The Impact of Gamified Learning Techniques in Improving Writing Skills outcomes: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

The purpose of this systematic review is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of existing literature that explores various gamification techniques, interventions, and principles employed in teaching and enhancing a spectrum of writing skills. The review analyzes interventions that employ full gamification or selective game components to improve writing competency among students specifically, to improve writing, identify the types of gamification techniques in terms of enhancing writing competency among students and examine the age group that is often exposed to gamification techniques in improving writing. The study follows a 5-phase model by Khalid Saeed Khan and collects journal articles from ERIC and Google Scholar published between 2019-2023. The results of the study show a preference for incorporating game elements into writing activities, either through full gamification or selective game components which led to an increase in students' motivation and engagement. The study aims to provide insights into the effectiveness of gamification strategies in enhancing writing skills and identify the most effective strategies for different learners and contexts.

Keywords: Game Elements, Gamification, Writing Skills.

Introduction

The acquisition of the 4Cs—Communication, Collaboration, Critical Thinking, and Creative Thinking—is universally recognized as essential for survival in the modern era of globalization (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). In alignment with the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, which identifies writing as a crucial skill for pupils in the context of a globalized economy where English serves as the international language of communication, it becomes evident that writing plays a pivotal role in fostering these essential skills (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). According to Pardede (2020), as the importance of traditional skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic grows, there is a growing realization that these alone are insufficient to prepare students for the complexities of contemporary workplaces and social

institutions. This shift in perspective inspires us to explore new approaches to teaching essential skills, recognizing writing as a key component in developing the 4Cs vital for success in the globalized landscape.

Recognizing the multifaceted nature of writing and the challenges students face, becomes apparent that teaching writing in isolation is impractical. Harmer (2007) argues against isolating language skills, emphasizing the need for a more integrated and coherent approach. To address this need, this paper proposes the integration of writing with gamification. This approach not only underscores the importance of teaching writing to pupils but also aims to holistically instil the 4Cs—encompassing communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creative thinking. This innovative method seeks to overcome the challenges students encounter in mastering writing skills while aligning with the evolving educational landscape.

Purpose of Study
This systematic literature review (SLR) is designed to accomplish specific goals by addressing the following research questions related to the gamification of writing skills. First, the review aims to evaluate the effectiveness of gamification techniques in improving writing skills. This objective focuses on assessing the overall impact of integrating gamification into writing instruction. It involves analyzing the extent to which gamification contributes to improved writing skills among participants. Evaluation criteria may include factors such as increased engagement, enhanced motivation, and measurable improvements in writing proficiency.
Other than that, the review seeks to examine the age group that is often exposed to gamification techniques. This objective involves identifying the primary demographic cohorts or age ranges where gamification strategies are commonly implemented. The examination aims to provide a detailed understanding of the target audience for these techniques, shedding light on whether they are predominantly applied in early childhood education, primary or secondary schooling, higher education, or across a spectrum of age groups.
Based on the above objectives, this SLR explores two research questions related to gamification techniques and their effectiveness in enhancing writing skills among students:
1. How does engagement in gamified learning environments impact the outcome of writing among ESL students?
2. Which age groups are commonly exposed to gamified learning activities to help enhance writing skills?

Background of the Study
Challenges in Writing among Esl Students
English plays a crucial role in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) as it serves as a lingua Franca, enabling communications among people of different cultures, ethnicities, and social backgrounds. Proficiency in English enhances opportunities for education, employment, and cultural exchange and is crucial for ESL students to navigate the globalised world effectively (Rao,2019). Additionally, with an adequate command of English, students are also able to acquire the necessary knowledge conveniently (Siddek & Ismail, 2021). Writing is one of the productive skills that is essential for ESL students (Toba et al., 2019) and its importance has been emphasised since primary school as it serves as a channel of communication that allows ESL students to express themselves through a well-structured composition (Morthy and Aziz, 2020). However, writing is often acknowledged as one of the most challenging language skills to master among ESL students even at the tertiary level (Dixon and Nessel,

1983). This poses a major problem to students in their attempt to write and produce a good piece of writing.

