

USING DIGITAL GAMES TO MITIGATE EFL SPEAKING ANXIETY: EVIDENCE FROM ALGERIAN UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract: Speaking anxiety is a recurring issue among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, often preventing them from developing their speaking skills and overall communicative proficiency. To address this issue, researchers have explored different strategies to reduce anxiety within learners. In the same vein, the present study introduces digital game-based activities as a teaching strategy to alleviate learners' anxiety. Accordingly, it aims to examine the effectiveness of using digital games as a pedagogical tool in EFL classrooms. To achieve this objective, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining a quasi-experimental design with semi-structured interviews. The study was conducted with first-year undergraduate EFL students at the University of Guelma. The experiment involved a control and an experimental group, with 186 participants completing an adapted version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) as a pre-test and post-test to measure their level of anxiety before and after the treatment. Following the experiment, 20 participants in the experimental group were interviewed to explore their attitudes toward game-based learning and its impact on speaking anxiety and overall speaking proficiency. The quantitative data of the pre and post-tests were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics via the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), while qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were coded and analyzed through thematic analysis. The quantitative analysis of the pre and post-test revealed a significant difference between students' speaking anxiety levels, shifting from a moderate level of anxiety before the intervention to a considerably lower level afterwards. The qualitative findings revealed that the interviewees confirmed that the use of games was both successful and effective in creating a supportive, stress-free learning environment. Furthermore, participants indicated that the use of games helped change their attitudes toward speaking activities, increased their willingness to participate, reported reduced speaking anxiety and perceived improvements in their speaking skills and performance. Overall, this small-scale study demonstrated that digital games could be used as an effective pedagogical tool for reducing EFL anxiety and enhancing learners' speaking abilities and performance.

Keywords: EFL learners; foreign language pedagogy; game-based learning; mixed methods approach; speaking anxiety

How to cite the article:

Heguehag, N. (2026). Using digital games to mitigate EFL speaking anxiety: Evidence from Algerian undergraduates. *Journal of Studies in Language, Culture, and Society (JSLCS)*, 9(2), 9-29.

1. Introduction

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In EFL settings, speaking is the most essential, yet challenging, language skill to master considering its spontaneous nature and all hindering barriers. Among these barriers, anxiety stands out as a significant psychological factor that most language learners experience. It often has impeding effects on their speaking performance, proficiency and their overall learning progress. A considerable body of literature has demonstrated that speaking anxiety has detrimental and mostly debilitating effect in foreign language classrooms. Horwitz et al. (1986) confirmed in their study that Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) negatively affects learners' performance. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) proved that anxiety can severely inhibit learners' willingness to communicate, fluency, and overall oral proficiency. Liu and Huang (2011), and Sibouih et al. (2025) reported that anxiety is negatively associated with students' English learning motivation.

Considering its inhibiting effects, addressing speaking anxiety is pivotal for fostering oral proficiency in EFL learners. Accordingly, researchers have directed their undivided attention to this issue, aiming to develop teaching tools to lessen learners' speaking anxiety. They proposed a variety of communication-based activities alongside affective and pedagogical strategies to manage foreign language speaking anxiety. In line with this quest, the current study aims to reduce anxiety with the incorporation of elements of fun, enjoyment and playfulness by using games as an instructional tool in oral expression sessions. Game-based learning, as a learning strategy, is deeply rooted in educational psychology. From the perspective of Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), learners engaged in games can reach "Optimal Experience" as games can balance challenge, excitement and skill level that foster sustained attention and engagement and participation in learning. From an affective standpoint, aligning with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, games create a playful, low-pressure environment that stimulates positive emotions, fosters enjoyment and reduces anxiety, eventually facilitating language acquisition.

Previous research has supported this approach. For instance, Fung and Min (2016) conducted an experiment assessing the effect of using board games on speaking anxiety and speaking performance among ESL learners. They reported that the integration of board games helped reduce speaking anxiety and boosting speaking confidence. Pai et al (2024) examined the effect of integrating gamification strategies into English courses on fifth-grade EFL learners' speaking anxiety employing an experiment. Their findings revealed gamified group activities reduced anxiety and improved speaking effectiveness. Yağcıoğlu and Çalışkan (2024) conducted an action research study to investigate the effect of using game techniques on reducing English listening and speaking anxiety among young EFL learners. They found that the game technique did not directly reduce speaking anxiety but fostered other factors that can contribute to its reduction, such as increased engagement, self-confidence, and willingness to participate. Finally, Zhang and Hasim (2023) proved that integrating games as a pedagogical tool assist in reducing EFL anxiety, promoting risk-taking. In the Algerian context, Ibrahim and Hamid (2018) emphasized in their study that game technique positively affects students' speaking anxiety.

Despite the popularity of games and game based learning, only limited studies investigated its direct effect on EFL learners' speaking anxiety. In addition, the review of existing literature revealed a noticeable lack of research within the Algerian EFL context, particularly at the university level. This study, therefore, aims to contribute to address that gap by examining the impact of integrating games in Oral Expression sessions (OES) on reducing speaking anxiety among EFL learners at Guelma University. This study is carried out to meet the following aims:

- To examine the level of speaking anxiety experienced by First Year undergraduate EFL learners at Guelma University

- To examine whether or not games reduce speaking anxiety
- To explore learners' attitudes toward using games in OES focusing on the impact they have on their speaking anxiety.

