English Language Learners' Perception of Using Digital Games and L2 Willingness to Communicate

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Abstract

This paper reports on an exploratory study into the perception of using digital games and L2 willingness to communicate of English language learners. Forty-three participants divided into two groups completed a questionnaire on their perceived language competence as well as their position towards digital games. Then, they received thirty hours of English instruction that included the use of digital games. These games were designed to facilitate learning of new concepts being taught during regular class time while encouraging the use of the L2 orally. The participants received a second questionnaire after the treatment to assess their perception of the digital games and their effects on their speaking ability. The participants expressed to be more engaged in the digital gamified activities than in those that follow a more "traditional" approach. Most participants reported to have positive feelings towards the inclusion of these tools in their language instruction. However, the participants failed to see how their use of the oral language during these activities for

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communication increased. Thus, results indicate that while the use of digital games was perceived positively among the participants, it did not significantly increase their willingness to use oral communication in the L2. It is recommended that these activities be integrated in the language class as part of regular instruction to add variety, but their effects on improving the speaking ability remain inconclusive.

Keywords: *English Instruction, Language, Learners, Oral communication, Digital games*.

Resumen

Este informe de investigación presenta los resultados de un estudio de corte exploratorio en torno a la percepción del uso de juegos digitales y la disposición de los estudiantes de inglés como segunda lengua para comunicarse en este idioma. Cuarenta y tres participantes divididos en dos grupos completaron un cuestionario sobre lo que consideraban como sus competencias lingüísticas, así como su posición en cuanto a los juegos digitales. Posteriormente, los estudiantes encuestados recibieron treinta horas de clases que incluían el uso de juegos digitales. Estos juegos fueron diseñados para facilitar el aprendizaje de nuevos conceptos que se enseñan durante el horario regular de clase mientras se fomenta la comunicación oral de los estudiantes de inglés como segunda lengua. Una vez los estudiantes estuvieron familiarizados con el uso de los juegos digitales, los participantes recibieron un segundo cuestionario con el objetivo de evaluar su percepción de los juegos digitales y sus efectos en su habilidad para comunicarse oralmente. En la encuesta los participantes expresaron estar más comprometidos en las actividades digitales gamificadas que en aquellas que siguen un enfoque más "tradicional". La mayoría de los participantes reportaron positivamente la inclusión de estas herramientas en la enseñanza del inglés. Sin embargo, los participantes no vieron cómo durante el uso de los juegos digitales sus competencias de comunicación oral aumentaban o se fortalecían. Por lo tanto, los resultados indican que si bien el uso de juegos digitales fue percibido positivamente por los participantes, no

aumentó significativamente su disposición a comunicarse en inglés Se recomienda que estas actividades se integren en la clase de idiomas como parte de la instrucción regular para agregar variedad, pero sus efectos en la mejora de la capacidad comunicativa oral no son concluyentes.

Palabras clave: *Enseñanza en inglés, idioma, estudiantes, comunicación oral, juegos digitales*.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that mastery of the English language gives nonnative speakers a competitive edge. In Panama, where the demands of its economic growth and multicultural diversity are reflected in its academic offerings, it is not surprising that parents choose to enroll their children from a very young age in language institutes. It is believed that being able to speak a foreign language, particularly English, allows people to access better academic and professional opportunities, which is one of the reasons people devote their time and energy to learning the language. While there are many great programs for learning English on the market, the reality is that little has changed regarding the teaching methodology, which is why it is not surprising to see people expressing their inability to communicate in the foreign language. In this regard, the introduction of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) into the curriculum has allowed teachers to bring the gap between the classroom and the outside world closer by providing more appealing content that is relevant to the learners. Now, as much as the language institutes in Panama offer a somewhat immersive environment and an interesting approach, the learners have limited opportunities to be in contact with the L2 outside class. In class, affective factors, such as a low self-perceived competence, fear of making mistakes, and anxiety also prevent learners from using the language orally as much as they should. Therefore, their opportunities to use the language meaningfully, and especially develop their speaking ability, are reduced.

