS frequency predicted mean length of fluent runs. The present results align with these findings in demonstrating that FS instruction produces measurable gains in oral production, though the present study used total word count as its primary fluency index rather than temporal measures of speech rate.

On the other hand, the control group did not show any significant change in the number of FSs or total words. Thus, the experimental intervention clearly contributed to the observed improvement in measured FS use and fluency, whereas the control group showed no statistically significant gains (Table 1). One possible explanation for the relatively limited fluency often observed among EFL learners is the need for planning time during real-time speech production. Learners may be highly conscious of accuracy, which can reduce the time available for generating subsequent content. FSs, however, allow speakers to retrieve multi-word units holistically, thereby reducing processing load and enabling longer stretches of fluent speech (Wood, 2009). In contrast, producing less frequent or more complex vocabulary requires greater online processing, which may disrupt fluency. From the perspective of the Trade-off Hypothesis (Skehan, 2009), learners may therefore prioritize fluency over lexical complexity during real-time speech production. In the present study, students in the experimental group frequently used FSs at the beginning of their utterances. This pattern may indicate that sentence-initial FSs functioned as planning devices, allowing learners additional time to organize subsequent content and produce longer, more complex utterances. These findings suggest not only quantitative gains but also qualitative shifts in how learners manage cognitive load during real-time speech production. It should be noted, however, that this study measured only specific aspects of speaking performance, and the control group may have developed in other unmeasured areas. The present findings suggest that FS instruction is quite effective in enhancing L2 learners' speaking skills through formulaic scaffolding.

A key theoretical finding is the positive correlation between written test performance and the use of learned FSs in speech. Table 6 shows that written test scores correlated moderately with the number of taught FSs used in the second speech (r = .50, p < .01), indicating that students who performed better on tests tended to use more learned sequences in speech. The mean score on written tests was 7.97 of 10 (SD = 1.34), suggesting active engagement in FS learning. This result supports Skill Acquisition Theory's (DeKeyser, 2007) proposed transition from declarative to procedural knowledge. Instruction in classes, intensive written tests, and practice served as deliberate practice, promoting proceduralization. The instructional cycle—consisting of noticing through visually underlined scripts, guided rehearsal, and repeated retrieval through short written tests—may have strengthened form-function connections and facilitated later spontaneous use. This suggests that repeated written testing and speaking practice functioned as effective retrieval-based learning, strengthening knowledge and

promoting automatization. As Roediger and Karpicke (2006) pointed out, retrieval-based practice strengthens memory and facilitates later recall in production. Moreover, written test scores moderately correlated with total word count ($r = .48$, $p < .01$), suggesting that traditional written tests may contribute to increased numbers of words produced in English speech.

Table 6. ***Correlations in the Experimental Group (n = 30)***

	Total Words (2nd)	Learned FSs (2nd)	Written Test Avg.
Total Words (2nd)	—	.78**	.48*
Learned FSs (2nd)	.78**	—	.50*
Written Test Avg.	.48*	.50*	—

Note. FSs=formulaic sequences, Pearson's *r* for correlations among total words, learned FSs, and written test average, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{*}p < .05$.

Müller (2005) demonstrated that non-native speakers use discourse markers differently from native English speakers, suggesting that L1 background may influence how learners deploy discourse markers in L2 speech. The author's observations of Japanese university students' everyday L1 conversation suggest that equivalents to textbook-like FSs (e.g., "all in all") are rarely used in casual speech. Nevertheless, mastering such fixed expressions appears essential for improving L2 fluency. The present findings indicate that learners used a mixture of both relatively formal expressions (e.g., "all in all") and more conversational ones (e.g., "to be honest"). This may suggest that classroom instruction can override L1-based preferences and expand learners' functional repertoire.

