

EdTech in ELT: Video Games in EFL and ESL—Strange Bedfellows or Perfect Companions?

by [*Christel Broady*](#)

Children of all languages and cultures are drawn into the realm of digital realities. Often, adults see games as a leisure activity: the opposite of learning and achieving. Some even see gaming as a waste of time.

But lately, we have been learning more about how games develop skills in users, and about how such skills can be translated into classrooms. In fact, there is evidence that gaming can develop mastery of materials and competencies and build social skills, and that they can be a way of formative assessment for teachers (see [SRI International](#), n.d.).

It may be daunting to use games in your classroom if you have no knowledge about the basic elements of gaming. The focus of this EdTech in ELT edition is to address gaming concerns, to help you learn more about the genre itself, and to show you the potential of gaming for English learning.

The Framework for English Language Instruction and Learning

For the sake of this article, English language instruction is defined as a process that requires a lot of practice in an authentic and communicative real-life context. In this context, students should have ample exposure to wide-ranging and challenging communication using language in the most natural way to communicate and to learn English along with content disciplines. English instruction should be stimulating and engaging with peers while pushing learners a little beyond their current developmental levels.

In general, English lessons should be fun and enjoyable, connecting with students' backgrounds and interests. Learning should be a social activity shared with others. Language should be used for real communication.

Learning Potential in Digital Games

How do video games fit into the above English framework? Let me make a case for the inclusion of video games in English classrooms by sharing some ways of describing gaming. In “Designing Mobile-enabled Game-based Experiences,” Villar (n.d.) provides guidelines for games, such as that they:

- focus on developing specific skills;
- work on a single task that resembles a real-world situation;
- have concrete, achievable, and rewarding goals;
- have students do something with the content afterward;
- include different levels of difficulty as students work toward skill mastery;
- reinforce a practical, real-world need or skill; and
- allow for replayability, utilizing and practicing other skills.

In analyzing these guidelines, it is apparent how much they interface with best practices of communicative English language learning principles. These guidelines describe a focus on real-world tasks, scaffolding and recycling concepts and skills, pushing learners slightly beyond their highest skill level, and using a highly authentic context.

Still in doubt? Here are some more facts:

- Learning a new task produces a demonstrable increase in the brain's gray matter in mere weeks (Zichermann & Cunningham, as cited in Bhasin, 2014).
- Gaming results in better retention: Games vs. text-based knowledge, when tested immediately after the instruction, are likely to have similar results, but when tested days later the game-based knowledge is better retained (Zichermann & Cunningham, as cited in Bhasin, 2014).
- Games can provide students with the ability to experience problems in a real-time and authentic way (Keeler, 2014).
- Games challenge learners at their skill levels. Many games are progressive. They increase the difficulty with student mastery. (Devaney, 2014)

Language Learning Uses for Games

Content-Based Instruction

Video games have the potential to link the English language to content instruction. Many games teach discipline-specific skills while using the English language. Shapiro (2014) explains that game-based learning “forces students to apply knowledge in a contextualized way, it creates an interdisciplinary learning experience where subject-specific knowledge is used in a context that requires diverse applications.” He goes on to say that “Video games can be used as tools that encourage students to apply class content in contextualized ways.” Here are a few games that can be used for or as a complement to content-based instruction:

- [BrainPop Games by Subject](#): BrainPop provides games focusing on a number of subjects, such as science, social studies, engineering and technology, and math.
- [SnapThought](#): This is a tool to use with the BrainPop games, which allows, among other things, teachers to build specific prompts into a game.
- GlassLab's [SimCityEDU: Pollution Challenge!](#): This game, for Grades 6–8, aligns with a number of standards and aims to address 21st-century skills, science, and English language arts.
- [Edutopia](#) lists some great content-based games to get started with, along with some excellent additional resources.