In order to provide learners a safe way to practice the language, digital games – through PCs or mobile devices – emerge as an opportunity to interact with the foreign language in a meaningful way. That being said, it is the premise of the researcher that by gamifying the activities that learners have to perform in and out of the classroom it is possible to engage them in class work and increase their willingness to communicate in the L2. In general, motivating students is not easy, as motivation itself is based on a variety of factors in which no single approach will work all the time and with all the students (Jackson, 2011 p. 18); however, Reinders and Wattana (2014, p. 103) have identified some factors that teachers should consider and can manipulate in order to improve motivation to participate and encourage meaningful language use, such as cultivating group cohesiveness, lowering students' anxiety, and making lesson content interesting and relevant among others. These factors can be addressed through the inclusion of digital games in academic activities.

According to Wright, Betteridge, and Buckby, games are entertaining, engaging, and often fun, activities in which learners play and interact with others. They are a great aid in language learning since they promote sustained interest and work (2006, pp. 1-2). More specifically, digital games provide the added value of technology to language learning; Godwin-Jones states these games provide a rich opportunity to connect with young learners who have limited interest in formal education, since digital gaming already plays a major role in their lives of many of them (2014, p. 9). By using digital games in the classroom, teachers can address student's engagement in class work in a more appealing environment for teenagers. Also, L2 fluency and willingness to communicate could be improved since the learners would be interacting in an activity that is often associated with feelings of pleasure and entertainment. Sykes adds that another value of digital games is that they offer a way to overcome challenges such as intercultural competence, pragmatics, and learning and performance strategies which can be difficult to address via other means (October 2013, p. 32). In this regard, digital games, especially simulation games are a great resource in fields such as medicine, military, construction, aviation, service companies, etc.; however, in education there is still some reticence to implement them. Godwin-Jones

(2014) identified and analyzed recent developments in the area of digital games and language learning, and offered some insights on the practical and pedagogical obstacles in the way of incorporating games in language lessons. Still, more studies are needed before digital games can be used in Panamanian schools and incorporated in the lesson plan as valid learning resources. It is expected that this study can address some of the concerns regarding the perception that digital games have little value as educational resources.

The use of digital games in education has already been documented in ELT research. In the same way, L2 willingness to communicate, although a very relative new concept that is linked to motivation, has been documented. However, recent research on the effects of using digital games on students' willingness to communicate is scarce.

Peng (2006) researched about the relationship between L2 willingness to communicate (WTC) and integrative motivation and whether integrative motivation was a strong predictor of L2 WTC. 174 Chinese medical college students (average age 18.8 years) participated in this study. They were administered a two-part questionnaire that was previously designed and used in other studies, measured L2 WTC inside the classroom and integrative motivation. Data collected were statistically analyzed using SPSS. The findings suggested that L2 WTC correlates with integrative motivation and that in an EFL context, motivation – a powerful driving force – stimulates L2 learning and L2 communication. Similarly, Knell and Chi (2013) also performed a cross-sectional study of the roles of motivation, affective attitudes, and willingness to communicate in an immersion program. In this case, the participants were Chinese primary (immersion / non-immersion) students of a language institute, grades 4 to 6. Much like the older participants in the study cited before, these children had to take surveys in order to examine a variety of affective variables important to L2 learning. They also took the oral language and reading achievement tests. Again, the results indicated that willingness to communicate and perceived communication competence were strongly related to success in English proficiency.

Schaaf (2012) carried out an action research project to compare Digital-Based Game Learning (DBGL) activities with effective-research based learning strategies in order to identify differences in student engagement and time-on-task behavior. The games selected were those browser-based games that met lesson objectives, whereas the alternative learning strategies selected were those interactive, stimulating, and engaging for students.

The participants of this study were approximately 280 students in grades 3 to 5 (ages eight to eleven years) in 12 different homerooms from a public school. The researcher selected them due to their level of maturity, honesty, and attention span. These students were assigned to either a control or experimental group, and administered the treatment over eight lesson cycles during which they were observed and surveyed. After data were collected and analyzed, the author concluded that DBGL does promote student engagement and should not be considered a waste of school time or a meaningless task. Finally, Schaaf recommended that DGBL should be included in lesson plans when appropriate to provide a fun and engaging experience for learners.

