ESL GAME-BASED LEARNING IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS AT THE PRIMARY LEVEL IN PAKISTAN

Ishrat Ranjhani
Assistant Professor, Institute of English language and literature, University of Sindh. Email: ishrat.rajhani@usindh.edu.pk
Dr. Naeem Fatima
Associate Professor, College of Flying Training, PAF Academy Asghar Khan, Risalpur Email: fatimabeena1@cae.nust.edu.pk
Fouzia Rashid
Lecturer, Coordinator PYP Uneizeh, Qassim University, Email: 3078@qu.edu.sa Orcid: 0009-0002-3915-8940

Abstract:

Game-based learning (GBL) has emerged as an effective pedagogical approach in enhancing English as a Second Language (ESL) education, particularly in primary schools within Pakistan. Despite the significance of English in academic, professional, and social contexts, many students in public schools face substantial challenges in acquiring the language due to factors such as limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and traditional, rote-based teaching methods. This paper explores the role of game-based learning in addressing these challenges by promoting engagement, enhancing language skills, and improving student motivation. Through interactive, fun, and context-based activities, GBL offers a dynamic way to practice listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English. It also encourages collaboration, caters to diverse learning styles, and provides immediate feedback. However, its successful implementation in Pakistani public schools requires overcoming barriers such as a lack of infrastructure, teacher resistance, and cultural perceptions of non-traditional teaching methods. This study highlights the benefits, challenges, and best practices for integrating game-based learning in ESL classrooms at the primary level, with the goal of fostering a more interactive and effective English language learning experience. The findings emphasize the need for teacher training, adaptation to local contexts, and resource considerations for GBL to be a sustainable tool in Pakistan's educational landscape.

Keywords: Game-Based Learning (GBL), ESL Education, Primary Schools, Language Acquisition, Pakistan

Introduction:

In recent years, Game-Based Learning (GBL) has emerged as a promising pedagogical approach, especially in the context of enhancing English as a Second Language (ESL) education (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023). This approach, which integrates interactive games into the learning process, offers a dynamic alternative to traditional, teacher-centered methods. GBL encourages active participation, fosters motivation, and supports the development of language skills, making it particularly valuable in primary school settings where young learners need engaging and effective tools for language acquisition (Gee, 2003; Anderson & Dill, 2000). In countries like Pakistan, where English proficiency is essential for academic success, professional development, and social mobility (Ahmad & Ali, 2017), the challenges of learning English in public schools are particularly pronounced. These challenges stem from a combination of factors, including overcrowded classrooms, insufficient resources, and the dominance of rote learning strategies,

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which often fail to provide an interactive or engaging learning environment (Khan, 2019; Fatima & Naseem, 2020).

The importance of English as a global lingua franca cannot be overstated, especially in the context of Pakistan (Li & Akram, 2023; 2024), where the language plays a crucial role in higher education, international business, and access to global knowledge (Ahmad et al., 2022; Niazi, 2015). Despite its significance, the acquisition of English remains a significant challenge for many students (Amjad et al., 2021), particularly those in public schools where educational resources and teaching methods are often limited (Durrani, 2016). Traditional teaching methods, which often rely heavily on rote memorization and teacher-directed instruction, do not cater to the diverse learning needs of students and fail to create an engaging learning environment (Akram & Yang, 2021; Ali, 2018). In this context, the potential of GBL to enhance language learning by providing a more interactive, student-centered, and enjoyable experience becomes increasingly significant.

Game-based learning incorporates elements of play and competition into the learning process, creating a more engaging and enjoyable environment for students (Prensky, 2001). This approach has been shown to improve not only language skills but also motivation and engagement (Al-Adwan et al., 2022), key factors in language acquisition (Gee, 2003). Furthermore, GBL promotes collaborative learning, where students work together to solve problems, thus facilitating social interaction and language practice in meaningful contexts (Surendeleg et al., 2017; Ramzan et al., 2023). Games also provide immediate feedback, which can enhance learners' understanding and retention of the language (Anderson & Dill, 2000). These benefits make GBL a compelling tool for addressing the challenges faced by ESL learners, particularly in the primary school context in Pakistan.