Several literary works have highlighted that students' writing issues often revolve around their linguistic competence. One of them is a study conducted by Arianti & Fitriana (2017) which revealed that errors commonly appeared in 33 university students' essays are tenses, subject-verb agreement, personal pronoun, word order, article, auxiliary, and sentence fragment. Along the same line, Fareed et al (2018), also highlighted that grammar and syntax pose major issues in students' writing by pointing out common errors made by students in their study which included incorrect use of prepositions, articles, tenses, singular/plural, verbs, and sentence structures. Cognitive difficulties involving content and organisation of ideas are another linguistic issue faced by ESL students (Schumaker & Deshler, 2003). Lack of knowledge in crafting a story hinders the writing process, as it necessitates the cohesive presentation of essential elements such as characters, location, descriptions, and sequence of events (Dunn & Finley, 2010). This coherence is crucial to effectively convey the concept of story structure and maintain the readers' interest. Another common factor contributing to the difficulty in writing also includes low motivation (Fareed et al., 2018). Moreover, students may find writing challenging if they lack interest in the assigned topics or if they do not perceive the relevance of writing to their personal or academic goals. This evidence also acts as a revelation for educators to find suitable strategies to cater to these challenges and to achieve writing success among ESL students.

Gamification in ESL
Throughout the years, gamification in education has undergone a significant transformation, steering away from the traditional chalk-and-talk method to the integration of game-based learning. Gamification is traditionally defined as the application of game elements in non-game activities (Werbach and Hunter, 2012) with the primary aim of increasing user engagement and motivation using game elements like points, leaderboards, and instant feedback (Koç & Sütçü, 2023). Since the 1980s, researchers have studied using games for education. Also, the idea that games are not just for learning but can also make activities enjoyable and engaging is well-known in areas like game design, human-computer interaction, and education. This led to the creation of concepts like funology, ludic design, serious games, game-based learning, edutainment, games for purpose, and gamification (Deterding, 2014). Since then, studies related to gamified learning has led to the emergence of other numerous concepts like entertainment education, edutainment, games-based learning, serious games, and gamification (Breuer and Bente, 2010 as cited by Cattoni & Venuti, 2021), which are further explained in table 1. While these concepts may vary, they all share the fundamental objective which is to facilitate learning in a playful manner (Cattoni & Venuti, 2021).

Table 1

Comparative analysis table (Cattoni & Venuti, 2021)

Comparison	Gamification	Game-based learning	Serious game
Purpose	Uses game-like features in a non-game context, to make it more fun and engaging	Involves actual gameplay, with defined learning outcomes, to fulfil learning objectives	Designed to provide training, practice and interactions that are engaging
Objective	Motivate	Educate	Educate
Benefits	• Instant feedback • Prompting behavioural change	• Fast strategic thinking, problem solving • Hand-eye coordination development	• Social development • Focus on autonomy
Examples	*Gimkit, Classcraft, Class Dojo, Duolingo, Kahoot!*	*SimCity, Civilization, Minecraft, Portal*	*Dragon Box Elements, Pacific, Pulse!!*

As mentioned earlier, mastering the art of writing is recognised as a complex and essential skill crucial for effective communication. To overcome this, modern-day teaching strategies like gamification have brought innovation to the teaching and learning process (Núñez-Pacheco et al., 2023). By incorporating game elements in a writing activity, students are more likely to feel motivated to venture into the world of academic writing. This can be proven by numerous literature such as a study done by Istighfar (2019), which shows how gamification techniques could be used as an alternative to boost students' motivation for learning when they have emotional or behavioural issues. Another study also claims that student's motivation to learn English can be generated by a framework of incentives and affirmation of the learning purpose (Anisa et al., 2020).

One of the key advantages of gamified learning platforms is the provision of immediate feedback. Students' writing performance in terms of content quality improves when they receive feedback throughout the pre-writing phase and continue through to the final draft stage (Chung Kim Yuk & Md Yunus, 2021). This allows students to understand and learn from their mistakes in real time. Furthermore, Wiethof et al (2021), discuss the use of gamification elements to enhance collaboration processes in writing, specifically in the context of collaborative story writing. This study shows how gamification promotes peer interaction as students can collaborate, thereby enhancing their learning experience.

