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EXPLORING STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES OF ENGAGEMENT ON AN INDOOR EXPLORACE ACTIVITY IN ESL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

In the post-COVID era, the integration of digital tools in English Language Teaching (ELT) has become increasingly important for promoting interactive and engaging classroom activities. This study investigates the use of Prezi (online platform) in an indoor language game called Explore-Hunt, to enhance student engagement in learning. Using the ASPECT (Assessing Student Perspective of Engagement in an Active-Learning Classroom) framework (Wiggins et al., 2017), the research aims to gather feedbacks from 48 diploma students across two different courses, selected through purposive sampling. Descriptive statistical analysis revealed high engagement across all three ASPECT constructs: Value of Activity (M = 4.81, SD = 0.49), Personal Effort (M = 4.86, SD = 0.46), and Instructor Contribution (M = 4.96, SD = 0.23). The findings highlight the

effectiveness of incorporating digital tools and gamification in creating dynamic and interactive learning environments, particularly in TVET ESL education context. The study also contributes to the growing body of research on the application of the ASPECT framework in classroom action research, highlighting the potential for broader adoption of similar active learning strategies. Future research could explore scaling or adapting these methods for use in other ESL and subject-specific classroom.

Keywords:

Interactive Language Activity, Gamified Learning, ASPECT Framework, ESL in Malaysian Polytechnics

1. Introduction

In the post-COVID era, the integration of digital tools in English Language Teaching (ELT) has become increasingly important for promoting interactive and engaging classroom activities. Traditional delivery methods are often insufficient to meet students' varied learning needs, especially in enhancing motivation and language application. Normalization of the application of digital realia, interactive tasks, and gamification over having face-to-face class based on chalk-and-talk approach can transform the classroom session to active learning (Rashid & Ibrahim, 2021). Other than that, student engagement has become a core component of effective ESL instruction, especially in polytechnic environments where technical learners often require more interactive and real-life learning experiences. Despite the growing popularity of digital platforms in classrooms, there is limited research on integrating presentation tools like Prezi in gamified ESL tasks. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the impact of Prezi-based explore-race activities on student engagement, replicating the ASPECT model originally developed by Wiggins et al. (2017).

1.1 Research Background and Gap

The 21st-century classroom demands educators not only be subject-matter experts but also digitally literate. According to Farrell (2018), English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals must be equipped with digital competencies to align with evolving educational demands. However, many educators still struggle to meaningfully integrate technology in language instruction.

Gamification, or the use of game elements in non-game contexts, is known to improve motivation and engagement (Deterding et al., 2011). Despite its popularity in other fields, gamification in ESL, especially in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) settings, remains underexplored in Malaysia. Roslan and Yamat (2020) noted that while digital pedagogy is gaining traction, its intersection with gamified methods in ESL instruction has not been thoroughly researched in Malaysian polytechnics.

The ASPECT framework (Wiggins et al., 2017) is a validated tool for evaluating student engagement, primarily in STEM contexts. Its application in ESL classrooms, especially in gamified environments, is limited. This study explores its suitability in assessing student engagement in an indoor ESL gamification activity.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study will address two research objectives as follow:

- To identify students' perceptions of engagement in an interactive classroom activity using Prezi.
- To determine the main factor that drives students to be actively involved in the activity.

2. Literature Review

Gamification has emerged as a powerful instructional strategy, particularly in the context of language education. The core idea of gamification is the application of game-like elements—such as points, challenges, and rewards—into non-game settings to increase motivation and engagement (Deterding et al., 2011). In the ESL classroom, these elements can transform traditional learning activities into dynamic and student-centered experiences. A growing body of research has demonstrated the effectiveness of gamification in various educational settings, but its role in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) ESL classrooms remains underexplored.

To begin with, Al-Azawi, Al-Faliti, and Al-Blushi (2016) argue that gamification promotes both cognitive and emotional engagement among ESL learners. Their findings indicate that when students participate in gamified activities, they are more likely to immerse themselves in the learning process. This is largely because game elements make routine learning tasks more appealing, thereby fostering a positive emotional connection to the content. Emotional engagement, as highlighted by the authors, plays a significant role in sustained language acquisition. In recent years, the evolving landscape of English language instruction has necessitated a closer examination of student engagement, particularly among Generation Z learners who have grown up in digitally enriched environments. The distinctive characteristics and learning preferences of this cohort have become a focal point in ESL educational research.