Despite its promise, the integration of GBL into Pakistani public schools faces several barriers (Ramzan et al., 2023). These include a lack of infrastructure, limited teacher training, and cultural perceptions that favor traditional, non-interactive teaching methods (Ali & Hussain, 2020; Ramzan et al., 2021). Moreover, the scarcity of digital tools in many schools further complicates the widespread adoption of technology-based games (Shah & Khan, 2019). Thus, while GBL has the potential to significantly enhance ESL education in Pakistan; its successful implementation requires overcoming these challenges (Ramzan et al., 2020). This paper aims to explore the role of GBL in improving ESL education in primary schools in Pakistan by examining its benefits, challenges, and best practices for effective integration.

Literature Review:

Technology has revolutionized the way people interact and share ideas in the digital era (Akram et al., 2021; 2022; Ma et al., 2024). Particularly Game-based learning has become a powerful method in education (Ramzan et al., 2023). Ramzan et al (2024) suggest that public school in country must focus on resources prioritization in GBL. This technological advancement has significantly impacted how teaching can be strengthened (Abdelrady & Akram, 2022), fostering a more interconnected and engaged environment (Akram & Li, 2024). Game-based learning (GBL) has gained significant attention as an innovative approach to teaching English as a Second

Language (ESL). The potential of GBL lies in its ability to enhance student engagement, motivation, and language proficiency through interactive and enjoyable activities. This section reviews existing literature on the role of GBL in ESL education, focusing on its theoretical foundations, benefits, and challenges, with specific reference to the context of primary education in Pakistan. GBL is rooted in constructivist theories of learning, particularly those proposed by Piaget and Vygotsky, which emphasize active, experiential, and social learning processes. According to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, meaningful interaction in a social context facilitates language acquisition, making GBL an ideal tool for ESL education (Javaid et al., 2023, 2024). Gee (2003) further elaborates that games create "situated learning environments" where students can practice language skills in contextually rich and interactive settings. These theoretical underpinnings highlight the importance of active participation and social interaction, both of which are central to effective language acquisition (Javaid et al., 2023, 2024).

Games inherently offer an enjoyable and immersive experience that can sustain learners' interest. Prensky (2001) notes that the element of play in GBL stimulates intrinsic motivation, encouraging students to participate actively in language learning activities. This is particularly important in the context of Pakistani primary schools, where traditional rote-based methods often fail to engage students effectively (Ali, 2018). GBL has been shown to improve key language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Research by Hwang et al. (2012) indicates that games provide learners with opportunities to practice vocabulary and grammar in a low-stakes environment, reducing the anxiety often associated with traditional classroom assessments. In Pakistan, where students often lack confidence in speaking English due to limited practice opportunities, GBL can create a supportive environment for language experimentation and improvement (Shah & Khan, 2019).

One of the strengths of GBL is its ability to address multiple learning styles. Visual learners benefit from graphics and animations in digital games, while kinesthetic learners engage through interactive, hands-on activities (Surendeleg et al., 2017). In large, overcrowded classrooms, which are common in Pakistani public schools, GBL can provide individualized learning experiences that cater to different student needs. GBL often involves group activities, fostering collaboration and communication among students. Social interaction is a critical aspect of language learning, as it provides opportunities for learners to practice language use in real-time contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Studies have shown that collaborative games encourage teamwork and peer learning, which are essential for building communication skills in ESL learners (Fatima & Naseem, 2020).

The integration of GBL in Pakistani public schools faces significant infrastructural challenges. Many schools lack access to digital tools such as computers or tablets, which limits the feasibility of incorporating digital games into the curriculum (Ali & Hussain, 2020). Even non-digital games often require materials and space that are unavailable in resource-constrained schools. Teacher attitudes toward GBL play a critical role in its adoption. In Pakistan, many teachers are accustomed to traditional teaching methods and may resist incorporating non-traditional approaches like GBL (Durrani, 2016). Furthermore, a lack of training in designing and implementing GBL activities prevents teachers from effectively utilizing this approach (Khan, 2019).

GBL challenges cultural perceptions of education in Pakistan, where rote learning is often viewed as the most reliable method of achieving academic success (Ahmad & Ali, 2017). Additionally, the rigid structure of the national curriculum leaves little room for incorporating innovative teaching methods such as GBL (Shah & Khan, 2019).Providing professional development opportunities for teachers is essential for the successful implementation of GBL. Training programs should focus on helping teachers design and integrate games into the curriculum while addressing their concerns about this approach (Ali, 2018).In resource-constrained environments, low-tech games that use readily available materials can be an effective alternative to digital games (Fatima & Naseem, 2020). Adapting GBL activities to align with local cultural and educational norms can also facilitate its acceptance among teachers and parents.

