

# Tahfiz Students' Perception of Game-based Learning for English Language Education

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## Abstract

This study aimed to examine perception of game-based learning for English language education among *tahfiz* students. This mixed-method study used questionnaires and interviews involving a private *tahfiz* institution in Kedah, Malaysia. Overall findings show that students perceive a higher level of content knowledge with the application of game-based learning. For skills improvement, descriptive analysis showed a high level of mean score (above 3.5) for improvement in thinking skills, presentation skills and problem-solving skills. In addition, a high level of mean score (above 4.0) was also seen in the ability to interact with others and ability to participate actively in groups. In conclusion, *tahfiz* students will definitely benefit from game-based learning, especially for academic subjects.

**Keywords:** Tahfiz Student, Game-Based Learning, English Language Education, Tahfiz Teaching Methods, Teaching Practices.

## Introduction

The need to transform Malaysia into a high-income and economically developed country requires the development of an English-educated workforce among Malaysians (Renganathan, 2021). Education plays a role in the development of good communication skills among Malaysians from various backgrounds, religions and ethnicity (Zulkefly & Razali, 2019). The English language has been regarded as a lingua franca in this era (Abas & Jaffri, 2017). Aligning with the worldwide demand for quality language teaching, materials and resources, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has made it compulsory for Malaysians to learn the language at an early age (Abas & Jaffri, 2017; Krish et al., 2019). This is to ensure that all Malaysian children are provided with an education that enables them to develop the English language skills necessary for their future employability irrespective of gender, family background and socio-economic status (Renganathan, 2021). However, many students, especially from rural areas, still view English as a foreign language that is only practised during classroom lessons due to inadequate exposure and practice (Zulkefly & Razali, 2019; Renganathan, 2021). This makes the teaching of English challenging for rural area learners. According to Zulkefly and Razali (2019), there is a continuous decrease in the English language proficiency and learning motivation of secondary school students in Malaysian rural areas because of their failure to

see the need to use English in their lives. Without significant motivation, even the brightest students are unable to continuously attain any really useful language skills (Machfudi, 2019). Zulkefly and Razali (2019) further stated that students who are staying in remote areas do not exhibit a positive attitude towards learning English and are inclined to be shy and reserved. In addition, Krish et.al (2019) stated that the cultures of being quiet in the classroom and practising rote memorisation have been prevalent among Malaysian students since young. This leads to the problem of low proficiency in the English subject in which its failure rate is rather high (Zulkefly & Razali, 2019). Hence, there is a need to improve the English language teaching and learning methods in rural-based schools. According to Renganathan (2021), who conducted a systematic review of research on English language education in rural schools in Malaysia, the number of publications reporting research related to it was rather low, emphasising the dearth of research concerning English language teaching in rural schools in Malaysia. Nearly 80% of the studies were carried out in primary schools compared to secondary schools (Renganathan, 2021). Hence, this study is important because it is focused on *tahfiz* secondary school in a rural area, and is among the earliest studies pertaining to this subject matter in Malaysia.

There are three main objectives of this study:

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of game-based English language learning in increasing *tahfiz* students' knowledge.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of game-based English language learning in strengthening *tahfiz* students' skills and personal development.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of game-based English language learning in building the attitude for knowledge sharing among *tahfiz* students.

