

The Effect of Using Gaming Techniques on Students' Oral Language Abilities in EFL Online Classes: An Action Research

Faezeh Ahmadpour^{1*}, Saeedeh Mohamadi², Zahra Lotfi Dehgan³

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Abstract

Speaking and listening are essential language skills used as a measure for evaluating the students' proficiency level. These skills receive more importance in the Iranian new educational curriculum by the publication of new English book series. However, as noticed in some of the classes, the purpose of mastering oral language abilities is not efficiently fulfilled. Accordingly, the present collaborative action research aimed to firstly identify the reasons underlying students' inability to perform oral skills in order to do the online activities in classes and secondly provide some suggestions to solve the existing problem. The study was conducted in a junior high school in Marand, Iran. The participants included 36 female 9th-grade students, who met on the Shad application and were selected based on convenience sampling. Class observations, interviews, and students' performance in language tasks were used to collect the required data. Gaming was implemented as the selected solution in a separate class planned for focused speaking and listening activities. More specifically, sentence-expanding games on different levels (adding words to a simple sentence to expand it and also adding sentences to the initiating sentence and making a short story) were used as the main methods in these sessions. The findings from the descriptive statistics indicated an improvement in students' motivation and engagement in speaking activities, as well as their accuracy in making sentences. They also showed positive attitudes toward the use of these game-based tasks in EFL classes. The study provides practical implications for materials developers and language teachers.

Keywords: Action Research; English Online Classes; Oral Language Abilities; Sentence Expanding Games

1. Introduction

English, the language spoken by most people all around the world, is called the international language. According to Richards and Rodgers (1986), among all foreign languages, English is the one that is learned the most. Learning an international language may enable people to

¹ B.A. Student in TEFL, Farhangian University, Zanjan, Iran. E-mail: ahmad.khanahmadi@gmail.com

² Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics, Farhangian University, Zanjan, Iran. E-mail: sahar.nasiri412@gmail.com

³ B.A. Student in TEFL, Farhangian University, Zanjan, Iran.

improve in their education, occupation, relationships, solving people's problems, and even in their everyday activities. This signifies the importance of learning and teaching English.

Language consists of four basic skills, including listening and reading (called receptive skills) and speaking and writing (called productive skills). According to Leong and Ahmadi (2017), speaking is one of the skills having been neglected in some schools and universities due to some reasons such as the implementation of inappropriate teaching methods or the extra emphasis on grammar. However, as Nunan (1991) puts it, "success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the (target) language" (p. 39). Students' proficiency in English highly depends on their ability to talk and communicate in English. In the era of the covid 19 pandemic, face-to-face education is replaced by online or distance education. The situation of the online classes and the platforms used to hold the classes added to the complexity of teaching and learning oral skills. One way to overcome the limits and provide opportunities for students to be exposed to language both in online and face-to-face classes is the implementation of games (Klimova & Kacet, 2017).

It is noticed in some of the English classes of junior high schools that students are either reluctant to participate in speaking activities or they are making incorrect sentences while talking. Especially, the situation of online instruction makes them inactive in class. In addition, there is a dearth of research on the use of games in online classes. Due to the novelty of the issue of online instruction, past research has not fully examined the various techniques which could be implemented in EFL online classes especially related to oral skills. Accordingly, this action research seeks to investigate the possible reasons for students' inability and improve their oral skills using gaming techniques and enhancing their participation in online classes.

Teachers, materials developers, and students will benefit from the results of this research. It can provide insights about selecting and preparing creative strategies to implement in classes to help students get the best results by participating in-class activities which enables them to foster their oral skills in non-threatening and fun ways. This action research thus focuses on two main purposes. Firstly, it aims at identifying the reasons behind students' inability in performing oral skills to find ways to overcome the difficulties hindering students from speaking. Secondly, it aims at implementing gaming techniques in online classes to improve students' oral skills. Accordingly, the following research questions are addressed in the present research:

RQ1. What are the barriers to the student's performance in oral activities in online classes?

RQ2. Do using gaming techniques improve the students' oral skills in online classes?

RQ3. What are the Iranian EFL students' attitudes toward using gaming techniques in online classes?

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Theoretical Background

Oral skills are the abilities that enable humans to interact with each other. According to the research by Rivers (1981), oral skills are used twice as much as writing and reading in real-life situations. Besides, communication plays an important role in people's success in real-life use of language. In learning a second language in actual classes, exposure to language oral skills seems to be a necessity for students' improvement; however, in online classes, students often

convey their meanings through written messages. Therefore, they have less chance to practice oral skills. One way to encourage and make students speak and send voice messages is by using language games (Alfulaih & Elsayed, 2018).

