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From Silent to Speaking: Reducing Speaking Anxiety in Low-Proficiency ESL Learners Through Game-Based Learning

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Abstract
Language connects people, as it is one of the important tools for communication. Having one shared language to communicate to one another is essential particularly in today's a fast-paced borderless world. In Malaysia, despite English being learnt formally in academic settings for an average of 11 years for each Malaysian student, their language proficiency is still concerning. Thus, this study explores the potential of using game-based learning activities in reducing speaking anxiety among low-proficiency English as a second language (ESL) learners at the tertiary level. This study employed a qualitative method, involving 18 participants answering an open-ended survey on their perceptions of using game-based learning activities for their English language class at the end of their semester. The findings revealed that these low-proficiency students feel comfortable using the language after being exposed to game-based learning activities throughout the semester. The game-based learning activities promote a conducive learning environment, increase motivation, and reduce their anxiety, making them feel confident using the language. Consequently, game-based learning activities effectively reduce speaking anxiety in using the English language among low-proficiency ESL learners by providing a supportive and enjoyable learning environment. This approach holds significant potential for enhancing communicative confidence among low-proficiency ESL learners in Malaysian tertiary institutions.
Keywords: communicative confidence, English as a second language, game-based learning, low proficiency, speaking anxiety

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Introduction

Proficiency in the English language is vital for learners to engage effectively in the academic, professional, and social environments, especially in a progressively interconnected world. In Malaysia, the English language is taught for an average of 11 years in formal education; nonetheless, numerous students, particularly in higher education, continue to encounter difficulties with oral communication skills (Mohd Fadhli Shah et al., 2024). For Malaysian students, their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination taken at the end of their secondary school serves as the benchmark for their academic performance before entering tertiary education. This examination includes some mandatory subjects, including English, which is aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), allowing their proficiency results to be recognised internationally (Chua, 2024). The CEFR scale categorises language learners into six proficiency levels which are basic users at A1 and A2, independent users at B1 and B2, and proficient users at C1 and C2 (Azurawati & Ramiaida, 2021). An A2 CEFR level indicates that a learner is a basic user who can understand and use simple, common sentence structures, especially in everyday situations, but may find complex and spontaneous communication challenging. Low-proficiency learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) frequently experience speaking anxiety, which is characterised by fear, apprehension, or hesitancy when compelled to communicate in the target language. This worry serves as both an emotional and cognitive impediment, obstructing active engagement, diminishing the desire to speak, and constraining possibilities for language practice. The challenging situation is made worse by conventional language instruction techniques that prioritise grammar, writing, and reading, frequently neglecting the development of speaking skills. Therefore, innovative, learner-centred methodologies are essential to mitigate the affective filters that hinder language acquisition and establish secure, engaging environments for learners to practise speaking.

Although a significant amount of research has been conducted on the application of game-based learning (GBL) in language education, most of the current literature focuses on its effects on motivation, vocabulary acquisition, and general engagement rather than its potential to reduce speaking anxiety, particularly among low-proficiency ESL learners. Studies that do investigate anxiety frequently concentrate on test anxiety or general language learning anxiety, with a limited number of studies specifically addressing the communicative challenges encountered by low-proficiency learners. Moreover, the direct applicability of the findings to tertiary-level ESL learners in Malaysia is restricted by the fact that a substantial number of these studies are conducted in primary or secondary school contexts or in non-Malaysian settings, where sociocultural factors and classroom dynamics may differ significantly.

In addition, while recent research has indicated that GBL can reduce affective barriers and promote communicative risk-taking, there is a lack of empirical evidence that systematically investigates its effectiveness in reducing speaking anxiety among English learners with low proficiency. The sustained impact of GBL when integrated throughout an entire semester is a space that has been left unexplored by numerous prior investigations, which concentrate on short-term interventions or one-off activities. The truancy of context-specific and longitudinal research requires studies that not only examine the effects of GBL on speaking anxiety but also record learners' perceptions of how these activities influence their confidence and willingness to communicate. By closing this gap, educators and curriculum designers can gain valuable insights that will allow them to establish more inclusive and supportive language learning environments.