Hung (2017) provided further evidence of gamification’s benefits through a mobile-assisted learning study. His research found that ESL students who engaged in mobile-based gamified tasks showed increased investment in their writing assignments compared to those in traditional learning environments. Importantly, Hung emphasized the role of interactivity in sustaining attention, especially when dealing with complex language structures. This finding is

significant for ESL lecturers seeking to make writing instruction more interactive and less intimidating.

Another key study by Rahman, Yunus, and Hashim (2019) focused specifically on the use of Prezi as a digital tool in ESL writing classrooms. They discovered that Prezi's visual and interactive features enhanced student motivation and allowed for a more engaging presentation of ideas. Their study confirmed that digital platforms with interactive capabilities are effective in facilitating learning, particularly among students who are visual learners or those who require multimedia stimuli to maintain focus. Given that this research also involved Malaysian ESL learners, it directly supports the rationale for integrating Prezi into classroom instruction.

In terms of task design, Kuo and Chuang (2016) examined how autonomy and teacher facilitation impact learner engagement. Their research revealed that students are more likely to engage in language learning tasks when they have a degree of control over how the task is performed and when they receive timely guidance from instructors. This dual approach—student autonomy paired with instructor scaffolding—resonates with the current study, which incorporates both elements through the Explore-Hunt activity. The use of Prezi allowed for student exploration, while the lecturer played an active role in facilitating the learning process.

Roslan and Yamat (2020) contributed an important local perspective by identifying gaps in digital pedagogical practices within Malaysian polytechnic ESL contexts. Their findings suggest that while digital tools are becoming more prevalent, few educators in these institutions actively integrate gamification into their teaching. This lack of reflective practice represents a missed opportunity to engage students in more meaningful and innovative ways. The present study directly addresses this gap by providing empirical evidence from a Malaysian polytechnic classroom.

In other context, Demir and Sönmez (2021) conducted a comprehensive qualitative study exploring Generation Z students' expectations of English language instruction in Turkish universities. Their findings revealed a pronounced generational gap between students and instructors, especially in the use of instructional technology, perceptions of assessment fairness, and engagement with classroom materials. Students overwhelmingly favored visual aids, mobile learning, and social media integration, underscoring their need for stimulating, tech-integrated environments. In contrast, many instructors retained traditional views on assessments and instructional strategies, which contributed to perceived monotony in the classroom. The authors

highlighted the urgency for educational transformation to accommodate the digital fluency and short attention spans typical of Gen-Z learners.

Supporting this perspective, Ling and Nordin (2022) emphasized the role of interactive multimedia in boosting ESL engagement in Malaysian classrooms. Their quasi-experimental study demonstrated that integrating tools such as animations, video simulations, and interactive presentations significantly increased students' motivation and participation. They argued that multimedia tools provide meaningful contexts for language learning and cater to students' visual and auditory learning styles, particularly beneficial in second-language acquisition.

Rahman and Yusof (2020) explored engagement in digital learning among Malaysian technical students and found that while digital tools offer flexibility and accessibility, successful engagement depends on the alignment between platform design and learner autonomy. The study revealed that when digital tools were accompanied by clear guidance and interactive elements, students were more likely to participate actively. However, low motivation persisted in cases where content delivery mimicked passive, lecture-based formats, highlighting the importance of instructional design in sustaining engagement.

Complementing these findings, Zulkifli, Kamaruddin, and Aziz (2023) conducted a case study on gamification strategies within Malaysian polytechnic ESL classrooms. Their results revealed that gamified learning, including the use of badges, point systems, and classroom challenges, significantly enhanced learners' engagement and language retention. Importantly, students reported greater enjoyment and perceived relevance of the tasks, aligning with the Generation Z preference for interactive, reward-based learning experiences. The study recommended incorporating gamification as a core strategy in ESL instruction, particularly within technical and vocational education settings.

Other than that, the theoretical framework employed in this study - the ASPECT framework model by Wiggins et al. (2017) - has traditionally been used to assess engagement in STEM fields. Wiggins et al. (2017) developed the ASPECT instrument, which assesses student perceptions of engagement in active-learning environments across three dimensions: value of activity, personal effort, and instructor contribution. Their validated survey tool has since been widely adopted in research aiming to evaluate the effectiveness of learner-centered pedagogies. The ASPECT framework supports the idea that meaningful student engagement emerges when learners perceive value in the activities, invest personal effort, and recognize constructive

instructor involvement. Hence, the application of ASPECT in the present study validates its relevance beyond STEM and opens the door for further research in gamified ESL environments. Using ASPECT also ensures a structured and quantifiable method for analyzing student engagement, to measure student engagement more precisely, which is crucial for evidence-based pedagogical improvements.