Games for Formative Assessment

Game can act as a great form of formative assessment; they provide student performance data to teachers while students still enjoy the gaming process. According to Rufo-Tepper (2015), “assessment tasks...offer valuable ways to unlock the instructional power of games and support a student-centered learning environment. Teachers can create game-related performance tasks

that are as interesting and engaging as the game itself.” Some good games for use with assessment can be found on [My Educational Technology Blog](#).

Games for Learner Differentiation

Because games are available with many different features and tasks to users, they also hold the potential to address learner special needs. Teachers can accurately search the Internet for games that align to their students’ challenges, thereby offering a fun and engaging way for learners to perform in class and learn content. The website [Talking Dictionary](#) provides several games for student differentiation via gaming. (Although they are mainly recommended for dyslexic students, they hold great promise for other areas of student needs.) Here are a few other games for learner differentiation:

- [Jeopardy Style Custom Review Game](#)
- [Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?](#)
- [Galactic Mappers](#)
- Create your own custom games at [Teacher Gaming Network](#)

A Great Game for Language Learning: Minecraft

Gaming allows for authentic and open-ended creation of new situations. This kind of exploration is often done in teams with other gamers/learners. One example of such a game is [Minecraft](#). Since its launch in 2009, Minecraft has sold more than 20 million copies worldwide (Rock, n.d.). Rock (n.d.) explains that “this game is an open-ended ‘sandbox’ that doesn’t come with instructions, so the gameplay is confusing — but that’s what makes it irresistible. Kids are forced to explore — first in the game, then out of it.” And she goes on to say:

To figure out what to do next, they’ll need to read sites such as Minecraft Wiki, where they learn to build an intricate maze of mine shafts or design their dream house. Slowly, they begin to see what’s possible, and develop skills of observation and perseverance. Regardless of the task, teamwork is a key part of the experience.

Teachers trying to learn about Minecraft can access servers and resources in their own countries to find out more about the game in their own language first before embarking on reading instructions in English. Teachers in the USA can provide ESL students with access to materials in their home languages to transition into English. Here is a list of all countries (more than 100) with [Minecraft servers](#), including links to the servers. Minecraft now [offers free versions](#) of the game to schools and has even expanded into China.

It is easy to see that Minecraft is a game that connects learners worldwide. ESL students can connect with their families’ heritage culture and language. EFL students, on the other hand, can connect with native-English-speaking countries to seek partners and instructions.

Gaming to Create Teacher-Student Connections

Using games can offer teachers and students ways to create something new while negotiating the creation with each other—speaking, listening, reading, and writing throughout the process. Again, such activities provide English classes with authentic communication for a real purpose. One teacher and his students built close connections with each other while using the game Minecraft to build an online school (Marsh & Spiller, 2015). Minecraft, in particular, is providing a powerful way for students and teachers to connect. One educator put it perfectly when he said, “It’s a powerful moment when you take something kids love and are passionate about, and you bring it into the school day, and you say, ‘Show me what you can do with it’” (Herold, 2015).

Conclusion

I hope that the discussion of game features and characteristics in the context of authentic and communicative English language learning provides you with the motivation to explore some of the resources and to consider the addition of gaming to your English classes. Below are some resources to help you get started. Game-based learning holds the potential of connecting with our students’ world while creating better English mastery. In summary, games and English lessons are perfect companions.

Resources Providing Educational Gaming Professional Development

- [Gamification vs. Game-Based Learning - Theories, Methods, and Controversies](#): online presentation
- [Using Game Mechanics & Game Elements in Learning Games](#): white paper, free download
- [Getting Started With Game-Based Language Learning](#): online article
- [Digital Alternatives](#): a site about game-based learning for language learners by Dave Gatrell, an ESL teacher trainer in Hong Kong
- [Digital Debris](#): a site by Paul Driver focused on mobile learning, augmented reality, and the pedagogy behind edtech
- [ELT Sandbox](#): a site of lesson plans, ideas, and reviews, including the article, [“Learning to Learn with #Minecraft – DGBL ELT Lesson Plan”](#)

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