

From Play to Proficiency: Examining the Role of Video Games in English Language Learning in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how playing video games contributes to English language development among Preparatory Year Program (PYP) students at Najran University, Saudi Arabia. A bilingual questionnaire was administered to 270 students (150 males, 120 females) to identify preferred game genres, perceived language gains, and the link between gaming frequency and English proficiency. Results showed that action and adventure games were most popular, with many students reporting improvements in vocabulary, listening, and pronunciation through gameplay. A positive correlation emerged between frequent gaming and higher self-assessed English proficiency, supported by increased motivation and confidence. The study highlights the value of integrating game-based elements into Saudi EFL contexts to enhance engagement and communicative competence.

Keywords: English Language Learning, Video Games, Language Skills, PYP Students, Incidental Learning, Motivation

INTRODUCTION

Due to the extensive incorporation of technology in people's everyday routines, participating in video games has undeniably become increasingly popular as a preferred leisure activity. In recent years, the boundaries between entertainment and education have become increasingly intertwined, leading to the recognition that video games can serve as more than just a source of amusement. There is a growing understanding that video games may also be excellent tools and valuable resources for acquiring language skills, particularly English, which has become a global medium of communication in both digital and academic contexts.

Considering this potential, it is essential to investigate the capacity for acquiring a language, particularly English, using video games. The interactive and immersive nature of video games allows learners to engage with authentic language input, contextual vocabulary, and communicative exchanges in meaningful ways. Many popular games incorporate complex narratives, instructions, and dialogues in English, creating a natural environment in which learners can enhance their comprehension, vocabulary, and communication abilities while pursuing enjoyable activities.

In the context of Saudi Arabia, English is taught as a foreign language, and learners often face challenges in gaining sufficient exposure to authentic English communication outside the classroom. Therefore, identifying informal and engaging ways to enhance English proficiency is highly valuable. Video games, as part of students' daily routines and recreational interests, present an opportunity for self-directed and contextualized learning that may complement formal English instruction.

The present study aims to examine the impact of video gaming on the enhancement of English language skills among Saudi Preparatory Year Program (PYP) students at Najran University. Specifically, it investigates how playing video games influences learners' perceptions of their vocabulary growth, listening comprehension, and communication skills. By focusing on this group, the study seeks to shed light on how interactive digital environments contribute to English language development and whether gaming can serve as a motivating and enjoyable medium for informal language learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The increasing popularity of video games has sparked considerable interest in exploring their potential benefits beyond mere entertainment [1]. Traditionally seen as leisure activities, video games are now recognized as interactive environments that can facilitate learning, skill development, and social engagement. In particular, the role of video games in second-language acquisition (SLA) has gained attention, as they provide learners with authentic, contextualized language input and opportunities for meaningful communication [2]. The immersive and multimodal nature of games allows learners to practice English in ways that are both motivating and cognitively engaging, bridging the gap between formal instruction and informal learning contexts.

Several empirical studies have investigated how video games can contribute to language learning. For instance, Islam et al. [3] conducted a mixed-methods study to examine the impact of a serious game on English vocabulary and content knowledge among undergraduate students. Participants were divided into an experimental group, which engaged with the game, and a control group, which received conventional instruction. The findings revealed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in vocabulary acquisition and comprehension of subject content. The study highlighted the importance of repeated exposure to target words, multimodal contextual cues, and learner engagement with gameplay, demonstrating that well-designed educational games can simultaneously enhance language and domain-specific knowledge. These findings suggest that interactive games can serve as a motivating tool for self-directed learning, providing learners with repeated, meaningful exposure to English vocabulary in context.

Similarly, Bendo and Erbas [4] investigated didactic video games specifically designed for educational purposes. Their research demonstrated that such games support vocabulary acquisition, grammar practice, and conversational skills through interactive and engaging exercises. The study emphasized that didactic games foster not only linguistic competence but also cultural awareness, as learners encounter different social and cultural contexts embedded in game narratives. By creating an enjoyable and low-pressure environment, these games can reduce anxiety associated with language learning and promote sustained engagement, which is essential for long-term language development.

Sylvén and Sundqvist [5] explored the role of extramural digital gaming in English language learning, showing that learners who spent more time playing English-language games outside the classroom exhibited higher proficiency in vocabulary and listening comprehension. The study highlighted that both the frequency of gameplay and the types of games played were significant predictors of language gains. Multiplayer and online interactive games were particularly effective, as they provided authentic communicative contexts, encouraged negotiation of meaning, and fostered collaboration among peers. These findings underscore the potential of games as informal, learner-centered spaces for practicing real-world English communication, which is particularly relevant for contexts where exposure to English outside the classroom is limited.

