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Using Genially Games for Enhancing EFL Reading and Writing Skills in Online Education

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Abstract. The aim of this study was to determine the impact of using Genially games for enhancing English as a foreign language (EFL) reading and writing skills. The participants were 48 students from the A2 level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). They were enrolled in two reading and writing courses at a private university in Loja, in the south of Ecuador. The participants were organized into an experimental (n = 23) and a control group (n = 25). A mixed-method approach was used for collecting and analyzing data in this research. Pre- and post-tests were administered to all the participants; furthermore, a perceptions survey was applied to the experimental group. This study involved an online instructional process in which Genially game-based activities were implemented for practicing reading comprehension as well as paragraph and essay organization. The results showed that the use of Genially games was effective to enhance EFL reading and writing skills. An increase in the experimental group's scores was evident for the reading skills, specifically when they had to identify main ideas, supporting details, and other elements of a reading passage. Regarding writing, they showed improvement in terms of recognizing accurate grammar and vocabulary, organizing ideas, and demonstrating awareness of essay organization. Participants also had a positive perception toward the use of game-based activities, which also increased their motivation. Further research should consider planning, game design, implementation, evaluation, and feedback.

Keywords: EFL skills; Genially games; online education; reading and writing; teaching and learning

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted all aspects of human activities, including education at all levels. Thus, elementary schools, high schools, and universities around the world had to implement online teaching, which was possible through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). In this context, instructors had to switch to online teaching, requiring them to apply numerous technological tools and resources to solve problems and implement new

educational approaches (Eickelmann & Gerick, 2020). Regarding foreign language instruction, technology plays a fundamental role (Singhal, 2004); in fact, the use of ICTs has been crucial because “technology has added new dimensions to the nature of English as a Foreign Language” (Papadima-Sophocleous et al., 2014, p. 296).

The use of ICTs for English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching has been especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers have used technological tools for delivering education and ensuring that learners continue to receive teaching (Sandhu & De Wolf, 2020). In fact, technology provides several benefits for teaching and learning linguistic skills. Among these skills, reading and writing are essential for successful language learning. As Sadiku (2015) asserted, reading brings wisdom; furthermore, it involves an interactive process to construct meaning (Shihab, 2011). Concerning writing, it is a skill that demands the instructor’s care and attention when training students (Harmer, 2004). As Sadiku (2015) emphasized, “[w]riting is a gem to pick” (p. 31), because people with good writing skills will always succeed when expressing themselves.

Therefore, EFL instructors need to implement innovative strategies and activities that help students develop reading and writing skills, especially when using online settings. The use of technological resources engages learners to develop reading and writing skills and offers unlimited opportunities for practicing them. In this context, games constitute important components in EFL education (Gozcu & Caganaga, 2016) and offer a competitive alternative for students to fully engage in learning (Mekler et al., 2016). Since there is a strong connection between gamification and emergent technologies (Figueroa, 2015), teachers need to familiarize themselves with online platforms that allow them to design digital game-based activities that are useful for language learners (Turgut & İrgin, 2009). One of the most innovative tools to create games is Genially, which has an intuitive and easy-to-use interface that facilitates content gamification and interactive communicative experiences (González, 2019).

Regarding the use of games in EFL teaching and learning, several studies have been carried out in different educational contexts. Jassim and Dzakiria (2019) investigated the impact of digital games on students’ vocabulary learning. Yavuz et al. (2020) analyzed the influence of gamified learning activities, designed in the free learning management platform Edmodo, on EFL students’ writing anxiety levels. Sari et al. (2020) explored the use of games for teaching speaking to EFL learners. Nevertheless, the possibilities and benefits that Genially games offer to enhance reading and writing skills have not been explored, especially when using virtual settings during prolonged periods of lockdown. In addition, it is necessary to remark that higher education students face many challenges when reading and writing in a foreign language, which influences their academic performance. Therefore, this research constitutes a contribution to shed light on the use of Genially games for enhancing EFL reading and writing skills in online education.