## Literature Review

### Malaysian English Education System and its Challenges

Nationally, English is formally chosen as the second language of Malaysia. The government recognizes its value as the language of trade, education, and science. In Malaysian schools, English language is a compulsory subject to take throughout primary (6 years) and secondary education (5 years). The primary concern in most research in the English language education in Malaysia is of course with the citizens' ability to use the language up to a certain level and not simply as passing a test. A study by Vaish and Subhan (2015) describes the existence of students who have an understanding of the English language but only at a surface level. In essence, it means these students are able to comprehend and use English but only within the scope of their classrooms. Their competency is not enough for them to engage in conversation and higher-order thinking in English. An excellent read on the Malaysian dilemma with regards to English language education among its citizens was written by Iber in 2014. In it, he stated that Malaysia is quite unique because the language learners of English here can be categorised into three groups. The first group basically have English as their first language hence they are quite capable of learning it. The second group are those who have English as their second language and it is broader than the first group. For them, their environment promotes the use of the language which allows them to experience it first-hand. For example, they may alternate between their mother tongue and English language at home. Subsequently, the majority of the students in this group are urban dwellers (Iber, 2014) which according to Darmi (2013) means that they are less anxious with using the language. The third and the largest make up of Malaysian students however are those who consider English as a

foreign language. They have little use and exposure to the English language in their daily life. Other than the classroom which only amounts to 136 hours a year, these students have limited interaction with English. This is a pertinent problem as limited exposure can result in poor proficiency in the language. Even common daily activities such as exposure to mass media was found to be significantly correlated with achievement in English language courses (Idris et al., 2019).

Another challenge for English language education in Malaysia is with regards to the students' own psychology. For instance, students who are not proficient in the language were found to have the least amount of motivation and a positive attitude towards learning it (Thang et al., 2011). Without the right mindset, it is expected that they will continue in this same state. This was confirmed by Bidin (2009) who found achievement in the English language to significantly correlate with attitude. The next psychological barrier that Malaysian students have to overcome is their own self-esteem. According to Kashinathan and Aziz (2021), the lack of self-confidence is a major problem because language learning requires investment in terms of enthusiasm and engagement. A study conducted by Rusli et al (2018) found that the lack of self-confidence also resulted in respondents choosing not to participate in English lessons. When teachers ask for opinions and feedback verbally in English, students remain silent rather than speak out. There is a constant fear and worry over judgements by their peers.

Other than that, the current approach to classroom pedagogy in the Malaysian English language classroom can prove to be challenging for students and teachers alike. English language teaching in the 21st century is expected to be engaging and inclusive for all students (Musa et al., 2012). As mentioned earlier these students are mixed in terms of their level of proficiency. Therefore, catering to the needs of all of these different levels of proficiency can be an arduous task. A policy was introduced that addresses this issue which was differentiation strategy (*pembelajaran terbeza*). In sum, teachers are to come up with different activities depending on the students' level. This may not be an issue if Malaysian teachers can focus solely on teaching alone; however, they also have to deal with high workloads, questionable remuneration and benefits, extensive job scope, pressure from superiors, exhaustion, large classrooms, and being left out of decision-making (Hussein et al., 2021).

### **Malaysian Tahfiz Education System**

*Tahfiz* al-Quran education is a stream of education that often received overwhelming response from parents and society today which prompted the government and the private sector to develop schools and institutions to meet the demand in the country (Samadi et.al., 2022). In general, the *tahfiz* education in Malaysia follows the six different memorisation methodologies namely Deobandy al-Quran from India, Panipati al-Quran from Pakistan, Luh al-Quran from Mecca, Saudi Arabia, Cirebon al-Quran from Indonesia, Quran memorisation from Turkey and Quran memorisation from Malwali, Bangladesh (Samadi et.al., 2022). Most *tahfiz* schools only focus on learning the Quran and there is a lack of focus in developing their students' proficiency in other subjects. This can lead to a problem when students are required to take their National Examination—the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), which is taken at the end of Malaysian students' secondary education. The SPM certificate and its results play a major role for school graduates to further their studies in the tertiary level locally as well as getting job opportunities in Malaysia. The lack of focus in SPM subjects in a majority of *tahfiz*

schools can lead to students lacking the potential to score in SPM. Hence, there is a need for innovative teaching interventions to increase *tahfiz* students' proficiency to prepare them for their SPM.

Additionally, English language is a compulsory subject to take in SPM; however, students are not required to pass it. There might be concern over students of *tahfiz* institution rejecting the language due its native speakers' background, values and religion. Nevertheless, a study by Jailani et al (2020), found that the respondents who enrolled in islamic-oriented education program in Malaysia still had high acceptance of the language and significantly disagreed that it had negative effects on their religious identity and islamic values.