Qualitative observations indicate that learners employed FSs for several purposes: (1) adding information, (2) providing examples, (3) shifting topics, and (4) gaining planning time. These uses suggest that FSs, especially discourse markers, function as scaffolding devices that reduce cognitive load (Wood, 2015) and enable longer utterances. During structured pair-work activities, students were encouraged to begin responses with target FSs, which may have contributed to the observed increase in sentence-initial usage. In the present study, students in the experimental group frequently used "in addition." This finding is partially comparable to that of François and Albakry (2021), who reported that clarifying FSs accounted for nearly 50% of all FSs used by their participants. While "in addition" can be considered a typical example of a clarifying expression, other frequently used items in the present study, such as "to be honest" and "all in all," appear to serve different discourse functions, including expressing stance and summarizing information. This suggests that learners may rely on a wider range of discourse-organizing FSs in spoken production. These findings reinforce the role of FSs as functional scaffolding devices.

Comparisons with the general learner corpus demonstrated that explicit instruction enabled learners to exceed average performance. After excluding task-dependent FSs from the ICNALE corpus (specifically, "agree with" and "disagree with," which appeared frequently due to the corpus task's opinion-eliciting nature), the adjusted baseline was 1.17 FSs per speaker. The experimental group's FS use (1.70) substantially exceeded this baseline, representing a ratio of 1.45, whereas the control group (0.87) remained below the baseline (ratio = 0.74). This pattern demonstrates that without explicit training, beginners' FS use remains below optimal levels, but that focused instruction can rapidly elevate performance beyond average levels observed in naturalistic learning contexts.

The present study combined explicit FS instruction with weekly retrieval-based written tests. While it cannot be strictly asserted which component contributed more to the observed gains, it could be suggested that the speaking practice embedded within explicit FS instruction played a central role in the experimental group's higher performance, given that it provided repeated opportunities for meaningful, contextualized use of target forms. Future research employing conditions that isolate each component would help clarify their respective contributions.

Taken together, this study extends previous classroom-based FS research by combining a controlled intervention, corpus-based benchmarks, and retrieval-focused assessment to document how specific discourse-oriented FSs develop over a semester. These findings advocate integrating retrieval-based FS training into EFL curricula to bridge the gap between controlled practice and spontaneous speech.

Limitations and Future Directions

During the classes, the instructor examined students' self-directed study practices. No participants were receiving private English conversation lessons. Both classes followed standard curriculum procedures taught by the same instructor using the identical textbook, minimizing differential motivational effects.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, this study's participants were first-year university science students at one institution, thus restricting generalizability to other academic majors and grade or proficiency levels. Different populations may yield different results. Second, the speaking task—an individual monologue on "My College Life"—represents only one task type, and FS use may vary across task types (e.g., interactive dialogues, presentations, debates). Future studies should include various tasks and participant demographics.

Third, the instructional intervention was implemented within a regular classroom setting using model scripts and weekly short written tests; therefore, it is difficult to isolate the relative contribution of individual components (e.g., visual highlighting, guided rehearsal, retrieval-based testing). Future research could experimentally compare different instructional elements to determine which components most strongly influence spontaneous FS use.

Fourth, while disputed FS coding items were resolved through discussion with a second rater, a formal inter-rater reliability coefficient was not calculated, which represents a methodological limitation that future studies should address.

Fifth, variations in individual students' effort and engagement may have contributed to some of the gains observed in the experimental group. The moderate positive correlation between written test scores and spoken FS use suggests that more motivated learners may have benefited disproportionately, and the degree of individual variation observed may limit the generalizability of the aggregate findings.

Future research should systematically develop discourse FS-focused instructional programs, including functional classification (addition, contrast, exemplification, conclusion), presentation of alternatives, and instruction on appropriate timing of use. Moving forward, addressing individual differences in instructional responsiveness will also be vital.

Conclusion

This study showed that explicit FS instruction significantly improved Japanese learners' English-speaking performance. After 15 weeks of instruction and written testing, the experimental group showed a large within-group gain in FS use (d = 0.95) and significantly outperformed the control group at posttest (between-group d = 1.13). Written test scores moderately correlated with FS use in speech (r = .50, p < .01), supporting a transition from declarative to procedural knowledge (DeKeyser, 2007).

