

THE INFLUENCE OF NARRATIVE-BASED VIDEO GAMES ENGAGEMENT ON ENGLISH VOCABULARY MASTERY: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary holds an essential role to language acquisition process. One of the ways to improve vocabulary mastery is through playing video games as it offers authentic linguistic stimulation to the players. This study explores how engagement with narrative-based video games influence English Language Learners' (ELL) vocabulary mastery. Narrative inquiry research was done with 3 participants majoring in English and sharing about their video gaming journey throughout the years. The findings of this study showed that high-level of engagement with narrative-based video games have positive impact on the participants' vocabulary mastery. The immersive nature of narrative-based video games offered rich contextual learning opportunities that could be implemented as a supplementary tool for vocabulary development. This study also generated both theoretical and practical implications that could be beneficial for teachers and students in the realm of vocabulary acquisition strategies.

Keywords: *ELL, narrative-based video games, video game engagement, vocabulary mastery, narrative inquiry*

INTRODUCTION

It has been widely acknowledged that vocabulary holds a significant role for people who want to learn a new language (Afzal, 2019). The mastery of vocabulary in learning a new language is essential as it acts as the foundation of language acquisition and the use of the newly acquired language (Alharbi, 2015; Alharthi, 2019; Ambarwati & Mandasari, 2020). The vocabulary of English language needs to be mastered in order to produce meaningful and understandable utterances (Afzal, 2019). Without grammar, the communication would be difficult to convey the message, but without vocabulary, no message can be conveyed in a communication (Scott, 2002; Ambarwati & Mandasari, 2020). When learning, especially a language, utilizing learning media can significantly help the learners to obtain and retain the materials better. In learning English as a second language, Hestiana (2022) mentioned that learning media can be utilized to help students improve their speaking, listening, writing, and reading skills in English. One way to hone the ELLs' (English Language Learners) English vocabulary mastery is through playing video games as they offer a real-life world simulation (Anderson, Reynolds, Yeh, & Huang, 2008; Calvo-Ferrer & Belda-Medina, 2021). Video games offer a profound way to provide simulation in an educational environment (Farhan et al., 2022). With traits like fun and relaxation paired with confidence and motivation boosting, video games can increase students' interest in learning the material (Farhan et al., 2022).

While video games have many genres, almost all of the video games available on the market have a story in it. These stories in video games are what make the players focus as they need to comprehend and understand

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the main idea of the game itself, thus the players can play it accordingly. Encountering words in the same context while playing a video game elicits incidental language learning. Incidental learning is defined as the result of activity that mostly focuses on comprehension of the content, which is not particularly designed for vocabulary learning. Nevertheless, these video game players manage to absorb and retain the new words they encounter during their time playing video games, especially the type of games that are heavy in narrative content. (Franciosi, Yagi, Tomoshige, & Ye, 2016; Macedonia & Klimesch, 2014).

Informal digital learning of English (IDLE)

Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) has emerged as a significant trend in language education, offering learners diverse opportunities beyond traditional classroom settings. Dressman and Lee (2021) proposed that integrating IDLE into formal education through student-centered approaches can enhance engagement and tailor learning to individual needs. This method empowers learners to control their language acquisition, leading to more personalized and motivating educational experiences. They suggest that when students are given the freedom to choose their own learning activities using digital tools and resources, they feel more passionate and engaged in their language learning process (Dressman & Lee, 2021). Soyoof et al. (2023) provided an in-depth analysis of IDLE research, highlighting several successful techniques and their beneficial results. They emphasize the need for further research into IDLE's long-term benefits and best practices, arguing that while the immediate benefits are obvious, knowing its long-term impact is critical for future educational methods. Furthermore, Informal exposure to English media, such as television and music, is strongly associated with enhanced language skills among young learners, highlighting the general benefits of extramural English exposure (Kuppens, 2010).

Video games in language acquisition

Video games have emerged as an engaging and innovative tool for language acquisition, particularly in the context of English as a foreign or second language. Numerous studies have explored the potential benefits of video games for enhancing various aspects of language learning, such as vocabulary, grammar, and communication skills. One area that has received significant attention is the use of video games for vocabulary acquisition. Researchers have investigated the effectiveness of different game genres, including narrative-based games, role-playing games (RPGs), and adventure games, in facilitating incidental vocabulary learning (Chen, Hao, Chen, & Dai, 2018; Janebi Enayat & Haghghatpasand, 2019; Lai & Chen, 2023). These studies suggest that the immersive and contextual nature of video games can promote meaningful and long-term vocabulary retention. Reinders and Wattana (2015) studied the relationship between digital game-based learning and learners' willingness to communicate in a foreign language, suggesting that games can foster a positive affective state conducive to language practice. Halbrook et al. (2019) reviewed the positive effects of video games on well-being, which could indirectly support language acquisition by promoting engagement and motivation.