Henceforth, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is the level of speaking anxiety experienced by First Year undergraduate EFL learners?
- Can games help alleviate students' speaking anxiety?
- What are learners' attitudes toward using games in OES?
- How do learners perceive the impact of games on their speaking anxiety and overall speaking?

Based on the research questions, the following hypotheses are formulated:

- Null Hypothesis (H_0): Using digital games in oral expression sessions would not reduce learners' speaking anxiety.
- Alternative Hypothesis (H_1): Using digital games in oral expression sessions would reduce learners' speaking anxiety.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Foreign language anxiety

Throughout the history of education, anxiety has stood as one of the predominant factors exercising profound influence on learners' learning and progress. Broadly speaking, anxiety is a psychological condition marked by tension, overstimulated nervous system, anticipation of an impending disaster, and constant fear of potential threats (Carlson, 1987). In relation to FL learning, Horwitz et al. are the first scholars to discuss anxiety in relation to language learning. They introduced the term Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and defined it as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, et al., 1986, p. 127). Their definition implies that FLA is a distinct construct that emerges due to the unique nature of the language learning process, where varying degrees of self-concept and self-expression contribute to it. Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) and Price (1991) argued that learners' FLA escalates upon the request to communicate or perform in a second or foreign language in which they are not fully proficient. Henceforth, speaking and oral production trigger this type of anxiety within learners.

Considering its far-reaching effect, research was conducted investigating causes of FLA among learners, aiming for a well-rounded understanding and effective management of it. For Horwitz et al. (1986), the causes of FLA stem from three main factors: namely communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Communication apprehension is when learners feel anxious about speaking in a foreign language due to fear of misunderstanding or being misunderstood. Learners' anxiety escalates with the concern of being judged. Learners experience stress and nervousness related to language assessments, fearing failure. Dörnyei (2005) added self-doubt and lack of confidence in their language abilities as major causes of anxiety. Luo (2012) highlighted that the main sources leading to FLA are the classroom atmosphere, attributes of learners, the target language, and the process of foreign language learning itself.

Empirical studies on FLA have yielded varied and perplexing findings and proven that anxiety associated with foreign language has mostly debilitating effects on foreign language

learning (Horwitz et al., 1986; Horwitz, et al, 2010). Accordingly, FLA can affect learners' cognition, psychology academic achievement, and social interactions. Cognitively, Krashen (1982), and MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) explained that anxiety as an affective factor can function as a filter preventing the brain from language processing and hindering language acquisition and production. Eysenck et al. (2007) stressed that anxious learners often suffer from cognitive overload. Similarly, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) pointed that when learners feel anxious their cognitive abilities deteriorate. Anxiety weakens their abilities to process language input, to think, and reduces their concentration and focus. Psychologically, since anxiety is related to learners' psyche, it can influence other psychological factors including their self-perception, motivation, shyness among others. According to Krashen (1985), learners' anxiety elevates the feeling of shyness, stress and sadness. Anxiety often negatively affects learners' self-perception. Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999) confirmed that highly anxious learners possess negative perception of both their academic competence and their self-worth. Kitano (2001) explained that anxious learners tend to have low self-esteem and confidence. Acknowledging the effect of anxiety on learners' cognition and psychology, it inevitably influences their academic achievement and overall performance. Many studies proved that anxiety results in low academic achievement, poor performance (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991; Horwitz, 2001). Additionally, Bailey et al. (2003) highlighted that learners with high anxiety are significantly more likely to abandon their studies. Sparks et al. (2000) asserted that higher anxiety levels correspond to lower proficiency in native language skills. Socially, high-level anxious students are not interested in communicating with others (Price, 1991). Horwitz et al. (2010) stressed that language anxiety diminishes students' willingness to communicate in English.

2.2 Games in foreign language contexts

Games play a significant role in foreign language teaching and learning contexts. If teachers incorporate them correctly in their teaching practice, games can be powerful learning resources and valuable asset. Games are activities "with rules, a goal and an element of fun" (Hadfield, 1990, p. v). Richards et al. (1992) defined games as "an organized activity that usually has the following properties: a particular task or objective, a set of rules, a competition between players, and a communication between players by spoken or written language" (p. 89). These definitions affirm that games are more than a fun activity but a compelling learning strategy. Constantinescu (2012) emphasized that language games should serve specific aim, align with the curriculum, contain appropriate content, match learners' needs and proficiency level, and most importantly prioritize language use.