One notable finding is the remarkable increase in FS usage, such as "in addition" and "to be honest," among the experimental group, indicating that such forms may take considerably longer to acquire without explicit instruction. This suggests that prioritizing explicit teaching of FSs that are difficult to acquire naturally can be especially effective for Japanese learners still developing their spoken English skills. For learners still at the stage of "thinking before speaking," this method may provide particularly strong benefits.

Comparison with a general learner corpus (adjusted baseline: 1.17 FSs) revealed that the experimental group (1.70) exceeded average performance by 45%, whereas the control group (0.87) remained 26% below average. This finding validates explicit instruction's effectiveness in elevating learner performance beyond levels typically achieved without explicit instruction.

Effective instruction requires not only exposing learners to useful expressions but also teaching them systematically, including repeated practice and usage opportunities. This approach—having teachers carefully select and model useful FSs and providing learners with repeated opportunities to retrieve and use them in meaningful tasks—proved effective in this study in enhancing Japanese EFL learners' speaking performance. Continued research is needed to further clarify which types of FSs should be prioritized and to explore optimal modes of instruction.

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Appendix A. *List of Formulaic Sequences Taught in Class*

Discourse markers	**Verb-based formulaic sequences**	**Prepositional / other formulaic sequences**
above all	add up to	a lot
all in all	aim for	a number of
as such	be able to	according to
at least	be about to do	as long as
first of all	be addicted to	as soon as
for example	be based on	at present
frankly speaking	be better off	at the same time
generally speaking	be famous for	at work
in addition	be good for	before you know it
in comparison	be of great value	behind the scenes
in fact	be proud of	cannot help but
in practice	be tempted to do	different from
in theory	care about	each other
in the first place	cheer up	even if
in a way	depend on	for the first time
on the other hand	end up ing	from now on
rather than	fill up	hand in hand
strictly speaking	find out	hundreds of
that is why	go out	in favor of
these days	hand down	instead of
to be honest	lead to	it is said that
to put it simply	listen to	not at all
without doubt	look after	not necessarily
for the following reasons	lose touch with	on the way to
in recent years	make a mistake	on time
	make an effort	ought to
	meet deadlines	over the course of
	pay attention to	per day
	shop for	regardless of
	split the bill	such as
	spend A on B	those who
	stick with	thousands of
	study abroad	together with
	take care of	written in stone
	take responsibility	a wide variety of
	think about	in some cases
	watch one's weight	thanks to

Appendix B. ***Example of Weekly Written Test***

Score _____

English B　mini-test 3

Name: _____

１．～につながる _____

２．加えて _____

３．実際には _____

４．～にとってよい _____

５．率直に言えば _____

６．外出する _____

７．世話をする _____

８．努力する _____

９．～する限り _____

１０．今から _____

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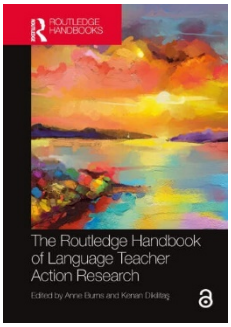
BOOK REVIEW



The Routledge Handbook of Language Teacher Action Research

Edited by Anne Burns and Kenan Dikilitaş
Routledge 2025, 436 pages.
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ISBN: 9781003367352 (ebook)

Reviewed by Valentyna Guseva
Karlsruhe University of Education, Germany
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-2107-5621

The Routledge Handbook of Language Teacher Action Research edited by Anne Burns and Kenan Dikilitaş is a valuable guide for readers who are new to action research (AR) or who want to strengthen their understanding of its principles and practice. Written in a clear and accessible style, the book combines theoretical and practical insights with real-life examples that help prepare researchers for the challenges and unexpected situations they may encounter in the field. The volume brings together contributions from forty-four researchers representing diverse global regions, including Scandinavia, Central and South America, the Pacific Rim, and Europe. Collectively, these authors have made a substantial contribution to the advancement and wider dissemination of AR.