Subsequently, In order to engage this type of learners in learning non-Quran subjects, there is a need to integrate alternative methods of teaching and learning for *tahfiz* students. Among the main directions and challenges that need to be faced by Malaysian *tahfiz* schools are the combination of ideas, competitive infrastructure and a strong implementation commitment to ensure that the *tahfiz* institution continues to excel on the world stage (Samadi et.al., 2022). Most *tahfiz* suffer from limited financial support and are in need of Islamic-centred ESL materials such as pronunciation activities with recorded examples and other intensive activities related to the students' preparation for the National Exam (Rohmah, 2009). These materials should provide students with fun activities such as games, pictures and songs to instil self-confidence for them to sit for the examination. However, the use of social media and phones are prohibited or not encouraged in a *tahfiz* school, hence, there is a need to use alternative methods such as game-based learning through non-technological methods to ensure students can improve their English language proficiency.

Many students are still showing slow mastery of the English subject in classrooms due to the lack of daily use of what they should be learning. This also can be easily seen in students from *tahfiz* schools. Even though some subjects appear to be difficult for students to comprehend and the study method in *tahfiz* schools focuses on memorisation and seriousness, learning in the classroom must be done in a fun way to make learners interested and motivated to learn new knowledge. Previous studies have reported that learning activities such as project-based learning (Mutakinati et.al., 2018), field-based science activities (Kinslow et.al., 2018) and game-based learning (Duncan, 2020) can develop the students' critical and creative thinking skills, problem-solving skills and entrepreneurship.

### **Game-based Learning**

Many teachers are unaware of the potential learning opportunities that games can provide (Mee et.al., 2021) and teachers still do not know what techniques are able to attract students' learning interest (Tahmit et al., 2019). Game-based learning allows for a wide range of ways to engage learners (Plass et al., 2015). Resources may be created for schools to provide teachers with a platform for the exchange of innovative ideas on tactile games for learners with varied needs (Alfallaj, 2020). Utilising games or gamified learning in teaching is a good way to make the students active because it can motivate them to learn and create a good classroom environment. These elements are important because learners could easily lose their concentration due to short attention span (Ni et. al., 2020). Games are tools that teachers can use to improve learners' outcomes across many areas (Mee et. al., 2021). Games are always learner-centred and they can be adjusted to be in sync with the learning objectives,

age of learners and their proficiency level (Ni et.al., 2020). Gamification refers to a problem-solving strategy that employs game features and game-design techniques in traditionally non-game contexts (Ahmed et.al., 2022). The primary purpose of gamification is to give students learning experiences in exciting and effective ways. Using gamification, students could be more interested and motivated in learning the subjects because games stimulate students' participation and give them confidence. It opens the doors for students to practice the subjects quickly and acquire some skills that can be beneficial to solve different tasks (Ahmed et.al., 2022).

Past researchers believed that games can help teachers to create various meaningful contexts in which learners can apply in terms of exchanging information and expressing their own ideas (Ni et.al. (2020). Ni, et.al. (2020) conducted a quasi-experimental study using a form of game-based learning on 40 Year Four pupils of four rural schools in Sarawak and their findings showed that the majority of the participants had improvements in their vocabulary skills and 4C's (cooperation and collaboration, communication, creative and critical thinking skills) and 1V (value). In a study done by Rahmah and Astutik (2020) on foreign language learning of Islamic elementary school students in an Indonesian madrasah, they found that charades game has a significant positive influence on the students' vocabulary skills. Hutaaruk (2021) did an experimental research with 60 eighth-grade students and concluded that students taught by dice game performed better in the targeted subject as compared to conventional non-game method. Tahmit et.al (2021) conducted a study using pictorial word game as an alternative learning method for 27 fifth-grade students and found that the game was quite effective in helping memory retention. The game also improved the students' interests in learning and passive students became quite active during the game. In a quasi-experimental study by Ahmed et.al (2022) they examined the attitudes of 84 Iranian EFL learners towards using gamification and their results revealed that the students equated the instructional games with enjoyment, fun, reducing anxiety, involvement, and immediate feedback. They suggested that teachers implement a variety of educational games in their teaching.