Students at tertiary institutions should be equipped with essential skills to survive, such as the ability to communicate effectively and access to learning materials. Most educational resources and the medium of instruction are in English, making it crucial for learners to have high proficiency in the language. Alarmingly, many Malaysian university students still struggle with speaking proficiency despite having exposure to the language. Despite years of formal English learning, they frequently avoid speaking opportunities due to low self-confidence, negative peer evaluation, and fear of making mistakes. This anxiety can be worsened by traditional teaching techniques that focus more on grammatical accuracy over fluency, which results in a high-pressure environment that discourages active participation and restricts communication development. Thus, GBL has the potential to resolve this issue by offering participative, interactive, and low-stress activities that shift the focus from error avoidance to meaningful communication. However, there is insufficient empirical evidence regarding its efficacy in reducing speaking anxiety among low-proficiency ESL learners in Malaysia making it crucial to comprehend the role of GBL in the establishment of supportive and pleasurable speaking environments in order to develop innovative teaching strategies intending to enhance the communicative confidence of learners. Thus, this article aims to explore the use of GBL activities and examine their effectiveness in reducing speaking anxiety among A2 learners, who are categorised as low-proficiency ESL learners according to the CEFR.

Literature Review

GBL has emerged as a dynamic and learner-centred approach in language education, with the goal of enhancing the motivational power of games to promote communication and ease learning apprehensions. Theoretical frameworks like Krashen's (1982) suggest that reducing anxiety and increasing motivation can meaningfully improve language acquisition. GBL frequently accomplishes its objective by implementing authentic, entertaining contexts that prioritise meaningful interaction and minimise the repercussions of errors (Chadafi, 2023), redirecting the learners' focus to communicating rather than accuracy. Furthermore, GBL uses the principles of self-determination theory and flow theory, providing defined objectives, immediate feedback, autonomy, and a sense of competence, promoting motivation and reduced anxiety, all of which foster sustained language use and engagement (Adipat et al., 2021; Hou & Keng, 2020).

Past research shows positive empirical evidence on the effects of GBL in ESL contexts, particularly in helping students' language learning using GBL activities through collaborative tasks, scaffolding, and immediate feedback. For example, Wong and Melor (2023) found that online board games significantly improved learners' speaking skills, including their fluency and engagement in classroom activities. Chan and Lo (2024) reported that students have the passion and desire to participate in GBL environments, as they are motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically by the collaborative and competitive nature of learning. Collaborative digital game activities in tertiary ESL classes significantly enhanced learners' oral participation and significantly decreased their speaking apprehension compared to conventional drill-based methods. Mohd Fadhli Shah and Mafarhanatul Akmal (2023) asserted that in non-digital GBL, game elements like challenges and rewards, as well as immediate feedback from classmates, create interactive and immersive environments, improving students' participation and engagement. Tian and Irfan Naufal (2025) further contend that gamified elements like points, badges, and scoreboard facilitate effective language learning by fostering independent learning, which consequently minimises language anxiety. In addition, interactive learning tasks in GBL activities, such as discussions, storytelling, and authentic interactive elements, boost learners' confidence and

engagement. Similarly, the integration of group-based collaborative tasks like narrative role-play games and debate or group discussions into speaking tasks facilitated the reduction of affective barriers and the enhancement of fluency in low-proficiency learners over time (Alzubi et al., 2024; Siti Fatimah et al., 2020). These findings are consistent with systematic evaluations that recognise improvements in motivation, willingness to communicate, and speaking proficiency that result from well-designed GBL interventions (Zolfaghari et al., 2025).

However, academicians suggest that the success of GBL is dependent upon the meticulous design of the instructional materials. Game tasks must be consistent with language learning objectives, rather than solely serving as entertainment. Learners may engage in play instead of learning when scaffolding and a distinct linguistic focus are absent (Reinders & Wattana, 2015). Additionally, teacher mediation is essential, ensuring learners understand the procedures and the expected outcomes of the activities and providing reflective discussion after the activities (Sun et al., 2023). In Malaysian tertiary contexts, contextualisation is essential, as cultural norms regarding saving face and students' reticence due to fear of making mistakes and keeping a positive outlook are highly culturally embedded, influencing their mannerisms and engagement in learning as well as participation in language class activities (Badrasawi et al., 2020; Le, 2024). Hence, the integration of GBL is highly promising; however, it necessitates careful execution with instructors' mediation.

