

Game-Based Learning and Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) in Higher Education

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1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between formal teaching methods and informal learning strategies has emerged as a major issue in English Language Teaching (ELT) in recent years. Game-Based Learning (GBL) and Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) are two of the most significant advancements in this field. IDLE stresses self-directed, outside-of-class interaction with English using digital technologies, whereas GBL refers to the pedagogical use of games to support language learning inside structured educational contexts (Hidayat, D, H; et al, 2022; Lee, J. S., & Lee, 2021; Lee, 2020). Although these two techniques are thought of as separate realms, new research indicates that they are closely related, especially when it comes to their ability to improve learner engagement, autonomy, and communication competence.

2. DISCUSSION

From a pedagogical perspective, GBL aligns closely with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). Both approaches emphasize meaningful interaction and the use of language as a tool for communication. (Ellis, 2021; Lee, J. S., & Lee, 2021; Mariam, S., et al, 2022). Games naturally incorporate these principles by requiring learners to negotiate

meaning, exchange information, and collaborate to achieve shared objectives. As Soyoo, A., et al (2021) argue, game-full language learning environments create opportunities for authentic language use that extend beyond traditional classroom practices.

2.1. Game-Based Learning in ELT

As a cutting-edge teaching strategy that encourages active learning and participation, game-based learning has drawn a lot of attention. Mayer (2021) states that GBL entails incorporating game mechanics and aspects into educational settings in order to accomplish particular learning objectives. Games offer relevant environments for language learners to use the target language for teamwork, communication, and problem-solving. The efficacy of GBL in raising motivation and engagement has been repeatedly shown by empirical research (Liu, et al, 2024; Liu, G. L., et al, 2020). This is especially crucial for second language acquisition (SLA), since success is largely determined by motivation (Dörnyei, Z., & Al-Hoorie, 2021). Games provide clear objectives, instant feedback, and a sense of accomplishment all of which support long-term student engagement.

GBL is strongly related to Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) from an educational standpoint. Both strategies place a strong emphasis on meaningful connection and language use as a communication tool. These ideas are naturally included into games because they force students to negotiate meaning, communicate information, and work together to accomplish common goals. According to (Lee, 2020; & Liu, G. L., et al, 2024), game-filled language learning environments offer chances for real-world language use outside of the classroom.

Because it encourages student motivation, engagement, and meaningful interaction throughout the learning process, game-based learning (GBL) has emerged as an innovative pedagogical approach in English language teaching (ELT). GBL is the term used to describe the use of games or game components into educational environments in order to promote communicative competence and language

acquisition. Games serve as educational tools in ELT situations, encouraging students to practice vocabulary, grammar, speaking, listening, reading, and writing in real-world and entertaining ways. According to research, game-based activities can boost involvement and lessen anxiety in students, especially EFL students who frequently worry about making mistakes when communicating in English (Deterding, 2020; Lee, J. S., & Lee, 2021; Zou, D., 2021).

GBL promotes learner autonomy and self-regulated learning while supporting critical thinking and collaborative learning. English classrooms are increasingly using digital platforms like Wordwall, Quizizz, and Kahoot! to create dynamic learning experiences. (Deterding, 2020) claim that through prizes, competition, and instant feedback, gamification and game-based learning increase students' intrinsic motivation. Additionally, (Aibar-Almazán, A., 2024; Özdemir, 2025; Tang, X., & Taguchi, 2021) contends that games offer contextual learning opportunities in which students actively create knowledge through engagement and problem-solving. Because students acquire language via purposeful usage rather than rote memorization, this method is consistent with communicative language instruction in ELT.

GBL has shown beneficial effects on students' vocabulary knowledge, speaking fluency, and classroom participation in secondary school settings (Li, R., & Hafner, 2022; Peterson, M., 2020; Xie, 2022). Because GBL promotes creativity and learner-centred instruction, lecturers also gain from it. However, careful instructional design, suitable technology support, and alignment with learning objectives are necessary for successful deployment. As a result, incorporating game-based learning into ELT can produce interesting, dynamic, and successful language learning opportunities that satisfy the needs of education in the twenty-first century.

2.2. ELT in Higher Education Using Game-Based Learning

Because it produces dynamic, inspiring, and student-centred learning environments, game-based learning (GBL) in English language teaching (ELT) has drawn a lot of interest in higher education. Many EFL students encounter poor self-esteem and few

opportunities to communicate in English in academic settings. By using digital or non-digital games into classroom instruction to promote language acquisition, engagement, and teamwork, GBL tackles these issues. Students can practice English in relevant and stress-free settings through game-based activities, which enhances engagement and communication proficiency (Lee, J. S., & Lee, 2021; Liu, G. L, et al, 2024). Digital tools like Kahoot! Quizizz, Duolingo, and Wordwall are frequently utilized in higher education to improve speaking exercises, grammar practice, vocabulary acquisition, and formative evaluation.

These resources boost students' intrinsic motivation by offering instant feedback, competitions, prizes, and interactive challenges. (Deterding, 2020; Ibrahim, 2023; Kruk, 2021) claim that gamification features like leader boards, badges, and points can improve student perseverance and engagement in learning environments. In a similar vein, (Lee, 2020) discovered that, when properly structured, game-based learning had a favourable impact on learning outcomes and motivation. Additionally, GBL encourages university students to learn both independently and collaboratively. Numerous games call for cooperation, communication, problem-solving, and negotiation all of which are consistent with the concepts of communicative language instruction. Additionally, because students actively track their learning tactics and progress, game-based training promotes self-regulated learning. This strategy can lessen anxiety and provide a more optimistic outlook on learning English in ELT courses (Hidayat, D, H; et al, 2022; Lee, J. S., & Lee, 2021; Lee, 2020).