2.1.1. *Teaching oral skills.* Oral skills are divided into two main skills: listening (the receptive skill) and speaking (the productive skill), both of which associate with each other to form meaningful and fruitful verbal communication. As stated by Nunan (2003), “Speaking is a productive oral skill and consists of producing systematic verbal utterances to convey meaning” (p. 48). In addition, it is a bilateral process including generating, processing and getting information (Ellisa, 2019), and the skill that identifies a learner’s success in acquiring a language (Nunan, 1991) is viewed as the most important skill among all the language skills (Rao, 2019). Learners should be able to carry out a continuous and accurate conversation to be considered proficient in English. As another oral skill, listening is always associated with speaking. According to Santos (2018), listening is the activity in which the listener tries to make meaning from the language sounds he hears. It is also prior to speaking because it forms the basis for speaking.

Choosing the most appropriate technique for teaching language skills is one of the biggest challenges for teachers. In the past years, teachers have taught speaking skills just as memorization of some words, sentences, grammatical structures, and dialogues. It was also believed that oral skills develop naturally over time by being exposed to language (Chaney, 1998). However, the goal of learning a language in this era should be the development of students’ communicative skills. Therefore, teachers should choose their teaching techniques and activities based on interaction and collaboration among students. Further, they should employ authentic activities to make a meaningful and joyful environment for learning and to enhance interaction and cooperation. Furthermore, these techniques should help minimize the challenges and difficulties teachers face during teaching (Kaur & Aziz, 2020). Discussion, role-play, simulations, interviews, picture description, storytelling, and gaming are examples of these authentic and communicative activities (Jabbarova, 2020).

2.1.2. *Teaching through Language Games.* Among other communicative activities, gaming is of critical importance, especially for young students. Yacob and Yunus (2019) described language games as fun activities facilitating the language learning process. Implementing games can benefit the process of teaching and learning in several ways. According to Harmer (2001), when a teacher wants to encourage his/her students to speak in class, he/she has to make them communicate, and to do this, students should be motivated to start and maintain the communication. He also mentioned that during this communication, the students should not focus directly on vocabulary or grammar but they must focus on the activity they are doing with the language. According to Mahmoud and Tanni (2014), games are activities used to increase students’ passion and interest and make a happy and enjoyable class. Since psychological factors such as fear of making mistakes, anxiety, low self-confidence, etc., negatively affect students’ speaking and may lead to reluctance, using games can help teachers solve this problem by making a relaxed environment. Games can create a relaxed atmosphere and make students participate in class activities (Zhu, 2012). According to Wright et al. (2006),

games are very useful tools to integrate all 4 skills of language. Since various types of games are applicable in the classes, students can master all skills simultaneously by reading or listening to the rules of a game and speaking or writing answers or the game structures. According to Golabi (2022), applying game-based activities will assist vocabulary retention, which is one of the fundamental elements of speaking activity, by providing a sample of authentic language. Some of these games include the telephone game, taboo words (Bolen, nd), guessing words (Hayati, 2020), sentence-expanding games (Knight, 2017), etc. Students can also gain a lot of new experiences through games that are not possible during the typical teaching methods.

2.1.3. *Sentence-Expanding the Game*. Sentence-expanding game is a language game that can be used in both online and physical classrooms to help students build stronger sentences (Knight, 2017). This game can be applied at different levels. The teacher first needs to identify and elaborate on the components of simple and complex sentences and then ask students to add words from their own to expand the selected sentence into a complex one. Moreover, this game can be used on another level by adding more sentences to the initiating sentence and making a story. As suggested by Knight (2017), a sentence-expanding game is also advantageous for the development of reading and writing skills. Moreover, Rosadah (2015) has shown that this game could boost students' knowledge of grammar, especially simple present tense. This research follows a similar direction to help students with their sentence construction as a fundamental procedure for proficient oral performance.

2.2. *Related Studies*

Numerous studies have been conducted on the use of gaming techniques in improving EFL students' oral skills in both actual and virtual settings. The results of all these studies support the efficacy of gaming techniques in teaching language skills, especially oral skills.

In the context of actual classes, Hayati (2020), following a quantitative approach to identify the efficiency of gaming techniques on students' speaking proficiency and their perspectives, found a better improvement in students' speaking skills in classes where a digital guessing game was applied. In another research, Alfulaih and Elsayed (2018), examining the impact of using games on developing Saudi female EFL students' speaking skills, suggested that the gaming techniques could motivate students and help them become more confident to participate in conversations, and consequently, improve their speaking skills. Cheng (2018), also investigating the efficiency of board games from the psychological aspect and its correlation with the student's oral performance, found that using board games could reduce the level of students' anxiety leading to better performance and improvement in oral skills.