The volume opens with the leading chapter by the editors (Chapter 1). In the concisely written introduction, Burns and Dikilitaş point out the increased recognition of the impact of AR and define the aim of the volume – to "confront misconceptions that previously existed and may still exist" (p. 2). The structure of the book, also explained here, attests to the expansion of AR's role in teachers' professional development (TPD). The 34 chapters comprising the *Handbook* are sorted into 5 divisions (Parts) corresponding to domains where AR can affect TPD: professional, pedagogical, personal, and educational aspects, and, finally, learnings from teacher-researchers' own projects, to which other language teachers can easily relate. Each chapter, consequently, represents a specific aspect of AR's impact on TPD. The volume thus serves as an encyclopaedic reference book detailing and systematising the far-reaching effects of AR. As such, it stands out among a collection of more general and / or more practical compilations of AR (e.g., Rowell et al., 2017; Stringer, 2014) as "the first extensive *Handbook* on AR and its related approaches in the field of language education" (p. 4).

Part I, titled "Professional impact", contains seven chapters. Siegel (Chapter 2) highlights the significance of research knowledge and skills for TPD, while Hadley (Chapter 3) explores Critical Action Research and its differences from AR. Carrying on, Banegas and Villacañas de Castro (Chapter 4) employ a triptych composed of creativity on, for, and through AR, to illustrate that AR is a creative process. Both chapters 3 and 4 merit attention as they note the potential within AR to become a transformative tool beyond language learning and teaching. Such adherence to the Freirean vision of education is notable in the introductory chapter too, where reflective and transformative praxis (i.e., from practice to theory and back to practice)

are named as the roots of AR (p. 1). In a similar vein, Hanks (Chapter 5) explores the impact of learner-led research on teachers and teaching. This chapter also provides a clear distinction between types of practitioner research and notes the lacunae in AR regarding learners' inclusion. Cárdenas (Chapter 6) then discusses the importance of publishing research findings and the challenges along the way, whereas Barnard (Chapter 7) emphasises ethical norms when conducting AR.

While teachers are encouraged to carry out AR, publishing their results in academic journals remains challenging, especially for novice teachers, due to journal expectations (Xerri, 2022) and the lack of focus on academic writing skills in teacher preparation programmes (Banegas et al., 2020). This is why I was especially interested in Chapter 6, in which Cárdenas, the editor of the *Profile* journal, presents her ethnographic case study to explore teacher-researchers' publishing experiences, addressing the challenges and the impact of disseminating AR. She emphasises that it is a crucial stage of research, as it allows teachers to share context-based insights, connect theory with classroom practice, and enrich educational knowledge. However, publishing their work entails a variety of challenges for teachers, such as meeting the standards of an academic publication, the complex process of revision that a written piece must go through before publication, and a lack of confidence on the authors' part whose first language is not English. An important solution that Cárdenas offers is that of a mentoring role for editors, who could guide and support novice writers – an approach adopted by some open access teacher-research oriented journals such as *Profile* [http://dx.doi.org/10.15446/profile] and *ELTCRJ* [https://eltcrj.com]. Nevertheless, to ensure the dissemination of teacher-research, commitment of all the involved parties is required: not just that of the editors and reviewers, but also the teacher-researchers and their audience.

