Language Learning in the 21st Century: Malaysian ESL Students’ Perceptions of Kahoot!

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ABSTRACT

Kahoot! is a gaming system designed for interactive learning and can be utilised for students of all ages. The present study involved two groups of Malaysian ESL students (n = 57) enrolled in a remedial English proficiency course in a public university. All 57 participants were exposed to weekly Kahoot! sessions over a period of one semester; the sessions covered various English language learning components including vocabulary and reading comprehension, but focused largely on grammar. At the end of the semester, the participants completed a 34-item questionnaire comprising closed- and open-ended items. The questionnaire was tested for reliability with returned values indicating high internal consistency, thus making the instrument a reliable option for use in future studies. The study’s findings indicate that the students found Kahoot! to be beneficial in terms of: 1) inducing motivation, and 2) fostering and reinforcing learning. The students were also of the opinion that Kahoot! would be useful for foreign language learning (for instance, Spanish and French).

KEYWORDS

English Language Learning, Game-Based Learning, Gamified Education, Language Education, Motivation, Remedial Learners, Technology, Tertiary Learners

1. INTRODUCTION

As we advance into the new millennium, the encroachment of technology has given rise to the emergence of a very unique concept of integrated game-based learning activities – gamification. Its notion, anchored in wedding play with learning, strives to blend and shape natural human activity around education (Flores, 2015). In essence, it is the utilisation of game elements and game design techniques in non-game contexts (Zarzycka-Piskorz, 2016). In this frame, gamification is quickly emerging as an alternative or supplementary educative application (Giannakas et al., 2018). Its ‘play nature’ has resulted in game-based learning that does not only captivate learners’ attention, but has the potential to motivate them and subsequently promote knowledge retention as well – just as it permits learners the opportunity to be fully implicated in the learning process (Flores, 2015; NMC Horizon Report, 2014).

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In his work on gamification and second language learning, Flores (2015, p. 42) stated the following:

The use of technology in education has become necessary to fortify the teaching and learning experience in the 21st century. Throughout the years we’ve seen dramatic changes and experienced transitions that have moved forward computer hardware and software, along with web-based technologies towards instruction. Most of all, we’ve experienced dramatic changes in the educational interests and the ways to teach different generations.

Studies conducted have demonstrated the viability of infusing appropriate learning approaches in gamification activities since they are likely to positively augment one’s learning achievement while simultaneously diminishing unnecessary cognitive load (Hwang et al., 2013). Additionally, Hwang et al. (ibid.) highlighted that the right learning strategies, apart from impacting a learner’s motivation positively, can potentially lead to increased persistence in learning (see also Zarzycka-Piskorz, 2016). On the other hand, if not carefully designed, gamification may lead to negative consequences (Hwang et al., 2013). Lending further support to the aforementioned, numerous researchers (Hwang & Wu, 2014; Tsai et al., 2012; Annetta et al., 2009; Rau et al., 2008) have underscored that motivation and interest levels, as well as learning achievements, can be further augmented via game-based activities blended with Internet tools, mobile environments, and popular communication services. A recent study by Wu (2018) on vocabulary learning via gamification has also recorded higher learning effectiveness. Additionally, there was positive feedback regarding learning motivation.

In light of the criticisms about Malaysia’s education system being unable to induce among students the motivation to learn, Ong et al. (2013) assessed the practicality and effectiveness of gamification within a tertiary education system in Malaysia and proposed that gamification can be practical and effective among when applied in Malaysia. The authors note, however, that while their research provides some grounds on factors affecting the effectiveness of gamified education, there remains the feasibility of conducting further research in this area.

One such gamification tool is Kahoot!, a digital student response system that permits interaction between teachers and learners via competitive knowledge games utilising existing infrastructure in classroom settings. Leveraging on Kahoot! to complement existing pedagogical practices in increasing student motivation and engagement through gamification may be feasible because as pointed out by Wang et al. (2016), Kahoot! embodies a new cohort of student response systems that focuses on student motivation and engagement through gamification. As such, this platform may be deemed fitting for the promotion of learning via increased motivation and engagement. It may also be employed for assessment and evaluation purposes. It is therefore viable to investigate the impact of Kahoot! on the attitudes of learners as well as its influence on their learning or persistence for learning, within the context of higher education, to gauge if the platform proves to be useful for tertiary learners.

1.1. Research Problem and Significance

According to Prensky (2003), “a motivated learner can’t be stopped” (p. 1). Unfortunately, much of learning in general is often dry, boring and even technical, and English language learning per se can be somewhat daunting for a student who is already struggling with the language. Despite years of compulsory English classes, Malaysian tertiary students are still confronted with a lack of English proficiency (Tan, 2016; David, 2015; Mohini et al., 2008). The dominant role of English in today’s world has resulted in the prioritisation of English mastery, by which an individual’s inclusion or exclusion, particularly with respect to the domains of education and the economy, is determined (Tan, 2016). Essentially, this leaves Malaysian students with no choice but to become adept users of the language, and the onus is largely on educators to find effective ways to help them.
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