Also, few recent studies have studied similar subjects in virtual settings: Shokarova (2020), for example, found that using games in online zoom classes creates an interesting and relaxing learning environment for the students. Students can also practice vocabulary and sentence construction via games. In addition, another research conducted by Aziz, et al. (2021) revealed that gamification allows students to have fun while learning and enhance their understanding of Morphology, Syntax, Semantics, and Pragmatics.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and Setting

The convenience sampling method was used to choose the research participants. They included 36 female junior high school students all in their 9th grade with an age range of 13-14 years old. There was no formal pre-test to make them homogeneous, but their marks in the previous class exams as well as their performances in-class activities were used to identify their level of language proficiency. Based on these factors, almost all of the participants were identified to be at the same level (intermediate level). They were all from the same school in Marand, Iran, knowing Turkish and Persian as their native and mother tongues, and had been learning EFL for about three years at school. As stated by these students, they had not attended English classes outside the school and school classes were the only opportunity for them to learn and practice English. Since this research aimed to eliminate the barriers to learning and performing oral skills, the participants were asked to join the research voluntarily without being compelled to do the activities or being influenced by their grades. In addition, the researcher acted as the teacher in the action research process. She was a 21-year-old teacher trainee educating in her third year in the major of ELT at Farhangian University and was participating in her internship classes.

3.2. Instrumentation

The data for this Action Research (AR) were collected through observations and interviews conducted in two stages; first, for identifying the problem, and second, for gathering data on the efficiency of this gaming technique. In addition, a final speaking task was assigned beside the class activities to evaluate the students' progress in oral skills. The sentence expanding game was used as the main activity during the sessions.

Observation: By participating in English classes at the school, the first stage of observations was taken place for 6 months. During this period, the class procedures and the activities of both the teacher and the students were carefully observed to find the problem or any difficulty that they might face and the reasons created these kinds of problems. The second stage of the observations was conducted during the implementation of gaming techniques in class. The students were fully observed while they were playing different levels of games and participating in the speaking activities. Field notes, observational checklists, and screenshots are used as tools to record data in two stages of observation.

Interview: The interviews aimed to reveal the teacher's view on practicing oral skills in classes and students' performances on these skills. Semi-structured interviews were used in two stages. These interviews consisted of 5 fixed and open-ended questions. However, in some cases during the interview sessions, these questions were used for opening a discussion with the interviewees, and sometimes more questions were raised to arrive at a deeper conclusion. The English teacher was interviewed in the first stage of the interviews using five open-ended questions together with some additional questions and answers in written form on Shad application; examples of these questions are: "what do you think the main problem of the students is?" and "What is your idea about the reasons for this problem?". Interviews with the teacher were conducted in two sessions. The factors, influencing students' inability were also

discussed with the teacher. The results of this interview helped us in planning and further implementing the selected plans and methods.

Interviews in the second stage also incorporated open-ended questions in a semi-structured method and addressed the English teacher as well as 15 of the students. The interview with the teacher included 6 questions related to the efficiency of gaming techniques and the specific games used in the class as well as further relevant talks. The teacher was also asked about the students' participation and performance and their probable attitudes toward this technique. Student interviews investigated their perceptions of the games implemented in the class, and their attitudes toward playing games and doing tasks individually or in groups. Their answers were also recorded.

Speaking Task: In addition to the sentence-expanding game played in the research process, a final speaking task was assigned in which the students were required to perform and record a monologue individually or a role-play in pairs using the suggested topics. The topics were related to the themes and functions in their textbooks.

3.3. Procedures

3.3.1. *Design.* Since the purpose of this study is to improve students' oral skills and overcome the barriers preventing them from participating in speaking activities, this study adopted an Action Research (AR) method using gaming techniques. AR is a research approach to systematically inspecting a social situation to solve probable problems to improve the situation and change it in a positive way (Burns, 2015). Action research leads toward positive quality improvement in the educational system. According to Tripp (2005), action research with the aim of solving a problem follows a cycle consisting of "(a) identifying the problem; (b) planning a solution; (c) implementing it; (d) monitoring and evaluating its effectiveness" (p. 3).