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In conclusion, gamification has the potential to revolutionize and significantly enhance the process of learning writing positively and effectively. Transforming the often-tedious process of writing into an engaging and rewarding experience through gamification mechanics such as points, badges, leaderboards, and quests adds an extra layer of motivation and enjoyment that encourages students to actively participate and persist in writing tasks. This leads to

better engagement and subsequently, enhanced writing skills over time. Gamified writing platforms provide real-time feedback, allowing students to iterate and improve their writing through a rewarding, non-judgmental system. This helps build their confidence as young writers. Therefore, by making writing fun and motivational, gamification has immense untapped potential to revolutionize writing pedagogy and significantly improve writing proficiency in students positively and effectively. It transforms writing from being viewed as a chore to an activity that students actively look forward to and enjoy.

Methodology

For the methodology, we employ 5 phases of the SLR technique by Khan et al (2003), in finding relevant papers related to answering the research questions above. This systematic literature review employs an explicit search technique to mentor and advise the inclusion and exclusion of studies to avoid bias and ensure its reliability and validity.

Phase 1: Framing Questions for a Review
This phase involves defining the purpose of the review and formulating research questions that will guide the review process. The purpose of the review is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of existing literature that explores various gamification techniques, interventions, and principles employed in teaching and enhancing a spectrum of writing skills. The research questions are as follows:
1. How does engagement in gamified learning environments impact the outcome of writing among ESL students?
2. Which age groups are commonly exposed to gamified learning activities to help enhance writing skills?

Phase 2: Identifying Relevant Work
This phase involves identifying relevant studies that address the research questions formulated in Phase 1. The researcher uses a systematic approach to search for studies that meet specific inclusion criteria. The inclusion and exclusion criteria can be seen in the table 1 below. The research began by conducting an electronic search of the ERIC and Google Scholar databases to gather all relevant articles. The next step involved accepting articles that met the inclusion criteria and excluding those that met the exclusion criteria. Further articles were identified by reviewing the reference list. To ensure a meaningful comparison, only full-text or peer-reviewed journal articles were chosen to form selected journal articles (Dekkers et al., 2022). Besides that, the selection of the journal articles was limited to those published between 2019 to 2023 were considered. The researcher used several variations of keywords such as 'gamified learning', 'challenges in teaching writing', and 'gamification tools' to identify relevant journal articles through search engines.

Table 2

Inclusions and Exclusions Criteria for this Study

Inclusion	Criteria	Exclusion
Articles or journals published in English	Published in English	Articles not published in English
Articles published in Journals	Published in Journals	Book Chapters and proceedings are not included
Journal articles published from the year 2020 to 2023	Period of Research	Journal articles published before the year 2020
Articles related to gamification		Articles not related to gamification & teaching writings
Articles related to teaching writing using gamification	Techniques	

Phase 3: Assessing the Quality of the Study

The articles were selected using the framework criteria, as well as the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The criteria were used as a guideline to determine whether the articles should be included in the review. As a result, the papers chosen for this evaluation met both the inclusion and exclusion criteria, as indicated in Table 1. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were meticulously followed to collect appropriate responses to the research questions.

Phase 4: Summarising the Evidence

The search for relevant literature was carried out utilizing two databases namely *Scopus*, and *ERIC*. Customised search strings were constructed according to the search logic of every database, ensuring uniform terminology usage throughout. Keywords such as 'gamification,' 'gamified learning', 'gamification to enhance writing skills,' game-based learning, writing skills among ESL students' were keyed in the search engine. Furthermore, only articles published within the 2019 to 2023 range were selected which finally yielded an initial search of 48 articles. A manual search was also performed using similar keywords on Google Scholar to include citations not included in other databases which generated an additional 12 articles. The articles were filtered according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and only 2 articles from Scopus, 5 articles from Eric and 3 articles from Google Scholar were finally chosen to be relevant for this systematic review.

Phase 5: Interpret the Findings

The last step involves analyzing the papers and grouping the results into four criteria which are outcomes of writing, research method, gamification method and learners' level. Under outcomes of writing, the impact of gamification for writing activities was extracted, and then the research method and gamification method were also identified to analyse the common approaches used by other researchers for best writing results. Lastly, the target of learners' level; primary, secondary, and tertiary level - was also mapped out to look at the pattern of target research. The primary level is the pupils ranging from 7 years old to 12 years old. The secondary level refers to pupils at the age of 13 years old until 17 years old and finally tertiary level refers to students at the university level ranging from 18 years old and above. These criteria were extracted from the papers as part of the analysis to achieve the objectives of the study.