In addition, Al-Jifri and Elyas [6] examined the potential of video games to enhance English proficiency among Saudi learners. Their study emphasized that English-language video games offer Saudi students a valuable opportunity to practice vocabulary, grammar, and listening skills in a context that is both engaging and culturally neutral. The research suggested that integrating video games into informal learning routines can complement formal English instruction by providing meaningful exposure to authentic language, especially in environments where opportunities for spoken English practice are scarce. The study also highlighted that multiplayer features, in-game chats, and collaborative gameplay can enhance learners' motivation and confidence in using English, reinforcing the social aspect of language learning.

Yudintseva [1] synthesized prior research on video games for second-language learning, concluding that games have a measurable impact on all four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The study pointed out that the combination of textual, auditory, and visual input in video games creates a rich learning environment in which learners actively engage with language, often incidentally acquiring vocabulary and grammar structures. Moreover, the gamified nature of these learning experiences can maintain learner motivation, providing a consistent incentive for engagement that traditional classroom activities may not offer.

The Role of Video Games in English Language Learning in the Saudi Context

A growing body of research in Saudi Arabia has explored how digital gaming can enhance English language learning, revealing strong potential for integrating game-based activities into formal and informal learning settings. Consistent with Krashen's [7] Input Hypothesis and Vygotsky's [8] sociocultural theory, these studies suggest that video games create rich, low-anxiety environments where learners are exposed to comprehensible input, social interaction, and meaningful linguistic practice—conditions that mirror natural language acquisition.

Alshabeb [9] conducted a case study on Saudi university students and found that video game engagement significantly contributed to vocabulary growth. Participants reported acquiring new lexical items incidentally through contextualized gameplay, illustrating how interactive environments facilitate input-driven learning. Similarly, Alshaiji [10] found that video games promoted English vocabulary retention among Saudi children. Her findings highlighted how repetition, visual support, and immediate feedback—core features of gaming—help sustain long-term word recall, supporting the idea that engagement and enjoyment reinforce linguistic exposure.

Extending this focus to younger learners, Almukahhili [11] examined the effects of gaming applications on vocabulary learning among elementary students. His results showed that game-based applications not only enhanced vocabulary comprehension but also increased motivation and participation. These outcomes resonate with the motivational component of your study, suggesting that positive emotional engagement with games can mediate linguistic improvement, particularly in vocabulary and listening skills.

Beyond vocabulary development, the motivational benefits of gaming have been widely recognized. Asiri [12] explored the influence of video games on EFL learners' motivation in the Saudi context, revealing that gameplay fostered autonomy, confidence, and a sense of achievement. These findings parallel the current study's emphasis on how game engagement enhances learners' motivation and confidence, both of which serve as mediating factors in improving speaking and overall language proficiency among PYP students.

Similarly, Alharbi [13] demonstrated that interactive technology and video games effectively developed English language competence among students in the Qassim region, enhancing both engagement and self-confidence in communicative use. In alignment, Al-Kunaydiri [14] found that Saudi secondary teachers perceived digital games as powerful tools for developing oral skills. Teachers observed that game-based tasks encouraged authentic communication, pronunciation practice, and peer collaboration in relaxed, socially interactive environments.

Taken together, these studies reinforce the pedagogical value of video games in promoting language acquisition through meaningful exposure, motivation, and interaction. This study seeks to build upon the existing literature by investigating how Saudi PYP students at Najran University engage with video games and perceive their impact on vocabulary, listening comprehension, and communication skills, by addressing the following key research questions:

1. What types of video games are most frequently played by Saudi PYP students at Najran University?
2. To what extent do these students perceive that playing video games contributes to the development of their English language skills, particularly in vocabulary, listening comprehension, and pronunciation?
3. Is there a relationship between the frequency of video game play and students' perceived improvement in English language proficiency?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative, descriptive research design, aiming to explore the impact of video gaming on English language proficiency among Saudi Preparatory Year Program (PYP) students at Najran University. This design was chosen because it allows the collection of self-reported data on students' gaming habits, preferences, and perceptions of their language learning experiences without manipulating variables or controlling the gaming environment. The focus is on gathering descriptive insights and identifying patterns in the participants' experiences rather than establishing causal relationships.