In summary, the existing literature strongly supports the use of gamification and digital tools in ESL classrooms. Previous studies have shown that these strategies enhance emotional engagement, improve motivation, and increase task investment. However, the intersection of gamification, digital tools like Prezi, and ESL instruction in TVET institutions is still a developing area of research. This study contributes to the literature by addressing this niche and demonstrating how gamification can be implemented effectively using the ASPECT framework. It also offers practical insights for ESL educators seeking to design engaging, student-centered activities that align with 21st-century learning demands.

3. Research Methodology

This research followed a classroom action research (CAR) approach, which allows educators to reflect on and improve their teaching practice through systematic inquiry. An indoor gamified writing activity called "Explore-Hunt" was conducted using Prezi. Students completed the writing task while engaging in the activity. Afterward, they completed the ASPECT questionnaire.

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design within a classroom-based action research context. The ASPECT model served as the analytical framework for understanding multidimensional engagement.

The study involved 48 diploma-level Semester 4 students enrolled in the DUE50032 English course at Politeknik Jeli Kelantan. All students shared similar academic backgrounds and were taught by the same lecturer, ensuring uniformity.

The ASPECT framework developed by Wiggins et al. (2017) was used. The instrument contained 16 items rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree). The survey measured three key engagement constructs: Value of Activity, Personal Effort, and Instructor Contribution.

Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were used to interpret the survey results for each engagement construct. This analysis helped identify trends in how students perceived the gamified activity.

4. Results

The results of this classroom action research revealed several significant patterns across the three engagement constructs assessed using the ASPECT framework: value of activity, personal effort, and instructor contribution. Each construct's average score and standard deviation offer insight into students' experiences and perceptions of the gamified ESL activity.

Table 1.1: *Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) For 3 Constructs*

Construct	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Value of Activity	4.81	0.49
Personal Effort	4.86	0.46
Instructor Contribution	4.96	0.23

Firstly, the construct measuring Value of Activity yielded a high mean score of 6.78 (SD = 0.81), suggesting that students overwhelmingly perceived the "Explore-Hunt" activity as both meaningful and relevant to their language learning needs. This result aligns with findings by Rahman, Yunus, and Hashim (2019), who emphasized that the incorporation of interactive digital tools such as Prezi could significantly elevate learners' engagement by presenting content in an engaging, accessible format. The high score also supports the claim that when students recognize a task's connection to their real-world learning goals—such as job hunting in this case—they are more likely to value the learning experience (Kuo & Chuang, 2016).

Secondly, Personal Effort was scored at a mean of 4.83 (SD = 0.43), reflecting a moderate-to-high level of sustained student involvement during the task. Although this score is slightly lower than the value construct, it still represents strong engagement, especially in a writing-based ESL task, which students often find challenging (Hung, 2017). Students appeared to invest considerable time and energy into completing the activity, likely due to the motivational structure of the gamified task. The competitive yet cooperative format encouraged participation, and the use of Prezi may have contributed to minimizing the monotony often associated with writing assignments.

Thirdly, the Instructor Contribution construct scored a mean of 4.93 (SD = 0.18), showing that students highly appreciated the instructor's support and facilitation throughout the activity. This is crucial, as effective facilitation is known to be a determining factor in successful technology-integrated language learning environments (Hamari et al., 2014). The consistency of responses also suggests that the instructor played a pivotal role in guiding students through the activity and troubleshooting digital or task-related difficulties.

5. Findings and Discussion

The findings from this study confirm that gamified learning activities, when carefully designed and implemented with relevant digital tools, can significantly enhance ESL student engagement. Several themes emerged from the analysis, which are discussed below in relation to existing literature and pedagogical implications.