Part II, focusing on "Pedagogical impact", also contains seven chapters. Two of them deal with methodological issues: Reed and Chappell (Chapter 8) provide a critical review on using AR for improving grammar teaching, whereas Dikilitaş (Chapter 9) demonstrates how participation in AR projects enhances students' engagement and thus fosters language learning. Giraldo and Murcia (Chapter 14), in turn, focus on assessment and demonstrate how AR can be incorporated to enhance specific aspects of learners' language skills. The rest of the chapters in this section all explore the integration of AR and technology, currently an inseparable element of language teaching and learning. Sert and Jonsson (Chapter 10) provide an excellent example of how data-led reflections of classroom interactions serve TPD. Crucially, their example goes to show how a piece of Collaborative Action Research between scholars and teachers, based on data-driven reflections, can bridge the gap between research and practice – one of the main issues that the practitioner research field is concerned with (Wyatt et al., 2016). Hockly (Chapter 11) takes this step further and reflects on a case study of designing and using mobile-based tasks, while Liontas (Chapter 12) analyses the advantages and limitations of hybrid learning presenting AR as a tool to help teachers understand and improve their practices. In the penultimate Chapter (13), Farr provides an overview of corpus-based studies with recommendations for teachers who are engaged in such research.

Among the chapters in Part II, I particularly enjoyed Giraldo and Murcia's (Chapter 14) approach to merging AR and assessment. The authors specify that language assessment is mostly based on the core questions of why, what, and how to assess, emphasising the shift from traditional to alternative approaches of assessment, such as self- and peer-assessment, portfolio assessment, and teacher conferences among others. Furthermore, they state that the incorporation of AR into language assessment prioritises process over product, which contributes to an assessment-for-learning culture, thus fostering language development rather

than measuring it. These are important points, because the synergy of AR and language assessment can empower learners to take an active role in their learning (Xu & Brown, 2016).

Under the heading "Personal impact", Part III, which is comprised of 9 chapters, dives into complex themes related to teachers' inner-growth. Building on AR as a framework for teacher development, Bahrami and Gao (Chapter 15) show how AR fosters reflective practice and teacher agency. Gregersen (Chapter 16) explores how teachers can use AR to improve their own wellbeing through individual self-care practices, while Webb and Mumford (Chapter 17) emphasise learner autonomy and suggest practical ways to develop it through AR. Sampson and Pinner (Chapter 18) highlight AR's suitability for studying motivation and involving participants ethically. Le (Chapter 19) reconceptualizes AR as part of a complex learning system, emphasizing self-reflection and teacher development, while Barkhuizen (Chapter 20) explores the link between teacher identity and AR. King and Gkonou (Chapter 21) examine emotion regulation that teachers can develop and sustain through engaging in AR, offering practical implications. Wyatt (Chapter 22) shows the importance of supporting teachers' self-efficacy for effective engagement in AR, and finally, Feryok (Chapter 23) examines the relationship between language teacher cognition and AR.

In this section, I was particularly drawn to Chapter 16 in which Gregersen highlights the central role of self-care in teacher wellbeing. She emphasises its impact on teaching effectiveness, student outcomes, and institutional climate, and focuses on what she calls N-of-one AR, a method that allows an individual teacher to investigate themselves and their self-care practices in order to identify what works most effectively for their wellbeing.

The majority of the 6 chapters comprising Part IV, titled "Educational impact", deal with the implementation of AR into pre- and in-service teacher training programmes. Teacher training in general is a core theme, rightfully permeating through the *Handbook*, as authors note the need to incorporate exploratory practice principles (Chapter 5) and academic writing skills (Chapter 6) into teacher training. The topic is also related to teacher agency (Chapter 17) and identity building (Chapter 20), to name but a few examples. In Part IV, however, it is addressed directly through a variety of practical considerations. While Barahona and Darwin (Chapter 24) examine the limits of AR in pre-service teacher education, questioning its universal effectiveness across different contexts and teaching environments, Burns (Chapter 25) explains why AR is an important form of professional development and analyses its impact on in-service English language teachers. Edwards and Ellis (Chapter 26) state that the potential for institutional development is still not being realised in many contexts, and illustrate how it can be initiated and sustained through AR. Yuan, Wang, and Zhang (Chapter 27) provide insights into AR facilitators' experiences, challenges, and coping strategies, offering guidance for aspiring facilitators. Lastly, the remaining two chapters turn to the effects of AR on education in general: Padwad (Chapter 28) notes the suitability of AR to research difficult circumstances – a complex and context-specific phenomenon, while Porto (Chapter 29) presents an AR intervention aimed at advancing social justice in education in practical terms.

