

From Boredom to Engagement: Investigating the Impact of Language Games on Adult EFL Learners' Motivation and Retention in Higher Education

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Abstract:

This research paper investigates the impact of implementing language games on students' motivation and retention in higher-education English language classrooms. It explores how incorporating interactive language games with adult learners can increase classroom engagement and knowledge retention, and decrease boredom and anxiety. The study is grounded in theories of adult learning and communicative language teaching. A mixed-methods approach was used, including questionnaires for teachers and students, phonetic tests, and long-term classroom observations to examine students' engagement and interaction. The findings suggest that well-designed language games positively influence adult learners' motivation, engagement, and retention, supporting their use as an effective pedagogical tool in higher-education contexts

Key words: *Adult learners, Higher education, Language games, Learner motivation, Student retention.*

The Presentation

1. Introduction

In recent years, learner-centered approaches to teaching have gained much attention and significance in all levels of education, including higher education. Despite the fact that traditional teaching methods are no longer used in most classrooms, many university students still report feelings of demotivation, boredom and more importantly difficulty in retaining knowledge.

One effective pedagogical response to this problem could be the careful incorporation of well-designed language games that encourage adult learners' interaction and engagement, and hence increase their motivation and retention. Even though language games have long been strongly associated with children's education, they are indeed becoming more commonly used and recognized as an effective classroom practice with older learners, including adults. Communicating meaningfully, performing less anxiously and learning in a much more engaging manner are some of the most noticeable and rare benefits that language games can provide to adult learners.

Language games, however, are still viewed by many instructors as too informal and even childish to be used for serious learning with adult learners. This is particularly true in university classrooms despite the proven potential of language games across all age groups. To challenge these common misconceptions, this research attempts to investigate the actual effectiveness of using language games with university students in order to boost their motivation, enhance their interaction and engagement, and also increase their knowledge retention. This research paper, which is well grounded in theories and principles of adult learning and communicative language teaching, tries to answer two main questions:

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- ❖ To what extent do language games influence adult learners' motivation and interaction in EFL classrooms?
- ❖ Do language games enhance the retention of information in adult learners?

The findings of this investigation are expected to contribute meaningfully to the growing body of literature and research regarding the use of engaging and interactive language classroom practices with adult learners.

2. Literature Review

The use of interactive language games in the EFL classroom has long been linked to the increased engagement and communicative competence of learners. Indeed, language games have several advantages that are rooted in communicative language teaching (Wright, Betteridge & Buckby 2006). Hadfield (1990) explains that some of these pros are that language games enhance engagement and interaction among learners, encourage risk-taking and provide meaningful language practice. Not only that, but they also break the ordinary classroom routine and function as powerful tools the instructor uses to support students' development in many areas like psychology, learning and cognition.

It is undeniable that language games have long been used and associated with young learners' education. However, more research is investigating their suitability and effectiveness with older learners, including adults at higher-education levels. Some examples of this kind of study are the ones done by Uberman (1998) and that by Nguyen and Nguyen (2020), who found out that even adults find language games enjoyable. According to these studies, adults show signs of high motivation, low anxiety and improved memory while doing some game-themed classroom activities. Results of these studies are in harmony with **Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis**, which suggests that a low-stress learning atmosphere enhances language acquisition (Krashen, 1982).

In addition to that, language games have also been strongly linked to learners' motivation, which is an indicative factor in the success or failure of the learning process. According to Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (1985), language games that create chances for an interactive, enjoyable and meaningful learning atmosphere strongly stimulate learners' intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, Dörnyei (2001) adds that language games bring novelty and variation to EFL classrooms. This energizes students, renews their curiosity and interest in learning and rids them of fatigue and boredom in the classroom.

As for memory and retention, language games can strengthen students' ability to recall, apply and manipulate information immediately while doing game-related classroom activities. Nation states that a number of these games encourage the quick retrieval and repetition of already stored knowledge while performing tasks which assists in improving memory (2001). Moreover, Chen (2005) adds that competition between learners arises as they get involved in performing interactive and collaborative language game-themed tasks which require them to use and develop their problem-solving skills. Pairs and groups of students, here, benefit from the increased attention and memory to successfully complete the activities.