A dearth of research has been done around the world regarding utilizing video games to improve students' proficiency in English, such as studies in Europe (Becker, 2022; Rasti-Behbahani, 2021; Toh & Kirschner, 2020), South America (Camacho Vásquez & Ovalle, 2019; Castillo-Cuesta, 2020), and the Middle East (Bin-Hady, 2023; Janebi Enayat & Haghghatpasand, 2019) regarding the topic of utilizing video games to help ELLs master the English language, especially improving their vocabulary mastery. In Indonesia, there are several researchers that have studied this topic that had been done in several levels of education, starting from middle school (Irfan et al., 2016; Ningtyas & Suganda, 2019), high school (Asari, 2023; Yudha & Mandasari, 2021), and even in the higher education setting (Winaldo & Oktaviani, 2022). While some studies have explored the effects of implementing video games for building vocabulary mastery in formal English learning

environments, the area of informal English learning that utilizes video games, especially narrative-based video games has not been thoroughly studied yet. Therefore, the writer proposes this study to find out how video game engagement influences ELLs in the higher education setting to improve their vocabulary mastery.

RESEARCH METHODS

The method used for this research is narrative inquiry. The main reason behind the selection of this particular method is that the author is able to dig further into each participant's individual story about their past experience playing video games that can be reflected in their vocabulary mastery today. This approach is rooted in the work of Clandinin and Connelly (1989), who conceptualized narrative inquiry as a way to understand and represent experiences through the study of stories. Narrative inquiry has been widely used in language teaching and learning research to explore various aspects of language learners' and teachers' experiences. For instance, Barkhuizen (2014) proposed the use of "narrative frames" as a tool for investigating language learning and teaching experiences, allowing researchers to elicit and analyze narratives within specific contexts or themes.

The study employed one-on-one semi-structured interviews with participants following their sixth-semester final examinations. Interviews were chosen as the research instrument due to their ability to elicit detailed information from participants' narratives, allowing for in-depth interpretation of the results (Taherdoost, 2022). Additionally, interviews create a more relaxed and natural environment for participants (Taherdoost, 2021). The recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to derive the research findings. Thematic analysis, a commonly used method for qualitative data analysis, involves the identification, examination, and reporting of patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2019).

Table 1. Participants' Profile and VLT Results

Participants	City of Origins	Genres of Games Played	Time Spent Playing Video Games	Vocabulary Level	VLT Result	
					Level	Percent (%)
Oscar	Surabaya, East Java	Action, Adventure, Role-Playing, Simulation	28-42 hours per week	Advanced	2k	100
					3k	100
					5k	100
					Acad.	100
					10k	100
Zidane	Sragen, Central Java	Action, Adventure, Puzzle, Role-Playing, Strategy	28-42 hours per week	Upper Intermediate	2k	94
					3k	100
					5k	94
					Acad.	94
					10k	67
Martha	Bangkalan, East Java	Adventure, Strategy	7-14 hours per week	Intermediate	2k	78
					3k	89
					5k	61
					Acad.	22
					10k	39

The participants of this research are three students majoring in English aged 20-21 years old who are currently in their sixth semester and are also gamers in their daily lives. The participants are selected individually from the questionnaire results. The students selected as participants are those who spend at least 7-14 hours of gaming per week and have a good vocabulary mastery. The identity of the participants is kept secret to ensure anonymity by the usage of pseudonyms. The participants selected in this research came from different backgrounds, the fact that all of them are student-gamers is the only similarity found between each of them. The

differences in their background can be seen in Table 1, the table also includes the participants' preliminary VLT test results as the main instrument for selecting the participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Oscar: Gaming as a Catalyst for English Vocabulary Mastery

Oscar's journey with English and video games began during his kindergarten years, with his formal English education starting in elementary school.

"I've been using English since around the beginning of elementary school. I started reading in kindergarten, but I really began implementing it in elementary school and beyond".

He describes himself as a dedicated gamer, often reflecting on the games he plays even outside of gaming sessions due to his deep engagement with their content. Through narrative-driven video games, Oscar reports significant vocabulary expansion, including learning slang, idioms, and cultural references.

"Yes, still, indeed, because we as players are also learning, right? So, every day, even if I'm not playing, when reading the news, I also find new vocabulary that I may not have learned before. From there, I immediately open a dictionary to see what the words mean that were just said by that character".