As someone who has worked on including AR in pre-service teacher education, I found Barahona and Darwin's chapter particularly interesting. The AR programs they introduced in the final-stage practicum for pre-service English teachers in Chile highlighted three conditions for effective AR: a collaborative framework, space for understanding, and sufficient time. I concur with scholars such as Schön (1992), Kemmis et al. (2014), McNiff (2013), and Burns (2010) that AR is closely linked to Reflective Practice, transforming critical reflection

and AR into a systematic, evidence-informed process. Rather than limiting it to the final practicum, introducing it progressively throughout the pre-service program could make it more meaningful, theoretically grounded, and pedagogically informed.

Finally, Part V, listing 5 chapters, is dedicated to "Teacher voices". In four of the chapters, language teacher-researchers from different backgrounds share reflections on their engagement in AR projects. Brereton (Chapter 30) describes AR as a structured and empowering approach that revitalized his professional development by enabling systematic experimentation, critical reflection, and greater autonomy. In a similar vein, Herrera (Chapter 31) recounts how AR helped him find ways of working with minority learners in various contexts, an element that was completely lacking in his teacher training. Chagua (Chapter 32) recounts the uplifting story of how AR helped her overcome challenges as a first-time teacher at a public school in Peru. Similarly to several authors in Part I, Chagua draws on Paulo Freire's ideas in her reflections, once again emphasising the deeply transformative nature of AR. Lastly, Malecka (Chapter 33) shows how AR can turn a local classroom problem into a broader inquiry. To conclude the volume, these personal accounts are followed by the closing chapter written by the editors (Chapter 34). Drawing on the immense input collected in all the chapters of the *Handbook*, Burns and Dikilitaş reflect on future directions for AR lamenting the lack of its inclusion into teacher education and calling for sustainable local, national, and international initiatives which would enable teacher-research.

In a broad sense, one of the great benefits of the *Handbook* is that it offers a comprehensive overview of research directions and discussion questions, as well as conveniently suggests further reading and lists of references at the end of each chapter. These features strengthen the practicality of the volume for the use by practitioners, seeking to try out a particular path of AR's impact. Although the inclusion of a chapter on qualitative and quantitative data analysis would have further strengthened the volume, the book is undoubtedly set to become a key reference for those interested in AR. Overall, this seminal and thought-provoking volume marks an important milestone in the inclusion of AR into language education, encouraging greater recognition of the value of teacher-led inquiry and providing a foundation for future studies exploring both the complexities and the benefits of such initiatives.

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Reviewer

Valentyna Guseva is a teacher-educator with 28 years of experience at the In-Service Teachers' Training Academy in Vinnytsia (Ukraine), where she taught English for Specific Purposes courses. After relocating to Germany in February 2022, she worked as a Visiting Professor at the Karlsruhe University of Education (2022-2025). Since 2021 she has also been mentoring English language teachers. Her academic interests include teacher education, EFL methodology, de/coloniality in ELT, mentoring teacher-research and curriculum development. Email: valentina.guseva23@gmail.com

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BOOK REVIEW

Global Stories on School Improvement: A Comparative Review of Action Research Projects

Action research for schools: Global stories of school improvement. British Council. (2024).

Action research for schools (2025–26): Global stories of school improvement. British Council. (2025).