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Regardless of their proven advantages, the use of language games with adult learners in higher-education classrooms is still very limited. This is due to the common misconception that such games are unproductive, unsuitable for the context and are even childish to be used there with them. However, it is argued that the careful selection and implementation of language games in adult classrooms can go in perfect harmony with the needs, objectives and principles of their education. This is particularly true when these adult learners are informed beforehand about the nature and aims of these games, and more importantly, are treated as mature and active participants in these activities (Ersoz, 2000; Baş, 2017).

In addition to theories centered on learners' motivation and retention, this research is also based on adult education theory, particularly Knowles' Theory of Andragogy (1984). According to Knowles, adult learners are goal-oriented and self-directed. Not only that, but they also learn best when the content presented to them is practical, problem-centered, and engaging. When language games are purposefully designed, they can meet these criteria by embedding language input in collaborative and meaningful tasks. This goes in harmony with the Constructivist Theory of learning, which suggests that learners actively construct knowledge through social interaction and contextualized learning experience which are both central to the use of language games in this study.

This study addresses two interrelated dimensions. It studies the dual impact of language games on adult language learners' motivation and retention so as to fill an existing gap in the literature concerning this very age group (adults) and specific context (higher education).

3. Methodology

Investigating the role of language games in boosting university students' motivation and retention is the main aim of this research paper. This was achieved via a mixed-methods approach. On the one hand, two structured questionnaires were submitted to students and teachers at Hamma Lakhdar University of Eloued in Algeria to collect quantitative as well as qualitative data.

A total of 155 second-year undergraduate English students participated in this study. They were randomly selected from a population of 260 students enrolled at the institution during the 2024–2025 academic year. A representative sample of this size provides a 95% confidence level with an estimated margin of error of 5%, ensuring the statistical reliability of the findings.

These participants completed both pre- and post-intervention questionnaires. A baseline questionnaire on students' attitudes and motivation toward the subject of phonetics was completed in September 2024 before the intervention. The same questionnaire was re-submitted to the same students in May 2025 after the game-based sessions were over to assess their feedback.

These two questionnaires aimed at assessing participants' attitudes towards the subject matter (phonetics) and determining their motivation levels before and after the intermediate phase of nine months during which students had twenty-four 90-minute sessions involving game-related classroom activities. The student questionnaires consisted of 12 items divided into four sections: prior experience, post-intervention perceptions, learning outcomes, and overall opinion.

The research also tested changes in their comprehension and retention of the knowledge presented to them in class while performing the game-themed tasks. The first test was administered in September, at the beginning of the intermediate phase. This test served as a baseline to assess

students' initial understanding and retention of phonetic concepts previously taught using traditional methods in the first year. The second test was delivered after the completion of the 24 game-based sessions, and it aimed to measure any significant improvements in students' academic achievement after the intervention. These two tests were designed to cover identical content, namely: knowledge of consonant sounds, monophthongs, diphthongs, triphthongs, stress patterns, and weak and strong forms of function words. Mean scores of the tests were compared to determine the extent of improvement in students' academic performance.

In addition, the teacher questionnaire was submitted to 28 professors at the English department at the institution. The questionnaire included five core questions, combining Likert and open-ended formats, focusing on suitability, past use, willingness to adopt games, and perceived challenges. One optional demographic item was also included.

Lastly and importantly, the researcher used a classroom observation checklist during the 24 sessions which enabled them to record students' real-time engagement and to focus on their interaction, engagement, attention and retention of lesson points while doing the activities in pairs or in groups.

It is worth noting that all 260 second-year students of English studied phonetics in their first year following the traditional no-games method. That is to say, no language games were used in the course for first year. It is also necessary to state that most of the lessons presented in second year had been already tackled in first year. These lessons were namely: consonant sounds, monophthongs, diphthongs, triphthongs, word stress, sentence stress, and strong and weak forms of function words.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data obtained from the students' questionnaires. As for that of teachers', thematic analysis was used to analyze the gathered data to draw insights regarding the perceived effectiveness and benefits of using language games to teach phonetics to adult learners as well as highlight the limitations and challenges of this technique in this setting. Last, classroom observations were reviewed to triangulate and support the findings of the two questionnaires.

4. Ethical Considerations

All participants in this study were informed in advance about the aim and nature of the research, and they gave their voluntary consent to take part in it. Participation was optional, and responses were collected anonymously to ensure complete confidentiality and respect for participants' privacy.

5. Results

Findings of the aforementioned research tools are presented in this section. These results are organized around two main research aims: (1) the impact of implementing language games in teaching phonetics on students' engagement and motivation, and (2) the effect of this technique on their understanding and retention of the content presented to them in the course.