Thus, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. What is the impact of using Genially games when teaching EFL reading and writing skills?
2. How do students perceive the use of Genially games to foster EFL reading and writing skills?

2. Literature Review

This section includes information about the teaching challenges during online learning, the use of ICT for EFL teaching, the teaching of reading and writing, the use of gamification in EFL education, and previous research regarding the use of digital games in EFL teaching.

2.1 Teaching Challenges During Online Learning

COVID-19 has struck the world suddenly and with force, with all aspects of human activities being dramatically impacted by this contagious disease. Higher education institutions as well as elementary schools and high schools around the world are still being affected by the global health crisis, which caused a devastating impact on learners, teachers, and parents (Karataş & Tuncer, 2020; König et al., 2020; Toquero, 2020). These learning disruptions decreased access to education and research facilities (Onyema et al., 2020).

In this context, educational institutions at all levels had to implement online teaching as part of the global efforts to mitigate the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers faced unprecedented challenges while adapting to online teaching, trying to communicate with students, and supporting their development (König et al., 2020). According to Eickelmann and Gerick (2020), instructors had to switch to online teaching, requiring them to apply numerous technological tools and resources to solve problems and implement new educational approaches. As Toquero (2020) acknowledged, for online education delivery, instructors need ICT skills to plan, implement activities, and evaluate learners' performance. Thus, the adoption of ICTs in education was and is inevitable.

2.2 ICT for Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Language teaching can be improved by the appropriate use of technology (Hoopingartner, 2009), which offers new opportunities for successful language learning (Kumar & Tammelin, 2008) and increases learners' interest, attention, and motivation (Cabrera-Solano, 2020; Saravanakumar, 2018). In the case of EFL teaching and learning, the use of ICT has been crucial; as Singhal (2004) acknowledged, technology and foreign language education are related to each other. According to Papadima-Sophocleous et al. (2014), "technology has added new dimensions to the nature of English as a Foreign Language" (p. 296). In addition, they asserted that language teachers should have pre-service instruction that includes the use of technological tools for language educational purposes. In fact, integrating the use of ICT for training pre-service teachers is an essential aspect that all education stakeholders should consider (Bahcivan et al., 2019).

The role of ICT for EFL teaching has been especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers have used technological tools for delivering education and ensuring that learners continue to receive teaching (Sandhu & De Wolf, 2020). They have thus tried to meet students' needs and showed that "[e]ven though schools have closed, learning has not ended" (Carver, 2020, p. 129). In fact, technology provides several benefits for EFL instructors and learners. Social networking sites have been recognized as efficient tools to enhance all language skills (Nugroho & Rahmawati, 2020), while digital games have been linked to improvement in terms of language acquisition (Castillo-Cuesta, 2020). Furthermore, EFL learners consider that web-based activities are helpful to learn course content (Kirovska-Simjanoska, 2019). Using ICT is also beneficial for EFL students because it allows them to communicate with native and non-native speakers around the globe and provides a diversity of resources to develop their skills and to become active learners (Isisag, 2012).

2.3 Teaching EFL Reading and Writing

Reading and writing are essential skills for successful language learning. According to Harmer (2007), reading is indispensable for language acquisition and has a positive influence on learners' knowledge of vocabulary and spelling. Nation and Macalister (2020) stated that "reading is a source of learning and a source of enjoyment" (p. 49). They have thus acknowledged that reading might be conceived as an aim and also as a way to accomplish other academic aims. Reading certainly brings wisdom (Sadiku, 2015) and involves an interactive process to construct meaning (Shihab, 2011). Likewise, for writing, Sadiku (2015) emphasized that "[w]riting is a gem to pick" (p. 31), because people with good writing skills will always succeed when expressing themselves. This skill has also been regarded as an essential device to demonstrate creativity and personal discovery (Ghufron & Ermawati, 2018) and as a crucial element of success at all educational levels and professional contexts (Çelik, 2016). Writing has been considered a fundamental and challenging skill (Cabrera et al., 2014) as well as a means to express ideas, which demands instructors' attention when training students (Harmer, 2004).