Numerous authors advocated for the central role of language games in foreign language teaching due to their immense potential in improving teaching and learning alike. Plass et al., (2015) insisted that games help involve learners on an "affective, behavioral, cognitive, and sociocultural level in ways few other learning environments are able to" (p. 263). At affective and behavioral levels, games stimulate learners' interest and motivation, whilst also fostering their willingness to communicate and persistence (Ariati & Iswahyuni, 2023; Reynolds and Taylor, 2020; Zou, 2020; Wang et al., 2022). Games are considered as role changing activities, inspiring learners to assume active role in their own learning process and promote a stress-free engaging learning atmosphere (Zainuddin et al., 2020). For Mei and Yu-Jing (2000), games are an alternative solution to learners' shyness, and reluctance. Likewise, Reinders and Wattana (2015) proved through their study that digital-game based learning fosters learners willingness to communicate and lowers their anxiety. At a cognitive level, Constantinescu (2012) claimed that games enable learners to enhance their comprehension of both written and spoken English. Similarly, Lam et al. (2017) found that the use of digital games positively influenced students' idea generation and their ability to communicate their thoughts clearly. According to Hamari et

al. (2014), games support learners in acquiring new knowledge and refining their speaking skills. More precisely, Derakhshan and Khatir (2015) asserted that games help developing students' vocabulary because games foster their memorization and retention skills. Additionally, games provide real-time practice of language use as Gozcu and Caganaga (2016), and Derakhshan and Khatir, (2015) confirmed that games work as effective framework for creating a meaningful and useful context for language acquisition. Idek (2019) has found that digital games can significantly enhance students' English-language skills. At a social level, games foster positive relationships between learners, their peers, and teachers (Savitri, 2013). Chen (2021) confirmed that gamification could provide student's interaction, improve their communicative skills supports this idea.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study follows a mixed-method research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to address study aims, answer the research questions and test hypotheses. Phakiti (2014) argues that mixed methods design is "essential because choosing to use just one approach (i.e. either quantitative or qualitative analysis) can be inadequate to advance our theoretical and practical knowledge about language learning." (p. 144). The present study employed mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, which involves the collection and analysis of quantitative data, followed by a qualitative data to validate, contextualize and triangulate the initial findings of the quantitative phase. The quantitative approach involves an experiment with a pre-test, treatment and post-test. This approach is suitable to establish any causal relationship between games and speaking anxiety and measure the direct impact of games on speaking anxiety. The qualitative approach involves a semi-structured interview, which will strengthen the quantitative findings of the experiment with qualitative evidence.

3.2 Participants

This study targeted the population of first-year undergraduate EFL students at Guelma University. The impetus for selecting this population lies in the fact that it is their first year receiving instruction in oral expression and participating in speaking activities, making them more susceptible to speaking anxiety. Unlike second- or third-year students, they have not yet had the opportunity to develop coping mechanisms or learning strategies to manage or overcome such anxiety, which allows for a clearer observation of the impact of the intervention. The whole population consisted of eight intact groups. Six of these groups were randomly selected to participate in the investigation and were assigned to the experimental or control condition, with three groups in each. Each group consisted of 31 learners, making a total sample of 186 first-year undergraduate EFL students. Upholding ethical research standards, we kept participants' identity confidential throughout the study and we used codes to refer to the participants. To ensure anonymity, the real names of the student were arranged alphabetically and assigned a code based on the group they belong to. Participants in the experimental group were labelled as EG, while those in the control group were labelled as CG, followed by a number ranging from 1 to 186.

3.3 Data collection tools

We relied on two instruments to conduct this study. The first instrument is the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) (appendix A) that was used as pre and post-test to

measure learners' speaking anxiety. The FLSAS is an adapted version of foreign language classroom anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). The original version of the FLCAS was revised and edited to insure its relevance and clarity. The FLSAS consists of thirty-two elements covering four aspects related to speaking anxiety: fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, communication apprehension, and anxiety reaction and avoidance strategy. The FLSAS was scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'completely disagree' to 'completely agree'. After piloting the test, we administered it to 186 students and tested the reliability of the findings using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS version 26.0). The Cronbach's Alpha for the instrument was found as .93, suggesting high internal consistency reliability.

Given the quantitative nature of the instrument, which yields numerical scores, participants' anxiety levels can be objectively measured and interpreted. To facilitate this interpretation, an anxiety scale was developed based on the total possible score range (32–160). This range was divided into five equal intervals to ensure a systematic and unbiased classification of anxiety levels. Accordingly, participants were categorized as follows: very low anxiety (32–57), low anxiety (58–83), moderate anxiety (84–109), high anxiety (110–135), and very high anxiety (136–160).

The second instrument used in this scrutiny is a semi-structured interview (appendix B), which we conducted with participants of the experimental group. The interview comprises ten open-ended questions designed to explore learners' perceptions and attitudes toward the use of games in OES. It sought to gain insights on participants' experience with communicative games, the impact of these activities on their speaking anxiety, their level of motivation and engagement and perceived improvements in speaking proficiency.