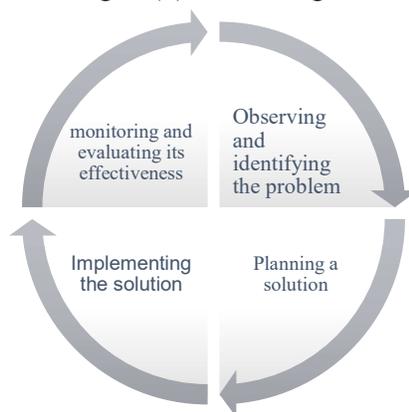


Figure 1. AR cycle.

3.3.2. *Data Collection Procedure.* To gather data for this research, 4 phases of an AR cycle were followed:

Phase One: Completing this phase took almost 6 months. During this period, the researcher attended the English classes as a teacher-trainee on Shad application and observed the class routines to gather data on the class atmosphere, the students' characteristics, and their performances. The purpose of this phase was to identify the existing problem in the class. Based

on the data collected through fieldnotes and screenshots gathered during the observations and the first interview session (before implementing the gaming technique) with the English teacher, it was revealed that the main difficulty that the students faced in classes were the utilization of oral skills.

Phase Two: After identifying the problem in the first stage, several solutions had been provided by the researchers to solve the problem and improve the students' oral skills, such as role-plays, storytelling, etc.

Having analyzed all these suggestions, gaming was selected as the most appropriate method. First, it could be considered as a combination of other methods if the right kind of gaming is selected. Second, it creates a meaningful context for learning (Simpson, 2019). As Kapp (2012) stated, the utilization of games in online classrooms can encourage students to keep learning and participate in class and also help the teacher to make desirable changes in the students' behavior. Gaming can also provide an opportunity for active learning by creating an entertaining and collaborative environment (Salter, 2011). However, selecting a suitable game is of great importance. Though, a teacher should consider different factors while selecting a game such as educational purposes, levels of the students, class environment, learner's age, their background, etc. (Mubaslat, 2012). The kind of game selected for this research was the sentence-expanding game (Knight, 2017). Similar gaming techniques were applied in several previous studies. For example, Rosadah (2015) used expanding games to improve the learners' understanding of grammar and consequently their sentence construction abilities. The gaming technique of this research was implemented on two levels; first, adding words to a basic sentence to expand it and construct more complex sentences. And second, add relatable and meaningful sentences to a core sentence to make a story. During the planning phase, the lesson plan, syllabus, and tasks for the acting sessions had been prepared and the required materials were collected

Phase Three: It was dedicated to the implementation of the selected technique. The first step in this phase was to create a separate social group on the Shad application named "listening and speaking" with the purpose of developing these skills. After the volunteer students joined this group, they got familiar with the class objectives, rules, and the activities they were expected to do.

One of the fundamental rules of the class was to send voice messages instead of written messages. The voice message comprising the first sentence was sent to the group. It tried to use sentences related to the themes and functions in their textbooks. The purpose of this activity was to familiarize students with the accurate structure of the sentences and provide an opportunity to practice making sentences in English. The students were called one by one and asked to add one new word to the first sentence. The written messages were forbidden during the class procedure to develop students' listening skills and help them become independent in comprehending oral utterances; however, the written messages were only applied to initiate and finish the talk in the class. The other sessions also followed a similar procedure as the first session starting the class with a different structure.

After these three sessions, a final task was defined to assess students' progress in speaking and also enhance their teamwork and cooperation. There were two kinds of tasks that the students could choose between them. One of them was to perform a monologue, and the

second one was to perform a dialogue or a role play in pairs. Ten topics such as *sports, hobbies, etc.*, were introduced to them to choose and prepare their task according to them. The criteria for selecting topics were students' background knowledge and the materials covered in the textbooks, including grammatical structures, lexicon items, and functions.

Phase Four: Monitoring and observing the process of teaching and the students' learning and progress have been taken place simultaneous with the third phase (implementing) as well as the end of the process through the field notes and the available screenshots. Conducting the classes and the interviews in an online environment like the Shad application provided the opportunity for keeping the data for further monitoring and evaluation. At the end of the implementation phase and after receiving all the students' tasks, the obtained data were analyzed using appropriate techniques.

3.4. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics had been used in this study. The collected data is shown in the tables below. The students are then categorized into 5 groups based on their participation in the activities and the score they gained from the indicators (Figure 2). The categorization of students according to these indicators includes: 1) not active (NA): meeting 0 indicator; 2) less active (LA): meeting 1 or 2 of the indicators; 3) active enough (AE): meeting 3 or 4 of the indicators; 4) active (A): meeting 5 or 6 of the indicators; 5) very active (VA): meeting 7 or 8 of the indicators.