Implementing pilot programs to test the feasibility and effectiveness of GBL in Pakistani public schools can provide valuable insights for scaling up this approach. Evidence-based policies that prioritize GBL as part of broader educational reforms can further support its adoption (Ali & Hussain, 2020).The literature highlights the transformative potential of GBL in addressing the challenges of ESL education, particularly in engaging students, enhancing language skills, and fostering collaboration. However, successful implementation in Pakistan requires addressing infrastructural, cultural, and curricular barriers. Future research should focus on developing contextually relevant GBL strategies that can be sustainably integrated into the Pakistani education system.

Methodology:
Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the potential of Game-Based Learning (GBL) in enhancing English as a Second Language (ESL) education in primary schools in Pakistan. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this research as it aims to understand the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of stakeholders, including teachers, students, and policymakers, in integrating GBL into ESL classrooms (Creswell, 2014). By employing an exploratory framework, the study seeks to uncover insights into the effectiveness of GBL, its practical challenges, and culturally relevant strategies for its implementation in the Pakistani context.

Data Collection Methods
Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and administrators from public primary schools to gather in-depth information about their experiences and perceptions of GBL in ESL education. This method allows for flexibility in exploring participant views while maintaining a consistent framework across interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). A total of 20 participants, including 10 ESL teachers and 10 school administrators, were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation of diverse school contexts across urban and rural areas.
Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with primary school students to understand their perspectives on learning English through games. FGDs are effective for capturing group dynamics and shared experiences, which are particularly valuable in understanding student engagement and collaborative learning in GBL (Morgan, 1997). Three FGDs, each comprising 8-10 students, were conducted in different schools to ensure a variety of student insights.
Classroom Observations

Non-participant classroom observations were conducted to examine the actual implementation of GBL activities in ESL classrooms. Observations focused on teacher-student interactions, student engagement, and the use of GBL tools and techniques. This method provided direct evidence of the effectiveness and challenges of GBL in real-time educational settings (Cohen et al., 2018).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify and interpret patterns and themes in the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved six steps: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo software was used to organize and analyze the data systematically, ensuring rigor and transparency in the coding process.
Coding Framework

The coding framework was developed based on existing literature and research questions. Key codes included:

- **Teacher Perceptions**: Attitudes toward GBL, perceived benefits, and challenges.
- **Student Engagement**: Levels of interest and motivation during GBL activities.
- **Implementation Barriers**: Resource limitations, cultural constraints, and training needs.
- **Best Practices**: Effective strategies and adaptations for the Pakistani context.

Sampling and Participant Selection

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were directly involved in or affected by ESL education and GBL. The selection criteria ensured diversity in terms of school type (urban vs. rural), teacher experience, and student demographics. This approach aligns with qualitative research principles, which prioritize depth and richness of data over generalizability (Patton, 2015).

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure the rights and well-being of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and parental consent was secured for student participation in focus groups. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Approval for the research was obtained from the relevant educational authorities and an institutional ethics review board.

Trustworthiness and Validity

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, triangulation was employed by using multiple data collection methods (interviews, FGDs, and observations) to corroborate findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking was also conducted, allowing participants to review and validate the interpretations of their input. Additionally, an audit trail was maintained to document the research process and decisions, ensuring transparency and replicability.

Results:

The findings of this study are organized into themes that emerged from the qualitative data collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations. These results provide insight into the benefits, challenges, and best practices of integrating Game-Based Learning (GBL) into English as a Second Language (ESL) education in primary schools in Pakistan.

1. Teacher Perceptions of Game-Based Learning

Teachers expressed mixed feelings about GBL, highlighting both its potential benefits and practical challenges.

Perceived Benefits

The majority of teachers (70%) recognized that GBL could significantly enhance student motivation and engagement. They observed that students participated more actively in GBL sessions compared to traditional lessons. One teacher noted, "Games make learning fun and less stressful for students. They don't even realize they are learning" (Interviewee 5). These findings align with Prensky's (2001) assertion that games enhance intrinsic motivation and create a positive learning environment.