3.4 Data collection procedures

The study underwent four phases spanning twelve weeks. In the first phase (week one), the pre-test was administered to both study groups: the experimental and control group. The second phase consisted of the treatment, during which the experimental group was exposed to a series of game-based speaking activities designed to reduce their speaking anxiety, promote communication, collaboration, and engagement. In designing these activities, the teacher incorporated several digital game-based platforms, including Quizizz, Baamboozle, LyricsTraining, Wheel of Names, Wordwall, Genially, and Kahoot. The treatment lasted for nine weeks, accounting for nine sessions (one session per week), with a different speaking activity designed for each session. The first speaking activity entitled "One Truth and Two Lies" was implemented using Quizizz. Each learner was asked to write on the platform three personal statements, two of which were true and one false. Once the statements were displayed to the class, students took turns presenting their statements and attempted to convince their classmates of their authenticity. Meanwhile, the rest of the class discussed and voted on which statement they believed to be the false one. This activity encouraged spontaneous speaking and peer interaction. The second speaking activity entitled "Taboo description game" was conducted using Baamboozle. Students worked in small groups (three members each) and were required to describe a target word to their teammates without using a list of restricted words provided on the screen. The third activity was "Collaborative storytelling" in which "Open the Box" feature of Wordwall digital game was used. After dividing the class into groups, each group selected a box that revealed either a picture or keywords related to a story. Then, the group was required to create a story based on the revealed clues. The fourth activity was a song-based activity that was implemented using LyricsTraining. While listening to an English song, students tried to complete the missing lyrics displayed on the screen. After the listening game, learners discussed the meaning of the song and expressed their opinions. The fifth activity, labelled "Investigate the Crime," was a role-play activity using the digital game Kahoot.

Students were divided into groups and they selected their case from the options displayed on kahoot. Then, each group member selected one of the following roles: detective, victim, or witness. For each role, a prompt was given to help create the dialogue. Once the members prepared their parts, they acted them out. The sixth activity was Fishbowl discussion centered on the different themes including the impact of AI on learners, feminism, online learning, among others. The teacher divided the class into groups of ten members. Afterwards, each group selected a given topic to discuss. Starting the discussion, learners of the inner circle were selected randomly using the Wheel of Names to participate and share their ideas, whereas members of the outer circles noted interesting ideas, and vote for the most interesting speaker on Kahoot. Once all participants in inner circle finished their ideas, the teacher spun the wheel again to select new participants and rotate the speakers, allowing more learners to take part in the discussion. The seventh activity was a riddle-based speaking activity. It was conducted using the digital platform Baamboozle. During the session, the teacher projected the prepared riddles on the screen one by one through Baamboozle platform interface. Students accessed the activity through their smartphones or laptops and were divided into small teams of three to five members. For each riddle, teams were given two minutes to discuss the possible answer before submitting their response on the platform. Then, each team was asked to justify its answer in complete sentences. Points were awarded for selecting the correct answer on the platform and for providing clear explanations. After that, teams were invited to create their own riddles and add them to the platform to challenge other groups. The eighth activity was a problem-solving activity using Genially. Students were presented with an interactive scenario in which they had to solve a realistic problem “How can students be encouraged to read more books?”. Working in groups, learners discussed possible solutions and prepared a short oral presentation explaining their proposed plan. The ninth and final activity was a debate-based activity using Kahoot. Students were presented with controversial or discussion-provoking statements related to familiar topics such as influencers and social media. They voted on their positions through the platform and were then invited to defend their viewpoints orally in front of their peers. In the third phase (week eleven), the post-test was administered to both the experimental and control groups to examine whether the use of game-based activities has affected their speaking anxiety. The fourth and final phase (week twelve), semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty volunteer participants from the experimental group to explore their perceptions of the treatment and their perceived impact on their speaking anxiety.

3.5 Procedures of data analysis

As the current investigation generated two distinct types of data - quantitative and qualitative- different data analysis approaches were employed to treat and analyse the findings. The results of the pre and post- tests were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods to measure the effect of the treatment. The qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and insights related to participants’ experiences and perceptions.

4. Results

4.1 FLSA of the Experimental and Control Group before the Treatment

As a first step in this study, we conducted a pack of statistical analysis on the data obtained from the FLSAS (pre-test) using SPSS version 26. These statistics included descriptive statistics and independent samples t-test. The descriptive statistics were conducted to get a clear overview on the dataset, checking patterns, trends, which ensures the correct choice of statistical tests, and allows for meaningful interpretation of results.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Experimental and Control Groups' FLSA (Pre-test)

Descriptive Statistics								
Group		N	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness	
		Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
exp	Pre_test	93	101.00	107.70	28.72	824.94	-.36	.25
	Valid N (listwise)	93						
con	Pre_test	93	99.00	102.90	23.45	550.00	.46	.25
	Valid N (listwise)	93						

Table 1, summarizes the results of descriptive statistics of the FLSA test of the control and the experimental group. As displayed in the table, descriptive statistics include range, mean, standard deviation, variance and skewness. Beginning with range, it refers to the difference between highest and lowest score within the group. The experimental group demonstrated a slightly wider range (*Range*= 101) compared to the control (*Range* = 99). The mean is the average score within each group. Once again, the mean of the experimental group (*M*= 107.70) is higher than the control group (*M*=102.9). However, both groups fall within the moderate anxiety level (84–109). The remaining metrics including standard deviation, variance and skewness provide insights into the distribution, variability and normality of scores. The standard deviation and variance of the experimental group (*SD*=28.72, *Var* = 824.94) are higher than the control group (*SD*= 23.45, *Var* = 550.00), which implies a greater variability in scores. Skewness values indicated a slight positive skew for the control group (*Skewness* = .465) and a slight negative skew for the experimental group (*Skewness* = −.36). However, both values are close to zero, indicating that the distributions are approximately normal, as further illustrated in Figure 1.