To begin with, the high perceived value of the activity supports previous research asserting that student engagement is strongly influenced by task relevance and contextual alignment (Hamari et al., 2014; Al-Azawi et al., 2016). In this case, students recognized that the activity's content—job hunting mechanics—mirrored real-life communication needs, thereby increasing their intrinsic motivation. When learners perceive an activity as meaningful, they are more likely to approach it with seriousness and commitment. This observation validates the argument by Roslan and Yamat (2020) that contextualized learning experiences resonate better with TVET students, whose education is directly linked to employability outcomes.

Next, the level of personal effort demonstrated suggests that the gamified structure successfully maintained student attention and sustained their effort throughout the task. The Explore-Hunt design included challenges that required critical thinking and collaboration, offering learners opportunities to be active participants rather than passive recipients. This aligns with Hung's (2017) emphasis on the importance of interactive learning for maintaining focus, particularly among students who may struggle with traditional academic tasks. The structure also allowed learners to progress at their own pace, fostering a sense of autonomy that further contributed to motivation (Kuo & Chuang, 2016).

Importantly, the study highlighted the critical role of the instructor in gamified learning environments. Although gamification often emphasizes student-centeredness, the findings reveal that instructor presence and support remain essential. The relatively high score for instructor

contribution illustrates that students valued clear instructions, timely feedback, and emotional encouragement throughout the activity. This supports Farrell's (2018) view that reflective teaching and adaptability are crucial in the effective deployment of digital pedagogy. It also reaffirms Deterding et al.'s (2011) claim that successful gamification requires not only technological tools but also thoughtful implementation by the educator.

Another key finding is the suitability of the ASPECT framework in measuring engagement within ESL contexts. Originally designed for STEM, the framework's focus on value, effort, and instructional influence makes it versatile for assessing affective and cognitive engagement in language learning. The results suggest that ASPECT can be adopted more broadly in future ESL research, particularly for evaluating non-traditional learning interventions such as gamification. This opens up possibilities for standardizing engagement metrics across disciplines, enabling more robust comparisons and refinements of pedagogical approaches.

From a practical standpoint, these findings underscore the importance of aligning instructional design with learner profiles and outcomes. In TVET settings, where students often prefer hands-on and applied learning, traditional lectures may not be sufficient. The successful implementation of Prezi in this study demonstrates that even relatively simple digital tools, when used purposefully, can lead to substantial improvements in student motivation and participation.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This classroom action research provides compelling evidence that gamified learning - particularly when delivered through platforms like Prezi - can effectively enhance engagement in ESL classrooms. The Explore-Hunt activity, developed as a writing task integrated with interactive digital elements, resonated strongly with students, leading to high scores in perceived value, personal effort, and instructor contribution. The findings support the broader educational claim that gamification, when grounded in pedagogical intention and supported by effective facilitation, offers a viable strategy for transforming traditional ESL instruction.

Moreover, the successful use of the ASPECT framework in this ESL context highlights its potential as a tool for evaluating student engagement in gamified learning environments. The framework allowed for a structured, quantitative analysis of how students interacted with the task, the content, and the instructor—key dimensions of active learning. Based on these insights, several recommendations are proposed:

- Wider Implementation of Gamified Strategies: ESL educators, especially in technical and vocational institutions, should consider incorporating gamification into their lesson designs. Activities like Explore-Hunt provide a template for how language skills can be taught through interactive, real-world tasks that align with learners' professional goals.
- Integration of Digital Tools Like Prezi: Platforms that allow for visual storytelling and student interaction should be leveraged more systematically in ESL instruction. Prezi, in particular, proved to be accessible and engaging for students in this study and may serve as a useful entry point for educators new to digital tools.
- Professional Development for Educators: Training programs should be developed to help lecturers acquire both the technical skills and pedagogical frameworks needed to implement gamification effectively. As noted by Farrell (2018), reflective and informed practice is essential for meaningful integration of technology in education.
- Use of the ASPECT Framework in Future ESL Research: Given its utility in this study, ASPECT should be adopted more widely to assess learner engagement in language learning environments. This could lead to more consistent evaluation across institutions and contexts, improving the evidence base for ESL instructional practices.
- Expand Research Scope and Duration: While this study focused on a single cohort and activity, future research should explore long-term effects of gamification on language proficiency, retention, and student attitudes. Comparative studies involving other tools such as Genially or Canva could also help determine which platforms are most effective for different types of learners and tasks.

In conclusion, this research adds to the growing body of literature supporting gamified instruction in ESL classrooms and offers a practical example of how reflective, technology-enhanced teaching can improve learner engagement in real-world educational settings.

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