5.1. Student Questionnaire Findings

The responses of 155 second-year English students indicated a marked improvement in their experience with phonetics following the integration of language games. The data reflect significant

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gains in motivation, enjoyment, engagement, retention, and confidence when comparing their first-year traditional instruction to second-year game-based instruction.

Item	Question	Terrible / Not at All	Bad / Little	So-so / Somewhat	Good / Much	Excellent / very much	Yes	No
Q1	Experience in 1 st year	26.3	38.2	21.1	14.5	0		
Q2	Motivation in 1 st year	34.2	32.9	18.4	11.8	2.6		
Q3	Enjoyment in 1 st year	34.2	40.8	17.1	5.3	2.6		
Q4	Experience in 2 nd year	0	1.3	5.3	32.9	60.5		
Q5	Motivation in 2 nd year	0	3.9	5.3	34.2	56.6		
Q6	Enjoyment in 2 nd year	0	2.6	3.9	21.1	72.4		
Q7	Focus and involvement	1.3	0	9.2	42.1	47.4		
Q8	Games helped me relax						97.4	2.6
Q9	Games helped me speak more						90.8	9.2
Q10	Games helped me remember						98.7	1.3
Q11	More confident in pronunciation						97.4	2.6
Q12	Use games in other modules						94.7	5.3

Table 1: Summary of Student Questionnaire Results

5.1.1. General Experience, Motivation, and Enjoyment

According to the results shown in the table above, students' perceptions of phonetics changed considerably over time. In the first year, only 14.5% rated their overall experience as "good" or "excellent," while 64.5% described it as "bad" or "terrible". In contrast, during the second year, after the introduction of language games, 93.4% rated their experience positively (good or excellent).

Motivation levels also shifted notably too. In the first year, only 14.4% of students reported being "much" or "very much" motivated to attend phonetics classes. This figure rose to 90.8% in the second year. Similarly, enjoyment increased from 7.9% to 93.5% between the two academic years.

5.1.2. Engagement, Comfort, and Willingness to Participate

With respect to classroom dynamics, 89.5% of students indicated that they felt "much" or "very much" focused and involved in phonetics classes during the second year. Furthermore, 97.4% of participants affirmed that language games helped them feel more relaxed in class. Regarding participation, 90.8% of students stated that the games increased their willingness to speak and engage during activities.

5.1.3. Retention and Pronunciation Confidence

The use of games also appeared to enhance learning outcomes. A substantial majority (98.7%) reported that games helped them remember phonetic content better. In addition, 97.4% of students noted that they felt more confident in their pronunciation by the end of the second year.

5.1.4. Perception of Broader Application

When asked whether language games should be used in other university modules, 94.4% responded “yes, of course” while only 5.3% selected “no”.

5.1.5. Comparative Analysis of Test Scores

Assessment Phase	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Sample Size (n)
Pre-intervention	10.5 / 20	2.4	155
Post-intervention	14.8 / 20	2.1	155

Table 2: Comparison of Student Test Scores Before and After the Intervention

Students' phonetics test scores before and after the intervention were compared to assess real progress in students' academic performance. The pre-test administered in September 2024 showed a mean score of 10.5/20, with the majority of students struggling especially with vowel sounds. After nine months of game-based instruction, the post-intervention test in May 2025 revealed a statistically significant improvement as the mean score rose to 14.8/20.

To assess whether this improvement was statistically significant, a paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of the pre- and post-tests. The results showed a significant increase in students' phonetic achievement.

$t(154) = 22.37, p < .001, \text{Cohen's } d = 1.57.$

This indicates a highly significant effect of the intervention. According to Cohen's (1988) benchmarks, the effect size is large, suggesting that the use of language games had a substantial impact on students' performance and knowledge retention.

The highest performance gains were observed in tasks involving monophthongs, diphthongs and triphthongs. Moreover, the number of students scoring below average dropped from 38% to 12%, indicating an overall improvement in academic achievement and retention.

5.2. Teacher Questionnaire Results

Twenty-eight university-level English teachers responded to the final questionnaire. Their insights provided a professional perspective on the feasibility and pedagogical value of language games in higher education.