Participants

The study targeted Saudi PYP students at Najran University who actively engage in video gaming. A screening questionnaire was administered to determine eligibility, ensuring that only participants with prior gaming experience were included. Students were asked to report the titles and genres of the video games they play, as well as the frequency and duration of their gaming sessions. This procedure ensured that the sample consisted of participants with sufficient engagement in gaming to provide meaningful data.

Instrument

Data were collected through a structured, web-based questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The questionnaire was divided into three sections:

1. Demographic Information: Age, gender, academic track, and gaming experience.
2. Gaming Habits: Types and genres of games played, frequency, and duration of gameplay.
3. Perceived Impact on English Language Skills: Participants rated the influence of video gaming on vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, and communication skills using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

The questionnaire was designed to align directly with the study's research questions, allowing for the collection of measurable and analyzable data. Participants could select multiple game genres to reflect the diversity of their gaming experiences.

Procedure

After obtaining ethical approval and informed consent, the survey link was distributed to students via university email and social media platforms commonly used by PYP students. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous. Data collection occurred over a single period to ensure consistency in the participants' reporting.

Data Analysis

The collected data were coded and analyzed using SPSS to generate quantitative findings. The analysis included:

- Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) to summarize participants' gaming habits and perceived impact on English skills.
- Correlation analysis to examine potential relationships between the frequency of gameplay and perceived improvement in vocabulary, listening comprehension, and communication.
- Cross-tabulations to explore differences in perceptions according to game genres and demographic variables.

This methodology ensures that the study captures both the types of games most frequently played by Saudi PYP students and the extent to which these games are perceived to support English language development, providing data-driven insights relevant to informal learning in the Saudi context.

RESULTS

Types of Video Games Most Frequently Played by Saudi PYP Students at Najran University

The findings indicate that Saudi PYP students engage in a wide range of video game genres, with a strong preference for action, adventure, and sports games. These genres were followed by simulation, role-playing (RPG), and educational games as shown in figure 1.

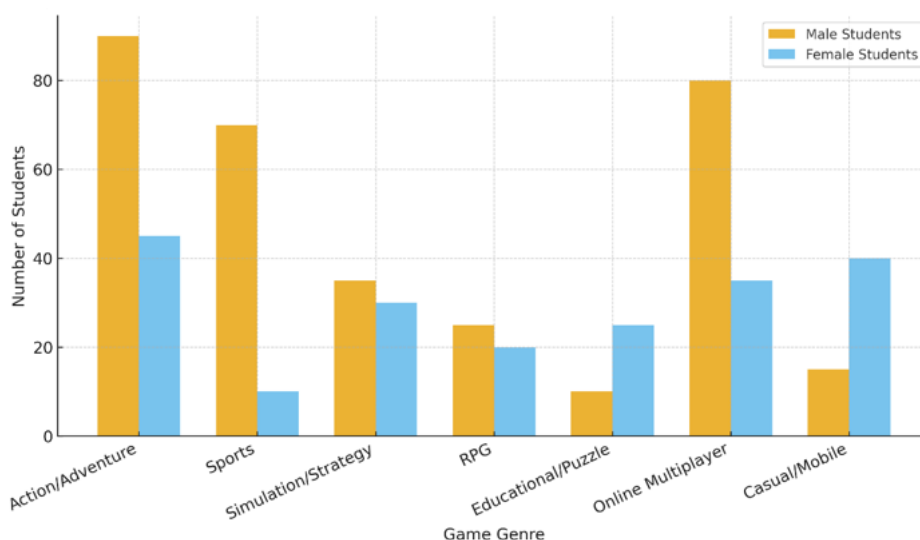


Figure 1. Game Genres Most Frequently Played by Saudi PYP Students at Najran University.

A gender-based analysis revealed distinct gaming preferences between male and female students: Male students (N = 150) predominantly favored action/adventure and sports games, followed by online multiplayer shooters

such as PUBG, Call of Duty, and Fortnite. These games are highly interactive and often require English communication, exposing players to rich linguistic input through in-game dialogue, mission instructions, and team communication.

Female students (N = 120) showed a preference for casual, simulation, and educational games, such as The Sims, Wordscape, and Candy Crush. Although these genres provide fewer interaction-based language opportunities, they still contribute to vocabulary exposure and reading comprehension through text-based prompts and tasks.