In another study, Chick (2014) investigated L2 gaming and learning practices in young people's everyday lives in a twelve-month exploratory study in East Asia context. In her multiple case study approach, she set out to study how Chinese-speaking gamers practice autonomous learning and explore their practices of digital gaming and L2 learning out of class. Chick applied Benson's four dimensions of out-of-class learning – location, formality, locus of control, and pedagogy – to better establish the contributions of L2 gaming to L2 learning. She also added a fifth dimension – trajectory – to reflect gaming practice management over time. The participants of this study were selected from a population of Year 1 Chinese-speaking undergraduates in an English-medium Hong Kong university who had been contacted via participation call. One hundred and fifty-three students responded, but only the fifty students who explicitly reported using digital games for L2 learning in their applications were interviewed in depth. Following the interviews, the researcher selected ten gamers to participate in the one-year study. The participants, six males and four females came from China, Malaysia and Hong Kong; they all spoke either

Cantonese or Mandarin as their first language and learned English as an L2. As for their game preferences, eight of them regularly played English-language games, two preferred Japanese-language games. For data collection, she included gaming sessions, stimulated recall, focus group discussion, individual interviews and online discussion forums. Chick concluded that L2 language learning is not completely incidental, especially when the gamer applied learning strategies learned from school to L2 gaming. Additionally, she observed that the most improvement occurred in vocabulary learning and that in the absence of clear instruction or pedagogy progress in L2 learning was restrained. Overall, she concluded that digital gaming facilitated language learning both by interaction with the game and with other gamers, through paratext and language learning advices.

Reinders and Wattana (2014) conducted research to establish the effects of digital game playing on students' willingness to communicate in the L2. The participants were a group of thirty Thai learners of English as a foreign language enrolled in a University language course of different L2 proficiency levels, and limited use and exposure to English outside the classroom. All of the participants had experience in playing computer games; additionally, they were sufficiently proficient in synchronous communication and typing skills necessary to engage in interaction during game play. The study was carried out in a 15-week course of English for information technology that was designed and taught by one of the researchers. The classes met for 180 minutes a week divided in two sessions, and twenty percent of each class hours was used for playing. The game selected was slightly modified to make it suitable for language learning. This game emphasized interaction among the players through text or voice chatting and between players and the game through controlled dialogues which the participants have to answer by typing a reply. The researchers administered a series of questionnaires to assess the students' perception on their willingness to communicate, anxiety, confidence, and perceived communicative competence before and after the treatment. Their results suggested that digital game play had a positive effect in the language learning process. The participants reported feeling more willing to interact during game play, were more confident to talk to others and ask for

help. They were also less anxious, not as concerned about making mistakes, and their self-perceived communicative confidence increased. Overall, they considered that game play developed their L2 fluency.

METHODS

Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to investigate the English language learners' perception of using digital games to promote the use of the target language in class Therefore the research question is How do English language learners perceive the use of digital games on their L2 willingness to communicate?

Definition of Willingness to Communicate

Willingness to communicate (WTC), has been defined by MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (as cited in Dörnyei and Ryan, 2015) as the "learners' psychological readiness to initiate communication given the choice and opportunity". WTC is considered to be between having the competence to use the language and actually using the language. Building on this, in the present study the construct WTC is defined as the learners' intention to engage in communication using the L2 at a particular situation. The intention can be determined by the perception of willingness to use the target language for oral communication, and communicative self-confidence feelings in the L2 derived from low anxiety levels and sufficient levels of self-perceived language competence in the target language. These factors are considered key since it is expected that digital games provide a non-threatening environment that will promote language use. Digital games is any game that is played using an electronic device. In this study, digital games are interactive activities (challenging and entertaining) that are designed by the instructor to facilitate learning English.