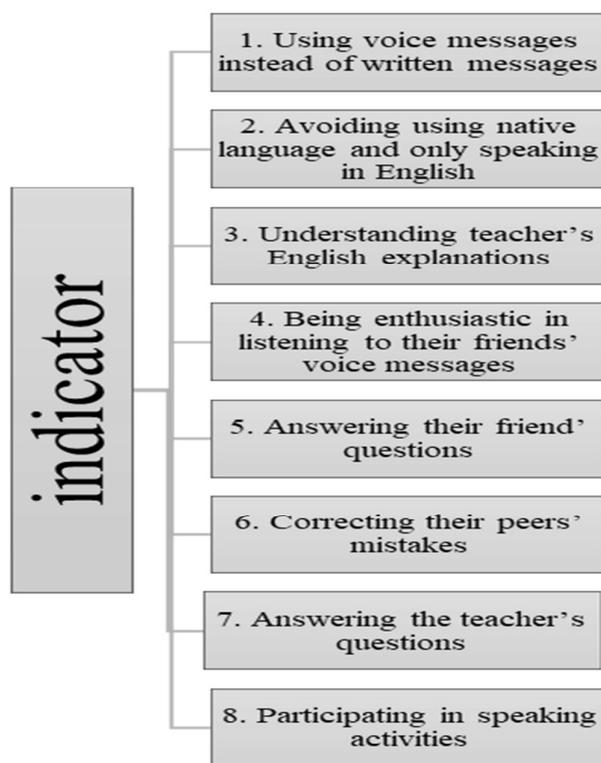


Figure 2. Indicators.

Table 1 reveals the obtained results in terms of the indicators of the observational checklist of the first phase of AR.

Table 1.

Observational checklist of the first phase of AR.

Students' numbers	Indicator 1	Indicator 2	Indicator 3	Indicator 4	Indicator 5	Indicator 6	Indicator 7	Indicator 8	score
No.1	—	—	+	—	—	—	+	—	2
No.2	—	—	+	—	—	—	+	—	2
No.3	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
No.4	—	—	+	—	—	—	—	—	1
No.5	—	—	—	—	—	—	+	—	1
No.6	—	—	—	—	—	—	+	—	1
No.7	—	—	+	—	—	—	+	—	2
No.8	+	+	+	—	—	—	+	—	4
No.9	—	—	—	—	—	—	+	—	1
No.10	+	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
No.11	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
No.12	+	+	+	+	—	—	+	—	5
No.13	—	+	—	—	—	—	+	—	2
No.14	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
No.15	+	+	+	+	—	+	+	—	6
No.16	+	—	—	+	—	—	+	—	3
No.17	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
No.18	+	+	+	—	—	—	+	—	4
No.19	+	+	+	—	—	—	—	—	3
No.20	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
No.21	+	—	+	—	—	—	+	—	3
No.22	+	—	—	—	—	—	+	—	2
No.23	+	+	+	+	—	—	+	—	5
No.24	—	—	+	—	—	—	+	—	2
No.25	—	—	—	—	—	—	+	—	1
No.26	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
No.27	—	—	—	—	—	—	+	—	1
No.28	+	—	—	—	—	—	+	—	2
No.29	+	+	+	+	+	—	+	+	7
No.30	—	—	—	+	+	—	+	—	3
No.31	+	+	+	+	—	—	—	—	4
No.32	—	—	—	+	—	—	—	—	1
No.33	—	—	—	—	—	—	+	—	1
No.34	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
No.35	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	8
No.36	+	+	+	+	—	+	+	—	6
Total	15	11	16	10	3	3	24	2	84
Percentage	41.66%	30.55%	44.44%	27.77%	8.33%	8.33%	66.66%	5.55%	

According to the data provided by the first observational checklist (Table 1), 41.66% of the students met the first indicator, 30.55% the second one, 44.44% the third one, 27.77% the fourth one, 8.33% the fifth one, similarly 8.33% the sixth one, 66.66% the seventh one, and only 5.55% of the students met the last indicator. The categorization of the students based on the indicators is presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Students' performance during phase one.

Categories	Score	Number students	Percentage
Very Active (VA)	7-8	2	5.55%
Active (A)	6-5	4	11.11%
Active Enough (AE)	4-3	7	19.44%
Less Active (LA)	2-1	16	44.44%
Not Active (NA)	0	7	19.44

A similar procedure was followed during the third phase of AR while the gaming technique was being implemented. The data are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3.

Observational checklist of the third phase of AR.