Despite its benefits, GBL implementation in higher education necessitates sufficient technology infrastructure, digital literacy among teachers, and game alignment with learning objectives. Games with poor design have the potential to divert students from learning objectives. As a result, lecturers should carefully choose or create games that encourage academic success and meaningful language use. All things considered, game-based learning has a great potential to enhance English language instruction in higher education by making learning more effective, collaborative, and entertaining.

2.3. GBL as a Bridge to IDLE

According to recent research, GBL can act as a pedagogical link between formal classroom instruction and casual digital activities. Teachers can help students acquire the language and strategic skills needed to participate in IDLE environments by including them in game-based activities. For instance, classroom games that focus on problem-solving and communication might help students get ready for online multiplayer gaming, where English is frequently utilized as a lingua franca. In a similar vein, exposing students to digital information and game-based narratives in the classroom can inspire them to independently investigate related resources outside of the classroom. According to Lee, J. S., & Sylvén, (2021) students who play digital games are more likely to take part in IDLE activities, which increases their exposure to English and enhances their language skills. This implies a reciprocal relationship in which GBL fosters informal learning outside of institutional constraints in addition to improving classroom instruction.

2.4. Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE)

Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) refers to learners' self-initiated engagement with English through digital technologies outside formal educational settings (Hidayat, D, H; et al, 2022; Lee, J. S., & Lee, 2021; Lee, 2020). These activities include watching videos, playing online games, participating in social media interactions, and consuming digital content in English. Unlike formal instruction, IDLE is characterized by its voluntary nature, learner autonomy, and integration into everyday life.

Research has shown that IDLE plays a significant role in language development, particularly in enhancing vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, and communicative competence (Lee, J.S., & Sylvén, 2021; Lee, 2020). Importantly, IDLE provides exposure to authentic language use in diverse contexts, allowing learners to

encounter different varieties of English and develop intercultural communicative skills.

One of the key strengths of IDLE lies in its ability to foster learner autonomy. According to Yüksel, H. G., (2022) autonomy involves learners taking control of their own learning processes, including setting goals, selecting resources, and evaluating progress. Digital environments offer rich opportunities for such self-directed learning, enabling learners to engage with English in ways that are personally meaningful and contextually relevant.

In modern English language teaching (ELT), game-based learning (GBL) and informal digital learning of English (IDLE) have gained popularity, especially in technologically advanced learning settings. While IDLE stresses self-directed English learning through digital activities outside of formal classrooms, like watching videos, playing online games, using social media, and participating in online communities, GBL refers to the use of games and game elements to facilitate language learning. Learners get real, interesting, and independent opportunities to practice English in relevant circumstances thanks to the integration of GBL and IDLE. Learners can converse with other players in English in interactive environments created by digital games, particularly online multiplayer games. Students naturally improve their vocabulary, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and communicative skills through gaming activities.

Lee, (2023) claims that because games encourage active engagement, problem-solving, and teamwork, they support contextual learning. Additionally, playing online games encourages students to use English outside of the classroom, which is in keeping with IDLE's tenets. Learners increase their exposure to real-world language input and engagement by actively and regularly interacting with English. Additionally, studies show that GBL and IDLE have a positive impact on students' English self-confidence, drive, and readiness to speak. Digital game-based learning has been shown by

(Lee, 2019; Zhang, Y., & Liu, 2020) to lower anxiety and promote more active English communication. In a similar vein, (Lee, J. S., & Sylvén, 2021) contend that because students choose their own resources and learning methods, IDLE activities improve learner autonomy and digital literacy.

Through online gaming communities, Roblox, Discord, and Minecraft, students may engage with people around the world and see English as more than just a subject in the classroom. To ensure that digital activities meet learning goals, educators must provide advice for the successful integration of GBL and IDLE. Teachers should promote balanced technology use, digital accountability, and reflective learning. All things considered, integrating game-based learning with IDLE provides creative ways to advance student autonomy, international communication abilities, and English proficiency in the digital age.

Game-Based Learning and Informal Digital Learning of English are closely interconnected approaches that share common theoretical foundations and pedagogical benefits. While GBL enhances engagement and interaction within the classroom, IDLE extends these benefits into learners' everyday digital practices. By positioning GBL as a bridge to IDLE, educators can create a more holistic and sustainable language learning ecosystem that transcends the boundaries of formal education. This integration not only enhances linguistic competence but also fosters learner autonomy, motivation, and intercultural awareness, aligning with the demands of Global Englishes in the 21st century. In conclusion, Game-Based Learning (GBL) and Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) offer innovative and engaging approaches to English language learning in the digital era. Both approaches encourage learners to use English actively through interactive, authentic, and meaningful experiences beyond traditional classroom settings. GBL enhances motivation, participation, and communicative competence through enjoyable learning activities, while IDLE promotes learner autonomy and continuous exposure to English in everyday digital environments. The

integration of GBL and IDLE also supports collaboration, digital literacy, and self-regulated learning. Therefore, these approaches have strong potential to improve English proficiency and create more student-centred learning experiences.

3. RECOMMENDATION

Higher education institutions should integrate Game-Based Learning (GBL) and Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) into English language programs to promote interactive and autonomous learning. Lecturers are encouraged to use digital games, online platforms, and collaborative activities that support meaningful English communication inside and outside the classroom. Universities should also provide technological infrastructure and professional development training to help educators effectively implement game-based instruction. In addition, students should be guided to use digital media responsibly and productively for language learning purposes. Future research is recommended to explore the long-term impact of GBL and IDLE on communicative competence, motivation, and academic achievement in higher education contexts.



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