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Item	Question	Response Summary
Q1	Years of Experience	1–5 years (32%), 5–10 years (46%), +10 years (22%)
Q2	Games suitable for university students	Not at all (22%), Slightly (32%), Very much (46%)
Q3	Have used games before	Yes (25%), No (75%)
Q4	Would use games if well-designed	Yes (52%), Not sure (29%), No (19%)
Q5	Games help motivation and retention	Not at all (17%), Slightly (25%), Very much (58%)
Q6	Main challenges	Classroom control (61%), Time limitations (49%), “childish” perception (57%)

Table 3: Teacher Questionnaire Summary

5.2.1. Professional Background

Among the respondents, 36% had 1–5 years of teaching experience, 43% had 5–10 years, and 21% had been teaching for more than a decade. This distribution offered a varied and representative set of views across different levels of expertise.

5.2.2. Perceived Suitability and Pedagogical Value

The findings reflect that many teachers remain hesitant or unsure about the suitability of language games in higher education. Only 46% of respondents believed language games are “very much” suitable for university students, while 32% rated them as only “slightly” suitable, and 22% considered them “not at all” appropriate. These responses reinforce the lingering misconception that language games are too informal or child-centered for adult learners.

Likewise, when asked whether such games help with motivation and retention of abstract material, only 58% agreed “very much,” while the remaining 42% expressed doubt or disagreement, further reflecting a split in teacher perception.

Despite this, some teachers acknowledged their potential value. One participant commented: *“Games, when tailored carefully, can still meet academic standards and increase interest, especially for students who struggle with theory.”* Another noted: *“The new generation seems more open to these methods than we assume.”*

5.2.3. Previous Use and Willingness to Integrate

Game-based learning remains underutilized in this setting. Only 25% of surveyed teachers reported ever using language games in their university courses. However, a slight majority (52%) said they would consider using games in the future if they were well-designed and academically appropriate. Notably, 29% were unsure, and 19% said they would not use them at all — highlighting that misconceptions persist even in the face of encouraging student results.

5.2.4. Challenges and Concerns

Teachers cited several recurring challenges. The most prominent were classroom management issues (61%), lack of preparation time (49%), and concerns about the perception of games as “childish” or “non-academic” (57%). These concerns echo the cultural and pedagogical biases

against informal methods in higher education. Respondents emphasized that overcoming these barriers would require institutional support, targeted training, and clearer examples of how game-based strategies can align with academic standards and subject requirements.

5.3. Classroom Observations

For nine months (September-May), 24 sessions were presented; each session lasted one hour and a half. During all these sessions, students' behavior was carefully observed. Results of these classroom observations strongly support the survey data. Thanks to the language games used in classroom, the great majority of students had and were made sure to have several chances every session to participate and engage in peer discussions to perform tasks. In addition, high levels of student enthusiasm, spontaneous peer interaction, and active engagement were consistently observed during interactive tasks. Last but not least, games targeting minimal pairs, monophthongs, diphthongs, triphthongs, and stress patterns elicited the highest engagement levels among students.

In a nutshell, language games enhanced students' motivation and positive attitude toward phonetics sessions. Not only that, but they also showed better retention of phonetic information thanks to the interactive and engaging nature of games. Last, some teachers believed that these games would improve students' motivation and retention if and only if they were chosen carefully and used properly.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that integrating language games into a phonetics course can significantly enhance university students' motivation and perceived retention.

This study utilizes a triangulated approach to address its two central research questions. Students' motivation and interaction being the first research question was primarily investigated through the student questionnaire (Likert and open-ended items). Also, long-term classroom observations and teacher reflections from their questionnaire partially answered this question. As for the second research question regarding retention of information, it was explored via students' perceived retention (survey responses), behavioral indicators of recall and focus (observation notes), and quantitative data from pre- and post-intervention phonetics test scores. This triangulation of data ensured a more thorough understanding of the impact of language games on both emotional and cognitive aspects of learning the subjects of phonetics.

Prior to the intervention, many learners expressed a severe lack of interest and confidence in phonetics, viewing it as a boring or challenging field of study. However, the introduction of carefully selected and structured games contributed to a significant shift in classroom dynamics and learner attitudes.

Importantly, academic performance also improved significantly. The comparative analysis of students' phonetics test scores before and after the game-based sessions showed a noticeable rise in mean scores - from 10.5 to 14.8 out of 20. These gains reflect not only an increase in motivation, enjoyment or engagement but also a statistical progress in understanding and retention of phonetic knowledge.

This conclusion is supported by the results of a paired-sample t-test, which confirmed that the improvement in test scores was statistically significant ($p < .001$) with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.57$), further validating the instructional value of language games.