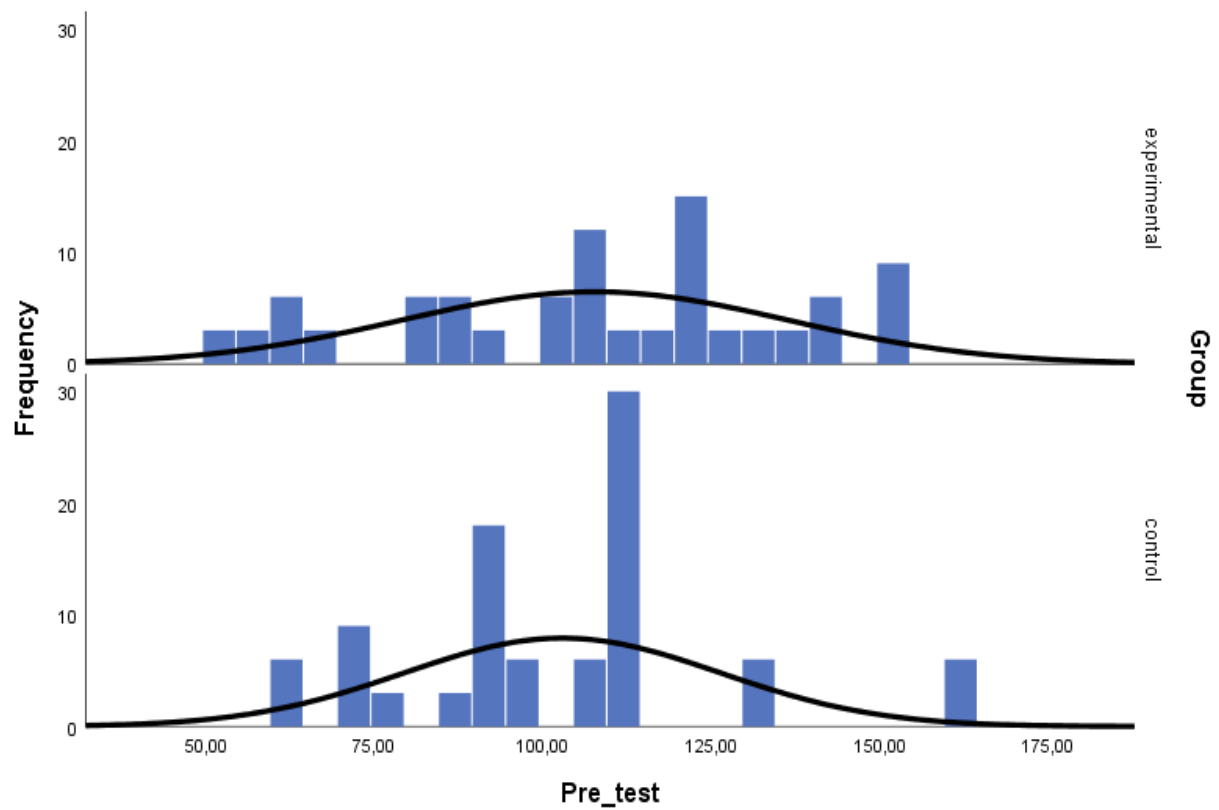


Figure 1

Histogram of Speaking Anxiety Pre-test for Both Experimental and Control Groups

Although the results of the descriptive statistics indicate that both groups experienced moderate anxiety level and are relatively homogeneous, an independent sample t-test was conducted to strengthen the validity of statistics proving that any observed difference is statistically significant rather than due to chance.

Table 2*Independent Sample t-Test for Pre-test and Before the Treatment*

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pre-test	Equal variances assumed	5.36	.022	1.25	184	.21	4.80	3.84	-2.77	12.39
	Equal variances not assumed			1.25	176.92	.21	4.80	3.84	-2.78	12.39
anxiety_level_pre	Equal variances assumed	3.15	.077	1.90	184	.058	.35	.18	-.012	.72
	Equal variances not assumed			1.90	180.75	.058	.35	.18	-.012	.72

Table 2 displays the results of the independent samples t-test for both the pre-test scores and the pre-test anxiety levels. For the pre-test scores, the significant value of the Levene's test of the pre-test ($p = .022$) indicates a violation of homogeneity of variances, therefore, equal variances were not assumed. The results of the t-test ($t = 1.25$, $df = 176.92$, $p = .21$) shows no statistically significant difference between the control and experimental groups.

For anxiety levels, Levene's test value was not significant ($p = .077$), so equal variances were assumed. The independent samples t-test ($t = 1.908$, $df = 184$, $p = .058$) also revealed no statistically significant difference between the two groups. Overall, these results indicate that the control and experimental groups were statistically equivalent at the pre-test stage in anxiety levels.

4.2 FLSA of the Experimental and Control Group after the Treatment

After the treatment, we measured the speaking anxiety once again using the FLSAS to examine the effect of using games (treatment) on reducing participants speaking anxiety. We ran statistical analysis on the gathered data using SPSS, including paired samples t-test and independent samples t-test. Table 3 shows the results of the paired t-test conducted.