He attributes his motivation to continue playing and actively seek out meanings of unfamiliar words to the immersive nature of these games. This engagement has led him to proactively research new vocabulary encountered during his gaming experiences with narrative-focused titles.

For Oscar, learning English through narrative-based games has been both enjoyable and effective, fostering a love for the language that traditional methods might not have achieved.

"For me, I really enjoy learning English through video games. Because initially, I knew English from video games, and because video games at that time, were old, we couldn't change the language of that video game to Indonesian. So, I had no choice but to sit and learn English".

Oscar's journey showcases how interactive storytelling in games can be a powerful tool for language acquisition, particularly for those who find themselves immersed in the virtual worlds and stories these games create. His experience highlights the potential of narrative-based games as an engaging and effective supplement to traditional language learning methods, especially for learners who connect with this interactive medium.

Zidane: A Journey of Informal English Learning through Digital Media

Zidane's exposure to English began in kindergarten through digital platforms like YouTube, before he started gaming. His gaming journey commenced in elementary school with mobile games, later progressing to narrative-based games on his first console. He found himself deeply engaged in these games, following storylines and connecting with characters to fully experience the game world.

"I like story speculation the most. Especially like Warframe, this is an ongoing story, so there are parts of the story that we get, but we don't know what it means."

Through this immersion, Zidane acquired a range of vocabulary, from basic to complex, which he occasionally used in real-life conversations.

"When I was in 9th grade, my English teacher told us to memorize vocabularys, but that wasn't really good. Video games are better because you directly apply the vocabulary."

While he acknowledges video games as an enjoyable method for vocabulary learning, Zidane believes videos are more effective for vocabulary acquisition due to their ability to provide greater context for word usage in sentences.

"It's very influential. Because that's actually, if it's from a game, it's like directly using the word, not explaining the word. So, they immediately use this word in this sentence. So, I can know how to use this word like this, the grammar is like this, so I don't make mistakes when speaking."

Zidane's journey of informal English learning through digital media, particularly narrative-based video games, showcases the potential of modern technology in language acquisition. From his early days of unintentional learning through YouTube to his deep engagement with complex game narratives, Zidane's story illustrates how digital media can provide rich, contextual language learning experiences. His journey stands as a testament to the changing landscape of language education, where informal, technology-driven learning can significantly complement, and in some ways surpass traditional educational methods.

Martha: The Evolution of English Vocabulary Learning Through Gaming

Among the participants, Martha developed an interest in English later, but her gaming experience began early in elementary school. She played games on various platforms, including mobile phones, computers, and gaming consoles. Despite describing her relationship with gaming as casual, Martha tends to immerse herself in-game content, particularly narrative-based games like visual novels.

"Recently, I've enjoyed playing games where you read stories, with dialogues between characters"

When encountering unfamiliar words, she actively seeks their meanings and takes notes helping her to keep her vocabulary retention.

"It's very influential. Especially for new vocabulary, which is a bit tricky. I find a lot of tricky words in games. It has a big impact on improving my vocabulary because my vocabulary is still limited. I learn a lot of new words, so it's like adding new vocabulary. There are many different words I can get from video games. It's a big boost to vocabulary improvement"

Martha believes that the relaxed and comfortable nature of narrative-based games creates an enjoyable environment for vocabulary learning.

"If you ask if it's comfortable, it's very comfortable because sometimes I get bored learning in class or learning through videos on YouTube, it just gets tedious and boring. So, with games, we can learn in a relaxed way. Learning is fun and relaxed, but it still sinks in. It's not too serious. When learning directly in class or from YouTube videos, it's very serious. So yeah, sometimes it gets boring"

However, she considers this method less effective than traditional instructional settings, which offer direct feedback on the learning process.

Martha's journey illustrates how narrative-based video games can serve as an engaging and effective supplement to traditional English learning methods, particularly for vocabulary acquisition. Her experience shows that the interactive and immersive nature of these games can make language learning a more enjoyable and personalized process, contributing to sustained engagement with the English language. As educational methods continue to evolve, Martha's story provides insight into how technology and entertainment can be harnessed to enhance language learning in ways that resonate with today's students.

Discussion

Based on the findings from this narrative inquiry research, it is evident that narrative-based video games have played a significant role in enhancing the English vocabulary mastery of college students majoring in English. The experiences of Oscar, Zidane, and Martha demonstrate how these games serve as an engaging and effective supplement to traditional language learning methods. All three participants reported substantial

improvements in their vocabulary acquisition, comprehension, and usage through their interactions with narrative-rich games.