Since reading and writing skills are crucial for language learning, EFL teachers need to understand that reading and writing are strongly linked because they seem to be constructed on the same linguistic and metacognitive knowledge resources (Schoonen, 2019). In fact, reading resources offer good models for writing because they allow teachers to demonstrate the way sentences, paragraphs, and whole texts are constructed (Harmer, 2007), especially in online education. Learners spend a lot of time reading and communicating online for educational purposes and personal enjoyment (Marboot et al., 2020). This online environment provides unlimited opportunities for them to practice their skills. Nevertheless, students need teachers' support. Students can use certain media to develop their writing skills (Kharis et al., 2020) and they can receive timely feedback through technological tools (Isisag, 2012). In this context, EFL instructors need to implement innovative strategies, activities, and technological resources that can engage learners so that they can develop reading and writing skills.

2.4 Gamification in EFL Education

Games, which include activities that involve goals, rules, and fun, have been considered as very important components in EFL education (Gozcu & Caganaga, 2016). According to Sørensen and Meyer (2007), games are useful to encourage motivation and authentic communicative practices in the language classroom. In addition, they offer an engaging platform where students can be involved in learning (Mekler et al., 2016). Certainly, gamification reduces anxiety, increases positive feelings, and improves learners' self-confidence when practicing the target language. Therefore, games can be recognized as learner-centered activities that provide opportunities for active participation (Mekler et al., 2016). Among the advantages of using games in EFL contexts, Deesri (2002) emphasized that they catch learners' attention, lower stress levels, and give students the chance for real communication; however, teachers need to carefully select games that actually meet students' needs in terms of age, language level, and time to be implemented.

Nowadays, the term gamification is increasingly being used in EFL education and other fields. As Deterding et al. (2011) stated: "Gamification is an informal umbrella term for the use of video game elements in non-gaming systems to improve user experience (UX) and user engagement" (p. 2425). Furthermore, gamification has been valued as a learning technique that transfers game mechanisms to the academic area (Alhalafawy & Zaki, 2019). According to Antonaci et al. (2019), the design, application, and usefulness of games depend on the users and the setting of the implementation; thus, it is necessary to consider the outcomes of an explicit gamification component in a specific scenario and audience. Since there is a strong connection between gamification and emergent technologies (Figuroa, 2015), teachers need to familiarize themselves with online platforms that allow them to design digital game-based activities that are useful for language learners (Turgut & İrgin, 2009). There are several technological resources for implementing gamification, such as Educaplay, Gamilab, Kahoot, Quizizz, and Blended Play. However, one of the most innovative platforms to create games is Genially, which has an intuitive and easy-to-use interface that facilitates content gamification and interactive communicative experiences (González, 2019).

2.5 Studies of Digital Games in EFL

Zheng et al. (2015) examined the acquisition of vocabulary through a quest game designed in English between a Japanese learner and a native speaker of English. The study explains how participants embodied in their avatars took semiotic resources imbued in *World of Warcraft*, a massively multiplayer online game (MMOG). Through interactive multimodal analysis, vocabulary acquisition was significant as the researchers examined both chat and avatar action information. The results demonstrated that the use of online games facilitates language learning and enhances problem-solving skills.

Calvo-Ferrer (2017) studied the influence of the didactic game *The Conference Interpreter* on second language vocabulary learning and perceived learning gains, as compared with a non-gaming resource that reproduced its contents. The participants were 65 English as a second language (ESL) students who were

divided into control and experimental groups; they took pre-, post-, and delayed tests. The results evidenced that the participants who had access to the contents via the video game performed better in the short run, found the materials more attractive, and had improved vocabulary knowledge than those in the control group.

Jassim and Dzakiria (2019) carried out a study to review literature regarding the impact of digital games on students' vocabulary learning. The objective was to shed light on the challenges and benefits of the use of gamification for acquiring EFL vocabulary. They found that most of the studies emphasized motivation and cooperation as significant benefits among learners. Furthermore, they concluded that teachers must consider time and materials when selecting or designing a game.