Learner Motivation and Engagement

Motivation is a critical factor in the acquisition of a second language (L2), as it influences the strategies that learners employ, the amount of effort they invest, and their persistence in the face of challenges. Motivation is a multifaceted construct that encompasses intrinsic and extrinsic factors, as well as integrative and instrumental orientations, in L2 learning (Alizadeh, 2016; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Alsawaier (2018) asserted that there are strong relationships between motivation and learning engagement. Low motivation can result in disengagement and stagnation, while high motivation can support learners throughout the frequently protracted and demanding process of acquiring communicative competence. Engagement, which is closely associated with motivation, is evidenced by the degree to which learners are actively engaged in language tasks, including cognitive, affective, and behavioural components (Ariyurek & Yurtseven, 2024; Fredricks et al., 2004). This is connection is further emphasised by Allen-Abulhassan (2025), who asserts that "student engagement and motivation also play a significant role in learning outcomes" (p. 330). In the event that learners are both motivated and engaged, they are more inclined to pursue opportunities to use the language beyond the classroom, practise speaking, and take risks.

GBL has been demonstrated to have a positive impact on both motivation and engagement in L2 contexts by offering interactive, pleasant, and goal-oriented activities. GBL can fulfil learners' intrinsic motivational requirements for autonomy, competence, and relatedness by integrating elements such as rewards, collaboration, and challenges, as suggested in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Research has demonstrated that learners are more inclined to engage, spend more time on tasks, and exhibit greater persistence when language learning is integrated into game environments (Reinders & Wattana, 2015; Zhou, 2024). Lin et al. (2025) further contend that motivation is crucial in facilitating language learning success, particularly through intrinsic interest, as learners show greater engagement when they enjoy acquiring the language through interactive platform. Additionally, GBL redirects the emphasis from language as an academic discipline to language as a tool for accomplishing significant

objectives, thereby enhancing both cognitive investment and affective engagement. This dual enhancement of motivation and engagement is especially advantageous for low-proficiency ESL learners, as it can establish a supportive environment that motivates them to surmount speaking anxiety and cultivate communicative confidence.

Language Anxiety

Language anxiety is one of the most common affective barriers in second language (L2) acquisition, particularly among learners with low proficiency. It is frequently accompanied by avoidance behaviours and limited participation, as well as feelings of apprehension and anxiety or nervousness when compelled to communicate in the target language (Horwitz et al., 1986). Speaking anxiety may result from the dread of making errors, negative peer evaluation, and the pressure to deliver precise speech in real time in the context of ESL. Learners' fluency and overall communicative competence are also impacted by this anxiety, which also affects their willingness to communicate. The affective filter is heightened by high levels of anxiety, which restricts the processing of language input and reduces opportunities for output, both of which are crucial for the development of oral language (Krashen, 1982).

Even among students who have completed years of formal English instruction, speaking anxiety remains a persistent challenge in Malaysian tertiary institutions. The hierarchical nature of classroom interactions and cultural factors such as "saving face" may prevent further learners from speaking up (Reinders & Wattana, 2015). Past research has shown that without targeted, supportive, and engaging interventions, anxious learners often remain silent, missing critical opportunities to practice and refine their communication skills (Goodarzi & Namaziandost, 2025; Liu & Jackson, 2008). Nor Aida et al. (2025) further corroborate that language anxiety among Malaysian ESL undergraduates is often influenced by their unwillingness to communicate using the language due to fear of negative evaluation, communication anxiety, and test anxiety. This emphasises the significance of establishing a learning environment that is supportive and low-stress and fosters risk-taking, while also framing errors as a natural part of the learning process. Interventions like GBL have the potential to reduce apprehension by redirecting attention from linguistic form to communicative meaning, thereby allowing learners to engage more confidently in speaking tasks.

Despite the expanding corpus of literature on GBL in language education, current research has not adequately addressed the unique challenges that A2 CEFR learners encounter, including a restricted vocabulary range, diminished confidence, and elevated levels of language learning anxiety. Despite past studies concentrating on intermediate and advanced users, beginner-level learners necessitate teaching interventions that are solely designed to adhere to their linguistic limitations and affective requirements. This inconsistency is especially important because beginner learners may show a distinct response to GBL in comparison to their more advanced classmates, particularly in the context of aligning cognitive demands with motivational support. Moreover, research on GBL for this demographic is still fragmented, with a small number of studies evaluating both the linguistic and affective aspects of learning within a single framework. Additionally, current past research primarily emphasises descriptive analysis by having students complete scaled questionnaires, which results in limited findings, especially for beginner learners who have limited linguistic abilities. The findings using an open-ended survey may provide an in-

depth view of how GBL influence students' language learning, including motivation, confidence, engagement, and speaking anxiety.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative research approach, through the use of an open-ended survey to explore the effectiveness of GBL activities for language learning among low-proficiency ESL learners. Creswell and Creswell (2017) noted that a qualitative approach enables in-depth exploration of the phenomenon to be examined, making it relevant for this study. The focus of this was to explore the actual perceptions of learners towards the use of GBL activities, through a qualitative approach which results in a richer and more profound understanding of the context (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021).