How Saudi PYP students at Najran University Perceive the Impact of Video Gaming on Their English Language Skills, Specifically Vocabulary, Listening Comprehension, and Pronunciation

Students rated eight statements on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The items measured students' perceived effects of gaming on vocabulary, listening comprehension, pronunciation, motivation, confidence, and academic language skills. The overall responses revealed a positive perception of video games as an informal learning tool for English. The grand mean score across all items was 4.03 (SD = 0.67), indicating general agreement that video gaming enhances English language skills as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The impact of video gaming on students' English language skills.

No.	Statement	Mean	SD
1	Playing video games helps me improve my English vocabulary.	4.32	0.69
2	Playing video games improves my listening comprehension in English.	4.18	0.74
3	Playing video games improves my pronunciation and speaking skills in English.	3.88	0.80
4	Multiplayer games and in-game chats motivate me to learn English.	4.22	0.77
5	I try to look up English words I don't know while playing video games.	4.09	0.71
6	Video games encourage me to practice English outside the game (e.g., reading, listening, speaking).	3.97	0.78
7	I feel more confident using English during in-game communication.	3.85	0.83
8	Playing video games has positively influenced my academic English skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking).	3.78	0.81
Overall Mean	—	4.03	—

Analyzing the data according to students' gender reveal that male participants reported slightly higher mean values across most items; t-test results indicated no statistically significant gender differences ($p > .05$) as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Gender-Based Analysis.

Skill Area	Male Mean (N=150)	Female Mean (N=120)	Overall Mean
Vocabulary	4.38	4.25	4.32
Listening	4.22	4.13	4.18
Pronunciation	3.91	3.83	3.88
Motivation (in-game chat, multiplayer)	4.30	4.13	4.22
Confidence	3.90	3.79	3.85
Academic English Impact	3.82	3.73	3.78

The Relationship Between the Frequency of Video Game Play and Students' Perceived Improvement in English Language Proficiency

The analysis was based on participants' self-reported frequency of playing video games and their responses to two motivational statements measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Students' Motivation towards video gaming.

Item	Statement	Mean	SD
11	Playing video games is an enjoyable way for me to learn English.	4.41	0.66
12	I would like to use video games as part of my formal English learning in the future.	4.07	0.78

Students expressed high motivation toward learning English through video games and a positive inclination to integrate gaming into formal English learning contexts. The high mean score for Item 11 (M = 4.41) indicates that most participants perceive video gaming as an engaging and enjoyable avenue for English learning. Similarly,

the mean score for Item 12 ($M = 4.07$) suggests general agreement regarding the potential of integrating video games into English instruction.

To determine the relationship between frequency of gameplay and perceived improvement in English language proficiency, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. The results revealed a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$) between gameplay frequency and overall perceived improvement in English proficiency as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. The relationship between frequency of gameplay and perceived improvement in English language proficiency.

Variable	r	p-value	Interpretation
Frequency of gameplay × Perceived improvement in English proficiency	0.46	< .01	Moderate positive relationship

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the role of video games as informal learning tools in enhancing English language proficiency among Saudi PYP students at Najran University. The overall results indicate that video games are not only a source of entertainment but also a meaningful context for developing English vocabulary, listening comprehension, pronunciation, and communicative confidence. These findings align with previous research emphasizing the pedagogical potential of digital gaming environments in language learning [15, 16, 17].

Types of Video Games and Language Exposure

Results from the first research question revealed that Saudi PYP students engage most frequently with action, role-playing (RPG), and sports games, followed by adventure and simulation genres. Male students predominantly preferred competitive and action-oriented games such as *Call of Duty*, *FIFA*, and *PUBG*, while female students favored simulation and story-based games like *The Sims* and *Genshin Impact*. These findings are consistent with earlier research [18, 19], which highlights that narrative and interaction-rich games naturally provide contexts for vocabulary learning and pragmatic language use. Such genres often integrate both written and spoken English, facilitating incidental acquisition through immersive engagement.

Perceived Language Gains from Video Gaming

Regarding the second research question, the Likert-scale responses indicated that most participants agreed or strongly agreed that video games helped them improve various aspects of English proficiency. Vocabulary development showed the highest mean score ($M = 4.35$), followed by listening comprehension ($M = 4.21$) and pronunciation ($M = 4.09$). Students also reported motivation to look up unfamiliar English words ($M = 4.12$) and to use English in multiplayer chats ($M = 4.26$).

These findings echo those of *deHaan et al.* [20] and *Berns et al.* [21], who found that contextualized exposure in games enhances vocabulary acquisition and listening skills through multimodal learning. The integration of visual, auditory, and interactive elements in gaming supports *Krashen's* [7] Input Hypothesis, which asserts that learners acquire language more effectively through meaningful, comprehensible input.