Yavuz et al. (2020) analyzed the influence of Edmodo gamified learning activities on EFL students' writing anxiety levels. The participants were 47 university students who took writing instruction. An experimental design was used and the researchers collected data by means of a background questionnaire and the Second Language Writing Anxiety Scale. The SPSS program was used to analyze data. The results evidenced that the learners who completed assignments using Edmodo experienced significantly lower anxiety levels than those who used the old-fashioned pen and paper to complete their assignments.

Sari et al. (2020) investigated English teachers' efforts in using games for the teaching of speaking and the implementation problems they faced. The participants included 30 adolescents and two teachers who were observed during four classes and then had to complete a questionnaire. The results showed that the challenges faced by teachers were related to preparation, participation, and class management. Thus, it is suggested that appropriate planning, better class management, and a focus on the learners' participation are required to implement gamification in large classes.

3 Method

3.1 Setting and Participants

This study included 48 EFL students enrolled in two reading and writing distance courses of the English major program at Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja, southern Ecuador. Their ages ranged between 20 and 45 years and their proficiency level was A2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The participants were organized into two groups; the experimental group included 23 students and the control group 25.

3.2 Research Instruments

A pre-test was administered through the Canvas platform to determine the participants' reading and writing skills. It included a reading comprehension section with four multiple-choice items and four matching tasks; also, participants had to write a brief essay in the writing section. In addition, a writing rubric was structured to monitor and assess aspects related to participants' use of grammar and vocabulary as well as their abilities to organize main ideas and supporting

details in academic essays. In addition, a post-test, with similar characteristics as the pre-test, was applied to measure the participants' level of improvement in comparison with the pre-test results. Finally, a student perceptions questionnaire was used to gather information about participants' experience with Genially games for improving EFL reading and writing skills. It consisted of eight items that elicited responses on a Likert scale.

3.3 Procedure

A mixed-method approach was used to collect and analyze data in this study, which was carried out during a five-month academic term. In education, the mixed-method approach has been recognized because of the opportunities it provides to influence ideas and practices for teaching and learning (Suter, 2011).

The methodological procedure has been synthesized as presented in Figure 1.

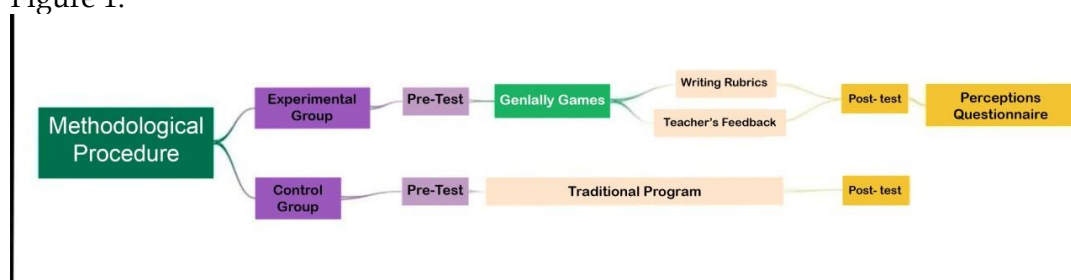


Figure 1: Methodological procedure

Before the intervention, the experimental and control groups were purposefully selected. In this case, purposive sampling was used since it involves participants who possess specific characteristics. Participants in both groups took a pre-test in the institutional Canvas platform to demonstrate their reading and writing skills. In the reading comprehension section, which included multiple-choice questions and matching tasks, participants had to analyze a reading passage, identify the main idea, find supporting details, and recognize vocabulary in context. In the writing section, participants had to write a brief essay about their hometown.

After analyzing the pre-test results and participants' needs, an intervention with 12 game-based activities designed in Genially was implemented for the participants in the experimental group. These games were thus produced taking into consideration the contents of the academic plan and were shared through the Canvas virtual platform. During this intervention, participants were invited to play voluntarily; nevertheless, the teacher emphasized the importance of practicing with games to improve their skills in the target language. The games included activities in which the participants had the opportunity to practice reading comprehension skills as well as paragraph and essay organization. As for the reading skills, participants practiced with games that required them to identify main ideas, supporting details, as well as topic and concluding sentences. For practicing their writing skills, other games were designed to help participants recognize grammatical structures, identify vocabulary in context, choose the appropriate transitions in a paragraph, and demonstrate their awareness of essay organization. During the implementation, the participants received permanent feedback; furthermore, weekly tutorials were offered through Zoom synchronous meetings.