Research Participants

The participants were selected using purposive sampling, looking into how beginner language users view the effectiveness of integrating GBL activities in class. A total of 18 students were selected from the intended cohort of 47 students. The participants in this study were pre-diploma students who had a CEFR A2 level for their SPM examination and were taking English as part of their semester study plan.

Research Instrument

The open-ended survey collected more extensive responses than the interview, further strengthening the findings. Jain (2021) asserts that survey questions are common and have long been used in qualitative research, as they are easier to conduct and allow access to a larger group of responses online. The survey was divided into two sections, each of which contained demographic information and four open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of GBL activities. The questions were designed based on the previous literature to thoroughly examine the effectiveness of GBL activities for low-proficiency students.

Research Procedures

Prior to the data collection, ethics approval was granted by the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Research Ethics Committee on January 26, 2025, adhering to ICH Good Clinical Practice Guidelines, Malaysian Good Clinical Practice Guidelines and the Declaration of Helsinki with the reference number REC/02/2025 (ST/MR/33). The participants were briefed and informed about the study before participating in it. They were informed of their right and allowed to withdraw from the study at any moment without penalty. Their responses were assured that they would be kept confidential. This procedure was done during their final class at the end of the semester by giving them the open-ended survey through Google Forms, as it was convenient for the participants.

Data Analysis

The open-ended survey was analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes aligned with the objective of this study. To proceed with the analysis, data cleaning was done by omitting the outliers, particularly those students who had CEFR above the A2 level. This procedure was to ensure that the findings aligned with the objectives and scope of the study, leaving only 18 students to participate in it.

Results

This study explored how low-proficiency students perceive the use of GBL activities for language classroom. There were 18 participants with an A2 CEFR level based on their English results in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), with 13 male and five female respondents. The thematic analysis presents the following findings, organised according to the four open-ended questions.

Table 1. *Learner motivation through GBL activities*

Participants	Responses
Confidence Gained Through Learning	
P3	*"With game, i can improve my confidence"*
P5	*"the game teach me how to communicate with confident"*
P6	*"can improve more confident"*
P18	*"That help me to be confident more"*
Enjoyment and Fun in Learning	
P2	*"fun"*
P4	*"Games can be a great way to learn English because they make the learning process more interactive, fun, and engaging"*
P11	*"game looks easier"*
P14	*"make me feel enjoy learning English"*
P15	*"Learning in an interactive and fun way"*
P17	*"the mission makes me want to know how to complete it"*
Improved Oral Communication Skills	
P1	*"speaking a lot"*
P7	*"Improving grammar which is many story and role-playing games use mostly proper sentences ,helping you to improve speaking"*
P8	*"practices listening and speaking skills"*
P9	*"i more understand English when play games"*
P12	*"because the subtitles we use in the game are in English"*

Table 1 presents the impacts of GBL activities on learners' motivation in using the language. The three themes for this question include learners' confidence gained through learning, enjoyment and fun in learning, as well as how GBL activities improved oral communication skills. Several participants expressed that games helped them gain confidence in using the language as reflected in statements such as *"With game, i can improve my confidence"* (P3) and *"the game teach me how to communicate with confident"* (P5). P6 and P18 also stated that they gained confidence when exposed to games in language learning, noting that games *"can improve more confident"* and *"That help me to be confident more,"* respectively. In addition, many participants asserted that GBL activities were enjoyable and engaging. P4 and P15 found that the learning process was more interactive and enjoyable, while P2 simply described the activities as *"fun."* Including games as part of language learning also made the lessons feel less complicated as agreed by P11 noting that *"game looks easier"* and P14 noting that *"make me feel enjoy learning English"*. This sense of ease thereby influenced the learners' curiosity and spark their interest in

completing the tasks, suggesting that intrinsic motivation, as stated by P17 *"the mission makes me want to know how to complete it"*. Lastly, several learners recognised improvements in their communication skills, owing to constant speaking, listening, and exposure to language through games. P1 highlighted the importance of *"speaking a lot,"* whereas P12 emphasised the benefit of using English subtitles throughout the game. P7 also agreed that using games helped learners to improve their speaking skills and P9 emphasised the impact of games in making better understanding of the language. The findings indicate that enjoyment, confidence, and meaningful language use in a GBL setting are significant motivators for low-proficiency ESL learners.