Instruments

Two sets of questionnaires were developed by the researcher to identify 1) the learners' perception of digital games; and 2) the learners' perception of their own language proficiency and readiness to use the target language in communicative tasks. It was important to determine how learners perceived themselves as the literature suggests that there are many reasons that affect a person's willingness to communicate in a L2. The

questions were structured in a five-point Likert scale. These questionnaires were administered before the treatment and again at the end of the thirty hours of language instruction. The games selected for this study were designed using two online platforms: Kahoot! and Quizlet. Kahoot! is a free game-based platform which was used to create formative assessment in the form of games. These games were played using the learners' cell phones. Quizlet is an online flashcard generator that helps students learn the definition of a word, learn how to spell it, and play games with a set of flashcards. It creates practice tests that consist of true and false, matching, multiple choice, and fill-in-the-blank as well. Several games were automatically generated using this tool and the learners played using the desktop computers in the lab.

These two platforms allowed the researcher to produce activities that were connected to the content being taught while providing the visual appeal, interactivity, and immediate feedback that comes with playing games. Moreover, these activities were used as part of the regular set of educational resources in the lesson plan.

The Participants

There were forty-three second-year students participating in the study divided in two groups: the morning group had nineteen (19) students of which twelve (12) were girls and seven (7) were boys, whereas the afternoon group had twenty-four (24) students, nineteen (19) girls and five (5) boys. They were teenagers aged sixteen or seventeen. Besides, they were all students from top public institutions in the city and they have an average GPA of 4.0 or higher in their schools. Moreover, all the students are Panamanians and their language proficiency is at the intermediate level. They had positive feelings about the use of technology in class and learning English. Finally, they were used to working in groups, pairs, and individually, and were willing to participate in all class activities suggested by their instructor / researcher.

The course

The study was carried out while the participants were taking English classes under the communicative approach. The class met from Monday to Friday and each session lasted one hundred and twenty (120) minutes; hence, in a week the students received ten (10) hours of English instruction. Lessons are focused on a topic, and tasks are proposed in order to achieve the communicative objective as well as the language objective set.

The inclusion of the digital games was implemented during 25% of the class session and were part of the formative assessment of the class. In the case of the activities that involved the tool Kahoot!, the learners had to answer questions about class content by reading a statement or watching a video and then selecting the correct answer from four different options. For these activities, the learners worked in groups so they could discuss orally the best answer as a team before choosing one of the options. Kahoot! was selected specifically because it allowed group work and was highly engaging and interactive. Besides the instructor / researcher had complete control over the content that was created. As for Quizlet, the learners were encouraged to work on new vocabulary by going through the games that were generated by the platform. These games often included matching term and definition, typing the correct word, or selecting the correct definition all before time was up. By playing with the vocabulary through the computer, memorization of new terms and definitions was expected to be more enjoyable and that it would allow the participants to advance at their own pace.

These games were part of the ongoing formative assessment of one unit of the program on the topic of cultural awareness, and the participants played the games at different times during the instruction. The unit covered five lessons and the main pedagogical objective was to have the learners to understand the purpose and importance of guidelines and etiquette rules when interacting with others. By introducing the digital games along with more traditional resources, the participants could practice the vocabulary and language skills in a fun way. Additionally, it was expected that these activities would lower the

affective filter, thus providing them with a non-threatening environment that would encourage more active participation.

RESULTS

In the first questionnaire, the participants were asked to identified their willingness to use the L2 in different situation in the classroom and rate them on a scale from "totally unwilling" to "totally willing." Their answers suggested that the learners perceived classroom interactions as important sources of opportunities for engaging in oral communication.

Table 1. Willingness to use the L2 in class.