The areas with the most notable gains – consonant sounds, monophthongs, diphthongs and triphthongs - are precisely the topics emphasized in the games.

This finding also aligns with Nation's view who suggests that meaningful repetition and retrieval, as provided through well-structured games, contribute directly to better memory and learning results. In this study, games allowed repeated exposure to phonetic rules in an engaging and collaborative manner, boosting deep processing and long-term retention.

Furthermore, while a slight majority of teachers expressed willingness to consider using games in future sessions, a substantial proportion remained skeptical. Only 46% viewed games as clearly suitable for university settings, and many maintained the belief that games lack academic rigor — reflecting the enduring perception that such methods are more appropriate for children than adults. Chaos creation and the need for very careful planning were raised as main concerns. These concerns can be lessened through a careful balance between engagement and academic focus (Baş, 2017).

Overall, the findings challenge the misconception that games are only suitable for younger learners, although this belief remains prevalent among a notable proportion of university instructors. When meticulously tailored to adult cognitive and emotional needs, language games can serve as a powerful pedagogical strategy, especially in traditionally abstract subjects like phonetics.

7. Limitations of the Study

While the findings of this study are promising, a few limitations should be acknowledged and made clear. First, the study was limited to a single institution (Hamma Lakhdar University) and one subject area (phonetics), which may affect the generalizability of the results to other settings or disciplines. Second, the absence of a control group means that improvements in motivation and retention cannot be entirely attributed to the intervention with full certainty. Third, the retention measured was primarily short-term, as the post-intervention data were collected at the end of the academic year. Therefore, future studies may consider including control groups, multiple institutions, and follow-up tests to assess long-term retention of knowledge.

8. Conclusion

This study explored the role of language games in enhancing motivation and retention among university-level adult learners in phonetics classes. The results indicate that game-based instruction not only increases learner engagement but also supports better understanding and recall of phonetic concepts. This was confirmed through students' perceptions and test score improvements, though teacher feedback revealed mixed views, with many still uncertain about the academic validity of game-based learning at this level of education.

By transforming potentially challenging content into interactive, collaborative experiences, language games created a more relaxed, dynamic and supportive classroom atmosphere. The vast majority of students and a modest portion of teachers responded positively to the approach,

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highlighting improvements in participation, confidence, classroom enjoyment and knowledge retention.

While the study was limited in scope, the findings offer strong support for the inclusion of structured language games in adult EFL instruction, particularly in subjects where learner demotivation and disengagement are common. Future research could investigate the effects of such interventions and explore game-based learning in other areas like grammar, oral expression (speaking), or written expression.

9. Acknowledgements

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11. Appendices

A. Students' Questionnaire

Part One: Phonetics in first year (before games)

1. In general, how was your experience with phonetics in first year?
Terrible | Bad | So-so | Good | Excellent
2. How much were you motivated to attend phonetics sessions in first year?
Not at all | A little | Somewhat | Much | Very much
3. How much did you enjoy phonetics sessions in first year?
Not at all | A little | Somewhat | Much | Very Much

Part Two: Phonetics in second year (with games)

4. In general, how was your experience with phonetics in second year?
Terrible | Bad | So-so | Good | Excellent
5. How much were you motivated to attend phonetics sessions in second year?
Not at all | A little | Somewhat | Much | Very Much
6. How much did you enjoy phonetics sessions in second year?
Not at all | A little | Somewhat | Much | Very Much
7. How much did you feel focused and involved in second year?
Not at all | A little | Somewhat | Much | Very much
8. Did the games you played in phonetics sessions in second year help you feel more relaxed in class?
Yes | No
9. Did the games make you want to speak or participate more in class?
Yes | No
10. Did the games help you remember phonetics lessons better?
Yes | No
11. Did you feel more confident in your pronunciation in second year?
Yes | No
12. Do you think other teachers should use games in their modules too?
Yes, of course. | No, of course not

B. Teachers' Questionnaire

1. How many years have you been teaching English at university?
1–5 years - 5–10 years - More than 10 years
2. To what extent do you think language games are suitable for university students? Why or why not?
Not at all | Slightly | Very much
3. Have you ever used language games in your teaching before?
Yes | No
4. Would you consider using games in your teaching if they were well-designed?
No | Not sure | Yes
5. To what extent do you think language games can help students stay motivated and remember abstract subjects?
Not at all | Slightly | Very much
6. What problems or challenges do you see in using games at the university level?