Table 2. *Increased confidence in speaking English through GBL activities*

Participants	Responses
Positive Emotions	
P14	*"Yes! Playing games can make speaking English feel more natural and less stressful."*
P5	*"yes i feel better when i playing games"*
P7	*"Yes, I'm feeling good"*
P12	*"yes i feel good"*
Reduced Pressure	
P14	*"Since games create a fun and relaxed environment, many people feel more confident using English while playing."*
P17	*"yes I am so interested to learn English"*

Table 2 illustrates how exposure to GBL activities enhances confidence in language learning. There are two themes that emerged for this question, which are positive emotions and reduced pressure. Some students expressed feeling emotionally positive and at ease while communicating in English during the GBL activities. P5, P7, and P12 shared that they *"...feel better…"* and *"...feel good…"* when engaging in games. P14 asserted further that games made the learning process and speaking English *"more natural and less stressful."* These responses indicate that GBL activities promote a more relaxed and emotionally comfortable atmosphere, supporting learners to participate in speaking without fear of judgement or failure. In addition to the positive emotional responses, participants admitted that they felt less pressure to use the language when playing games. P14 emphasised that games create a *"...fun and relaxed environment..."* which enhances learners' confidence in using English. Similarly, P17 stated that *"yes I am so interested to learn English"*, agreeing that less pressure in using language correctly helps learners to have high interest and encourages their involvement in the language learning process. These responses indicate that a supportive and enjoyable classroom, free from fear of making mistakes or being judged by their friends, facilitates learners' confidence in speaking English.

Table 3. *Learner engagement during GBL activities*

Participants	Responses
Collaborative Peer Interaction	
P3	*"Because i can practice speaking with my friends"*
P6	*"because it's fun to be able to work together with friends"*
P10	*"Because we can communicate with our classmates the most"*

Supportive Learning Environment	
P4	*"Playing games in English class makes learning more fun, interactive, and effective"*
P5	*"can get energise in class because can communicate with friends"*
P9	*"yes because i enjoy the class without feel pressure"*
P12	*"because i like playing with my friend"*
P16	*"fun and chill"*
P18	*"My hobby is playing game and thats make me easy to learn more"*
Competitive Engagement	
P2	*"challenge because want to beat my friends mark"*
P7	*"I can learn some new vocabulary and practice for my grammar and try to speak"*
P8	*"I like playing games in English class because it can improve my speaking."*
P13	*"because it's more fun when i play with my friend and make me want to try again if i make mistakes"*
P15	*"Improving listening and reading comprehension"*

Table 3 illustrates learners' engagement while playing games in the language classroom. There are three major themes analysed in the responses, such as collaborative peer interaction, supportive learning environments, and competitive engagement. Participants emphasised the importance of collaborative peer interactions during games, as accounted for by P3, who noted that *"Because i can practice speaking with my friends"*, and P6, who expressed, *"because it's fun to be able to work together with friends."* Other than that, peer communication is crucial in sustaining participation in language learning, as implied by P10, who stated that "Because we can communicate with our classmates the most." A supportive learning environment is also prominent in participants' responses, as can be seen from P4, who stated that "Playing games in English class makes learning more fun, interactive, and effective", and P5 explained that "can get energise in class because can communicate with friends." P9 described the classroom environment as enjoyable and free of stress, stating, *"...because i enjoy the class without feel pressure"*, while P12 and P16 regarded the experience playing games with their friends as *"fun and relaxed."* Moreover, GBL activities, which correspond closely with individual learner interests, significantly boost student engagement in the classroom. P18 affirmed this by stating that "My hobby is playing game and thats make me easy to learn more." In addition to a supportive learning environment, the theme of competitive engagement was common among participants. P2 enjoyed the challenge, noting that *"challenge because want to beat my friends mark"*, expressing a desire to surpass their friend's record. P7 and P8 stated that the competitive environment helps them to learn and use the language, noting that playing games *"...learn some new vocabulary and practice for my grammar and try to speak"* and *"...playing games in English class because it can improve my speaking"*, respectively. P13 found motivation in attempting again after errors *"...when i play with my friend and make me want to try again if i make mistakes"*, while P15 indicated that games facilitated enhancements in listening and reading comprehension. All of the themes demonstrated that GBL encourages learners to use the language by promoting interaction with others, providing an enjoyable and conducive learning environment, and incorporating elements of challenge and repetition.

