

ENHANCING READING SKILLS THROUGH NARRATIVE-BASED GAMES AMONG EFL STUDENTS AT PEKALONGAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan implementasi penggunaan narrative-based games sebagai media pembelajaran membaca serta mengeksplorasi persepsi mahasiswa terhadap efektivitas media tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan studi kasus pada mahasiswa semester dua Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Universitas Pekalongan. Teknik pengumpulan data meliputi observasi, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan angket. Instrumen observasi digunakan untuk mengamati keterlibatan siswa dalam kegiatan membaca menggunakan permainan "Choices: Robots", sementara wawancara dan kuesioner digunakan untuk menggali persepsi mereka terhadap pengalaman belajar ini. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa permainan berbasis naratif berhasil meningkatkan partisipasi aktif mahasiswa dalam membaca, terutama dalam hal keterlibatan emosional, diskusi kelompok, serta kemampuan memahami struktur narasi dan kosakata. Sebanyak 72,73% mahasiswa menyatakan lebih menyukai metode ini dibanding metode konvensional. Permainan ini juga membantu meningkatkan rasa percaya diri siswa dalam memahami dan menceritakan kembali isi teks. Berdasarkan temuan ini, permainan berbasis naratif terbukti dapat menjadi alternatif media pembelajaran yang menarik dan efektif untuk meningkatkan kemampuan membaca mahasiswa EFL (English as a Foreign Language).

Kata Kunci: Game berbasis naratif, media pembelajaran, membaca, persepsi siswa, pendidikan bahasa Inggris

ABSTRACT

This research aims to describe the implementation of narrative-based games as a teaching medium for reading and to explore students' perceptions of their effectiveness. A qualitative case study approach was employed, focusing on second-semester students of the English Language Education Study Program at Pekalongan University. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires. Observations were used to examine student engagement during the game "Choices: Robots", while interviews and questionnaires captured students' experiences and perspectives. The findings reveal that narrative-based games significantly enhanced student engagement, particularly in terms of emotional involvement, group discussions, and comprehension of narrative structures and vocabulary. A total of 72.73% of students expressed a preference for this method over traditional approaches. The games also helped boost students' confidence in understanding and retelling the text. Based on these results, narrative-based games can be considered an engaging and effective alternative medium for improving reading skills among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students.

Key Words: Narrative-based game, teaching media, reading, student perception, English language education

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a crucial skill in the process of acquiring language competence, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It supports learners in expanding vocabulary, understanding complex sentence structures, and building comprehension skills essential for academic success. However, conventional approaches to reading instruction in many EFL classrooms often rely heavily on passive techniques such as silent reading, translation, and textbook-based drills. These methods frequently fail to stimulate active learning and tend to make reading a monotonous activity for students (Saraswati et al., 2023).

To address these limitations, educators have explored various innovative methods to enhance student engagement, one of which is the integration of narrative-based games. These games offer immersive learning environments where students interact with texts by making choices, predicting events, and experiencing consequences based on their understanding. Saraswati et al. (2023) emphasize that

narrative games encourage deeper emotional and cognitive engagement, which fosters greater comprehension. In particular, games that embed decision-making within storytelling structures help learners reflect critically on plot development and character motivation.

Additionally, the cultural relevance embedded in narrative content can make learning more meaningful. According to Rustan and Rachmat (2024), students are more likely to engage with reading materials that reflect their cultural backgrounds or values. Cultural familiarity allows students to draw personal connections to the story, which increases both motivation and comprehension. The inclusion of cultural context in educational games also contributes to inclusivity and relevance in diverse classrooms (Rustan & Rachmat, 2024).

The interactive design of narrative-based games also contributes significantly to the success of reading instruction. Oktarind (2022) found that students who participate in game-based reading activities are more likely to collaborate, ask questions, and engage in peer discussions. This interaction not only promotes a dynamic classroom environment but also enhances reading comprehension through social learning. Furthermore, Oktarind (2022) explains that game-based strategies support student autonomy by allowing them to make their own choices in the learning process.