	Totally unwilling	Somewhat willing	Neutral	Very willing	Totally willing	Mean Scores
Talk to my classmates about class activities and assignments.	0,00%	5,88%	35,29%	20,59%	**38,24%**	3,91
Talk to my classmates about topics not related to the class.	5,88%	8,82%	**47,06%**	11,76%	26,47%	3,44
Ask for permission to do activities outside the classroom.	0,00%	5,88%	26,47%	14,71%	**52,94%**	4,15
Express ideas,	0,00%	5,88%	17,65%	35,29%	**41,18%**	4,12

feelings, and opinions about class related topics.					
Ask questions about class related activities to complete in the classroom.	0,00%	8,82%	17,65%	23,53%	**50,00%**	4,15
Talk to my teacher about topics that are not related to the class.	8,82%	5,88%	**35,29%**	23,53%	26,47%	3,53
Listen to my classmates speak in English.	3,03%	0,00%	12,12%	27,27%	**57,58%**	4,36
Read instructions or texts aloud voluntarily.	6,06%	3,03%	18,18%	24,24%	**48,48%**	4,06
Start conversations with my classmates in English, even if	2,94%	5,88%	20,59%	**35,29%**	**35,29%**	3,94

said conversation is not part of the class work.						
Respond to my classmates in English when I am addressed in that language, even if is not part of the class work.	2,94%	5,88%	5,88%	41,18%	**44,12%**	4,18

Additionally, the participants were asked to rate the situations they identified themselves with on a scale from "completely disagree" to "completely agree." These statements were devised to assess the learners' communicative self-confidence, covering anxiety and self-perceived communicative competence. From their answers, it could be observed that fear of negative evaluation was the main reason for not using the L2, followed by speaking nervousness, low linguistic proficiency, and finally low L2 self-confidence.

Table 2. Level of confidence using the L2.

	Completely disagree	Disagree	Indifferent	Agree	Completely agree	Mean Scores
I worry about making mistakes in front of my teacher/classmates.	17,65%	0,00%	20,59%	**52,94%**	8,82%	3,35

In general, I find it easy to communicate myself in English.	0,00%	8,82%	**38,24 %**	35,29 %	17,65 %	3,6 2
In general, I understand what my teacher/classmat es say to me in English.	0,00%	2,94%	5,88%	44,12 %	**47,06 %**	4,3 5
I feel nervous when I have to talk in English in front of my teacher/classmat es.	14,71 %	8,82%	26,47 %	**38,24 %**	11,76 %	3,2 4
I believe that my teacher/classmat es cannot understand me due to my poor language skills.	26,47 %	**29,41 %**	14,71 %	23,53 %	5,88%	2,5 3
I believe I know enough vocabulary to complete class activities.	0,00%	11,76 %	14,71 %	**52,94 %**	20,59 %	3,8 2

I can express myself easily in English about any topic I choose.	2,94%	17,65 %	**32,35 %**	**32,35 %**	14,71 %	3,3 8
I only participate in class when I am sure I have the right answer.	11,76 %	29,41 %	14,71 %	**38,24 %**	5,88%	2,9 7
I believe that participating in class helps me improve my fluency.	0,00%	0,00%	8,82%	26,47 %	**64,71 %**	4,5 6
I prefer the activities that do not require talking in English in front of my classmates.	**45,45 %**	18,18 %	30,30 %	6,06%	0,00%	1,9 7

Figure1. Main reasons behind L2 Unwillingness to communicate
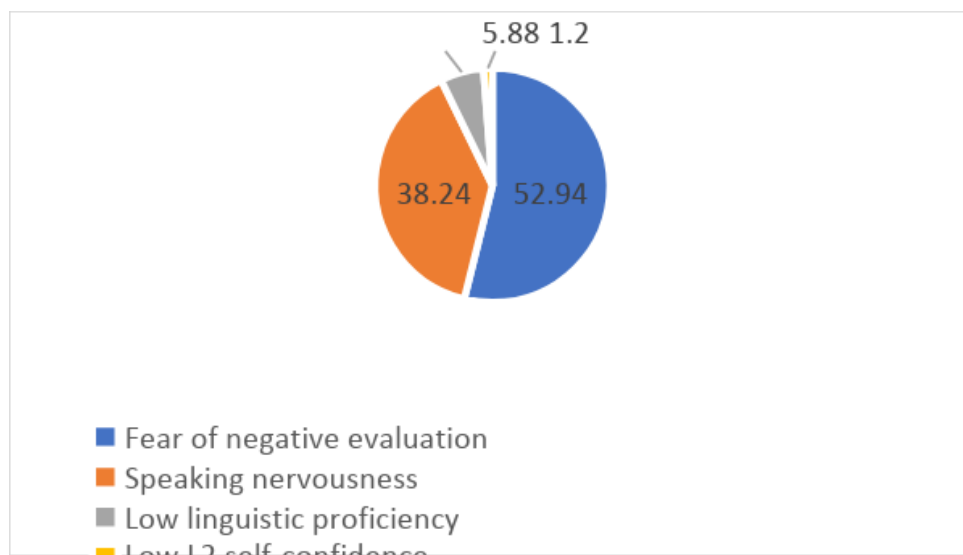
When inquired about their digital playing habits for leisure time, the participants revealed that they engaged in this form of games at different frequency levels.