Challenges

However, teachers also cited resource limitations and large class sizes as significant barriers. For instance, one teacher from a rural school stated, "We don't have access to computers or even enough physical space for group activities" (Interviewee 9). Additionally, some teachers felt unprepared to implement GBL effectively due to a lack of training, echoing findings from Durrani (2016), who highlighted teacher resistance as a barrier to pedagogical innovation in Pakistan.

2. Student Engagement and Language Development

Focus group discussions with students revealed that they found GBL activities enjoyable and engaging. Students reported that they particularly liked games that involved competition and rewards. For example, a student commented, "I learned new words when playing word-building games, and I wanted to win, so I tried harder" (FGD 2, Participant 6). These findings support

Surendeleg et al.'s (2017) research, which emphasizes the role of collaborative and competitive elements in fostering active learning.

Observations also showed that GBL activities encouraged participation from students who were usually reluctant to speak in class. Teachers noted increased confidence among these students, particularly in speaking activities. For example, a shy student in one classroom observation confidently participated in a vocabulary game, which was an uncommon occurrence during traditional lessons. This aligns with Hwang et al.'s (2012) study, which highlights the role of GBL in reducing language anxiety.

3. Implementation Barriers

Resource Limitations

Consistent with teacher feedback, classroom observations highlighted the lack of infrastructure as a major impediment. None of the observed schools had dedicated technology resources, such as computers or tablets, which limited the use of digital GBL tools. Teachers often relied on low-tech or no-tech games, which, while effective, restricted the variety of activities they could conduct.

Cultural Constraints

Some teachers and administrators expressed concerns about cultural resistance to non-traditional teaching methods. For instance, one administrator remarked, "Parents often question whether games are a serious way of learning" (Interviewee 16). This sentiment aligns with Ali and Hussain's (2020) findings that societal expectations in Pakistan often favor rote-based learning as a measure of academic rigor.

Curriculum Rigidities

Several teachers mentioned that the rigid national curriculum left little room for integrating GBL. "The syllabus is too dense, and there's no time for games," said one teacher (Interviewee 7). This reflects Shah and Khan's (2019) observation that the prescribed curriculum limits innovation in teaching methods.

4. Best Practices for Effective Integration

The study identified several strategies for overcoming the challenges associated with GBL implementation:

Low-Tech Solutions

Teachers who lacked access to digital tools often adapted traditional games or created simple, low-tech activities. For instance, a teacher used flashcards and word puzzles to conduct a spelling bee, which was well-received by students (Observation 3). These findings are consistent

with Fatima and Naseem's (2020) recommendation for contextually relevant, resource-light solutions in resource-constrained settings.

Teacher Training

Teachers who had received professional development in innovative teaching methods were more confident and effective in implementing GBL. One teacher noted, "The training sessions helped me understand how to align games with learning objectives" (Interviewee 12). This aligns with Ali's (2018) emphasis on the importance of teacher training for successful pedagogical innovation.

Collaboration and Peer Support

In schools where teachers collaborated to design and share GBL activities, implementation was more effective. For example, a group of teachers co-developed a storytelling game that incorporated vocabulary and grammar lessons (Observation 5). This supports Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which underscores the importance of collaboration in learning.

Summary of Findings

The results indicate that GBL has the potential to enhance ESL education in Pakistani primary schools by increasing student engagement, reducing language anxiety, and fostering active learning. However, successful implementation requires addressing barriers such as resource limitations, cultural resistance, and rigid curricula. Teachers play a pivotal role in the effective use of GBL, and their professional development is crucial for sustainable adoption.

Discussion:

The findings of this study highlight the transformative potential of Game-Based Learning (GBL) in enhancing English as a Second Language (ESL) education for primary school students in Pakistan. This discussion explores the implications of these results in relation to the existing literature, addressing the benefits, challenges, and strategies for implementing GBL in resource-constrained contexts.

The study confirms that GBL significantly enhances student engagement and motivation, a finding that aligns with Prensky's (2001) assertion that games inherently stimulate intrinsic motivation. Students reported enjoying the competitive and interactive nature of games, which encouraged them to participate actively in learning activities. This is particularly important in the Pakistani context, where traditional rote-based methods often disengage students (Ali, 2018). Moreover, the observed increase in participation among shy students highlights the ability of GBL to reduce language anxiety, consistent with Hwang et al.'s (2012) findings.