Reviewed by Raju Shrestha
Kathmandu University School of Education, Nepal
https://orcid.org/my-orcid?orcid=0000-0003-3335-6065

Various international organizations and agencies have played a crucial role for decades in the field of classroom research for the professional development of teachers' pedagogical practices, thereby leading to school transformation (Calhoun, 2002; ProFuturo, 2025). Among these, the British Council (BC) has gained global recognition for its exceptional work in supporting education through its Partner Schools network. The BC's focus has been on three pillars of modern education: leadership at all levels, effective continuing professional development (CPD), and the integration of technology and artificial intelligence (AI) into English Language Teaching (ELT) and other school subjects.

The two volumes on school improvement through Action Research, which I review here, are the direct result of the Partner Schools initiative, during which, over a three-year period, teacher researchers accomplished their projects related to the three main themes mentioned above. Academic leads Sirin Soyoz and Kathleen O'Hare guided the researchers and were responsible for helping to choose appropriate methodologies and frameworks. Judging by the outcomes, their persistent support and feedback probably provided crucial help to the participants throughout the research and editing process.

The two volumes hold great significance, as they provide experiential data from teachers confronting real challenges in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) contexts. The majority of partner schools use English as the medium of instruction to deliver UK qualifications. The volumes do not only offer clear, evidence-based reports on subject-specific difficulties, which often coincide with language barriers, but also propose strategies for teachers to overcome these challenges. For example, in my context, I have found that a student in Nepal struggling with science may, in fact, be struggling with the language used in science rather than the subject matter itself.

Through the reports presented in the slim volumes, it is evident that English is no longer confined to the classroom but is now being used to address whole-school problems and to access various sectors, from mastering complex subjects to participating in the digital economy worldwide. In an analysis of Bangladeshi pre-adolescents, Neeti Tripathi in the first volume

(2024) underscores the integration of English along with generative AI into EFL instruction to enhance not only linguistic skills but also cognitive and digital proficiencies. Also, in the same volume, Lina Hoyos presents a cross-disciplinary approach in Colombia where AI is used in language teaching to help students master complex topics in other subjects as well.

In the second volume (2025), Sara Ahmer demonstrates that the synergy between English instruction and generative AI helps students to access differentiated learning by providing them with the tools required to navigate global knowledge systems. While Ahmer's research focuses on AI-driven learning to forge connections in diverse classrooms, Alexander Owens emphasizes active learning by using English as a dynamic tool for expression rather than merely as a subject that improves academic attainment through interdisciplinary linguistic support.

These reports suggest that the introduction of AI and digital tools into traditional lesson planning can replace the outdated teaching methods that are no longer relatable to the tech-savvy lifestyles of today's students. The initiative, which began with the integration of basic digital tools is now focussing on something much deeper and more complex, such as Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and the impact of generative AI.

The two volumes clearly show that the limitations of ELT can be organically surpassed. While they reveal that English is presently used as a medium of communication and a tool for accessing global knowledge, they also create a solid foundation for the international Partner Schools network. The use of English as a lingua franca in the projects promotes a seamless exchange of ideas and findings of the researchers, despite having different native languages, and ensures that local classroom understanding meets global standards. This structure recognizes the achievements of local scholars and connects their work with the global scientific research community. It ensures that their ideas are not confined by geographical borders anymore. They can be heard and cited across the globe. The combination of action research with digital tools and awareness offers a comprehensive picture of English teaching in modern times.

One of the major contributions of the volumes is their focus on action research methodology, which is becoming increasingly popular in ELT contexts as a means of continuing professional development (Edwards & Burns, 2016). The claim about the centrality of action research as a practitioner-led methodology in ELT is strongly supported across both volumes, particularly through evidence-based accounts and concrete actions for change, inspiring novice researchers to undertake this approach. Action research is evidenced to be the bridge between teaching, language, and subject content through the grouping of individual teacher stories into bigger themes.