Table 4. *Reduction of speaking anxiety through GBL activities*

Participants	Responses
Anxiety Reduction Through Fun Context	
P4	*"Yes, games can make speaking English less scary because they create a relaxed and enjoyable environment for learning"*
P5	*"yes can less scary. We can play more activities"*
P6	*"with games can make conversation in English become fluent because it is fun to do with friends"*
P8	*"speaking English is less scary because we can learn and collaborate with classmates during game-based activities."*
P9	*"games makes learning English fun"*
P12	*"because understanding English is very fun"*
P15	*"create a more relaxed and fun environment."*
Confidence Through Repetition	
P1	*"game with speaking English , we get more confident"*
P2	*"We can play more activities"*
P3	*"Always practice"*
P7	*"encourage people to build their confidence to speak also be brave"*
P13	*"in games we can practice again and again"*
P14	*"when speaking English while playing game makes me feel more better"*

Table 4 explores the usefulness of GBL activities in reducing speaking anxiety among low-proficiency ESL learners. The responses to this question reveal two major themes, which are anxiety reduction through a fun context and confidence building through repetition. Many participants expressed that games facilitate an engaging and enjoyable learning environment, making speaking English less intimidating. P4 agreed to this by stating that *"Yes, games can make speaking English less scary because they create a relaxed and enjoyable environment for learning"*, while P15 similarly highlighted that they *"create a more relaxed and fun environment."* P6 expressed that games enhance the ability to speak using English, *"...as it is fun to do with friends"*, while P8 agreed that speaking English was less intimidating by stating that it was *"less scary because we can learn and collaborate with classmates during game-based activities."* It can also be observed that the other participants agreed that speaking English while playing games was less intimidating as compared to a conventional language learning classroom, as playing games reduces the fear of speaking and provides the need to communicate using the language. Another significant theme regarding how GBL activities alleviate speaking anxiety is the development of confidence through repetition. Participants expressed that using games exposes them to practising using the language outside their comfort zone, thereby developing language confidence. P1 mentioned that playing games required them to speak in English, which made them *"...more confident"*, whereas P3 merely stated, *"Always practise."* P7 highlighted that games *"encourage people to build their confidence to speak also be brave"*, and P13 added that *"in games we can practice again and again"*. P14 echoed that confidence can be gained through repetition by stating, *"when speaking English while playing game makes me feel more better"* as repetition makes the learners communicate better, hence making them feel better about themselves. Overall, the responses indicate that GBL reduces learners' emotional barriers to speaking English by making

language learning activities more enjoyable and allowing learners to use language repetitively without fear of making mistakes.

Discussions

This study explores the use of GBL activities for low-proficiency ESL learners at tertiary institutions, as students are expected to excel or be able to communicate using the language for daily activities since they are generally exposed to English language for 11 years of formal education. However, Mohd Fadhli Shah et al. (2024) asserted that, despite prolonged exposure to English and its status as the second language in Malaysia, students' proficiency remains worrying. This is further concerning, as this study involved 18 pre-diploma students, who were classified with low proficiency in English, as indicated by their A2 CEFR level in the national SPM examination. Offering these students alternative instructional approaches such as using language games may lead to better outcomes, as these methods are not limited to traditional language learning. The findings revealed that there are four major domains of responses on learners' perceptions of GBL, which include learners' motivation, confidence, engagement, and anxiety reduction.

Firstly, engaging with GBL activities in classrooms promotes higher motivation to use English. The learners were interested in learning and using the language, as their learning experiences were enjoyable and engaging. Providing unrestricted platforms for the students to use and explore the language increased their motivation to participate in the learning session actively. They also highlighted that they were willing to engage and participate in the activity, as games made learning more enjoyable and less challenging. These findings align with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Learning, who emphasises the role of social interaction in acquiring knowledge (Lantolf, 2000), suggesting that learners are highly motivated to engage in meaningful and socially interactive learning environments. The findings also support Chan and Lo (2024), which states that collaborative games significantly enhance oral participation and motivation among ESL learners.