### Methodology

This study used mixed methods which applied survey and interview approaches to collect the data. Participants were selected using purposive sampling and underwent game-based activities for a total of four hours. The activities include:

- Idiom Card Game
- Pictionary Game
- Tongue Twister Game
- Selling Game
- Grammar Card Game
- Reading Game
- Charades Game
- Speaking Game

A set of questionnaires was used to collect quantitative data. The questionnaire items consist of 14 questions and are divided into three sections: demographic information (Section A), skills and personal development (Section B), and knowledge sharing (Section C). The questionnaire underwent a process of reliability check to ensure that the items are able to measure what should be measured. The study sample was 14 male students aged 12 to 16

years old from a *tahfiz* secondary school in Sungai Petani, Kedah, Malaysia. The quantitative data were analysed descriptively using *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS) software to obtain frequency, percentage, mean score and standard deviation.

In addition, interviews were conducted to four *tahfiz* students and one *tahfiz* teacher to triangulate the data. Content analysis method was used to analyse the interview data, where concepts and themes are identified. The raw data was classified according to different codes generated by the researcher.

## Results & Discussion

### Reliability analysis

According to Muijs (2004), the instrument is considered internally consistent and reliable if the test result is over 0.7 as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1

*Classification of Reliability Index in Cronbach's Alpha*

Reliability indicator	Cronbach's alpha score
Very High	0.90-1.00
High	0.70-0.89
Moderate	0.30-0.69
Low	0.00-0.30

Table 2 showed the reliability analysis of the questionnaire instrument used in the study. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for Section 1 and Section 2 was found to be highly significant (> 0.7).

Table 2

*Variables' Reliability*

Section	Cronbach's alpha	No. of Items
Section 1	.715	7
Section 2	.757	6

### Objective 1: Effectiveness of game-based English language learning in increasing *tahfiz* students' knowledge.

To analyse the descriptive data in this research, Nunally's (1978) mean interpretation table was used, as shown in Table 3 below. The means are categorised in descending order, from the highest to the lowest.

Table 3

*Nunnally's (1978) Mean Interpretation Table*

Interpretation	Mean Score
High	4.01–5.00
Medium High	3.01–4.00
Medium Low	2.01–3.00
Low	1.01–2.00

Based on Table 4, the findings showed how students see their knowledge improvement via a self-assessment questionnaire distributed before and after the activity.

Table 4

Knowledge of Programme Content

Item	N	Pre-Test Self Assessment		Post-Test Self Assessment	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Knowledge of programme content.	14	1.86	0.66299	4.21	0.89258

Before the activity, students showed a low mean score (Mean=1.86, SD=0.661). However, at the end of the game-based learning activity, students showed a high mean score for content knowledge (Mean=4.21, SD=0.891).

This finding is also supported by the interview data. The following are excerpts from the students with regard to knowledge improvement:

*"I got to learn a lot more about the English language. I got to play with my friends while using the English language..."*

(Student 1)

*"...very suitable for us to learn English for our future..."*

(Student 2)

*"I learned many things...plenty of English language knowledge..."*

(Student 3)

Such transition for their content knowledge might be motivated by the diversified learning environment, which is entirely different from the normal study method in *tahfiz* schools that prioritise memorisation and seriousness. By adapting to the games, it encourages the learners to reflect on their current level of knowledge, cognitive abilities and emotions and adapt their newly learned knowledge to become self-regulated skills (Plass et al., 2015). At the same time, the findings from the interviews showed students' motivation to increase their knowledge when they are with their own peers and interest in participating in similar activities in the future when learning English. This finding was in line with Taat et al (2021), which suggested teachers to diversify the process and activities for teaching and learning, especially focusing on student-centred strategy to encourage better interaction and discussion of the content knowledge. Despite the fact that *tahfiz* schools focus primarily on religious subjects, this finding suggested that by creating a proper learning environment, *tahfiz* students' academic

attitude can be improved and they have the ability to balance between religious subjects and academic subjects.