In the first volume (2024), several chapters demonstrate this process in practice. For example, Cesar Morales, in the chapter titled "Developing leadership skills in Peruvian high school students", uses focus groups, interviews, and reflective journals to identify students' perceptions and then iteratively designs and implements a leadership program based on the findings. Similarly, Neeti Tripathi in "Leveraging Chat GPT to enhance EFL reading skills for 10–12-year-old students" applies action research to test digital interventions in English learning, adapting instruction based on observed outcomes. These chapters clearly show teachers diagnosing issues, testing strategies, and refining practices of the recursive action research cycle. In the second volume (2025), chapters such as "Impact of gender stereotyping on performance in English" by Tendai Mendaza and "All the school's a stage: Improving

attainment through drama as pedagogy" by Alexander Owens illustrate how teachers investigate specific ELT issues (gender bias, the use of drama-based pedagogy), implement interventions, and evaluate their impact within their own contexts.

Both volumes include several special chapters with real applicability to our classroom practice. I found the chapters on student engagement to be particularly impactful, especially the use of drama as an interactive tool. Since these strategies align with my belief in the communicative approach, I look forward to implementing these tasks to help my students learn and use English more naturally.

To me, teacher collaboration is another relevant issue. Peer mentoring and professional learning communities demonstrate how group collaboration and reflection enhance pedagogical quality (Lynch et al., 2024). I believe such collaboration, peer mentoring, and collective reflection support ELT practitioners in the effective dissemination of language teaching strategies, the shared use of materials, and the implementation of up-to-date assessment practices (Song, 2019).

The chapters' focus on ongoing interactions among teachers for their professional development as a social and continuing process is highly commendable. This marks a shift from teachers following traditional training, where they are told how to teach, to taking ownership of their classroom solutions and actively researching and improving them as they go. The academic leads Soyoz and O'Hare highlight this shift by recognizing how teachers can take on the role of researchers and solve problems through constant reflection. The volumes also show the importance of peer monitoring through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which the British Council deems a shared path for professional growth.

Technology integration in teaching is another relevant aspect in both volumes. The use of multimedia resources, such as smartboards and online feedback platforms as digital tools, is an innovative way to support language teaching and assessment in my context, too. The examples presented show their relevance to combining digital technology with language teaching. It is a great hands-on demonstration of the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) model (Koehler & Mishra, 2009) that proves that digital tools are a fundamental part of teaching today.

Despite their strengths, it is worth noting that the volumes lack a balanced geographical representation since the primary focus is on specific parts of Asia, Africa and South America. While these contexts are vital, the under-representation of other regions limits the potential for comparisons across different institutions and cultures. A clearer picture of the diverse environments of school reform could be achieved by broadening the regional scope.

The volumes offer valuable insights, yet the lack of longitudinal data makes it difficult to discern the sustainability of these projects in the long run. Although they cover a wide range of topics, the addition of a clearer summary of the findings could have provided the ideal finishing touch. For me, a final discussion on what links the themes to school policy would have been more insightful. That being said, these gaps do not take away from the strengths of the publications but rather highlight opportunities for the program to evolve.

In conclusion, the volumes demonstrate the British Council's catalytic role in school transformation by not limiting its role to the traditional focus on ELT. The Partner Schools project focuses on three main pillars for sustainable change, namely, AI integration into

teaching, leadership development and commitment to continuing professional development programs for teachers stepping forward as researchers. This approach ensures a modern and holistic vision for education systems all over the world. The volumes stand out in terms of using action research to create solutions that work in local contexts. The studies reveal that EMI serves as a thread connecting language learning and subject knowledge for ELT professionals. Collaboration, reflective practice, and technology integration are additional relevant aspects of the volumes. Overall, the global stories of school improvement present a compelling, practical framework for transforming schools through research-informed, globally connected practice.

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The Reviewer

Raju Shrestha is a teacher educator in Nepal and a visiting faculty in Kathmandu University School of Education, where he supports teachers for classroom transformation through action research. He is a member of MenTRnet, a community of teacher-research mentors. He promotes critical pedagogy and transformative learning in curriculum development, instructional design, and teacher-research. Email: rajushrestha@kusoed.edu.np

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