After the intervention, a post-test was administered to both experimental and control groups to determine the participants' level of improvement in comparison with the pre-test results. For evaluating students' production in the writing section, a rubric was used to monitor the participants' use of grammatical structures and vocabulary, as well as their skills for organizing all the components of their paragraphs and essays. Also, a perceptions questionnaire was employed to identify the experimental group's views on the use of Genially games to foster EFL reading and writing skills. Finally, it is important to remark that all the instruments were piloted and validated with similar groups of students before their administration.

4. Results and Discussion

This section has been articulated along the aforementioned research questions. Regarding the pre-test, the results showed participants' reading comprehension and writing skills before the implementation of games. The participants in the experimental group obtained an average of 6.81 points out of 10 points and the control group 6.65 points. Therefore, we can observe that there was not a significant difference between the mean scores of both groups ($t = 0.3062$, $p = 0.7609$). Nevertheless, these results were considered when planning and designing the game-based activities to be implemented.

As for the post-test results, Table 1 shows that the participants in the experimental group significantly increased their scores ($t = 2.4390$, $p = 0.0186$). These results show that the use of Genially games helped the participants in the experimental group enhance their reading and writing skills. Concerning the participants in the control group, the increase in the post-test scores might be attributed to the regular teaching process.

Table 1: Results of the post-test in the experimental and control groups

Post-test		
Group	Experimental	Control
Mean	8.3735	7.2244
SD	1.3727	1.8355
	$t=2.4390$	$p=0.0186$

These results demonstrate that the game-based activities implemented were effective in improving EFL reading and writing skills among the participants of the experimental group. Thus, a positive impact of using Genially games was evident because the games fostered the development of the aforementioned skills. In this regard, the results are aligned with previous research that explored the effectiveness of gamification for enhancing EFL skills (Calvo-Ferrer, 2017; Sari et al., 2020; Yavuz et al., 2020).

With respect to the experimental group perceptions regarding the use of Genially games to foster their reading and writing skills, results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Participants' perceptions of the use of Genially games

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Access to Genially games was easy through the institutional Canvas Learning Management Platform.	52.17%	34.78%	8.70%	4.35%	0%
Genially games had an attractive and engaging interface to practice reading and writing skills.	52.17%	34.78%	4.35%	8.70%	0%
The use of Genially games improved my EFL reading comprehension.	73.91%	13.04%	4.35%	8.70%	0%
The use of Genially games improved my ability to write and organize ideas in paragraphs and essays.	60.87%	26.08%	4.35%	4.35%	4.35%
The use of Genially games improved my grammar knowledge.	65.21%	21.74%	4.35%	4.35%	4.35%
The use of Genially games improved my vocabulary knowledge.	73.91%	17.39%	4.35%	4.35%	0%
The teacher's feedback after playing Genially games helped me improve my reading and writing skills.	65.21%	17.39%	8.70%	4.35%	4.35%
The use of Genially games was motivating for enhancing my reading and writing skills.	60.87%	30.43%	4.35%	4.35%	0%

Regarding the results of the perceptions questionnaire, most of the participants (86.95%) strongly agreed and agreed that access to Genially games was not complicated by means of the institutional Canvas Learning Management Platform. Similarly, most of them (86.95%) perceived that these games had an attractive interface that engaged them to practice reading and writing. In this respect, Genially has a friendly and intuitive interface that fosters student engagement and participation (González, 2019). Furthermore, Okada et al. (2019) asserted that one of the main requirements in game design is its ease of use, which must be accompanied by pedagogical strategies to determine students' achievements and difficulties.