**Objective 2: Effectiveness of game-based English language learning in strengthening *tahfiz* students' skills and personal development.**

Based on Table 5, the findings showed how students see their skill improvement and personal development via a self-assessment questionnaire distributed before and after the activity.

Table 5

*Skill Improvement and Personal Development*

Item	N	Pre-Test Self Assessment		Post-Test Self Assessment	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Skill improvement and personal development.	14	2.07	0.73005	4.14	0.66299

Before the activity, students showed a medium low mean score (Mean=2.07, SD=0.730). However, at the end of the game-based learning activity, students showed a high mean score for their skill improvement and personal development (Mean=4.14, SD=0.663).

Table 6

*Descriptive Analysis for Skill Improvement and Personal Development Items*

Item	N	Mean	SD
(1) I can identify and analyse problems in complex and vague situations, and make justified assessments.	14	2.9286	1.49174
(2) I can improve and extend my thinking skills such as in explanation, analysis, and discussion.	14	3.6429	1.08182
(3) I can present clearly with confidence and appropriately to the audience.	14	3.5000	1.28602
(4) I can analyse and make decisions to solve problems.	14	3.8571	1.02711
(5) I can identify and recognise entrepreneurial opportunities.	14	2.4286	1.69680
(6) I can understand the basic principles of leadership.	14	2.7143	1.72888
(7) I can lead an activity or project.	14	2.9286	1.85904

For better understanding, more specific questions were asked in the survey. Table 6 shows the finding for seven items related to skill improvement and personal development. Among the items that show a medium high mean score are improvement in thinking skills (Mean=3.64, SD=1.082), presentation skills (Mean=3.50, SD=1.286) and problem-solving skills (Mean=3.86, SD=1.027).

This finding is supported by the interview data, as a student claimed to have learned some new skills for their self-development:

*"I learned some entrepreneurial skills...along with reading and writing skills..."*

(Student 2)

Game-based learning helps to foster soft and technical skills in a structured learning process concept and acts as an active learning environment that encourages learning activities that engage and challenge students to achieve the learning objectives (Yusof & Shahrill, 2021). However, in comparison with the two other objectives of the study, based on the results in Table 6, the student respondents who participated in the study did not have a high perception in their soft skills improvement and development as the average mean scores are mostly around the middle low of the given scale. This shows there is a lack of adaptability skills among the students. Adaptivity is the capability of the game to engage each learner in a way that reflects his or her specific situation (Plass et al., 2015). The findings may have reflected that way due to the limited time spent on each activity (total of 4 hours only with 8 different games). Additionally, the choice of games may also have an impact on the mean scores as only one game involved entrepreneurial opportunities. The highest mean scores are related to critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills (items 2 and 4). It was revealed that educational games are effective in learner achievement as they improve creativity and mental functions, facilitate learning process and provide a meaningful learning (Talan, Dogan & Batdi, 2020). Hence, it can be concluded that the game-based English activities have more impact on the students' thinking skills.

### **Objective 3: Effectiveness of game-based English language learning in building the attitude for knowledge sharing among *tahfiz* students**

Data on Table 7 was obtained using a self-assessment questionnaire. The findings showed how students evaluate their lifelong learning and knowledge sharing ability, before and after game-based learning activities.