Digital games have also been shown to benefit learners with diverse needs. Salgarayeva et al. (2021) argue that the visual and adaptive features of narrative games are especially helpful in inclusive classrooms, where students may have varying levels of reading ability. Features such as audio support, simplified instructions, and context clues can help reduce cognitive load and enable students to focus more on understanding the story.

Another advantage of narrative-based games is their ability to assess students' skills naturally during gameplay. Ying et al. (2023) describe this approach as stealth literacy assessment, where students demonstrate comprehension, vocabulary understanding, and inferencing abilities through their choices in the game. Without the stress of formal testing, learners can apply reading strategies in context and show real progress. In line with this, Ying et al. (2023) further suggest that stealth assessments provide more authentic and continuous insights into student learning.

Narrative games, therefore, serve not only as engaging learning tools but also as platforms for both instruction and informal assessment. They are effective in encouraging motivation, supporting cultural relevance, fostering collaboration, and promoting deeper comprehension. Saraswati et al. (2023) reinforce this by stating that game-based reading helps learners internalize content and enhances long-term retention through repeated interaction and decision-making.

Based on this theoretical framework, this study explores the implementation of narrative-based games as a teaching medium for reading in an EFL context. Specifically, it investigates how the game Choices: Robots was applied in the English Language Education Program at Pekalongan University and how students responded to its use. The research aims to understand how narrative-based games can improve reading engagement and comprehension among second-semester university students and contribute to the development of effective, interactive reading instruction.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach with a case study design because it aimed to investigate the implementation of narrative-based games as a teaching medium for reading and to understand students' perceptions in a natural classroom setting. A case study approach was considered appropriate since it provides a detailed and contextualized analysis of a real-life educational practice.

The setting of this research was Pekalongan University, specifically in the English Language Education Study Program. The participants were second-semester students who were actively involved in reading courses. One class was chosen purposively because the students were considered suitable for the application of narrative-based learning strategies.

Data collection was carried out through three main techniques, which were observation, interview, and questionnaire. Observation was used to understand how the narrative-based game Choices: Robots was applied in the classroom and how students engaged with it during the lesson. The interview was conducted in a semi-structured format, allowing students to express their personal experiences and responses in greater depth. The questionnaire was administered to obtain general feedback from the class and to capture students' perceptions related to motivation, engagement, comprehension, and vocabulary development.

To ensure the validity of the data, this research applied triangulation by cross-checking the information obtained from observations, interviews, and questionnaires. This approach was intended to enhance the credibility of the findings by confirming the consistency of the results across different data sources.

The analysis of the data followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman. This model includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing with verification. In the data reduction process, irrelevant information was eliminated while key points were highlighted and categorized. The data were then organized and presented in a thematic format to make it easier to interpret patterns and insights. The final stage involved drawing conclusions based on the emerging themes and verifying them by reviewing all sources to ensure consistency and reliability.

This methodological approach allowed the researcher to explore how narrative-based games can be meaningfully used in reading instruction and how students experience and respond to this innovative learning model.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of narrative-based games, specifically Choices: Robots, provided a positive impact on students' reading activities in the EFL classroom. When the game was used during the reading lesson, students actively engaged with the content, followed the storyline, and interacted both with the material and with each other. Observations showed that the lecturer delivered the lesson clearly, set objectives for the activity, and guided students in using the game, which allowed them to understand the rules and participate meaningfully.

Moreover, students demonstrated high levels of enthusiasm during the gameplay. Approximately 84% of students were actively involved in the session, while around 90% showed emotional engagement such as excitement and curiosity, especially when responding to unexpected narrative events. Their behavior reflected increased motivation and a willingness to explore the material in a way that traditional reading

activities often fail to promote. In addition, 75% of students were observed asking or answering questions related to the storyline, and many students collaborated with peers by discussing possible outcomes before making decisions. These indicators suggest that narrative-based games can create a lively, interactive, and learner-centered environment in reading instruction.