Secondly, the findings highlight learners' increased confidence when speaking English during GBL activities because the environment was supportive and there was less pressure. They expressed feeling positive, less anxious, and more natural in speaking English, as they were not judged for making mistakes. This finding corresponds with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, that emotional variables such as motivation, anxiety, and confidence act as filters that may help or hinder language learning (Krashen, 1982). Language learning is most effective when anxiety is minimal and motivation is maximised. As such, engaging learners in intriguing and enjoyable environments enables them to communicate using the language in natural settings, not having to worry about making grammatically sound sentences as well as being judged by their classmates and instructors.

Thirdly, strong and positive engagement in language learning is imperative. The findings demonstrated that learners had strong engagement in GBL activities, stating that interacting with other students, having a supportive learning atmosphere, and friendly competition were motivating factors. Participants' interest and involvement were maintained through teaming up with classmates, enjoying class sessions, and overcoming speaking challenges through games. Despite having limited linguistic ability, participants expressed that their willingness to actively participate and challenge their friends influenced them to complete tasks due to the supportive environments. According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), learners are more likely to engage

in learning environments when their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. Thus, the findings were consistent with this notion, as the participants demonstrated a strong level of engagement while playing language games with their classmates, overcoming communication barriers, and enjoying the supportive GBL environment.

Finally, the findings revealed that GBL activities reduced learners' anxiety in using the language, facilitating their language learning experiences. Participants noted that they willingly and naturally used the language as learning sessions were engaging and not too intimidating. Nor Aida et al. (2025) supported that less formal and intimidating lessons with little emphasis on grammatical correctness or testing encourage learners to participate in communicative activities. Consequently, when participants were motivated to participate in the GBL activities, the participants eventually repetitively used the language. This scenario helped build their courage to speak and fluency using the language, thereby encouraging them to feel at ease in speaking and lowering their speaking anxiety. GBL activities not only provide participants with engaging and enjoyable experiences but also allow low-proficiency language learners to engage in effective learning environments without the fear of making mistakes (Mohd Fadhli Shah & Mafarhanatul Akmal, 2023).

Conclusion

Having a proficient grasp of the English language is essential and highly demanded to connect with others, especially in today's fast-paced borderless society. This is crucial for Malaysian ESL learners in tertiary institutions as part of their survival and preparation for the real working world, as English provides common access to educational materials and career opportunities. This study demonstrates GBL activities significantly enhancing low-proficiency learners' ability to communicate in English. This approach can help them reduce their language apprehension by reducing their speaking anxiety, building confidence, and fostering learning engagement. Learners are prone to participate in communicative activities in comfortable and conducive environments, as they enjoy the process of learning. GBL activities lower affective filters, hence motivating learners to use and practice English repetitively without fear of making mistakes. With the integration of both digital and non-digital GBL activities, students who have prior exposure to the language but lack confidence can benefit from them, as they use it naturally while playing the games. Peer collaboration, friendly competition, and purposeful communicative tasks enhance engagement and transform learners' emotional connection with English from apprehension to active participation.

The study emphasises the importance of GBL in ESL language classrooms, especially for low-proficiency learners who may feel intimidated and restricted in using the language. Being confined to a conventional classroom that emphasises accuracy and completes the syllabus may limit opportunities for learners to feel connected and engage in authentic learning environments. By integrating active learning that involves learners participating in communicative tasks as playful, low-stakes challenges and collaborative learning, the classroom can be shifted into a safe space for them to communicate, allowing learners to transform their silence into confident speech in the language. The findings presented in this study contribute to the field of language pedagogy by demonstrating the efficacy of GBL in reducing speaking anxiety among low-proficiency ESL learners. The findings provide insights for educators to integrate GBL in their language learning to facilitate proficiency and classroom engagement, providing interactive, low-stress environments that promote risk-taking and meaningful communication.

The study suggests the integration of structured GBL activities in speaking-focused modules and language instruction to meet the learners' cognitive and affective demands. The research also demonstrates the benefits of GBL in enhancing learners' communicative confidence by fostering supportive learning environments, making them confident enough to use the language outside classroom settings. It is recommended that future research explore larger and diverse CEFR proficiency levels and the effects of both digital and non-digital GBL activities on students' communicative competence. GBL has the potential not only to create inclusive and authentic learning environments but also to equip learners with the skills and confidence to use the language effectively in real-world situations.

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