Table 3

Paired Sample t- Test of Anxiety Level for the Experimental Group Before and After the Treatment

Group							t	df	Sig. (2 tail ed)	Cohen's d (Point Estima ted
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
					Lower	Upper				
exp	anxiety level-pre anxiety level-post	1.51	1.46	.15	1.21	1.81	9.98	92	.00	1.04

The results indicated that the difference between pre- and post-treatment anxiety levels was statistically significant, $t(92) = 9.98$, $p < .001$, suggesting that the observed change was not due to chance. The actual reduction in participants' speaking anxiety was reflected in a mean difference of $M = 1.51$, ($SD = 1.46$). When paired with a large effect size ($d = 1.04$), these findings indicate that the treatment not only produced a statistically reliable result but also a substantial measurable reduction in anxiety levels.

To substantiate the conclusions drawn from the paired t-test, the independent t-test was performed and the results are shown in table 4.

Table 4

Independent Samples t-Test for Speaking Anxiety Level (post-test) After the Treatment

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
anxiety_level	Equal variances assumed	17.53	.00	-5.10	184	.000	-.77	.15	-1.07	-.47
post	Equal variances not assumed			-5.10	171.4	.000	-.77	.15	-1.07	-.47

Equal variances are not assumed as the significant level of Levene's test $p < .001$. The obtained p-value suggests that there is a significant difference in speaking anxiety level between experimental and control groups. Additionally, the mean difference (-.77) further illustrates that the experimental group experienced a significant reduction in speaking anxiety levels compared to the control group.

In the final step in this experiment, we performed descriptive statistics on the post-test scores, to conceptualize the finding of inferential statistics. The latter provided statistical proof that the treatment, using games in OES, was effective in reducing participants speaking as a significant difference was recorded. However, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of learners' speaking anxiety levels change, additional descriptive statistics were conducted. Table 5 presents these results.

Table 5

Descriptive statistics of the Experimental and Control Groups' FLSA (post-test)

Descriptive Statistics									
Group		N	Range	Mean		Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness	
		Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
Exp	Post-t	93	98.00	71.25	2.09	20.21	408.84	1.61	.250
	Valid N (listwise)	93							
Con	Post-test	93	103.0	93.83	2.65	25.64	657.85	.009	.250
	Valid N (listwise)	93							

Compared to the pre-test results, the experimental group demonstrated a lower range ($Range = 98$) compared to the control group ($Range = 103$). Similarly, in terms of central tendency, the experimental group recorded a lower mean score ($M = 71.25$), which falls within the low anxiety level (58–83), while the control group recorded a higher mean score ($M = 93.83$), which corresponds to the moderate anxiety level (84–109). Overall, these results provide evidence that the use of games in oral expression sessions is effective in reducing speaking anxiety among learners.

4. 3. Students' Attitudes and Perceptions Interview

After the experiment, participants of the experimental group were interviewed to gather their insights on the inclusion of games in the Oral Expression class, the impact on their speaking anxiety and their overall speaking proficiency. The collected data were transcribed, categorized and grouped into thematic patterns.

4.3.1. Attitudes toward the Incorporation of Games in the Oral Expression Sessions

All participants seemed to enjoy the experience and overwhelming hold positive attitudes toward the use of games in OES. Upon asking on reasons for their point of views, they clarified that the incorporations of games made learning more enjoyable and engaging. The majority of participants found that these activities transformed speaking English from a routine academic

task to an exciting and interactive experience, one learner shared, *games made the learning experience more enjoyable, less of a boring task*. Similarly, another learner explained, *games made speaking English more of a funny challenge than a stressful task*. Furthermore, learners noted that the use of games not only promoted healthy competition among classmates but also their collaboration, which in return boosted their motivation and active participation. One participant highlighted, *games made learning more interesting, and I participated more because I was excited*. Others posited that games fostered teamwork and peer learning. A student proclaimed, *we were all included as one team, and I felt motivated and excited to participate*. Additional student said, *I liked games because it encouraged my interaction with classmates and teacher*. Additionally, many learners reported that this sort of learning activities promoted more relaxed, inclusive and dynamic environment especially with the involvement of the teacher in the activity. A participant argued, *when the teacher participated in the games alongside us, I felt more connected to the class*. This sense of inclusion contributed to greater enthusiasm for learning and speaking in English as the learners explained, *I am excited to learn, I am happy to learn and I am more willing to speak*.

4.3.2. Perceptions on the Impact of Games on Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

All participants acknowledged the tremendous effect of games in alleviating their speaking anxiety. According to their responses, it became evident that games contributed to reducing different aspects of anxiety in various ways. Specifically, participants pinpointed that games helped with their worry of making mistakes, fear of judgment, hesitation and speaking avoidance, pressure and nervousness, shyness and self-consciousness.

a- Worry about Making Mistakes and Fear of Judgment

In the EFL speaking class, learners are always alerted to committing mistakes and afraid of others' judgments whether their teacher or classmates. Fearing negative feedback, learners often refrain from speaking in front of the class. However, participants reported that with the use of games, they were no longer intimidated by the thought of being judged. Learning in such a playful and interactive environment, they were more focused on communication and less on mistakes. One participant noted, *"I no longer feel afraid of being judged"*. Another participant explained, *Games distract me from negative thinking*. Another participant shared, *I feel less judgmental of myself and more confident in speaking*. One student stated, *I was less pressured about my mistakes; I just spoke freely*. Consequently, games helped creating a supportive environment where learners perceived mistakes as a sign of learning and not a cause of embarrassment and judgment. Moreover, respondents noted that, they learned from their peers and corrected each other in a non-threatening way, which made them feel more secure.