Table 7

#### *Lifelong Learning and Sharing of Knowledge*

Item	N	Pre-Test Self Assessment		Post-Test Self Assessment	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Lifelong learning and sharing of knowledge.	14	1.86	0.53452	4.50	1.01905

Before the activity, students showed a low mean score (Mean=1.86, SD=0.535). However, at the end of the game-based learning activity, students showed a high mean score for lifelong learning and sharing of knowledge (Mean=4.50, SD=1.019). Among the three pre-post self-assessment scores, this section has the highest positive change, which shows that the game-based activities influenced the students' sharing of knowledge and life-long learning the most. This can also be seen in Table 8 in which the higher mean scores were obtained.

Table 8

*Descriptive Analysis for Lifelong Learning and Sharing of Knowledge Items*

Item	N	Mean	SD
(1) I can communicate ideas clearly with confidence verbally and in written form.	14	3.7857	1.12171
(2) I can be an active listener and give feedback.	14	3.8571	1.23146
(3) I can present clearly with confidence and appropriately to the audience.	14	3.9286	1.14114
(4) I can build good connections, interact with others, and work effectively with others to attain the same objectives.	14	4.2857	0.82542
(5) I can understand and take part in the group as a group leader and team member interchangeably.	14	4.0000	1.03775
(6) I can search and organise relevant information from various sources.	14	3.8571	1.23146

To gain better insight, Table 8 shows the finding for six items related with lifelong learning and sharing of knowledge. Two items that show high scores are ability to interact effectively with others (Mean=4.29, SD=0.8254) and ability to participate actively in groups (Mean=4.00, SD=1.0378).

This was further supported by data from the interview, as a student claim:

*"...I got to play with my friends while using English language...we got to work together in a team."*

(Student 1)

Sharing of knowledge and information can be considered as one of the challenges among *tahfiz* students, as research by Taat et al (2021) found their level of communication to be at a moderate level. This indicates there is not much discussion going on between *tahfiz* students with their peers about lessons learned in school. Interestingly, findings in Table 8 indicate *tahfiz* students are able to benefit from the game-based English language activities that can lead to lifelong learning and sharing of knowledge. Plass et al (2015) highlighted that games provide opportunities for lifelong learning during and after play. At the same time, they also build their social skills such as teamwork by participating in the activities as a group among their peers. This is reflected in items 4 and 5 in Table 8 which have the highest mean values (4.2857 and 4.000 respectively). Hence, the findings of the study are similar to Plass et al.'s study in 2015 that pointed out that games can motivate learners to engage in a task they otherwise would not find attractive. In addition to that, due to the motivating nature of game-based learning, students are able to stay engaged over long periods through a series of game features (Plass et al., 2015), which is also reflected in the study via the use of several types of games throughout a period of time. In general, game-based language learning requires students to work together in groups with minimal restrictions from instructors. Their preference to work with their peers might lead to such improvement in their attitude and personal development.

### Conclusion

This study was conducted to identify *tahfiz* students' perception of game-based learning for English language education. The objectives have been achieved and answered through the use of questionnaires and interviews. It can be concluded that students in *tahfiz* school will definitely benefit from the application of game-based learning for academic subjects, especially on their content knowledge, skills improvement and communicative ability. In addition, due to the non-digital nature of the games used in the study, the findings showed that face-to-face communication is still advantageous because it incorporates several forms of learning such as reading, chatting, tasks, collaborative activities and presentations (Alfallaj, 2020). Non-digital games could be efficient in learners' development and learning as they supply more opportunities for interaction among peers, a wider spectrum of activity choices, more flexibility of design and content, and a variety of platforms for playing (Talan, Dogan & Batdi, 2020). However, this is a small-scale study and the generalisability might not be significant. Despite this issue, the findings are able to provide useful input that paves the way for further research in *tahfiz* schools in our country. As found by Taat et al (2021) in their research, many *tahfiz* students wanted to continue their studies either in the field of religion or other fields upon graduating. Hence, exposure to other languages such as English will help them in the future. With the implementation of student-centred and engaging lessons, *tahfiz* institutions will keep on being relevant in the modern era.

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