With respect to the use of Genially games to improve EFL reading comprehension skills, 73.91% of the participants strongly agreed and 13.04% agreed with this statement, whereas 4.35% were neutral and 8.70% disagreed. Participants clearly

had the opportunity to practice identifying main ideas, supporting details, and other elements of a reading passage while they were playing the games. In fact, games have a positive effect on students' linguistic skills and a significant impact on their learning strategies (Blume, 2020). Nevertheless, when using games, it is necessary to pay attention to the design, planning, and implementation process to guarantee their effectiveness, especially when teaching EFL reading (Rodriguez, 2018).

As for the use of Genially games to enhance the participants' ability to write and organize ideas in paragraphs and essays, 60.87% strongly agreed and 26.08% agreed, whereas the rest of the opinions were equally divided into neutral, disagreement, and strong disagreement (4.35% each). In fact, some of the game-based activities involved recognizing appropriate transitions in a paragraph and demonstrating awareness of essay organization. As Sermsook et al. (2020) acknowledged, the use of games encourages learners to develop their writing skills in English by generating enjoyable learning environments, thus ensuring that students become involved in their own learning. Regarding the implementation of gamification to improve the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, 86.95% of the participants agreed that Genially games helped them improve their grammar, whereas 91.3% mentioned that these activities helped them enhance their knowledge of vocabulary. This shows that games can certainly help students learn vocabulary effectively (Castillo-Cuesta, 2020). Nevertheless, when designing or choosing a game, it is necessary to consider time and materials, which should be selected appropriately taking into account students' proficiency level, interest, and context (Jabbarova, 2020).

In addition, the participants expressed their perceptions regarding the benefits of feedback, with 82.6% agreeing because they perceived that feedback helped them improve their reading and writing skills. It is necessary to remark that permanent feedback was offered considering the elements of the writing rubric. In fact, when implementing educational games, feedback is beneficial for reducing redundant cognitive processes and providing students with schemas to help them correct their comprehension errors (Clark & Mayer., 2016).

Finally, the participants' opinions with respect to the use of Genially games and their impact on motivation were significantly positive, with 91.3% acknowledging that these games motivated them to enhance their reading and writing skills. The incorporation of games in the classroom evidently allows students to take on different challenges that activate their intrinsic motivation and help them learn while interacting and having fun (Kostikova, 2017). Game-based activities are amusing and interesting; furthermore, they are highly motivating since students can use them in many types of communication tasks that enhance all language skills.

5. Conclusions

The use of Genially games was effective to enhance the EFL reading and writing skills of participants. There was an increase in participants' scores favoring those

in the experimental group, which indicates the positive impact of game-based activities on their academic performance.

The implementation of game-based activities motivates learners to improve their reading and writing skills. Easy access through an interactive virtual platform, and an attractive interface constitute engaging features EFL students value while using Genially games for learning. Thus, these features foster learner commitment and participation.

EFL learners have positive perceptions toward the use of game-based activities for enhancing reading comprehension skills because they can practice identifying main ideas, supporting details, and other elements of a reading passage while they play games. In fact, games allow students to improve reading and other linguistic skills.

Genially games are useful to help students enhance their writing skills. Thus, recognizing and using correct grammatical structures, identifying appropriate transitions, organizing ideas in paragraphs, and demonstrating awareness of essay organization are some of the game-based activities that can effectively develop writing skills. When students play these games, they can also increase their vocabulary knowledge, which fosters their writing skills.

Permanent feedback is an essential aspect to be considered when implementing game-based activities to enhance EFL learners' reading and writing skills. Feedback based on rubrics allows teachers to provide timely instructions and clarify students' doubts so that they can overcome their weaknesses.

Although the number of participants and the lockdown conditions due to the COVID-19 pandemic might represent limitations regarding this work, the findings constitute a starting point for future studies that focus on the use of game-based activities for enhancing linguistic skills. In addition, since the results of this study are limited to a specific population, it can therefore not be generalized to other contexts. Further research should consider teachers' perceptions regarding planning, game design, implementation, evaluation, and feedback. Finally, further implementations of this study might also include listening and speaking skills that can be improved through the use of game-based activities.

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