Not only did the game encourage participation, but it also helped develop core reading skills. Students were observed identifying unfamiliar vocabulary, making inferences about characters and events, tracking narrative structure, and summarizing story segments during classroom reflection. Some groups confidently retold the path they had taken in the story, indicating a deep level of comprehension and narrative recall. These behaviors confirm that the game successfully supported sub-skills necessary for reading development, such as vocabulary acquisition, inferencing, and understanding plot structure.

Students' emotional responses further supported these findings. They appeared surprised, amused, and curious throughout the gameplay, and many made spontaneous predictions about what would happen next in the story. Their verbal expressions during group work reflected critical thinking and decision-making. For example, students debated moral choices in the story and shared their reasoning aloud. These observations are in line with Saraswati et al. (2023), who emphasized that participatory storytelling within games encourages analytical thinking and active reflection.

The role of the lecturer also contributed to the success of the implementation. The teacher monitored the students, facilitated discussions, and provided support by explaining unfamiliar vocabulary and prompting students to reflect on their decisions. The class atmosphere remained focused and collaborative, and the game-based activity fit well within the allocated instructional time. These aspects demonstrate that narrative-based games can be smoothly integrated into the curriculum, as also highlighted by Oktarind (2022), who found that interactive reading activities foster group discussion and engagement.

The results from the questionnaire further validated these findings. A total of 72.73% of students stated that they preferred using games for reading rather than conventional methods, while 69.69% believed that the game helped them understand the text more effectively. Around 63.63% reported that they remembered vocabulary more easily after playing the game. Additionally, 66.66% felt excited when the lecturer introduced reading through games, and 60.6% claimed that games helped them focus more during the lesson. These responses confirm that narrative-based games increase attention, motivation, and overall learning satisfaction.

Student perceptions also revealed that they felt emotionally connected to the material. For instance, 75% of students stated that the game format made them feel more connected to the reading material. Meanwhile, 72.73% felt that their choices in the game mattered, which reflects a sense of autonomy and personal involvement. Students expressed in interviews that the decision-making process allowed them to follow the story more easily and helped them retain information. One student shared that the consequences of each choice made the reading more memorable, while another highlighted how the game encouraged collaboration and discussion with group members.

Although not all students felt that the game's story was directly related to their cultural background, many acknowledged that its themes—such as moral decisions and teamwork—were still relevant and thought-provoking. This finding supports the claim by Rustan and Rachmat (2024), who argue that cultural

familiarity enhances reading engagement but that relatable themes can still foster comprehension and motivation even if the content is not culturally specific.

In addition to promoting language development, the game also provided a low-stress learning environment. Students reported feeling less pressure and more enjoyment when engaging with reading through the game, which aligns with the concept of stealth assessment introduced by Ying et al. (2023). Through their gameplay decisions, students naturally demonstrated reading comprehension, vocabulary understanding, and critical interpretation—without being subjected to formal tests.

Altogether, the classroom observation, questionnaire responses, and interview data strongly support the conclusion that narrative-based games like Choices: Robots serve not only as engaging learning tools but also as effective media for improving reading instruction. These games create opportunities for students to experience language authentically, interact with texts meaningfully, and develop essential reading skills in a context that feels relevant, collaborative, and enjoyable.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study lead to the conclusion that narrative-based games, specifically Choices: Robots, serve as an effective and engaging medium for teaching reading in EFL classrooms. The implementation of the game was able to foster student participation, improve reading comprehension, and promote collaborative learning. Students responded positively to the use of the game, expressing increased motivation, emotional engagement, and a deeper connection to the reading material.

The narrative structure and decision-making elements within the game encouraged learners to actively process the content, think critically, and interact meaningfully with the storyline. These experiences reflect a shift from passive reading to active learning, supporting the integration of digital tools in language education. Moreover, the use of such games aligns well with the goals of modern reading instruction that emphasize context, interaction, and learner autonomy.

Based on the results, it is recommended that educators consider the use of narrative-based games not only as supplementary tools but as integral components of reading instruction, especially at the university level. Future research is encouraged to explore the long-term impact of narrative-based game use on reading proficiency and to examine its effectiveness across different language skills such as writing and speaking. Additionally, further studies could investigate the role of cultural adaptation in narrative content to enhance relevance and inclusivity for diverse learner backgrounds

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