Additionally, students in this study reported increased confidence in using English during in-game communication, suggesting that gaming can reduce anxiety and foster real-world communication skills. This outcome aligns with *Peterson* [22], who found that MMORPGs encourage negotiation of meaning and collaborative dialogue—key elements of communicative competence. These findings can also be explained through *Vygotsky's* [8] sociocultural theory, which emphasizes learning through social interaction and scaffolding.

Relationship between Gaming Frequency and Perceived English Improvement

The third research question investigated the relationship between gaming frequency and perceived improvement in English proficiency. A moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.46$, $p < .01$) was found, indicating that students who spend more time playing video games perceive greater language improvement. This suggests that consistent engagement with English-mediated gaming environments enhances exposure and linguistic development.

This relationship supports the work of *Sundqvist* [23], who found that learners involved in English-rich digital activities outside school displayed higher vocabulary proficiency. Similarly, *Sockett and Toffoli* [24] noted that frequent engagement in online English environments, including games, leads to incidental vocabulary acquisition. In the present study, students' strong agreement that gaming is an enjoyable and effective way to learn English ($M = 4.41$) and their willingness to use it in formal learning ($M = 4.18$) further validate the motivational role of gaming.

This aligns with *Ushioda's* [25] **motivational synergy** model, which emphasizes the value of personally meaningful and autonomy-supportive learning contexts in sustaining long-term motivation.

Many Saudi EFL learners, particularly those in Preparatory Year Programs (PYP), encounter challenges when speaking English due to factors such as limited vocabulary, insufficient grammatical competence, and low self-confidence [26]. These barriers often hinder spontaneous communication and fluency development. However, such difficulties can be mitigated through increased exposure to authentic English input and consistent opportunities for meaningful practice. In this regard, video games offer an engaging platform where learners can interact with language in contextualized and motivating ways, facilitating incidental vocabulary acquisition and communicative confidence. Moreover, speaking instructors play a crucial role in this process by fostering a supportive and low-anxiety classroom environment, encouraging students to apply their language skills more freely, and integrating game-based or interactive tasks that mirror real-world communication.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings underscore the potential of video game-based learning in Saudi EFL contexts, particularly within preparatory programs. Because games naturally integrate English input with problem-solving and authentic communication, they can serve as **complementary tools** to formal instruction. Teachers can leverage these experiences by designing classroom tasks that extend in-game learning, such as vocabulary logs, reflective discussions, or project-based tasks.

Moreover, the enjoyable and interactive nature of gaming may help reduce the anxiety often associated with language learning, promoting positive attitudes and sustained learner motivation [27]. These aspects make video games not only a modern recreational activity but also a promising pedagogical resource in EFL education.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined the impact of video gaming on the enhancement of English language proficiency among Saudi PYP students at Najran University. The findings revealed that video games serve not only as a source of entertainment but also as a dynamic, authentic environment for language learning. Students demonstrated positive perceptions toward the use of video games as a means of improving their English skills—particularly in vocabulary, listening comprehension, pronunciation, and confidence in communication.

The study also found a moderate positive correlation between the frequency of gameplay and the students' perceived improvement in English proficiency, indicating that regular exposure to English-mediated gaming contexts contributes to meaningful language gains. This supports the notion that informal digital learning environments, when engaging and personally relevant, can complement traditional classroom instruction.

Moreover, students expressed strong motivation and enjoyment in learning English through gaming, suggesting that video games can reduce language anxiety and foster sustained engagement with English in both formal and informal contexts. Collectively, these findings affirm the growing pedagogical relevance of game-enhanced learning within EFL programs in Saudi Arabia.

This study contributes to the growing field of informal digital language learning (IDLL) by demonstrating how video games can serve as effective tools for English language development in the Saudi EFL context. The results highlight that when learners are immersed in enjoyable, interactive, and linguistically rich digital environments, language learning becomes both natural and sustainable. As English continues to play a vital role in academic and professional domains in Saudi Arabia, embracing innovative and student-centered approaches—such as video game-based learning—represents an important step toward enhancing language education for the 21st century.

Future studies should expand on this research by including a larger and more diverse sample across multiple Saudi universities. Experimental or longitudinal designs could be employed to measure actual language development over time, rather than relying solely on self-reported data. Additionally, qualitative methods such as interviews or classroom observations could offer deeper insights into learners' gaming experiences and the cognitive processes involved in incidental language learning.

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