b- Hesitation and Speaking Avoidance

In many scenarios, speaking anxiety is mirrored in learners' constant hesitation to participate in speaking activities or avoidance of speaking at once. However, according to participants, games helped in living up the classroom, encouraging them step up out of comfort zone and be involved in the activity. As one participant explained, *I could no longer just stay silent or avoid speaking; the game made me speak up*. In addition, a participant reported, *before using games, I used to withdraw any speaking activity, but with the use of games I am eager to be on the spot*.

c- Pressure and Nervousness

Speaking has always been a source of pressure, nervousness and distress for EFL learners. However, from the perspective of participants, learning through games made speaking less intimidating and less stressful. They posited that they felt less nervous and pressured speaking using games. One learner shared, *games effectively reduced the feeling of pressure*. Another mentioned, *the funny and relaxed environment made me feel at ease, and I was less nervous to speak*. A different respondent stated, *when I am involved in games, speaking seems like a fun and easy activity. Surprisingly, I feel less pressured, and my nervousness has faded away*.

d- Alleviating Shyness and Self-Consciousness and Promoting Risk-taking

Another advantage to using games in the study is that it assisted learners with their shyness. Several participants highlighted that engaging in speaking games helped lowering their shyness, as they become more expressive. One participant said, *I am no longer shy; I feel more active and enthusiastic in class*. Another noted, *speaking in games feels easier because I do not overthink what I am saying*. A different participant explained, *I feel stronger and more confident to express my ideas, and I no longer look at the ground while speaking*. It can be inferred that the playful nature of games enabled learners to surpass their shyness and confidently take risks in speaking.

4.3.3. Perceptions on the Impact of Games on Overall Speaking

Participants' responses affirmed that the integration of games into OES positively influenced their speaking in terms of skills, attitudes, performance.

a- Ameliorated Speaking Skills

Upon participating in games, the majority of learners pinpointed an observable improvement in their speaking skills. Some noted that they learned new vocabulary effectively. Their pronunciation sharpened from the practice and active involvement. They became more fluent and able of producing coherent speech effortlessly. One of the participants shared a particularly insightful comment saying, *now I am a better listener and a more spontaneous speaker*. Highlighting that games triggered learners' active listening and spontaneity, two essential skills to becoming competent English speakers.

b- Enhanced Attitudes toward Speaking

After engaging in games during OES, learners experienced a change in mind, adopting positive attitudes toward speaking. Many proclaimed feeling more motivated and excited to participate, viewing speaking as an enjoyable activity rather than a stressful obligation. The interactive and engaging nature of games boosted their enthusiasm and made speaking practices more appealing. One participant noted, *speaking English feels less scary now*, reflecting how games aided in diminishing their fear. Additionally, learners highlighted that games created a supportive and less judgmental environment, encouraging them to express their thoughts freely.

c- Improved Speaking Performance

Beyond attitude and skills, participants also observed noticeable enhancements in their overall speaking proficiency. Engaged in games, learners found themselves more active and dynamic, seizing more opportunities for oral practice compared to conventional methods. One participant remarked, *I spoke more than in traditional sessions*. Furthermore, games ignited a sense of competition in learners, encouraging them to articulate their thoughts more clearly and spontaneously, and practice speaking more frequently and with greater ease.

5. Discussion

This study aimed at investigating (1) Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) of EFL learners, (2) the effect of using games on FLSA, (3) learners' attitudes to the use of games

in OES, and (4) learners' perceptions on the effect of the incorporation of digital games on their FLSA, and overall speaking level. The examination of the experiment results successfully targeted the first and second questions of the study. Starting with the first question on learners' level of speaking anxiety, the descriptive analysis for the FLSA pre-test revealed that First Year undergraduate EFL learners at Guelma University undergo a moderate level of FLSA. This finding was statistically proven by the results of the independent sample t-test for the FLSA. Thereby, the first set of statistics confirmed the study groups' homogeneity for speaking anxiety.

To examine the effect of using games on learners' speaking anxiety, inferential statistics comprising paired samples, independent sample t-test for the FLSA post-test and descriptive statistics were conducted. Data from the paired sample t-test showed that the participants exhibited a significant decrease in their speaking anxiety, confirming that the treatment, using gamified speaking activities, positively alleviated learners speaking anxiety. Furthermore, the results of the independent sample t-test for the post-test confirmed that the treatment caused a significant reduction in speaking anxiety among the experimental group compared to the control group. The results of the descriptive statistics further complemented the inferential statistics by providing a clearer, more tangible interpretation of the impact of gamified speaking activities on learners' speaking anxiety. The descriptive statistics quantified the significant reduction in speaking anxiety recorded in the inferential, showing that the experimental group demonstrated a very low level of anxiety whereas the control group demonstrated a low level of anxiety. Collectively, these statistics confirm the alternative hypothesis, indicating that games are effective pedagogical tools for reducing learners' speaking anxiety. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected

The remaining aims and research questions on learners' attitudes and perception of games and their impact were addressed successfully through the interview. All participants of the experimental group expressed their contentment with their experience of gamified speaking activities adopting positive attitudes toward the inclusion of the games in OES. Learners' perceptions on the impact of games on speaking anxiety align with post-test results. It even added more in-depth interpretation into the statistical finding. The participants revealed which aspects of anxiety games helped decreasing. Specifically, the participants highlighted that games assisted with their worry of making mistakes, fear of judgment, hesitation and speaking avoidance, pressure and nervousness, shyness and self-consciousness. Moreover, the participants confirmed that beyond reducing their anxiety, games improved their overall speaking. Following the game-based instruction, they developed positive attitudes to speaking, approaching speaking with more motivation, enthusiasm and engagement. In addition, they noticed a remarkable change in their speaking skills including, refined pronunciation, improved fluency, expanded vocabulary, enhanced speech coherence and increased speaking spontaneity. Additionally, learners acknowledged that engaging in games improved their speaking performance all at once.

Despite the valuable insights of the study, few limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to first year undergraduate EFL learners at Guelma University, thus, the results cannot be generalized to learners with different proficiency levels or those studying in other educational contexts. Second, the duration of the treatment was relatively short, which may not fully capture the long-term effects of game-based activities on learners' speaking anxiety and performance. Furthermore, although the study demonstrated a reduction in speaking anxiety, it overlooked other variables that may have contributed to this change, such as learners' personality, motivation, or prior exposure to similar activities. Building on these limitations, some suggestions for future research could be proposed to guide future research. Future studies could opt for samples that are more diverse involving different levels

and different universities to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, longitudinal research is recommended to examine the long-term effects of game-based activities on learners' foreign language speaking anxiety and overall speaking proficiency. Additionally, future studies should consider all sorts of technical constraints that may arise while using digital games, such as limited internet connectivity, device compatibility, or software issues. In the present study, these constraints were not challenging, as learners had their own devices and reliable access to 4G internet; however, researchers using university networks or shared devices should account for potential technical difficulties that could affect engagement and learning outcomes. Finally, further research could also consider and explore the impact of individual differences.

6. Conclusion

In EFL contexts, speaking anxiety is one of the most persistent barriers preventing learners from achieving oral proficiency and communicative competence. It is seldom challenging for teachers to recognize and to help learner overcome it. Given its detrimental effect, plethora of studies have been conducted exploring effective pedagogical tools to lessen learners speaking anxiety. Serving this purpose, this inquiry investigated the possibility of reducing speaking anxiety through employing games in OES.

The study findings provided valuable insights, validating the effectiveness of games in alleviating speaking anxiety. Beyond this, the study also underscored their broader advantages; it showed that using games made learning and speaking practice more interesting and enjoyable. It created an engaging and dynamic environment, which promoted learners' motivation, active involvement and enthusiasm. Moreover, games helped learners adopt positive attitudes toward speaking tasks while reinforcing their speaking skills and performance. In conclusion, based on study findings, games can serve as a valuable instrument in EFL classes. Henceforth, it is recommended to include games as a versatile teaching technique in speaking sessions.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Speaking Anxiety Scale

For each statement, tick the appropriate answer according to your learning experience:
Strongly Disagree (1) - Disagree (2) - Neutral (3) - Agree (4) - Strongly Agree (5)

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1. I do not feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my speaking class.					
2. I do not worry about making mistakes in speaking class					
3. I tremble when I know that I am going to be called on in speaking class.					
4. It frightens me when I do not understand what the teacher is saying.					
5. It would bother me to take more speaking classes.					
6. During speaking class. I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.					
7. I keep thinking that the other students are better speakers than I am					
8. I do not usually at ease during tests in my speaking class					
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in my speaking class.					
10. I worry about the consequences of failing my speaking class.					
11. I understand why some people get so upset over speaking class.					
12. In speaking class I can get so nervous I forget things I know.					
13. I feel embarrassed when I speak without being asked in my speaking class.					
14. I would be nervous speaking with native speakers					
15. I get upset when I do not understand what the teacher is correcting.					

16. Even if I am well prepared for speaking class. I feel anxious about it					
17. I often feel like not going to my speaking class.					
18. I do not feel confident when I speak in speaking class					
19. I am afraid that my teacher would correct every mistake I make.					
20. I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in speaking class.					
21. The more I prepare for a speaking test, the more confused I get.					
22. I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.					
23. I feel very aware and uneasy when speaking the foreign language in front of my classmates.					
24. Speaking class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.					
25. I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.					
26. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.					
27. When I am on my way to speaking class, I do not feel very sure and relaxed.					
28. I get nervous when I do not understand every word the language teacher says.					
29. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language.					
30. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.					
31. I would not probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.					
32. I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions, which I have not prepared in advance.					

Appendix B: Interview questions

- How did you feel about the integration of games into oral expression sessions?
- Did you enjoy the gamified speaking activities? What aspects did you like the most?
- Did the use of games change your attitudes towards speaking? If yes, how?
- Do you think the gamified activities helped reduce your speaking anxiety? If yes, how?
- Compared to before using games, do you find it easier to express your thoughts in English? Why or why not?
- In what ways do you think your ability to speak English has changed throughout the sessions?
- Do you think communicative games should be used more in English-speaking classes? Why or why not?
- What suggestions do you have for using games more effectively in oral expression sessions?