The study participants exhibited varying degrees of engagement with video games, particularly narrative-driven ones. Oscar and Zidane showed high engagement levels, having played since childhood. This early and sustained engagement aligns with research suggesting video games' potential as a language-learning resource for young children (Jensen, 2017). Martha, in contrast, described a more casual gaming relationship. Nevertheless, all participants found narrative games captivating. Oscar's habit of contemplating game choices even when not playing illustrates the immersive nature of these games. This level of engagement with game narratives suggests language learning potential, consistent with findings that engagement in digital entertainment games can yield educational benefits (Boyle et al., 2012; Hamari et al., 2016). These varying engagement levels mirror Dhiya Ulhaq and Noviantoro's (2023) study on role-playing video games and informal reading learning. Their research found that participants engaged with games at different intensities, but all reported language learning benefits, particularly in reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

The participants highlighted the immersive nature of narrative-based games and how this affects their language learning experience. Zidane emphasized the importance of context in understanding language use. This suggests that narrative games provide rich contextual information that aids language comprehension, aligning with research on the benefits of contextual language learning in digital games (Breien & Wasson, 2021; Chen et al., 2018). Martha noted how narrative games encourage active engagement with the language. This active language processing in context may contribute to more effective vocabulary acquisition, a finding supported by several studies on video games and language learning (Enayat & Haghghatpasand, 2019; Zou et al., 2021). Pratiwi et al. (2022) further support these findings in their narrative inquiry on digital game-based learning experiences. They found that the immersive nature of games enhanced students' learning enjoyment, which in turn positively impacted their vocabulary mastery. The study highlighted how the interactive and contextualized nature of games facilitated better understanding and retention of new vocabulary.

All participants reported acquiring new vocabulary through narrative-based games. Oscar mentioned learning complex words. This aligns with research showing that video games can be effective tools for vocabulary acquisition (Franciosi et al., 2016; Octaberlina & Rofiki, 2021). Zidane provided a specific example: “grandiose” This demonstrates how games can introduce learners to nuanced vocabulary in context, supporting findings that contextual learning in games can enhance vocabulary development (Chik, 2014; Rahman & Angraeni, 2020). Martha highlighted the motivational aspect of learning vocabulary through games. This suggests that the enjoyable nature of games may enhance vocabulary retention, a concept supported by studies on the motivational effects of game-based learning (Dehaan, 2010; Ningtyas & Suganda, 2019). Salsabil et al. (2023) support these findings in their study on Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). They found that the rich vocabulary encountered in these games not only enhanced players' vocabulary but also increased their willingness to communicate in English. This suggests that the vocabulary acquired through games has practical applications beyond the gaming context.

The interviews revealed that narrative-based video games serve as a form of informal language learning. Oscar noted how games expose players to native-speaker pronunciation. This aligns with research on extramural English activities and their impact on language proficiency (Sundqvist, 2009; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). Zidane emphasized how games provide immediate context for language use. This suggests that games offer an immersive environment for implicit language learning, supporting findings on informal digital learning of English (Chik, 2014; Lee, 2022). However, Martha pointed out that while games are enjoyable for language learning, they may not be as effective as formal instruction. This highlights that while narrative-based games can be a valuable

supplement, they may not replace traditional language learning methods entirely. Nassrallah's (2023) study on adult gamers' perceptions of learning through video games supports this balanced view. The research found that while gamers recognized significant language learning benefits from playing games, they also acknowledged the importance of formal education. This suggests that video games can serve as a powerful complement to traditional language learning methods, rather than a replacement.

The immersive nature of these games, coupled with the contextual learning they provide, has enabled the students to encounter, understand, and retain complex vocabulary more naturally and enjoyably compared to conventional study methods. The participants highlighted the benefits of the immediate application of new words within the game context, the motivation to explore dialogues thoroughly, and the relaxed learning environment that games provide. While the degree of engagement and specific learning strategies varied among the participants, all three acknowledged the positive impact of narrative-based games on their English language skills, particularly in expanding their vocabulary and improving their confidence in using the language. These findings suggest that integrating narrative-based video games into language learning curricula could potentially enhance students' engagement with the English language and support their vocabulary development more interactively and enjoyably.

CONCLUSION

The research findings suggest that narrative-based video games create a unique and effective environment for language learning, especially for vocabulary acquisition. These games' immersive qualities and rich contextual learning opportunities provide an excellent platform for learning and internalizing new words. The participants' experiences reveal several key advantages of using games for language learning: The study emphasizes the beneficial effects of early English exposure through gaming. All participants reported interacting with English-language games from a young age, which seems to have substantially contributed to their long-term language skills. This finding is consistent with current research on the advantages of early language exposure via digital media. To gain more comprehensive insights into the enduring effects of game-based learning on vocabulary retention and overall language proficiency, future research could benefit from conducting longitudinal studies.

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