Table 3. Frequency of use of digital games for leisure time

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always	Mean Score
Use of digital games for leisure time	0,00%	25,81	**38,71**	16,13	19,35	3,29

The participants were asked about their preferred platform for playing digital games. It was not surprising that their answers revealed they the majority usually play these games on their cell phones or tablets.

Figure 2. Type of device preferred for playing digital games.

In the second questionnaire, the participants were asked some of the reasons why they considered the playing the digital games were appealing to them.

Table 4. Reasons digital games are appealing to learners.

There is a goal to achieve	**84,85%**
I can collect points, rewards, etc.	42,42%
It's random	6,06%
The story presented is interesting.	51,52%
It has good graphics and effects.	48,48%
I have several opportunities to obtain my goal.	6,06%

The participants were asked to select what they believed was improved in their learning process as a result of playing digital games in class. Their answers indicate they considered that the digital games were beneficial to the process.

Table 5. Aspects improved by playing digital games in class.

attention	35,29%
assimilation and retention of information	52,94%
organization	17,65%
creativity	47,06%
analysis	64,71%
Information-searching skills	35,29%
decision-making skills	52,94%
problem-resolution skills	58,82%

On a more personal level, the learners answered how they perceived that playing digital games in class could benefit them based on how they felt after the class sessions. Interestingly, the participants did not see learning in a fun way as the main benefit of using this type of activities in class.

Table 6. Benefits of playing digital games in class.

Help pass time	61,76%
Improve self-esteem	14,71%
Improve learning	55,88%
Make friends	41,18%
Reach learning goals	44,12%
Learn in a fun way	5,88%

There is not a benefit	0,00%

Finally, on the question about using digital games in class most participants expressed that these games should definitively be a part of the strategies used to facilitate learning in class while a minority considered they should not.

Figure 3. Should digital games be included in class?
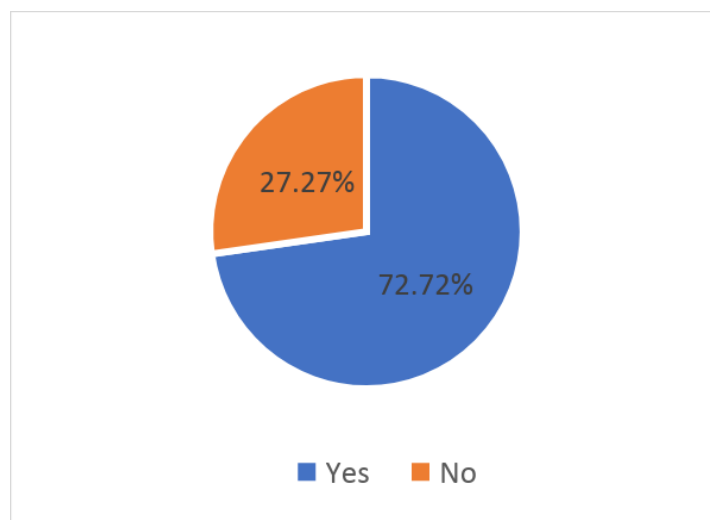
The reasons in favor suggest that they believe these games offer an atmosphere that is conducive to learning. Comments such as "si es para aprendizaje están bien" (If it is for learning, it's OK) and "si porque tal vez a los estudiantes que no saben pueden aprender a utilizar este tipo de juegos y podrían aumentar su desarrollo intelectual" (Yes, because maybe students don't know that they can learn how to use this type of games and improve their mental development), support this idea. Other comments like "si puede ser, depende del juego que utilices" (It could be, it depends on the game used) and "si porque ayudarían a mejorar la unión y comunicación del salón" (Yes, because [digital games] could help improve the bonds and communication in the classroom) also favor the use of these strategies in class.