Students' numbers	Indicator 1	Indicator 2	Indicator 3	Indicator 4	Indicator 5	Indicator 6	Indicator 7	Indicator 8	score
No.1	+	—	+	—	—	—	+	—	3
No.2	+	—	+	—	—	—	+	—	3
No.3	—	—	+	+	—	—	—	—	2
No.4	+	—	+	—	—	—	+	—	3
No.5	—	—	—	—	—	—	+	—	1
No.6	—	—	—	—	—	—	+	—	1
No.7	+	—	+	+	—	—	+	—	4
No.8	+	+	+	—	—	—	+	+	5
No.9	+	—	—	+	—	—	+	—	3
No.10	+	+	+	+	—	—	+	+	6
No.11	—	—	+	+	—	—	—	—	2
No.12	+	+	+	+	—	+	+	+	7
No.13	+	+	—	+	—	—	+	+	5
No.14	—	—	—	—	—	—	+	—	1
No. 15	+	+	+	+	—	+	+	+	7
No.16	+	+	—	+	—	—	+	+	5
No.17	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
No.18	+	+	+	+	—	—	+	+	6
No.19	+	+	+	+	—	—	+	—	5
No.20	—	—	—	+	—	—	—	—	1
No.21	+	—	+	+	—	—	+	+	5
No.22	+	+	—	+	—	+	+	+	6
No.23	+	+	+	+	+	—	+	+	7
No.24	+	+	+	+	—	—	+	+	6
No.25	+	—	—	+	—	—	+	+	4
No.26	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
No.27	—	—	—	—	—	—	+	—	1
No.28	+	+	+	+	—	—	+	+	6
No.29	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	8
No.30	+	+	+	+	+	—	+	+	7
No.31	+	+	+	+	—	—	+	+	6
No.32	+	+	+	+	—	+	+	+	7
No.33	—	—	—	+	—	—	+	+	3
No.34	+	—	—	+	—	—	+	—	3
No.35	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	8
No.36	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	8
Total	26	18	22	26	5	7	31	20	209
Percentage	72.22%	50%	61.11%	72.22%	13.88%	19.44%	86.11%	55.55%	

Table 4 presents the categorization of the students based on the scores they received from the indicators in the third phase.

Table 4.

Categorization of the students in the third phase.

Categories	Score	Number students	Percentage
Very Active (VA)	7-8	8	22.22%
Active (A)	6-5	11	30.55%
Active Enough (AE)	4-3	8	22.22%
Less Active (LA)	2-1	7	19.44%
Not Active (NA)	0	2	5.55%

Another instrument used for gathering data was the speaking task assigned at the end of the third phase. About 20 students chose to perform a dialogue in pairs, while only 10 students volunteered to have a monologue. 6 students were reluctant to have any kind of these tasks. The frequency of the topics selected by the students is demonstrated in Table 5.

Table 5.

Topics and their frequency.

Topic	Frequency		
	Monologue	Dialogue	Reluctant to do neither of them
Hobbies	1	—	—
Cooking and food	—	1	—
Shopping	1	1	—
Books	—	—	—
Sports	—	2	—
Describe yourself	5	—	—
Friendship	—	—	—
Your favorite job	1	2	—
Traveling	2	4	—
One of your favorite memories	—	—	—
Total	10	10 (pairs)	6

To conclude the students' attitudes toward using the gaming technique, grounded theory was followed in the coding process (Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019). According to this theory, first, the data gathered from the interview sessions as well as class observations were reviewed to find the main concepts and then summarized into codes. Next, the similar codes were grounded into higher-level groups called subcategories. After being compared with one another, these subcategories were arranged under the main themes (teacher's and students' attitudes).

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the data analysis demonstrate that the students have improved in two aspects; first, their engagement in-class activities, and second, their speaking performances. In the first

phase, only two of the students were categorized as very active (VA) by meeting almost all the indicators; while at the end of the third phase, this number increased to 8, and 6 of the students became more active than they were before. On the other hand, before the gaming technique, 7 students had no participation in class and were categorized as NA students, but in the third phase, this number decreased and only two of the students remained inactive. Furthermore, the total score of the students in the first phase was 84, while at the end of the implementation phase, the total equaled 209 suggesting an overall increase in the students' performance and participation. Table 6 demonstrates the comparison of students' categorizations in two phases.

Table 6.

A comparison of students' categorizations in phases one and three.