The implications of these results suggest that GBL can serve as an effective tool for fostering a positive learning environment, particularly in large classrooms where individual attention is limited. By creating opportunities for active and collaborative learning, GBL can address some

of the systemic challenges in Pakistani public schools, such as lack of student motivation and low engagement levels (Fatima & Naseem, 2020).

GBL was shown to enhance key language skills, including vocabulary acquisition, speaking, and listening. These findings support Surendeleg et al.'s (2017) argument that games provide meaningful contexts for practicing language skills. The study also demonstrates the importance of immediate feedback in GBL activities, which helps students identify and correct their mistakes in real time, thereby improving language retention.

However, the limited use of digital tools in the observed classrooms suggests that the full potential of GBL remains untapped in Pakistan. The reliance on low-tech or no-tech games, while effective to some extent, restricts the diversity of activities that can be offered. These results highlight the need for investments in educational technology to unlock the benefits of digital GBL tools, which can provide richer and more immersive learning experiences (Shah & Khan, 2019).

The challenges identified in this study—resource limitations, teacher resistance, and cultural constraints—echo the findings of Ali and Hussain (2020), who noted similar barriers to pedagogical innovation in Pakistan. Resource limitations, such as the lack of access to computers and inadequate classroom space, were particularly pronounced in rural schools. This reinforces the need for scalable, low-tech solutions that can be adapted to resource-constrained environments (Fatima & Naseem, 2020).

Teacher resistance emerged as another significant barrier, often stemming from a lack of training and familiarity with GBL. Durrani (2016) emphasized that teachers play a pivotal role in the success of any educational innovation, and this study reaffirms the importance of equipping teachers with the skills and confidence to implement GBL effectively. Professional development programs that focus on integrating GBL into the curriculum and aligning it with national educational goals can help address this issue.

Cultural constraints also pose challenges, as traditional educational practices in Pakistan prioritize rote learning and academic rigor over interactive and student-centered methods. This cultural resistance to GBL highlights the importance of raising awareness among parents, teachers, and administrators about the long-term benefits of this approach. As Ali (2018) suggested, involving stakeholders in the design and implementation of GBL activities can help mitigate resistance and foster acceptance.

The study identified several strategies for overcoming the challenges of GBL implementation, including the use of low-tech solutions, collaborative approaches, and teacher training. The effectiveness of low-tech games observed in this study aligns with the recommendations of Shah and Khan (2019), who emphasized the importance of contextually relevant solutions in resource-limited settings. Teachers who collaborated to design and share GBL activities were more successful in engaging students and addressing logistical challenges, supporting Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which underscores the value of collaboration in learning.

Teacher training emerged as a critical factor for the success of GBL. Teachers who had received professional development were more confident and innovative in their approach, highlighting the need for targeted training programs. These programs should focus on aligning GBL activities with curriculum objectives, managing classroom dynamics during GBL sessions, and leveraging available resources effectively (Cohen et al., 2018).

The findings of this study have significant implications for policymakers and practitioners. Integrating GBL into the national curriculum could help address systemic challenges in ESL education, but this requires a concerted effort to provide schools with the necessary resources and infrastructure. Pilot programs that test the feasibility of GBL in diverse school contexts can provide valuable insights for scaling up this approach. Additionally, policymakers should consider incorporating GBL into teacher training programs to ensure sustainable adoption.

While this study provides valuable insights into the potential of GBL in Pakistani primary schools, it is not without limitations. The qualitative design limits the generalizability of the findings, and the study was conducted in a limited number of schools. Future research should explore the long-term impact of GBL on language proficiency using quantitative methods and larger samples. Additionally, studies that examine the use of digital GBL tools in resource-constrained settings could provide further insights into how technology can be leveraged to enhance ESL education.

Conclusion:

The discussion highlights the potential of GBL to transform ESL education in Pakistani primary schools by increasing student engagement, enhancing language skills, and fostering a collaborative learning environment. However, addressing the challenges of implementation requires investments in infrastructure, teacher training, and cultural change. By adopting scalable and contextually relevant strategies, GBL can become a sustainable and effective tool for improving English language learning in Pakistan.

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