5.0 Summary of the Findings

No	Authors	Key Findings	Method	Gamification Method	Level of Learners
1	Callista Anak Yunus & Kim Hua, 2021	• Quizziz is effective for teaching irregular past tense verbs to primary school ESL students. It fosters student engagement and adds a sense of fun to English Language Arts. • Gamification with digital badges improves the accuracy of peer feedback. • Higher competency students enjoy using digital badges more than lower-ability counterparts.	Quasi-experimental	Gamification	Primary
2	Kersie & Broome, 2023	• Students showed improvement in the quality of their writing. • No significant improvement was observed in writing mechanics. • Low proficiency students disliked game elements such as badges and timers compared to other gamified writing tasks.	Non-experimental (Quantitative)	Game Elements	Secondary
3	Uy, 2021	• Digital badges and gamification helped students understand key concepts.	Experimental	Gamification	Tertiary

No	Authors	Key Findings	Method	Gamification Method	Level of Learners
		• Students improved in writing better summaries overall			
4	Jong & Tan, 2021	• The respondents exhibited positive responses towards Padlet.	Non-experimental (Quantitative)	Game Elements	Primary
5	Pringmuang & Koraneekij, 2022	• The samples' English writing skills in the post-test were higher than in the pre-test at the 0.5% level of significance.	Experimental	Gamification	Secondary
6	Samosa, Resty et al., 2021	• The research aimed to assess the effectiveness of gamification in improving students' creative writing skills. • Gamification led to positive shifts in overall writing engagement and attitude. • The study suggests that gamification enhances student engagement and learning.	Experimental	Game Elements	Tertiary
7	Aderin & Yunus, 2021	• Peer-Mode feedback was effective for primary 4 students. • Significant improvements were observed in the content quality of	Quasi-experimental	Game Elements	Primary

No	Authors	Key Findings	Method	Gamification Method	Level of Learners
		students' writing in their post-test.			
8	Bai, 2019	• Students participated in one class, and narrators took action. • The plan promoted student interest and collaboration. • Contributed to the development of careful writing and collaboration skills.	Non-experimental	Game-Based Learning	Primary
9	Núñez-Pacheco et al., 2023	• The experimental group achieved a higher mean score (15.52) in the post-test compared to the control group. • No significant difference was observed between the pre-test and post-test results.	Quasi-Experimental	Gamification	Secondary
10	Cattani & Venuti, 2021	• The gamified learning tool increases student interest in the writing process • Contributing to the development of careful writing and collaboration skills.	Quasi-experimental	Game-Based Learning	Tertiary

Summary
- Methods used: Non-Experimental (3), Quasi-Experimental (4), Experimental (3)
- Gamification: Gamification (4), Game-Based Learning (2), Game Elements (4).
- Levels of Learners: Primary (3), Secondary (3), Tertiary (3)

Discussion of Findings

Table 3 shows the findings on the research method mode done on all the literature. Out of the ten papers reviewed, three (30%) utilized experimental methods with true control groups

or pretest/post-test designs. These experimental studies allow for strong causal conclusions by randomly assigning participants to conditions and controlling confounding variables. However, experimental trials can be limited by ethical concerns about manipulating certain variables, as well as the costs associated with large-scale, long-term experiments.

The most common approach was quasi-experimental, used in four (40%) of the papers. These studies examined existing groups and variables in their natural setting, without actively manipulating conditions. While quasi-experiments do not allow for the same strength of causal inference as true experiments, they provide valuable insights into real-world contexts and relationships. By including both control and non-control groups, quasi-experiments balance research validity with ethical practicality.

The remaining three (30%) papers utilized non-experimental designs such as observations, surveys, and qualitative methods. These approaches do not actively intervene or control variables but rather aim to provide detailed descriptive data about phenomena in their unmodified state. While non-experimental studies cannot examine causality, they can still yield useful exploratory information about real-world behaviours, attitudes, and experiences. In conclusion, the analysis shows that quasi-experimental designs tend to be the most widely used method in this research area. This preference likely stems from the balance of internal validity and ethical feasibility provided by quasi-experiments. However, experimental, and non-experimental approaches still play an important minority role in building a robust understanding of the research problem.