Category	Phase 1		Phase 3	
	Number of the students	Percentage	Number of the students	percentage
Very Active (VA)	2	5.55%	8	22.22%
Active (A)	4	11.11%	11	30.55%
Active Enough (AE)	7	19.44%	8	22.22%
Less Active (LA)	16	44.44%	7	19.44%
Not Active (NA)	7	19.44%	2	5.55%

The results also showed that the participation of the students improved in all 8 indicators (Table 7). Before implementing the game, 21 students preferred written messages and used voice messages unwillingly only when the teacher forced them to read some parts of the book. But in the third phase, they got informed that the rule of the game is to send voice messages and talk orally rather than typing. In this stage, 26 students were encouraged to use oral skills to communicate their ideas.

Indicators number 2 and 3 are in direct relation with each other. During phase one, a traditional method was applied by the teacher, so the native language and translation were used most often in the class. Accordingly, the students did not notice any necessity to use English or try to understand the teacher's English sentences. In this stage, only 11 students used English in their communications (like greeting, replying to their teachers, etc.), and 16 students fully understood English utterances used in class. However, during the implementation phase, since the dominant language was English, more students tried to understand the sentences without translation (61.11%), and also the number of the students who avoided using their native language increased as well (50%). Other students used English and their mother tongue interchangeably. Lack of language competencies and knowledge of vocabulary and language rules made them unable to comprehend the language (Littlewood, 2004). Gaming is then one of the beneficial ways to provide them with new knowledge of the language. The pamphlets comprising the general information of the session like vocabulary and grammatical structures were provided to the students at the end of each session.

In the case of the fourth indicator, the students showed great progress. During the classes before the research, the students only participated in the activities when they were called

by names. In that case, only 10 of the students paid attention to what their friends said or how they replied to the teacher. On the other hand, by the implementation of the games, 26 students passionately listened to what their friends had sent in voice messages to be able to follow the game. Listening to each other provided the chance of practicing the listening skill, which then leads to the facilitation of the speaking skill.

The results of indicators 5 and 6 are completely related to indicator 4. Listening to their friends' voice messages, the students realized that in some cases they made some mistakes in grammar or pronunciation, etc. In such situations, they tended to correct their friends by providing feedback on their sentences (peer-correction). While in the first phase, only 3 students with a higher level of proficiency tried to correct their friends' mistakes, in the third phase, this number slightly increased to 5. While the game was going on in the class, some students had questions about the game, language functions, grammatical rules, or the vocabulary; there were some of the students (7 of them) who voluntarily answered their friends and helped them go through difficulties.

The results of the indicators 4, 5, and 6 altogether revealed an increase in the interactions and collaborations in the classroom. At first, the teacher was the only authority in the class, but with the implementation of the games, the class became more collaborative and almost all of the students began to involve in the activities. Teacher-student interactions could be frequently observed in the class environment before starting the AR procedures; whereas, implementing games in the online classes resulted in student-student interactions. In addition, conducting dialogues and role-plays in groups of two is the other factor that expands the interaction and the communication of the students. Groupwork reduces students' anxiety in attending class activities (Foster, 1998).

Compared with other indicators, indicator number seven gained 66.66% in the first phase, which is the highest among other indicators. Since most of the interactions in the class were teacher-initiated, the students answered what their teacher asked them for the sake of the grade. This indicator also raised to 86.11% during the third phase.

Regarding the results of the last indicator, in the third phase, the students were more active and engaged in comparison to phase one. Only 2 students initially participated in speaking activities. The data-driven from the field notes also indicated the lack of speaking activities before the implementation of games. The only optional activity assigned by the teacher was to ask them to describe their city, and only two students performed it. However, more authentic oral activities like games were employed in online classes in the AR process. Consequently, more students participated in those activities (about 55%). The other reason for students' greater involvement is assuring students that they were not going to be judged based on their mistakes. Positive marks were awarded to more active and diligent students. Table 7 provides a comparison of the indicators in phases 1 and 3.

Table 7.

A comparison of the indicators in phases one and three.

Indicator	Phase 1		Phase 3	
	Number of the students	percentage	Number of the students	percentage
1. Using voice messages instead of written messages	15	41.66%	26	72.22%
2. Avoiding using the native language and only speaking in English	11	30.55%	18	50%
3. Understanding teacher's English explanations	16	44.44%	22	61.11%
4. Being enthusiastic about listening to their friends' voice messages	10	27.77%	26	72.22%
5. Answering their friends' questions	3	8.33%	5	13.88%
6. Correcting their peers' mistakes	3	8.33%	7	19.44%
7. Answering the teacher's questions	24	66.66%	31	86.11%
8. Participating in speaking activities	2	5.55%	20	55.55%

The conversations and the role-plays sent as the final task received feedback and positive reinforcements. Some of the topics attracted more attention, while some others did not (Table 5). As stated by the students, the reason for selecting those topics concerned their familiarity with the general idea and their knowledge of relevant words and structures. The participants' attitudes toward using the gaming technique are displayed in Table 8.