On the other hand, reasons against using games suggest that learners believe playing games are not suitable or appropriate for the academic setting "Sería útil pero como es en la escuela no resultaría" (it could be useful but since it is in the school it wouldn't work), "no porque a la escuela vamos a estudiar" (no because we go to school to study). Other reasons given by learners to be against using games are that digital games may in fact become distractors: "no porque podrían entretener a los estudiantes"(no because they could distract students); or they are not appealing to everybody: "no porque hay personas que no les gusta y también puede darse el caso de que las personas lo hagan como una obligación y no como un medio para aprender" (no because there are people who don't like them and also it could happen that people play them because they have to and not as a way to learn).

DISCUSSION

Willingness to communicate in a L2 is defined as the readiness to engage in conversation when opportunity arises. In this study, it was observed that the participants were able to identify such opportunities as they present in the classroom; yet it seems other factors influence the actual decision to initiate or maintain oral communication in the L2. According to Alemi, Tajeddin, Mesbah, (2013) individual differences (proficiency level, length of studying, being abroad, and communicating with foreigners) have a partial effect on willingness to communicate (WTC). In the study on WTC of EFL learners in a Turkish contex, Öz, Demirezen, and Pourfeiz (2014) found out that indicated that communication competence and communication apprehension were strong predictors of WTC while motivational factors indirectly influenced it. Cameron (2014) identified the following factors as strong influencers of WTC: self-perceived competence, personality, anxiety, motivation, and the importance of English with studying Iranian permanent migrants EFL students in New Zealand. Cameron concluded that the factors that affected these learners' WTC were mostly dynamic rather than stable predispositions. In the present study the lack of confidence is not driven by feelings of self-perceived low language proficiency, but by affective factors such as fear of making mistakes in front of others and anxiety. While the literature suggests the factors behind the unwillingness to communicate in a L2 are varied

and most likely rooted on the learners' low linguistic competence, in this case the reasons for not using the language orally had to do with the affective component. Participants showed interest in activities that included the use of technology in class. They expressed that presenting language through digital was new to them. Overall, the activities that included the use of technology to promote friendly competition – Kahhot! – were the most engaging. When the participants were in the computer lab and worked individually on gamified activities (using Quizlet), they reported positive feelings towards the resource as well. Participants also reported that the inclusion of games in the language instruction has helped them memorize vocabulary and social language better. Observation of the participants' performance during the activities that included digital games indicated that the presence of gamified instruction did not seem to increase the spontaneous use of the target language significantly. In fact, in some cases engaged participants tended to switch to their mother tongue more often (perhaps because winning or losing was involved). Also, it was observed that when new language was presented through games the vocabulary recall was better, but again not significantly. It is important to highlight that even though the learners received the inclusion of digital games in the class work positively, their feelings towards these activities are still mixed. They expressed that not all games are appropriate for the classroom; however, they can have a positive effect in the group dynamics. Moreover, they also reported that not everybody likes playing games and that it would defeat any educational purpose. These suggest that instructors must identify the participants' learning styles before introducing digital games into the classroom because they are still viewed more as ways to pass time than considered for their educational value. At this point of the study it seems that digital games seem to work better for promoting autonomous learning. This is beneficial for teachers of large groups and/or mixed abilities classes. It is suggested that further studies are conducted on this topic to better understand the effects of digital gamified instruction in language learning, particularly on the affective component.

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