The 10 papers were reviewed, and their gamification approaches were classified based on the taxonomy of gamification, game-based learning, and game elements proposed by Cattoni & Venuti (2021). The findings revealed that gamification, which applies game elements like points and badges to non-game activities, was the most common approach, used in 4 out of 10 papers (40%). Game-based learning, which involves complete gameplay to achieve learning goals, was less prevalent, and utilized in only 2 out of 10 papers (20%). The use of individual game elements like narratives and feedback was equally as popular as full gamification, seen in 4 out of 10 studies (40%).

In summary, the most widely used technique incorporated game elements into learning activities and materials, through either comprehensive gamification or selective game components. This approach was observed in 8 out of 10 papers (80%). In contrast, full game-based learning was a less common tactic, making up just 20% of the reviewed studies. The breakdown provides valuable insights into the prominence of different gamification methods in research on teaching writing.

The analysis from Table 3 also shows that primary school students were the most common focus of the research on gamification for writing instruction, accounting for 5 out of 10 papers (50%). Studies at the secondary school level were also well represented, comprising 3 out of 10 papers (30%). Research involving tertiary or university students was the least common, with only 2 out of 10 papers (20%) examining this population.

The large proportion of papers studying primary students' points of view on gamification have potentially been uniquely advantageous for young students who are still grasping foundational writing skills. Khaitova's (2021) study supported this, revealing an increase in

motivation and engagement in writing skill growth among primary students through gamification. This aligns with the research by Michael and Chen (2006), as cited by Vandercruysse et al. (2012), which showed games naturally contain abilities to teach, prepare, and enlighten learners, and at the same time nurture constructive attitudes towards education and qualities that are challenging to instil through mundane memorization alone. Drawing on the virtues of game-based models, gamification provides primary students with an interactive means to acquire elemental understandings and abilities in writing via enthusiastic participation and direct learning, as opposed to detached memorization. In summary, the level analysis highlights a concentration of gamification writing research in primary grades, while indicating a need for further research at secondary and tertiary levels. More studies across elementary, secondary, and tertiary contexts are needed for a comprehensive picture of how gamification can transform writing pedagogy at all ages.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review aimed to analyse the impact and effectiveness of gamification techniques for enhancing writing skills outcomes. The analysis of 10 recent studies published between 2019-2023 provided insights into the benefits of gamification for improving student writing proficiency.

Research Question 1

The first research question is looking at the impact of engagement on the outcomes of writing among ESL students. Based on the data analysis, the most common finding was that incorporating game elements into writing activities, either through full gamification or selective game components, led to increased student motivation and engagement. This enhanced involvement resulted in measurable improvements in writing performance, such as higher quality writing, better retention of writing conventions, and stronger collaborative writing skills.

Research Question 2

The second research question is about identifying the age group that is commonly exposed to gamified learning to help them enhance their writing skills. The review revealed a predominant focus on implementing gamification writing techniques with elementary school students. The motivational effects appear uniquely beneficial for young learners still developing foundational writing skills. However, more research is needed to understand how gamification could enhance writing instruction for secondary and post-secondary students. Overall, the studies highlight the potential of gamification as an innovative strategy to transform writing pedagogy across all educational levels. The approach leverages the inherent engagement and enjoyment of game-based learning while still achieving meaningful writing outcomes.

This review has some limitations, including the small sample size of only 10 papers and a narrow publication timeframe of 2019-2023. Additionally, most studies focused on English language learners, so implications may be limited for native English speakers. More research across diverse educational settings and demographics is warranted. However, the findings imply gamification holds potential as a supplementary technique for writing instruction. Educators could integrate game elements to motivate students and make the process of writing mastery more rewarding. However, gamification should supplement rather than

replace research-backed pedagogical writing practices. Furthermore, the smaller number of papers looking at secondary and tertiary students indicates more research is needed at these levels. Older students have more advanced writing abilities and needs, so it is important to understand how gamification can enhance writing instruction for them. The limited studies to date show gamification does have a positive impact on secondary and post-secondary students, but further research would provide more insights into best practices.

To address gaps, future studies could examine the long-term impacts of gamification on developing writing skills over years rather than weeks. Comparisons of gamification's effects on writing in different subject areas and genres would also be beneficial. Finally, researchers should continue exploring optimal gamification strategies for both elementary learners and older students at the secondary and university level

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