Table 8.

The participants' attitudes toward the gaming technique.

Theme	Subcategory	Codes
Students' attitudes	Interview with the students	Loving games
		Enjoying fun games
		Cooperating with their friends
		Creating a stress-free environment
		No fear of making mistakes or being judged
	Students' performance	Being more engaged in a speaking activity
		Voluntarily playing games
		Using better and more accurate sentences
		A beneficial activity to improve students' language skills
		Increasing students' participation
Teacher's attitudes	Interview with the teacher	Still some inactive or less active students

The result of the interviews with students revealed that; (a) they liked and enjoyed playing games, (b) they preferred cooperation rather than individual activities, and (c) some stated that the stress-free and fun environment of games helped them to overcome their fears of making mistakes or being judged. Furthermore, (d) the students participated more voluntarily in the activities, and (e) made accurate and longer sentences while talking or playing the game (Tables 1 and 3). Therefore, in responding to the third research question, it could be

concluded that the students expressed a positive attitude toward using fun activities like games in classes.

On the other hand, the teacher also believed that the games are beneficial activities to enhance the students' language skills and class participation. In her idea, the only negative point was that some students were still inactive or less active. The teacher suggested that encouraging these students with incentives like a reward or good grades can increase the usefulness of the gaming technique.

Consequently, the comparison of the results of the indicators 2,3, and 8 in two phases were applied to answer the first research question in finding the barriers to the student's participation and speaking in activities. Indicators 3 and 8 revealed that the inadequacy of activities and exercises, students' lack of linguistic knowledge, and their low English proficiency are the barriers preventing them from participating in activities and mastering their oral skills. These findings are in accordance with the finding of the research conducted by Baktash and Chalak (2015) who provided the reasons for students' reluctance in participating in activities. In another research, Yen and Danh (2021) declared that using students' mother tongues in EFL classes acts as a hindrance to mastering the oral skills by letting the students be passive members of the class and not pushing them to make efforts. The participants in Yen and Danh's (2021) study preferred using English more dominantly in class to have more opportunities to practice using the target language. The finding of Yen and Danh's (2021) research is also in line with the results of the second indicator in the present study considering using L1 as a hindrance to the use of English by the students.

Besides, the analysis of the indicators 1,4,5,6, and 7 in two phases implied the answer to the second research question. Similar to the current study which indicates an improvement in students' oral skills, Aziz and Kaur (2020), in a systematic review, concluded some benefits of using games in EFL classes like motivating the students, eliminating the barriers hindering students from participating in the class, involving students in fun and stress-free activities, and consequently enhancing their oral skills. Additionally, the findings of the studies by Hayati (2020), Alfulaih and Elsayed (2018), and Cheng (2018) all suggested that using gaming techniques in classes has many benefits, including motivating the students and helping them with the psychological aspects by reducing their anxiety levels, which all ultimately result in a better oral performance. Also, similar results were found by Aziz et al. (2021) and Shokarova (2020) who applied gaming techniques in virtual settings and obtained positive results.

5. Conclusion

In general, based on the data gathered in different phases, some of the barriers to students' reluctance and inability to speak and participate in activities can be concluded. For example, according to the 8th indicator, one of the reasons hindering students from speaking is the inadequacy of activities related to this skill. In addition, indicator 2 suggests that while students are allowed to use their native language freely, they find it difficult to speak English, and subsequently, they avoid practicing the speaking skill. Furthermore, the results of the final task as well as the third indicator reveal the lack of linguistic knowledge and vocabulary as another barrier to developing students' oral skills. The overall results of the games, final tasks, and the comparison of the indicators in two phases indicate the improvement in students' oral skills

and involvement in the class. Besides, as revealed by the results of the interviews with participants, positive attitudes were expressed toward game-based techniques. In this regard, the present study can guide teachers and materials, and developers, to select, prepare, and implement creative strategies like gaming to get the best results by having a joyful and relaxing virtual environment for learning. It can also encourage students to participate in activities of virtual classes and consequently foster their oral skills.

Some factors can be regarded as limitations of this research, including time limitation, connection problems, and software failure of the Shad application. Some of the students had problems with their digital devices. Furthermore, the student's previous experience with translation and using the native language in class made them inconvenient about using English.

This study provides some suggestions for future research. Sentence expanding games can be used to improve writing skills as well as speaking skills. Teachers can also use this kind of game as a warm-up activity or break between the classes. In addition, the digital format of this game is available, so it can be used both as a class activity or as entertainment for students' free time.

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